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Scarico: It's Only a Movie, Most of the Time

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Scarico:
It's Only a Movie, Most of the Time

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communication

by

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Abstract

Exploitation cinema is a domain of motion picture content catering to a viewership interested in imagery that is more provocative than what mainstream audiences desire to see. These types of films are typically considered lowbrow entertainment and have been made in every era, albeit in a limited capacity proportional to the niche audience demand for them. Some time periods see a rise in exploitation film productions in response to a growing demand for such content from a larger share of the broader cinematic audience. This relationship indicates that period-specific cultural factors can cause mainstream audience members to seek out more lurid visuals than they typically would, the reasons for which are open to speculation among film scholars. Between 1960 to 1988 Italy experienced a boom in exploitation cinema. Because Italy also produced many art films during this timeframe that featured the same type of brutality and salaciousness of exploitation movies, the broader term of “transgressive” will be used to encompass all films from this era that pushed the envelope of sexuality or violence, regardless of what their artistic merit might be. This thesis proposes that Italy’s prolific transgressive cinema run was fueled by major political events happening concurrently with the loosening of censorship laws. The anxiety over decades-long crises prompted many in the general public to seek catharsis through viewing violence onscreen. A reduction in cinema censorship not only made audience anger relief by way of seeing violent imagery a possibility, but it additionally allowed for the display of never-before-seen sexual content, purveyed for its novelty rather than as a kind of emotional displacement. This thesis explains the cultural causes behind the rise and fall of Italy’s transgressive cinema movement.

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Introduction

Throughout the 1970s and into the early '80s Italy produced what is arguably the largest volume of unbelievably shocking films ever created (O'Neill, 2008). Films with translated titles such as *Strip Nude for Your Killer* (1975), *Anthropophagus* (1980), and *Gestapo's Last Orgy* (1977) actually played in theaters all across Italy, although many were never exported beyond its borders. The emergence of home video around 1980 made the worldwide distribution of these egregious works the utmost concern for various nations' censorship bureaus hoping to block content that was potentially harmful to minors (Phelan, 2014). Perhaps the most famous crackdown on this content in the Western world took place in the United Kingdom, when the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) passed the Video Recordings Act of 1984 (Phelan, 2014).

During this time in the United States movie censorship was and is still managed by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). This non-governmental organization would place an X rating on films deemed excessively violent or pornographic and it was up to a theater if they wanted to screen them, unless they had a contractual obligation with a studio not to (Johnson, 2019). By contrast, the British system would heavily trim certain works before they could even be granted an X rating, while many films were deemed so thoroughly reprehensible from start to finish that they were banned outright (Phelan, 2014). While the MPAA is a trade association of movie studios, the BBFC, although not a government agency per se, is accountable to the Secretary of State, to the extent that it is referred to as a "quasi non-governmental organization" or QUANGO (Petley, 2011, p. 35). The Video Recordings Act of 1984 made it illegal for video distributors to sell any tape that wasn't certified by the BBFC or to provide content to customers under the ages recommended by the board. Police would seize the

tapes from video stores and any owner knowingly distributing the prosecuted films could be arrested on charges of obscenity (Phelan, 2014).

Of the 72 “Video Nasties” from around the globe that were banned by BBFC, 23 of them, roughly one third, were Italian (Navarro, 2018). Rather than serving as an example of moral panic from a more prudish time, contemporary film critics are often of the opinion that these films were as unacceptable as they were previously described. In May 2020, the American magazine *Complex* published an article titled “The Most Disturbing Films of All Time” (Barone et al, 2020). The list of 60 films, spanning multiple decades, put Ruggero Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) in the third spot, with the article arguing that the most shocking motion picture of all time is Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò: Or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975). These two works are debatably the most censored movies ever made, in terms of the number of countries that restricted them (Jones, 2017). For almost two decades, Italy’s film industry had created hundreds of films that would still be considered outrageous to modern audiences. There are at least 500 that could not be shown on most American cable television channels today without some content editing, while others are still illegal to possess in various nations because they contain some combination of real animal cruelty, genuine human death, or underage performers in taboo situations (Shipka, 2011, p. 71).

The United States is one of the only regions where all of these works are legally available uncut due to several Supreme Court cases on obscenity, such as *Miller v. California* (1973) and their grandfather clauses interpretations (Hudson, Jr., 2009). Italy itself had banned many of the works featured in this thesis, either when they were made or in subsequent decades, however this was nullified when Italy abolished all film censorship in 2021 (Vivarelli, 2021). This historical

overview is not intended to raise a legal subject for re-adjudication, rather it is to justify the use of the term “transgressive” in describing this plethora of Italian works.

So, what exactly are the types of films this thesis covers? Can they be categorized into one genre? The short answer is ‘no’. The transgressive elements of either explicit sexuality or graphic violence, in some cases both, were cross-genre occurrences during this era, showing up in cannibal adventure films, sex comedies (*commedia sexy all'italiana*), slasher films (*giallo*), police procedurals (*poliziotteschi*), spaghetti westerns, sexploitation, nazisploitation (*sadiconazista*), women-in-prison films, and shock documentaries (*mondo*). Although many of the above subgenres can be grouped under the wider category of “exploitation”, this nomenclature would exclude those shocking works of the time that are now considered masterpieces, such as Pasolini’s “Trilogy of Life” erotic literary adaptations, or his Marquis de Sade inspired *Salò*. It is for this reason that the term “transgressive” must be adopted for this writing to describe all the films herein that graphically provoke an audience in one form or another.

The main concept this thesis uses for a theoretical application is the human experience of ‘catharsis’. ‘Catharsis’ is a term dating back to the ancient Greeks that describes the purge of negative emotions and the subsequent restoration of positive feelings that can take place when a person experiences art (Berndtson, 1975, p. 235). The central argument of this whole analysis is that Italian audiences displaced the anger and anxiety they felt during the politically chaotic “Years of Lead” onto violent films they sought out as a form of catharsis. The “Years of Lead” were a time period in Italian history 1968-1988 marked by numerous kidnappings, assassinations, and terrorist attacks (Westcott, 2004). This relationship of violent times and demand for violent movies occurred alongside the lifting of censorship restrictions, making the

novel curiosity of sexual imagery coincidentally popular at the same time. The salacious aspect of these transgressive movies tracks along a similar timeline as the violence, but is quite different in its origin as well as its function. This history will be provided along with an explanation for why aggressive images would eventually fuse with the comparatively more benign titillation. Regardless of their impetus for creation, ticket sales fueled these grisly motion pictures for two decades, but their production stopped when the real-life carnage ended.

A detailed description of the relevant genres' rise and fall will put some parameters around what the catharsis theory is being applied to and what it isn't. Specific case studies of individual motion pictures will be limited to three because it is the sheer volume of all these movies that proves the overall cultural catharsis point, rather than a deep dissection of any one film's themes. The Years of Lead was a spiritual battle between fascist and Marxist dissidents over who could overthrow the centrist liberal democracy of Italy by using violence. While nazisploitation deals rather graphically with the subject of fascism, the other genres are not known for having any kind of political substance. Some critics have claimed that poliziotteschi films might have even been thematically promoting fascism, but these kinds of interpretations are extraneous to the more encompassing argument about catharsis and violence. Put another way, this analysis is arguing that the public wanted to see violent movies as a release valve because there was violence in society, regardless of who was causing it. The title of this paper is 'scarico', an Italian word for 'discharge', as Aristotle originally described catharsis. The subtitle "It's only a movie, most of the time", refers to the notion that as extreme as these films were, they were ultimately fiction, excluding the mondo documentaries.

Another large segment of the full thesis deals with the topic of sexploitation. This might seem an odd tangent, but anyone familiar with these genres knows the sexual content is so

prevalent and sometimes mixed with heinous violence that it's nearly impossible to avoid discussing it. To many modern gender scholars, it is the standout feature worth studying. Therefore, sexploitation must be explained in order to avoid counter interpretations of these films as reactionary statements against women's liberation. The entire Years of Lead will be expounded and placed in context within Italy's 20th century history. Perpetrators of political violence during the Years of Lead often had educated leadership, taking inspiration from successful prior revolutions in Russia, Germany, Spain, and of course Italy. While the topic could be limited to just the specific years of the conflict, this thesis has a historicist conception of society woven throughout all its passages. It is the belief that one cannot understand a culture without knowing its history and that each societal event is but one link in a falling stack of dominoes.

Considerable attention will also be devoted to Italy's censorship history, as lenient censorship is one of the prerequisites for transgressive cinema to exist at all. The bureaucratic attitudes toward violent and pornographic images will explain how and why the two elements could merge at times in certain genres. Italy's regulations will be contrasted with the American system because one must have a reference point for comparison when assessing something as extreme. This is an American thesis, so it is inescapably from this standard that all other countries' cinema will be judged. The final portion of the thesis will consider counter explanations for why these films exist. It will feature the opinions of psychologists who've investigated violent movies as a form of catharsis in addition to the comments of directors who make such content. A final concluding section will summarize the entire analysis and briefly speculate on what the legacy of these movies is or should be from a film studies standpoint.

How the cathartic theory of violent cinema is visibly observed in Years of Lead era cinema requires just a simple understanding of the situation. Hundreds of Italian motion pictures, spanning multiple genres, showcased excessive amounts of gruesome imagery and their audience popularity coincided with real life assassinations, kidnappings, and bombing terror plots. When the real-life violence ended, the movies fell out of favor with the public. A detailed history of the Years of Lead, Italian censorship, and an overview of key genres will be provided in this analysis, but none of that is essential to understanding the basic premise above. Mondo documentaries, cannibal films, gialli, poliziottesco, and il sadiconazista all feature plenty of horrific actions perpetrated against men, women, sometimes children and animals, but this can be observed by anyone, regardless of if they know anything about the movies' background. What is important to know is that these types of films didn't exist in large numbers before or after the Years of Lead. The movies are so numerous that their graphic content can't be interpreted as the work of just a few auteurs. They also can't be completely understood through genre theory because the violence was not limited to just one genre that a scholar could focus on. A horror film expert might have a theory about the violence in gialli films, but they'd be at a loss to explain why Italian police dramas and nature documentaries were equally gruesome during the same period. No other country has produced this kind of content at this magnitude so it can't be seen as a reflection of universal audience tastes either.

Whether one accepts the catharsis explanation or not, these films must be studied at least from a national cinema point of view. This means the movies must be seen as a product of the culture at that particular time unless a scholar is going to make the claim that Italians just inherently like sex and violence in movies more than other nations for some mysterious reason. When trying to pinpoint the cultural climate of that era, the Years of Lead is unavoidable

because this is what that entire period in Italy's history between 1969-1988 is referred to as. The phrase "Years of Lead" is not a name for an isolated event like "Bay of Pigs." The entire 1970s and '80s in Italy are characterized as being chaotic and violent with that phrase, in the same way that American historians refer to the 1920s as "The Roaring Twenties" or the 1930s as "The Great Depression." As with the case of American movies where the catharsis theory has been applied critically before, the core of the argument revolves around the timing of a movie release and its subsequent popularity rather than the specifics of how a particular genre works in any other era.

Although the catharsis connection between the Years of Lead and all these different Italian genres might seem obvious after it's pointed out, the observation is still novel for several reasons. Firstly, these genres, though somewhat popular in Italy for a while, were mostly unheard of outside its borders. Those who are aware of them and inclined to write something usually stick to one genre and apply a theory to it. In practice this could be using auteur theory to study Dario Argento's work in horror, gender theory for gialli, or exploring colonial themes in cannibal movies. Gialli, cannibale, mondo, poliziotteschi, and nazisploitation really don't have much in common other than that they are all Italian, violent, and from the same time period, so scholars typically don't group them together for any kind of analysis. This lack of connection between the genres also means that someone who is an expert in one category might be completely unaware that these other genres exist, or at least know very little about them. For the catharsis proposal of this analysis to occur to a scholar, they would have to be familiar with not only these unrelated genres, but with Italy's political history. All the material covered in this analysis was difficult knowledge to acquire until very recently because the movies themselves were limited in their home video availability and a local library would be unlikely to offer much literature about them.

Many have only become readily available in the 21st century because of DVD and streaming, while others are still languishing in celluloid vaults. Through this new technology, along with the use of modern internet databases, the similarities between all the works becomes noticeable. In this regard, though the movies themselves may be old and mostly forgotten, it is only with these decades of hindsight that modern scholars can fully understand the cultural relevance of this massive collection of Italian artifacts.

Chapter 1: Transgressive Cinema

This chapter explains what the term “transgressive” means in this thesis. First, it’s explained here what kind of person would find these movies to begin with. Following this explanation, some tools for quantifying movie imagery are described, namely the ratings systems used by governments. Why transgressive cinema matters is argued, along with a description of necessary conditions for this content to emerge in a country.

A Window Into This Content

The type of American scholar or critic who would be most interested in the subject matter of this thesis is likely someone who specializes in horror cinema. There are a few reasons for this and elaborating on them might give the reader an easier framework for understanding where the writer is coming from. Whenever anyone takes an interest in a niche subject, they usually stumbled upon it while investigating a broader topic that encompasses said niche. What this means is that, for example, someone who enjoys popular jazz music might explore lesser-known artists, discovering that they really enjoy something very specific, such as Brazilian jazz from the 1980s. It’s not impossible, but unlikely that someone would collect Brazilian jazz records while simultaneously having zero interest or awareness of mainstream jazz. This dynamic also applies to career fields. A person might have a broad interest in the legal system, but while in law school decide to specialize in insurance litigation. The reason horror interest is the most likely route an American would travel to find these Italian films is because the common denominator in most of them seems to be their intention to shock the audience. Horror films deal with the emotion of fear, which is distinct from shock, but the two overlap so often it can be difficult to separate them. Footage of a rendering factory might be shocking, but may not make a viewer feel afraid. However, that type of imagery is replete throughout many classic horror movies such as *The*

Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) because it does prime the viewer's mind for an uneasy mood packed with jump scares. It doesn't have to be this gratuitous; it could simply be something subtle like Norman Bates' taxidermized birds in *Psycho* (1960), but it's undeniable that shock is a regular component of horror, along with disgust.

So, the American horror-to-Italian exploitation pipeline can be explained with a simple imaginary case study. Let's say a person enjoys the gory horror drama TV show *The Walking Dead* (2010-present). This person decides to watch Lucio Fulci's *Zombie* (1979) out of curiosity. Realizing how unbelievably gruesome and bizarre this film is, the horror fan decides to watch other Italian horror productions in the cannibal and giallo slasher genres. Learning that the directors of these films also made gory and oddly sexualized works in other non-horror genres, they begin to notice these patterns in Italian police stories, westerns, and even documentaries. These other works may not feature the gothic trappings that characterize typical horror, but they are shocking enough in their own right that they can be considered "horror adjacent." For example, nazisploitation films are not macabre horror, but back when video stores still existed, those lurid movies would certainly have been placed in the horror section. The same goes for mondo documentaries like *Africa Addio* (1966) because it's likely only a horror enthusiast would have any interest in watching a VHS tape literally titled "*Africa Blood & Guts!*".

A second reason horror fans would be the most likely group to find these films is the universal quality that horror has. Comedies and romance films are very dialogue-driven, the nuance of which is something that doesn't translate easily because it's culturally specific. Horror, like sci fi, action and fantasy, is more visual based and requires less cultural understanding in order to affect an international audience. So hypothetically, it's more likely a fan of American horror would seek out some other country's take on that genre than it is for an American comedy

or romance fan to look for similar Italian works. The last reason an American horror enthusiast would be the most likely to find these films is because of the abstract nature of horror. Most horror films contain some element of unreality that resembles the nonsensical characteristics of nightmares. Critics who are fascinated by horror films often study them as allegories, in a manner similar to psychoanalytic dream interpretation. Just as someone might wonder what the monster in their dream represents, critics will ask themselves, “what does the monster in this film represent?” Since cinema reflects society, at some point the viewer will wonder what was going in Italy to inspire so much of this kind of content.

The catharsis argument of this thesis is on similar territory to claims that American hard rock music was inspired by the Vietnam war. Most hard rock music of the 1970s doesn't feature lyrics about war. Yet, the idea that the screaming vocals and howling guitars of Jimi Hendrix reflected deep anger is something that resonates with many once the connection is pointed out. The same has been put forth regarding 1930s instrumental jazz as an expression of racial agony. However, the connections between the music and the politics of its time is something that only makes sense with a tremendous amount of context. If young people in Cambodia were to listen to Miles Davis jazz records for the first time, would they perceive it as some rebellious statement against oppression, or just as easy listening? The same is true of Italian transgressive cinema. An American viewer unacquainted with these works would initially view them as nihilistic, prurient exercises in viciousness, yet knowing the context of Italy at the time makes it clear the filmmakers and audiences were lashing out against someone or something, somewhere.

Quantifying Transgressive Content

This thesis uses many synonymous terms to describe vaguely transgressive content throughout the analysis, creating ambiguity at times regarding how excessive a particular wave

of movies was. Thankfully, there already exists a shorthand way of classifying the levels of graphic imagery in movies that an American reader would be familiar with. It is the MPAA ratings system. Using this system to categorize foreign films may seem odd, but it's helpful for a few reasons. The biggest reason is that this thesis is aimed at an American readership who have seen these ratings on movie trailers and would know what they mean. Even if an Italian movie rating such as "T" or "VM6" were explained, the reader would have trouble remembering this information compared to the MPAA system.

A second reason for including this ratings overview is that the entire study is being viewed from an American perspective already, because there exists no neutral starting point from which to view culture anyhow. It is through comparison with American movie censorship that the differences in the Italian system become obvious. To start off, the Motion Picture Association of America is a trade alliance of studios that assigns ratings to films with the goal of preventing minors from seeing certain imagery. It is not a government agency (Johnson, 2019). Movies are voluntarily submitted to the association in order to be approved by theaters who are contractually aligned with these studios.

Since the ratings have been updated several times over the decades, a brief refresher on them can remind the reader of what kind of content they indicate. A G-rated movie ideally contains no scenes that could in any way be potentially disturbing to a child, with the "G" standing for general admission. PG ratings indicate some frightening images as well as very light violence, such as a slap. This acronym stands for "parental guidance", as a recommendation that some discretion is advised. The PG-13 rating recommends that no one under the age of 13 watch the program, although the theater is under no contractual obligation to prevent them from doing so. This rating was implemented after the first Indiana Jones movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

(1981) received outcry from parents at theaters (Harmetz, 1981, p. 7). The concern was over a scene at the end where Nazi soldiers' faces melt off in a gory mess. It was deemed too adult for PG, yet the overall film was admittedly not adult enough to warrant more stringent restrictions, so the PG-13 rating was created as a middle ground.

R-ratings suggest either coarse language, sexuality, or violence that is so explicit that the picture should only be seen by adults. Theaters are required by the MPAA to ensure that no one under the age of 17 is admitted without an accompanying guardian, enforcing this by checking identification. The final classification is the NC-17 rating, which denies anyone under the age of 18 a ticket, under any circumstance. NC-17 is reserved for those works that are either outright pornographic or so extreme in their violence that it could potentially induce trauma in a minor. Using these ratings as a heuristic for quickly categorizing transgressive content, the three phases of the arc of catharsis can be organized simply. The first phase, Initium (1968-1974), contains mostly movies that are equivalent to an R-rating. Ramping up dramatically, phase two Ne Plus Ultra (1975-1982) movies would almost certainly receive an NC-17 rating today. Italian exploitation cinema between (1983-1988) was when the public cooled to the more extreme content and the films in that era would likely be rated R.

Before the Years of Lead, Italian movies never went beyond a PG-13 level of content in either violence or sexuality. A scholar of Italian cinema would probably contest this claim at first due to the plethora of Spaghetti Westerns during the 1960s. Therefore, a thorough explanation is necessary to justify said claim, especially considering the entire premise of the thesis rests on it. Though explicit violence had been banned outright throughout the 1950s, it crept into gothic horror films in the early 1960s and a few gialli such as Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace* (1964). More importantly, the Spaghetti Western films popularized by Sergio Leone's *A Fistful*

of Dollars (1964), had become a staple of the Italian movie industry domestically and abroad. These cowboy pictures, though relatively tame compared to what followed, do feature liberal amounts of beatings, gunfights, and even an ear severing in Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966). However, the ear sequence in *Django* was supposed to be cut as the censors demanded, yet Corbucci claims he forgot to do so (Cox, 2009, p. 153).

The ability of the censors to enforce their mandates is a separate issue that will be elaborated on later. Legislatively the film commission at the time was following Presidential Decree no. 2029 of the year 1963, which did not consider violence in and of itself to be immediate cause for denial of authorization (Price & Verhulst, 2002, p. 57). In *Mavericks of Italian Cinema* Roberto Curti explains that this legislation allowed the censors to take the overall morality of the movie into consideration. (Curti, 2018, p. 47). This means that if a villain, who the audience is supposed to despise, harms others in a horror, western, or police drama, this is to be expected and not an indication that the film itself seeks to corrupt impressionable viewers. Still the imagery couldn't be too explicit. For example, *Django, Kill...If You Live Shoot* (1967), with its odd fusion of cruelty and homoeroticism, was pulled from theaters one week after its debut (Hughes, 2006, p. 134).

When one goes back and watches Spaghetti Westerns with a close eye for censorship, they will notice that the gunfights are not conducted graphically. They feature what is essentially one actor firing a prop gun with blanks and another actor clutching their chest and falling to the ground. There is no actual visualization of bullets exploding into a person by way of gunpowder pyrotechnic charges attached to the actor's clothing. This technology existed at the time if Italian filmmakers had wanted to use them, as a few can be seen in American movies as early as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). Still, few Italian filmmakers would waste the time and money to shoot

scenes with this dangerous technology only to have them rejected later. This is where one must really get into the weeds of minutia when making claims about violence in movies serving as catharsis for a violent society. The theory is not suggesting that movies did not feature violence as a narrative device in movies from previous generations. It is that they did not execute these actions as explicitly as possible by way of special effects, which would only be necessary if producers believed audiences were willing to pay more to see all the gory details.

Depicting violence with special effects in film doesn't change the narrative in any way; rather it changes the emotional impact. This is to say that when a character is killed, whether graphically or not, the audience still understands said character is no longer part of the story. Doing it more explicitly changes how the audience *feels* about what happened, which is in the realm of catharsis. For example, when Janet Leigh's character is murdered in *Psycho* (1960), the knife is never shown making contact. This generates a completely different audience response than a film like Pupi Avati's *The House With the Laughing Windows* (1976), which shows the knife penetrating the body repeatedly, using a pig carcass to achieve the effect (Curti, 2017, p. 210).

This speculation about what is shown versus unshown really gets to the core of what makes images, not just in cinema, but in general, so powerful. When something is witnessed with the eyes, it truly is processed in a different part of the mind than when it is merely imagined or read. Reading about a war in *The New York Times* is not the same experience as watching actual combat footage and this is also the reason that erotic literature is treated completely differently than even the most artistic forms of pornography. This is what media theorist Marshall McLuhan explores thoroughly in his book *The Medium is the Massage* (1967). It was his idea

that various mediums create radically different perceptions of messages, even when the expressed underlying content is identical.

Why Transgressive Cinema Matters

Italian filmmakers made some outrageous films forty years ago, but why should we care? Why study this at all? Well there are a few ways to respond to such a question and they depend on the perspective a viewer has when evaluating a piece of art. In the 19th century there was a popular phrase in certain bohemian circles, “l'art pour l'art” or “art for art’s sake.” Those espousing this creed believed that the value of art is independent of the moral, political, or informative purposes behind its creation (Ruckstuhl, 1917, p. 98). In some situations it was used as a rejection of Victorian moralism, other times a stand against Marxist politicization (Sultana Farooqui, 2018, p. 1861). Director David Lynch once seemingly took this position to defend his rapist murder mystery film *Blue Velvet* (1986) in an interview during its press circuit. When asked by a journalist why he wanted to make such a graphic piece, Lynch stated “I think this is entertaining, to me it is. I love watching it” (Midday, 1986). Due to the film’s critical praise, the interviewer pressed Lynch on why it was necessary to put an audience through such an ordeal and whether he had any real-life experience with the controversial themes the movie dealt with. Lynch responded that it was mostly based on his dreams and that an audience could “become a voyeur” by way of his film if they wished to.

Someone adhering to this philosophy could see the films covered in this research and praise them for their pulp entertainment value or simply dismiss them as distasteful, ultimately concluding that they are what they appear to be on the surface, nothing more, nothing less. To extract any artistic value out of these films at all, a critic would generally evaluate individual works on a case-by-case basis, focusing on how formal features achieve an emotional effect in an

audience. Despite these films' relative obscurity within the legacy of global cinema, a considerable amount of literature has detailed the ways that their makers have achieved suspense, shock, and titillation through camera position, movements, lighting, lenses, music, and editing. This thesis, although detailing the style of certain films to provide context, is mainly focused on why Italian society was preoccupied with these unusual genre conventions. Unusual in the sense that most nations do not have any film movements of their own that were comparable to the kind of transgressive titles that poured out of Italy for several decades.

In the macro view of things, it's obvious that major societal changes in any country affect what's on the mind of the public and the emotions they feel. This inescapably impacts what kinds of films audiences want to see. For decades film critics have used this understanding to explain why certain film movements were popular for a specific time only to vanish shortly after. In American cinema studies, the box office appeal of 1950s giant monster movies is often explained by the public's newfound terror upon entering the atomic age (Waldman, 2013). The explosion of spy movies and television shows during the 1960s has been studied as a reflection of the public's fear of Cold War communist infiltration (Ward et al., 2021). Vigilante film critics have made the case that the anxiety from rising crime rates in the United States during the 1970s led to the public's consumption of violent retributive crime pictures such as *Death Wish* (1974) and the *Dirty Harry* series (Lim, 2009). Film scholars Thomas Frenzt and Janice Rushing argued in their book *Projecting the Shadow* that many modern sci-fi films such as *The Terminator* (1984) and *Blade Runner* (1982) tapped into audiences' vague apprehension toward technology as personal computers were emerging (Rushing & Frenzt, 1995).

However, the connections between the source of the public's anxiety and the events depicted on screen are not always apparent. Read any in-depth analysis for *Easy Rider* (1969),

The Wild Bunch (1969), *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967) or *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and their allegorical relationship to the Vietnam War will invariably be mentioned (Nayman, 2020). A perceived deep resonance of those violent films with audiences at the time is often attributed to their evocation of the Vietnam conflict on some level despite them not depicting warfare at all. What made the relationship between the Vietnam War and the movie violence popularity noticeable to critics was their simultaneous occurrence then disappearance. Had the level of intensity featured in those movies always been a staple of Hollywood, drawing any correlation between real life war and the silver screen ugliness would've seemed a dubious claim. If cinema had remained perpetually grisly since the 1960s up to the present, these critics' observations of corollary cause and effect would also have appeared tenuous. It was the clear beginning and end points for the waves of popular, yet nihilistically brutal Hollywood pictures of the late 60s and throughout the 70s that made the relationship obvious.

With some notable exceptions, the vast majority of Hollywood's output before 1967 was designed so that children could be admitted, due to the enforcement of the Hays Code restrictions (Mondello, 2008). By the late 1960s, when the American death count and dissatisfaction with the Vietnam conflict reached its zenith, Hollywood began producing numerous movies restricted to adults only that featured squibs. Squibs are the explosive charges attached to packets of fake blood that simulate gunshot wounds (Lincoln, 2017). The downbeat endings of all the above films, where the main characters died, was a striking demarcation from all that preceded them. When these and other similarly styled pictures proved immensely popular with audiences, critics were quick to take note of negative current events' impact on box office performance. Other aggressive and tonally abrasive works like *Soldier Blue* (1970), *Billy Jack* (1971), *Dirty Harry*

(1972), and *Taxi Driver* (1976) continued into the next decade, but eventually declined in their popularity as the Vietnam conflict became a fading memory.

The release of William Friedkin's epic *Sorcerer* (1977) can retrospectively be seen as the point by which audiences had reached cathartic closure over the Vietnam conflict, at least as box office trends go. Friedkin's picture was a grim story of mercenaries, criminals, and terrorists smuggling nitro glycerin through the jungles of South America whose trucks explode at random. The film was a box office disaster, completely overshadowed by the inspirational children's fantasy *Star Wars* (1977), released at the same time (Guerrasio, 2014). A new era of hopeful family-oriented pictures dominated the 1980s with titles like *E.T.* (1982), *Gremlins* (1984), as well as the *Indiana Jones* and *Back to the Future* series. A handful of grim Vietnam-set pictures popped up periodically throughout the decade, such as *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), but the wave of brutally pessimistic Vietnam angst displacement movies had reached its crest a decade earlier, with the wake rolling back into general escapism. By the 1980s even movies specifically involving war were popularly jingoistic, with military victory assured in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Commando* (1985), and *Missing in Action* (1984).

A more recent example of how audiences displace their anxieties onto a movie, specifically violent ones, was proposed by film scholars covering the wave of "torture porn" horror popular from the mid 2000s and into the early 2010s (Collis, 2020). These movies revolved around people caught in unfamiliar circumstances, sometimes foreign countries, who are tormented relentlessly by their captors with surgical instruments and power tools. The titles of these works became known far beyond a select audience of gore hounds, with *Hostel* (2006), *The Human Centipede* (2010), and the *Saw* series becoming household short hands for gratuitous low brow entertainment. Although hardly praised for being high art, these films have endured a

mild renaissance of appreciation among some films scholars as cultural artifacts from the War on Terror (Kerner, 2015).

As with many of the other film movements noted above, the relationship between their content and contemporary events can sometimes only be made obvious with the privilege of hindsight. By retracing the timeline of world events occurring alongside their release, the connection becomes obvious. In 2002, due to the novelty of internet videos in a pre-YouTube era, the world was subjected for the first time to a new type of cyberterrorism with the beheading footage of American journalist Daniel Pearl (Kermani, 2021). In April 2004, CBS News published an exposé on the bizarre rituals the American military forced upon captives held in an Iraqi prison called Abu Ghraib (Leung, 2004). The Abu Ghraib scandal and the beheading videos that followed the Daniel Pearl incident were occurring during a several year period where the use of waterboarding by the U.S. military was a national topic of debate over its ethical and legal ramifications. It was in this climate that in October of 2004, a low budget (\$1 million) horror film called *Saw* (2004) became a box office sensation, grossing \$103 million worldwide (Clark, 2021). Its success not only paved the way for its own franchise, but also the *Hostel* and *Human Centipede* series along with lesser-known titles like *Captivity* (2007) and *Turistas* (2006). Just as the public's fears led them to seek gruesome entertainment to purge negative emotions, the subgenre's popularity dwindled once administrations changed and new concerns were placed in the forefront. The examples of Cold War monster pictures, Vietnam angst movies, and Iraq era torture flicks demonstrate that whether a critic enjoys them or not on a personal level, these transgressive works reflect the culture of their time. If culture is worth studying at all, then the Italian output covered in this thesis is a worthy subject for humanities scholarship.

Prerequisite Conditions for Transgressive Cinema Movements

The phenomena that critics have observed, linking the extreme films of the post-Vietnam years or Iraq War era with violence in the news is something that could happen in any other country with a developed movie industry, assuming censorship didn't intervene, and this is the case with Italy during the Years of Lead. The calling of these works "extreme" in the previous passage is not an arbitrary descriptor. Rather, it points to their condition of existing outside the ordinary or average for what general audiences typically wish to experience through cinema. If one were to hypothetically plot all of world cinema onto a statistical distribution chart, there would exist some range for what could be considered "normal" levels of violent imagery. Certain war films might cause a spike here and there, but for the most part audiences do not seek out this kind of grisly content consistently. If they did, then the terms for subgenres like "splatter" would have no meaning because all films would have those elements. It would be a term as vague as "drama", since all films possess some amount of drama. It is through their rare occurrence as tail phenomena on a bell curve, so to speak, that these types of extreme cinema can be so easily observed. Because Italian cinema didn't display that kind of graphic imagery in large numbers before or after the Years of Lead, the period where it was prominent calls attention to itself and warrants further inspection.

The shocking films that came out of that time and place were a result of perfect circumstance because a set of conditions must be met before this "violent reality leads to violent movies" paradigm can occur in a country. The first condition that must be met is for the nation to have a domestic film industry. Filmmaking is taken for granted as a mainstay of culture in the United States because Hollywood just so happens to be the oldest film industry in the world as well as the largest in terms of revenue (Bakker, 2008). However, many countries historically and

even to this day do not have either the capital required for the labor-intensive process of movie production or the infrastructure for their distribution. In Liberia, for example, the last theater was closed during the civil war there in the 1990s and new theaters weren't reopened until the mid 2010s (Page, 2016). The first national production shot entirely in Guatemala was *Silencio de Neto* in 1994 (King, 2000, p. 292) and the first Honduran feature *No hay tierra sin dueño* was released in 1996 (Erazo, 2015). Zimbabwe's film industry currently consists of amateur productions shot on camcorders or cellphones in under a week using skeleton crews (Ureke, 2020). Their main exhibition channel is YouTube.

The second condition for this thesis' catharsis paradigm is there must exist some kind of violence occurring on a wide enough scale that it affects the collective consciousness of the population. These conflicts could be occurring either domestically through revolution and terrorism or they could be taking place in foreign country where it affects the domestic citizens somehow, such as a war. Every country has its fair share of violent crime, but it would have to reach a fairly high level of death in order to be comparable to something like the Vietnam War or the War on Terror.

Here is one reason why the emergence of shocking cinema in a country, at least in terms of the number of productions, is so rare. There are many countries around the world currently in the grips of civil war, revolution, or out of control crime, but as a result their film industries are too dysfunctional to create the kinds of films covered in this piece with enough proliferation to be observed as a cultural movement, rather than as the product of a regional auteur's imagination. Conversely, many of the nations leading the world in film production have populations living a relatively safe and stable existence to the extent that they seek no catharsis via extreme cinema. There will always be those in any population who seek out such material,

but it wouldn't constitute a large enough share of the box office to be considered a societal phenomenon.

A caveat to this, which is also the third and final prerequisite for transgressive film movements, is that there must also be a censorship system that allows for extreme images to be shown publicly. There are only a few nations in the world that would allow for these kinds of movies to be distributed in any era including the present. For example, in India the Central Board of Film Certification regularly asks its directors to remove scenes from films that include extreme violence, sex, and elements that are politically subversive (Ahluwalia, 2017). Among their classifications is the category of "S" which states that a particular work "should not be viewed by the public" with the possible exception of certain doctors and scientists (Katarki et al., 2018). In 2015 India banned 77 films from being released (Ahluwalia, 2017) including *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), despite all the nudity being excised prior to submission to the CBFC (Child, 2015).

Of the three prerequisites for transgressive cinema movements outlined earlier, India would meet the first two. It has the largest film industry in the world by number of productions (Kim et al., 2017, p. 36) and certainly its fair share of political strife to inspire cathartic cinema, but its censorship status would prevent virtually all of the movies discussed in this thesis from even being made, much less released on the public. In fact, many of the most prolific film production countries ban the kind of transgressive movies mentioned in this article, as demonstrated by France banning *Antichrist* in 2016 (Lee, 2016), Norway banning *A Serbian Film* (Flowers, 2021), New Zealand banning *Hostel Part II* (Rutledge, 2007), and Australia banning *Human Centipede 2* (Miska, 2012). These are recent examples, but the extreme Italian films of the Years of Lead were also blocked back then, with Australia prohibiting the exhibition

of *Salò* (Browne, 2008), Iceland banning *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) in 1992 where it is still banned (Szabo, 2020) and Finland blocking *House on the Edge of the Park* (1980). In the case of *House on the Edge of the Park*, it took six years after its production before a distributor even tried to get it released in Finland, knowing the process would prove difficult. In fact, this merely brought the film to the attention of the censorship bureau, who not only refused it a certificate, but also made it illegal in the country for 15 years (Shipka, 2011, p. 119).

All three conditions listed above prove why the brutal Vietnam angst films of New Hollywood, the torture films of the 2000s, and of course the Italian transgressive output of the 70s and 80s was and still is a rare emergence of converging societal influences. Even within the specific confines of American or Italian cinema, all three conditions still must be met for the “violent reality leads to violent movies” paradigm to take place. A film like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) would not have been produced in America during the immediate aftermath of World War II, when it would have been most relevant, because the Hays Office would have blocked it. Italian society would have been ripe for cathartic cinema in the aftermath of the Mussolini regime’s devastation, but it would be unthinkable for the Cinema Central Office to allow something like *The Night Porter* (1974) to be produced or distributed in the 1940s. It’s possible that it wouldn’t even be releasable in the decades after the 1970s because censorship does not become more permissible in all directions as time goes by. Many things that were considered shocking to audiences fifty years ago are now seen as benign. On the other hand, many films from previous eras that were seen as wholesome family entertainment are retroactively seen as horrifying, perhaps due to antiquated racial or gender depictions, and would never be allowed now. This reversal of leniency has been documented as it relates to violent imagery, quite notably with the case of slasher film *My Blood Valentine* (1981). The American slasher film

Friday the 13th (1980) had proved tremendously successful at the box office despite its gruesome content, which prompted backlash from some in the press. Film critic Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* asked his readers to write one of the actresses in the film to complain about the level of violence (Eggertsen, 2015). Slasher film scholars have noted the pressure the MPAA was under to increase censorship of scandalous content with the new era of conservatism brought on by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 (Williams, 2015, p. 185). As a result, *My Bloody Valentine* (1981) was notoriously cut to ribbons by the censors before its release, with at least three minutes of the feature excised (Rockoff, 2011, p. 106). American movies in the 1980s were more restrictive than what was allowed in the '70s, a reversal of leniency. If a viewer wants to understand a transgressive cinema trend, from a cultural point of view, they should be aware that most, if not all, of the preconditions listed above had to have occurred for that product to even exist.

Chapter 2: Catharsis

This chapter tells the reader what the concept of catharsis is and how it's been discussed historically. Moving beyond the basics, this section also speculates on how catharsis could work through cinema. Finally, the reader is introduced to a concept, coined for this thesis, something called the "arc of catharsis". It's the idea that the movies of the whole period have sort of a rise and fall pattern when it comes to their gruesomeness. They escalated in their intensity over the years before becoming tame again.

Catharsis Explained

Assuming the societal conditions are met for shocking cinema to exist, how does catharsis work within this framework? Catharsis is a concept found in the oldest text on dramatic theory, Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in 335 BC (Butcher, 2021, p. 8). *Poetics* is an analysis of many written forms of creative expression, including lyric poetry and epics, but is mostly concerned with the structure of drama (p. 1). Split into two volumes during ancient times, the first half covered tragedy while the second portion discusses comedy (Watson, 2015, p. 3). Considered lost for centuries, only the first volume was rediscovered in the Middle Ages and it is this document where catharsis is described. The text posits that tragedy is serious in tone and that it should tell the story of a person experiencing a reversal of fortune in some way (Butcher, 2021, p. 8). The gruesome agony of *Oedipus Rex* creates terror and sadness in an audience and it is through these emotions that a viewer can feel relieved and refreshed. Philosopher Richard McKeon's *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, sourced from the definitive Oxford translations, additionally refers to catharsis as "tragic pleasure" in its table of contents (McKeon, 1941, p. iv).

In the centuries since *Poetics* was rediscovered, the concept of catharsis has remained a point of contention among scholars over its contextual meaning. Aristotle doesn't define

catharsis within the text itself and his prior writings use the word in its strict medical sense, referring to the evacuation of menstrual fluid (Haberg & Jos, 2015, p. 193). It's clear that within *Poetics* the term becomes a medical metaphor for emotional purgation and this usage has persisted to the present day (Sifakis, 2001, p. 88). Many if not most of the Italian films covered in this thesis are tragedies, specifically one of the four types classified by Aristotle, that of "spectacle" (Halliwell, 1998, p. 337). These are those works that have a horrific tone such as retellings of the Prometheus myth and plays involving the Graeae "grey witches" (Grimassi, 2003, p. 11).

In the modern era, catharsis is often associated with psychology due to the work of Austrian physician Josef Breuer and his influence on Sigmund Freud. Freud is now known as "the father of psychotherapy," but his education was a conventional doctorate in physiology (Suloway, 1983, p. 22). Several years after graduation, Freud attended a three-month conference French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot was hosting on hypnosis research (Aguayo, 1986, p. 222). This inspired Freud to delve deeper into psychopathology and away from neurology, putting on hypnosis demonstrations in front of audiences and purportedly curing the hysterical on stage (Aguayo, 1986, p. 222). During this time Josef Breuer was a renowned physician with several medical discoveries under his belt, such as uncovering the role of the vagus nerve in breathing, a reflex now called "Hering-Breuer inflation" (Comroe, 1976, p. 108). In the early 1880s Breuer had a patient named Bertha Pappenheim who was experiencing paralysis of the limbs. To Dr. Breuer's surprise, the symptoms not only had no physical origin, they would also dissipate when she discussed her troubles during their visits (Guttman, 2001, p. 2). This "talking cure", as the patient would later describe it, treats somatoform disorders when the patients relates their repressed trauma, anger, and anxieties to their doctor, purging the

negative emotions. Breuer called it the “cathartic method” and Freud began treating his patients through this approach when his hypnosis methods proved inconsistent (Guttman, 2001, p. 2). This is the basis for modern psychotherapy or “talk therapy.”

Catharsis in Cinema

Canadian horror director David Cronenberg once stated in an interview his belief that "Catharsis is the basis of all art," (Garber et al., 2018, p. 230). He was referring to the nature of art generation, where a creator feels an idea or an emotion so strongly that they must express it in something, else they are unsatisfied until they do. In his case, reporters have asked him on many occasions over the years, why his films contained such vile bodily transformations. He has explained that he personally has a strong revulsion and preoccupation with diseases of the flesh and that this is his primary fear in life (Kennedy, 2021). Rather than worrying over attacks from humans or the supernatural, he is most threatened by tumors, lesions, and decay, but also the elongated cellular death that is the aging process. Cronenberg creates fantastic visions of impossible ailments in order to free himself of these anxieties. This is similar to comments made by painter Francis Bacon regarding why he made such macabre tableaux of viscera, calling his crucifixions "a magnificent armature on which you can hang all types of feeling and sensation" (Jeffery & Minissale, 2009, p. 191). The artist Henry Moore once said, "If I were psychoanalyzed, I might stop being a sculptor.," (Martin, 2015). In some situations, a creator's understanding of their own psychological motivations behind what they make may be unknown to them, because they are displacing very complex emotions onto a project. For example, it's highly probable that Michel Foucault's books *Birth of the Clinic* (1963) as well as *Discipline and Punish* (1975) were somewhat influenced by his conflicted childhood relationship with his strict surgeon father who he described as a “bully,” (Miller, 1993, p. 39).

Delving further, Cronenberg's above quote also applies to what an audience extracts from any artwork when they consume it. In the case of cinema, the value that a film has to a particular viewer is proportionately tied to the amount of emotion it can generate in them. If the viewer feels nothing at all, they will dismiss the product as being without merit. The action that different artforms have on the consumer varies based on the medium. Meaning that the attributes a building must have to be aesthetically pleasing are different than what makes for a fulfilling book. Cinema is a narrative artform, similar in many aspects to the theater and fictional literature in that it must create emotion within the frame of a story, in a way that music, for example, does not. It's possible for a movie to merely hold one's attention through captivating visuals, but if it's unable to inspire deeper feelings through empathy, it will generally be considered superficial entertainment rather than art. This is what critics are experiencing when they describe something as "style over substance."

The movies an individual treasures most in the long run are those that evoke the richest emotions. It is no coincidence that the genre of drama is the category that describes the vast majority of what scholars consider to be the masterpieces of cinema, because drama can replicate the most powerful feelings a human being experiences in life. These are the sometimes-overwhelming emotions surrounding major life milestones such as the death of a family member, finding love for the first time, the wonder of childhood, becoming a parent, and feeling that one's life made a difference. Of course, these are only a few examples because there are an infinite number of niche situations in a story that can bring catharsis. Certain scenes can evoke emotions that are so complex that they are difficult for an audience to articulate why they are cathartic, such as a character accepting that they will never change or forgiving someone who doesn't deserve it. It is nearly impossible to give a concrete definition for what art is exactly, but within

the logic of this thesis, cinematic art is moving images that achieve catharsis in a viewer on some level. Anything that doesn't is just entertainment.

Abraham Maslow was one of the most cited psychologists of the 20th century (Dittmann, 2002) and he is perhaps most famous for his "Hierarchy of Needs" pyramid outlining what constitutes a fulfilling life. The bottom of the pyramid pertains to the baser instincts of humans, the need for safety, food, water, shelter. Further up the pyramid are those needs that are less immediate, such as the need for companionship, recognition from peers, and wanting to reach one's full potential (Deckers, 2018, p. 4).

Conflict is the basis for all storytelling and it is the desire to see it resolved that holds an audience's attention. Every narrative has its own unique conflict and these are not all equally of the same gravity. In some movies, the conflict revolves around something relatively trivial, like trying to plan the perfect birthday party, while other films might deal with some infinitely more serious like genocide. Whatever the core conflict of the story is, the root psychological need it operates on can be plotted on Maslow's pyramid. Horror films, with their focus on death, usually fit at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy, the need to physically survive. On the opposite end of the spectrum are those movies that deal with concerns a person has when all their urgent needs are met. *Amadeus* (1984), for example, is the story of a man obsessed with becoming a renowned composer, above all else. Since this character is already wealthy, he focuses on what Maslow called 'self-actualization' (Deckers, 2018, p. 10) or the higher aspirations a person strives for when they don't have to worry about anything else. The core conflict of this story is the frustration felt from not receiving the societal recognition one feels entitled to.

Like options on a restaurant menu, having multiple genres to choose from allows viewers select the one that will create the catharsis they are looking for. It's odd to say that anyone enjoys

crying, many do not since it is often brought about through emotional pain. However, the desire on some level to experience it is why audiences will elect to see harrowing stories of indescribable suffering, like *Schindler's List* (1993), because of the cathartic peace they find when it ends. It fulfills the same psychological function that grieving a tragic event does. Many of the films in this thesis cater to an emotion that is less commonly sought after through cinema, that of disgust. The profitable mondo and cannibal films during the Years of Lead were marketed as featuring revolting imagery, something that is too unpleasant an emotion for some to voluntarily endure. Although catharsis of all kinds is the appeal of cinema in general, it is the purgation of anger and fear through witnessing violent imagery that is the most pertinent to understanding the Years of Lead movie output.

Outside of movie watching, people purge anger through a multitude of ways. Many will stoically suppress the feeling until it passes. Others will vent their thoughts to a receptive confidant, which is the basis of the cathartic method used in all talk therapy. A smaller percentage of people will indulge in arguments or even damage property and persons. Whether it works or not, in terms of relieving the frustration, the impulse behind consuming violent imagery is the same as these other outlets. The ways that people regulate their emotional state varies from person to person and, much like diet, what works for one may not for another. Seeing as how numerous kidnappings, assassinations, and bombing took place during the Years of Lead, it's obvious that the public was quite fearful for the future of their country as well as their own safety. Like anger, there are many ways that people cope with their anxieties. Some just ignore it while others attempt to treat it through a variety of therapies. The cathartic method of talk therapy works both through professional counseling as well as informal rapport with family and friends. Fear that reaches a clinical level might be treated pharmacologically, but the most

effective long-term treatment for phobias is a process called “exposure therapy” (Whalley, 2019). This is a where a patient is exposed to a fearful stimulus repeatedly over time until their anxiety begins to diminish. While working well for irrational fears, the public’s worries during the Years of Lead were in fact quite justified. Where does one go to desensitize their fear of terrorism happening every day in the news?

Again, the cinema plays a role in the regulation of one’s emotions with results that are harder to measure. There are two components of a theatrical horror film viewing experience that provide this relief. The first lies with the projected film itself. Scary movies create the sensation of fear, but with the safety valve of being able to exit the theater when overwhelmed by imagery. This is like a rollercoaster ride that provides all the thrills of falling from the sky, but with the safety regulations of engineers. The second component is the audience itself. Theatrical screenings are a public spectacle, like a sporting contest, where attendees are expected to make raucous noise. Anyone who’s ever watched a football game on television knows the experience is completely different than at an arena where the energy from the crowd can induce a temporary state of benign mania. In a horror film screening, audience members will scream in unison as a specter appears or groan in agony as a character’s eyeballs are gouged. The cathartic nature of this social activity is sometimes obvious when screams are followed by laughter in those who feel slightly embarrassed that ridiculous visuals could bring out such a reaction in them. Upon exiting the theater many friend groups will joke with each other as to who among them was the most surprised and by which scene. In this regard, viewing horror pictures at the theater is the only place in all of society where people can collectively, yet anonymously feel these types of fear and scream out with no worry of being judged.

The Arc of Catharsis

Since the types of movies this thesis is preoccupied with didn't exist in large numbers before or after the Years of Lead period of 1969-1988, the connection between their graphic content and real-world events makes intuitive sense. One might then wonder if specific political occurrences in an individual year affected the movies of the following season. In other words, if an assassination took place in 1976, did this lead to an increase in assassination-themed movies in 1977? Although a distinct possibility, this study is instead making the case that it was the broader level of movie violence intensity that got elevated after those real-life events which caused either the most casualties or the maximum collective trauma. Throughout the entire Years of Lead various policemen, students, and political theorists were murdered. While each death would have made some impact in the news, these isolated attacks would not induce the same level of mass trauma as a high-profile assassination or a large-scale terror attack. The proportional impact of catastrophe on culture is not unique to Italy. Even though the 1993 assault on the World Trade Center killed 6 people, it was not a large enough event to make al-Qaeda a household name in the United States. Whereas the events of 9/11 were of such devastating scale that they completely ushered in a new zeitgeist, just as many have considered JFK's assassination the spiritual end of the 1950s. The graphicness of Italian movies during any particular year reflected the political conflict's intensity at that time.

While the entire Years of Lead resulted in transgressive movies, there is a narrower period within it that would constitute the apex for extreme imagery. The most egregious works, i.e., *Salo*, *Emanuelle in America*, *Cannibal Holocaust*, etc., were all released between 1975-1982. This seven-year stretch is also when terrorism peaked in Italy. The most assassinations of any year in the conflict occurred in 1979 (Seaberry, 1979, p. 1), former prime minister Aldo

Moro was killed in 1978, and the largest bombing took place in 1980, killing 85 civilians in Bologna (Armstrong, 2020).

Looking at the entire Years of Lead decades, it's clear that movies escalated in their graphicness during the early 1970s, peaked from 1975-1982, and became gradually less extreme throughout the remainder of the '80s. If this was represented on a hypothetical graph representing gruesome visual content's rise and fall over time, an arc pattern, resembling a bell curve, would emerge. Since societal catharsis is the overriding theory used to explain why these films existed, the conceptual trend above will be called the "arc of catharsis" going forward. A consistent theme in writings about catharsis is the notion that there exists a point when an audience member or psychiatric patient experiences some relief through the emotional purge. A viewer can experience this by witnessing a play, movie, etc., while a person in therapy achieves it through recounting their life events to an attentive confidant. Once audiences became satiated with the shocking content in any cathartic violent movie cycle, they moved on. Those in Italy still creating shock entertainment into the mid 1980s saw diminishing box office returns until those types of films were no longer profitable. So, the arc of catharsis is not only a representation of movie production trends, but audience tastes.

Because these various genres' content was changing in proportion to frightening cultural events, the history of both must be understood in order to see the full relationship. Organizing all the political events and cinematic trends in a chronological timeline is the most coherent way to communicate this information in literary form. A concurrent history of sexploitation will also be included. This might seem to be an unrelated subject for a study of cathartic movie violence, but it plays a major role in these films for several reasons. First off, the previously mentioned examples of cathartic movie violence cycles in other countries do not feature this sexualized

component. Vietnam war angst pictures of the early '70s and the so called "torture porn" movies of the Iraq War era are mostly void this kind of content. The *Saw* series, for example, is completely bereft of nudity, with the pejorative "porn" in "torture porn" referring to the excessive nature of their gore.

This is where the Years of Lead films distinguish themselves. Most of them feature at least what feminist scholars would call "the male gaze" or photographing women's bodies in a way that forces the audience to see the characters as sexual beings. Whether audiences respond to the intended effect or not, scholars who are following closely often object to the perceived manipulation of viewer perspective. Though generally applying to women in movies, in some cases it was the eroticized photography of the male form that landed filmmakers in hot water with the Catholic-leaning authorities. Pasolini's work is still prohibited around the world for this, as many of his performers appeared to be underage. For example, his film *Teorema* (1968) was denounced as a "homosexual fantasy" by the censors (Greene, 2011). However, most of the transgressive films this analysis refers to go beyond just a "gaze" because they often feature naked women throughout. Since this kind of imagery is presumably meant to be arousing, it can be especially unsettling when it's displayed alongside brutal violence. Even though modern *Rambo* pictures might have more onscreen gore and with more realistic special effects, the sexualized component of the Italian works is usually what makes them seem more extreme even after all these decades. Whether a viewer is a staunch conservative or a sex-positive feminist, many of these films have something designed to offend just about anyone. The filmmakers were aware of the potential outrage caused by this dynamic and it can be seen in their marketing. For example, the original Italian title for Sergio Martino's giallo film *Torso* (1973) was *I corpi presentano tracce di violenza carnale*, translated "The Corpses Bear Traces of Carnal Violence"

(Croce, 2009). Even though the fusion of sexuality with grisliness can be used to make films more confrontational, its absence in modern day works like *Saw* (2004) suggests the Italians were probably incorporating it because of the overall popularity of sexploitation at that time. So theoretically, if Italy were to make cathartically gruesome content today in response to political turmoil, a sexual element might not be present.

This thesis argues sexploitation cinema's international popularity in the '70s was an outgrowth of the 1960s sexual revolution while the violence in Italian movies was a reaction to the Years of Lead. The convergence of the two is what ultimately led to movies like *Nazi Love Camp 27* (1977). Interestingly, the presence of overtly sexualized, if not outright pornographic images escalated and dissipated on the same trajectory as the "arc of catharsis", but for different reasons that will be elaborated on later in the analysis. The two phases of the arc will be detailed ahead along with a specific movie analysis from each period that best embodied the trends at that time. All of the relevant political and cinematic history will be contextualized around them to explain why the key movies in question were chosen as a reference point. Since the phases are a categorization unique to this analysis, both will be granted a short Latin title as if to classify them taxonomically. Phase one "Initium" covers films released during the years of 1968-1974 and phase two "Ne Plus Ultra" from 1975-1982. The titles of the representative films from each period to be given case studies are *A Bay of Blood* (1971), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). To understand where these specific movies fit within genre categorization, a summation of the subgenres themselves is needed next.

Chapter 3: Case Study #1

This chapter is all about the movie *A Bay of Blood* (1971). However, the analysis can't just jump into critique immediately because there is simply too much contextual information the reader must know first. First, the movie must be placed into a genre the reader can understand. After this, the political situation in Italy at that time must be covered. There is also a discussion about all the over-the-top sexual elements found in films of the time, with the chapter providing some ideas about where that came from. Finally, the censorship laws of the time are explained to show how the prerequisites for transgressive cinema were met.

Overview of the Subgenres

With the basic premise of catharsis theory laid out above, it is now necessary to provide a brief explanation of the types of transgressive Italian films the theory is being applied to. It was previously mentioned that they cannot all be grouped into one category, but over time critics have found ways to place most of them into a handful of subgenres. The term "subgenre" is used because *gialli* are a type of horror film, *mondo* a bizarre subtype of documentary, etc. There are a number of other films mentioned in this piece that fall outside the bounds of coherent genre or even subgenre classification because there are simply too many discordant elements contained within them for scholars to be able to reach consensus regarding what the intended emotional purpose is. These are those select films where opinions vary as to whether the work is supposed to be seen as arousing, disturbing, humorous, or perhaps all three. However, by and large the conception of catharsis theory this thesis uses is applicable to the subgenres of *gialli*, *poliziotteschi*, *mondo*, *il sadiconazista*, and *cannibale*. These five categories cover almost all of the Italian films banned by the UK during the "Video Nasties" panic and each subgenre will need some basic description to catch a reader up to speed on these forgotten forms of entertainment.

A giallo film, plural form “gialli”, is a type of murder mystery that features a killer whose identity isn’t revealed until the end of the picture (Fischer, 2015). Most gialli involve an antagonist donning leather gloves who eliminates their victims through bladed weapons. Critics have noted that gialli served as a sort of precursor to the American “slasher film” and former professor of communication Danny Shipka estimated in his book *Perverse Titillation* that some 250 of them were produced (2011, p. 71). Poliziotteschi were police procedural detective stories or action movies involving organized crime (Front, 2016). Scholars have previously noted poliziotteschi’s connections to the Years of Lead because their plots often involved kidnappings, sometimes terrorism (Ashurst, 2022). A mondo film is a type of pseudo-documentary that purports to showcase real events of the bizarre, exotic, or violent nature (Lyne, 2018). The intention of mondo is ostensibly to disturb the viewer rather than inform them, hence the nickname “shockumentary.” Il sadiconazista or “nazisploitation” as it’s referred to in the English-speaking world, were movies set in Nazi concentration camps as a backdrop for depicting the most heinous human indignities conceivable by the content creators’ imagination (Magilow, 2012, p. 1). Cannibale, or “cannibal films”, were stories involving naïve, but well-intentioned journalists, anthropologists, or wayward travelers who one way or another wound up mutilated and eaten by Amazonian natives (Shipka, 2011, p. 112). Cannibal films, much like mondo, attracted additional controversy for their frequent use of genuine animal cruelty in their productions. Some of these five subgenres originated in the early 1960s, but all of them peaked in popularity during the Years of Lead, before diminishing in their output and vanishing altogether by the early 1990s.

One thing that needs to be made clear here is that the cathartic violence in these movies is the main thing spiritually tying them to the Years of Lead, in the same way that affrontive gun

violence is what most obviously connects films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) to the Vietnam War. Had those American films been rated G, it's unlikely anyone would have seen them as a reflection of the anti-war resentment. This is all to say that the plots of gialli, cannibal films, etc. don't involve Marxist and fascist radicals carrying out terror schemes. However, an overview of their history and content can at least create an idea in the reader's mind for what these subgenres really were and why they are this study's focus.

Mondo films are the oldest of the categories covered in this thesis, dating back to the subgenre's namesake origination, *Mondo Cane* (1962). Mondos are often referred to as pseudo documentaries because they always show transgressive images that could be genuine or fake. Preceding the mondo, documentaries were typically low cost, black and white, and generally informative movies shot on portable cameras using a celluloid format called 16mm. A favorite for industrial training films and classroom educationals, this format was also used by war documentarians in WWII and up through Vietnam until it was phased out by videotape in the 1980s (Trempe, 2016). In 1960 Italian journalist Gualtiero Jacopetti conceived of making a so called "anti-documentary" to be shot on the grander format of Hollywood style 35mm in color (Goodall, 2018). Teaming up with marine biologist Franco Proserpi and cameraman Paolo Cavara, the three traveled around the world for several years filming what they considered to be strange human and animal behaviors. The resultant product was *Mondo Cane* or "Dog World", a collection of well photographed, but mostly unrelated vignettes showcasing bullfights, mortuaries, brothels, and people eating bugs. The film was a surprise hit and inspired countless other low-cost bizarre travelogues.

While *Mondo Cane* was a relatively tame proceeding by today's standards, its imitations became increasingly violent into the 1970s. Antonio Climati's *Savage Man, Savage Beast* (1975)

for example, contains (probably fake) sequences where a man is eaten alive by a lion and another where a Patagonian native is castrated and murdered by a group of hunters. Mondo films, at least the theatrical Italian variation, mostly died out after the early 1980s, although shock videos persist on the internet to this day. Another important subgenre in this thesis is the Italian cannibal film. Not exactly horror movies per se, at least not in the sense of supernatural or gothic trappings, they involve foreigners being killed by natives of the Amazon in fantastically graphic ways. Beyond their notorious gore, cannibal films can usually be split into two camps as to what they are expressing thematically. Many of them, such as *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* (1977) involve well-meaning journalists and anthropologists who earnestly want to bring awareness to a cause that ultimately results in their demise. Others such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) play on more of a colonial theme, where exploitative intruders face their deserved comeuppance. The cannibal film cycle lasted from about 1975 to 1982, which is also the Ne Plus Ultra timeframe.

Gialli are the most acclaimed subgenre of the ones covered in this thesis, at least in the English-speaking world, with the praise directed at their formal technical merits rather than thematic ambitions. Several books have been written about giallo director Dario Argento's oeuvre although any notable list covering the best of this genre will also include the works of Sergio Martino, Mario Bava, among others. The reason gialli were more acclaimed is due to several factors.

Firstly, the compositional elements of gialli were perhaps better suited for visual experimentation than the other subgenres were and this requires some elaboration. Gialli are mystery thrillers and Italian directors realized that the anonymity of vast cities was a better location for such a story than the countryside. Setting the proceedings at nighttime creates more

suspense, so the combination of aesthetically pleasing Italian architecture and low light photography emerged. The exterior and interior locations of gialli are lit with a high contrast between light and dark, called “chiaroscuro” in painting (Taggart, 2018), which is just visually more striking than the flat outdoor lighting often seen in the other subgenres covered in this section. Another likely reason gialli have garnered more critical accolades is that the Italian fashion and cityscapes are just inherently more appealing to look at than the bland jungles and fields found in mundos, cannibale, and especially the oppressive prison camps of Nazisploitation. Gialli are the most accessible of the genres covered in this thesis, not only in terms of home video availability, but also in their more relatable Hitchcockian style aesthetic.

The word “giallo” is Italian for “yellow.” In the 1930s a publishing company called Mondadori released mystery novels in Italy with a trademark yellow cover that became so popular that the word for “yellow” became synonymous with suspense stories (Cicioni & Ciolla, 2008, p. 9). The first notable giallo films were made by Mario Bava in the early 1960s, but his *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963) and *Blood and Black Lace* (1964) were not successful enough to inspire imitations. It was Dario Argento’s *The Bird With the Chrystal Plumage* (1970) that started the giallo craze of the 1970s which ended by the late 1980s (Gallant, 2018). Violence in these mystery pictures is typical of what one might expect to see in an American slasher movie, with various bladed implements used to slice surprised victims. A curious aspect of gialli, especially the ones of Argento, is their emphasis on conveying pain to the audience. A reoccurring motif is characters having to walk or crawl through broken glass, barb wire, and touch scalding hot objects. Although, this was hardly a stylish flourish limited to one auteur, as pain motifs seem to show up in many other Italian works, such as countless Spaghetti Westerns where the hero is tortured.

Of course, Nazisploitation is where agony was most prominent in Italian cinema and this genre was also the shortest lived of the ones mentioned here. “Nazi Exploitation” films or “Nazisploitation” are a sort of torture subgenre that had a brief run of niche popularity in the 1970s. In Italy they are called “il sadiconazista” (Deighan, 2021, p. 122). The progenitors of Nazisploitation are Luchino Visconti’s Oscar nominated picture *The Damned* (1969) and the American “women-in-prison” film *Love Camp 7* (1969). Visconti’s work was considerably more sophisticated although no less transgressive than the American exploitation counterpart. Several dozen Nazi torture camp movies were made in Italy during the 1970s, with some exhibiting enough artistic sincerity that their legacy among film critics is elevated above exploitation. These acclaimed diamonds in the rough include *The Night Porter* (1974), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and *Salon Kitty* (1976). Irrespective of the quality of storytelling, the violence in all Nazisploitation films is more focused on creating degrading set pieces rather than the outright gore of a mondo or cannibal picture. Put another way, they are visually more about the destruction of the human spirit than the body, although there is definitely some of that as well.

The final genre in the cathartic violence analysis is the police procedural or poliziottesco. “Polizia” means “police” and the “esco” portion of poliziottesco is similar to the English suffix of “esque.” The phrase poliziottesco means “police-esque” (Ashurst, 2022). These were action detective movies that became popular in the ‘70s with their plots of bringing down the mafia, catching serial killers, or foiling bank robbers’ plans. Although not as overtly gory as the other genres covered, many of these police stories feature considerable gun violence, and some, such as *Like Rabid Dogs* (1976), *Savage Three* (1975), and *Almost Human* (1974) revolve around serial rapists. Author Danny Shipka’s book *Perverse Titillation* puts the timeframe of Italy’s exploitation movie boom as falling between 1960-1980, but these works actually persisted until

the late '80s, as seen with Fulci's *The Devil's Honey* (1986), Lamberto Bava's *Demons* series, Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust II* (1988), Michele Soavi's *The Church* (1989), and a few others. An important note on Shipka's timeframe is that although exploitation movies were being made in Italy as early as 1960, they were not of the explosively violent type common during the Years of Lead.

Each of the subgenres this analysis focuses on had their own boom and bust within the larger timespan the Years of Lead encompasses. Nazisploitation was popular in the '70s, mondo from the '60s to the early '80s, and police procedurals in the '70s, with Lucio Fulci's *Contraband* (1980) being considered a late poliziotteschi. Cannibal films started in the early '70s and petered out by the early 80s. Giallo films have a more ambiguous beginning and endpoint for popularity because although they technically originated with Mario Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* (1963) and *Blood and Black Lace* (1964), a trend wasn't ignited until the success of Dario Argento's *The Bird With The Chrystal Plumage* (1970). Even after the giallo boom ended in the 1970s, Argento continued to make them all the way into the 2000s. Yet, it's important to note that his are marketed as the work of an auteur, featuring his name boldly on the posters, and are not indicative of some continued overall subgenre popularity.

One of the things that emerges from time to time in art appreciation articles is various authors' attempts to pinpoint when a stylistic movement peaked before fading away. Hunter S. Thompson once described the end of the 1960s' spirit as "the high water mark — that place where the wave finally broke, and rolled back" (1971, p. 66). Cinema studies is no different, in that critics will ponder on what "the last great Italian Neo-Realistic film" or "the last true Spaghetti Western" was. Trying to isolate when exactly the cathartically gruesome Years of Lead movies stopped is debatable because films containing similar elements would still sprout up

every few years into the 1990s, such as Michele Soavi's *Cemetery Man* (1994). Perhaps the most fitting swan song for this entire era was Lucio "The Godfather of Gore" Fulci's *A Cat in the Brain* (1990). By the end of the '80s the audience demand for these kinds of pictures had gone away, so some producers conceived of one last gore movie cheaply comprised of footage from Fulci's older works. The footage was combined with new narrative material of Fulci playing himself in an alternate reality where he has ironically gone criminally insane from all the years of producing disgusting visuals. Retroactive reviews have compared *A Cat in the Brain* to Fellini's masterwork *8½* (1963), showing that despite the lowbrow content of the production, at least some critics viewed it with a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor. With this overview completed, one can better conceive of where the three key films in focus might fall within all these various subgenres.

Initium (1968-1974) and *A Bay of Blood*

The first time that graphically violent movies became a trend in Italian cinema was in the early 1970s. Because art movements result from the cumulative efforts of many creators, it usually takes some time for critics to notice that the observable patterns connecting the works are part of a larger cultural wave. Sometimes the chronological boundaries separating these movements can only be precisely delineated in retrospect. Meaning, that while a modern art critic might classify expressionism's popularity as peaking between 1914-1930, it is unlikely a critic living in 1930 would have declared that year as the cycle's end point.

Sometimes these hard dates cannot be established at all because art styles evolve gradually over time rather than suddenly emerge or become obsolete like a technological invention. This problem of putting historical parameters around cultural movements also applies to cinema studies. As an example, it's debatable whether the classic sci-fi picture *Forbidden*

Planet (1956) belongs to the 1950s atomic age cycle of *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956) or rather the space race era of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) because it straddles the line between the two.

Accepting these limitations of classification, Mario Bava's film *A Bay of Blood* (1971) will be chosen as not only the film that ignited a new era of violence in Italian cinema, but the one that best represents a trend applicable to probably a hundred other films in the early '70s. *A Bay of Blood* tells the story a wealthy matriarch whose murder involves a conspiracy to steal her inheritance, particularly the titular bay her mansion resides on. Her insidious relatives and their lovers wind up stabbing each other in the back, sometimes literally, turning what should be a line of succession formality into a gory game of musical chairs. A group of teenagers investigate the property for an afternoon of partying, believing it to be deserted after reading about the matriarch's death in the newspapers.

The film's murder mystery structure is a conventional "whodunnit", but where it stands out from other works of the time is in its brutality showcase. Victims are stabbed repeatedly in closeup shots, receive meat cleavers to the face, and the film ends with children accidentally killing their parents with a rifle. The ending is seemingly intended to be played for laughs, if the whimsical music cue is any indication. These grisly visuals were achieved through prosthetic appliances by Carlo Rambaldi (Bergan, 2018), the future Academy Award winning visual effects artist, best known for his design of the animatronic creature in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). As a bold decision on director Mario Bava's part, the murders in *A Bay of Blood* (1971) were explicitly showing what would normally be, either implied offscreen, or conducted with some degree of discretion in Italian films prior.

Since this imagery had been previously unallowed due to censorship, the financial success of *A Bay of Blood* created a new industry demand for graphic content. Soon producers of gialli and poliziotteschi sought other effects artisans such as Massimo Giustini and Giannetto De Rossi to replicate this violence in their movies (Brunetta, 2009, p. 204). Though rudimentary looking by today's standards, the effects in *A Bay of Blood* led to rapid innovation in effects authenticity, with one of Rambaldi's own subsequent creations landing him in court. The controversy surrounded a scene in the giallo *A Lizard in Woman's Skin* (1971) that depicted severed dog heads kept alive with IV tubes. It was perceived as so realistic that the director, despite the crew testifying the imagery was fake, almost received a two-year sentence for animal cruelty until Rambaldi provided the props in court (Jones, 2003).

However, the technical merits of these kinds of images are less important to this analysis than the impulse motivating their creation. Why did audiences want to see this content in 1971, but not 1961, and why wasn't it allowed before? It was explained in an earlier section that there are three preconditions a country must possess for cathartically brutal cinema to proliferate theaters. These are: a functional movie industry, out of control violence affecting the society, and lenient censorship standards. A historical understanding of these three aspects, as they would have been in 1971, when *A Bay of Blood* was released, will show why the gruesome cinema of early '70s Italy couldn't have been made prior.

The first prerequisite, which is having a working film industry, is obviously satisfied by the fact that Italy has been one of the largest exporters of movies for nearly a century, only slowing down during World War II and the civil war in 1943. While many authoritarian regimes in the world today make domestic film production virtually impossible, Italy didn't stop producing motion pictures even during its fascist era. To the contrary, Benito Mussolini founded

Cinecittà Studios in 1937 with the goal of making Italy a beacon of world cinema and to this day this facility remains the largest movie studio in Europe (Collinson, 2012). The bombing of Rome in 1943 and '44 rendered the studio unusable, yet many masterpieces continued to be made by shooting on location, using portable cameras, etc. There was no pause in movie production from the 1940s to when *A Bay of Blood* was made, so what about the other two prerequisites for transgressive cinema?

A Bay of Blood was released at a time when the film censorship laws in Italy had become considerably laxer than just a few years earlier. Roberto Curti is the editor of *Blow Up* magazine's film section (Bianchi, 2014) and has authored a number of books regarding cinema, including a two volume compendium called *Forbidden Visions*, that details the censorship of Italian cinema from 1947 to the present. These two books, co-authored with Alessio Di Rocco, are surely the most complete work ever written on the subject because they not only include every piece of censorship legislation adjudicated by the Cinema Central Office, but also list the entire index of every movie to have its content excised, with specific annotations of what was trimmed. Curti and Di Rocco split the volumes by time period, one for the years of 1947-1968 and another for 1969 to the present, because 1968 is when the transgressive works started to pour in.

In his book *Italian Gothic Horror Films 1957-1969* Curti describes how horror in the 1960s was generally about fear of the supernatural and “not yet about the horror of the body, as post 1968-horror movies would be”, (Curti, 2015, p. 46). By no coincidence, 1968 is also the starting point for The Years of Lead. The way that the laws went from so strict to lax from the 1950s to the 1970s was, to quote Ernest Hemingway, “Gradually, then suddenly.” In *Italian Gothic Horror Films 1957-1969* Curti make the case that film censorship changes were one of

many cultural shifts that happened as a result of what's known as the "Movement '68." This year-long event was sort of the spiritual precursor to the Years of Lead and will be mentioned in any article explaining the background of the bloody events of the '70s. In 1968 union strikes broke out and every college campus except Bocconi was occupied in May of that year (Breschi, 2012). Earlier in March, some 4,000 people had gathered at the University of Rome to take it over. College-aged members of a neo-fascist group called National Vanguard Youth as well as left-wing students seized parts of the campus and police were caught in the middle of what would later be called the "Battle of Valle Giulia." The chaos led to 400 injuries, 8 destroyed police cars, and 5 officers having their handguns stolen (Poggiola, 2008). In *Italian Gothic Horror Films 1957-1969* Curti writes "The year 1968, and all that came with it, was a fertile ground for heretic, iconoclastic approaches", (2015, p. 178). Cultural scholars often attribute much of these similar changes in the United States as being a reaction against the Vietnam War. However, the movement in Italy was more a consequence of its changing economy, with a surplus of working-class students being able to enter academia for the first time as a result of newfound prosperity. This upward mobility created a new class of intelligentsia eager to restructure society in a way that clashed with traditional Italian expectations.

Tracking the history of Italian movie censorship from the 1960s through the 1970s reveals that the censorship board had capitulated to pressure from the public and press to stop blocking the exhibition of certain provocative films. For example, the American movie *Trash* (1970) was blocked from exhibition in Italy. Roberto Curti writes "The ban caused a sensation, with ample coverage in the media, and the intervention of imminent cultural personalities such as novelist Alberto Moravia", (Curti, 2017, p. 90). So, directors would vent their frustrations to newspapers and magazines whose writers would then write scathing editorials about the tyranny

of the moralists at the Cinema Central Office. Though Italy's street activists had different motivations, the spirit of the times was very similar to the anti-Vietnam war counterculture in America that influenced music, fashion, politics, and cinema. Any modern American viewer of the transgressive movies covered in this piece can observe that the fashion and music in these films is of the same '70s style associated with America and other western countries during that time. This is to say that even someone completely unfamiliar with Italian cinema would notice that these films must have been made in the 1970s based on the characters' wardrobes, hairdos, and how interiors are decorated. This would not be the case when watching films from regions that were not connected to western culture at all during that time, such as Soviet Union territories or mainland China. Just as in the U.S, Italy experienced the hard rock and hippie counterculture in the 1960s that opposed the conservative norms of the previous decades.

However, it was different in some regards of course in that Italy had no connection to the Vietnam War and its demographics removed it from many of the civil rights racial issues experienced in America. The biggest thrust of all this social change in Italy during the late '60s stemmed from the rapid transformation of Italy's entire society in the decades after World War II. In retrospect, Italy experienced so many devastatingly jarring changes in government during the 20th century, it's obvious why each generation would have completely different values than the next. The country had endured a fascist system for twenty years before experiencing a total collapse of order during the civil war from 1943-1945. After World War II, the United States was one of the only developed countries whose economy had not been damaged by the conflict. It was able to implement what was called The Marshall Plan, a massive foreign aid package (\$114 billion in today's terms) to rebuild western Europe (Mingardi, 2021). After joining NATO in 1949, Italy became a recipient of this aid, which completely restarted their economy. The

Marshall Plan is credited with bringing forth the “Italian economic miracle”, creating 5% annual GDP growth all throughout the 1950s and ‘60s. Brands like FIAT and Ferrari became global players in the automobile industry while employing tens of thousands. As the standard of living increased, new portions of the population entered college for the first time and sought social change via the university system, just as American students of the boomer generation did. Much like the automobile industry in America during this time, unions had more power than ever and teamed up with student activists in the Movement ’68 (Poggioli, 2008).

Student protests are all well and good, however they wouldn’t constitute the “out of control violence” prerequisite for transgressive movies this thesis uses to explain the existence of these films. Had the cultural revolution stopped in ’68 with merely protests and beat poetry, the following decade’s cinema would have been considerably more benign. By 1968 the most notable change in Italian movies, in terms of transgressiveness, was a liberation of nudity and eroticism stemming from the sexual revolution. There is a scene in *A Bay of Blood* where a girl goes skinny dipping and is completely naked for an extended sequence as she is chased by the killer.

It’s moments like these that stand out because they are entirely absent from Italian movies just a few years earlier. Even when one looks through the director Mario Bava’s own filmography in the 1960s, there’s nothing this blatant. For example, his film *Kill, Baby, Kill* (1966) takes place in a Romanian village during the 19th century. Characters are being killed by the ghost of a child, placing the film firmly in the horror genre. Yet, this work, like Bava’s other 1960s horror films contains no nudity and only mild violence. This suggests that when he made *A Bay of Blood*, Bava was changing with the times, similarly to Alfred Hitchcock when he made

his rapist strangler film *Frenzy* (1972) which was way more graphic than *Psycho* (1960), *Vertigo* (1958) and his earlier thrillers.

The reason it makes sense to examine Bava's earlier work, in the attempt to culturally understand *A Bay of Blood*, is because he has the reputation for being an auteur. Most movies are made in such a way that the direction doesn't stand out as particularly unique. These are those works where, if critics were not informed who directed them, it is unlikely they'd be able to guess who it was. A lack of noticeable direction is very common in television shows, where the showrunners want to produce a consistent product over time, even though each episode might have a different director. This phenomenon can be seen in a show like *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), where nearly every episode had a different director (Kronke, 2012), yet the mise-en-scène and tone are consistent across five seasons. With this in mind, one could argue that most directors in television and film are what would be called a "director for hire." This is someone who is able to adapt what is on the script into a visual product, but without imparting a distinct creative flair, at least no more than anyone else on the production crew. An auteur is the opposite of this. Named after the French word for "author", these directors imbue their works with such artistic exuberance that they are unmistakably the result of a singular vision. When critics notice a bold style in a film, they begin to look for patterns in the director's other works, presuming they have made more than one.

With something as subjective and ambiguous as the cinematic experience, scholars will use many different tools to interpret it and auteur theory is one that would draw different conclusions about *A Bay of Blood* than this thesis does. However, if one were to go that route, some shared explanations would emerge. Mario Bava's movies are characterized by dramatic illumination of subjects, creating a stark contrast between well-lit faces and pitch-black portions

of the frame. In the Italian art tradition, this practice in painting is called “tenebrism” (Rzepinska, & Malcharek, 1986, p. 91). Tenebrism lent itself well to Bava’s gothic horror films of the 1960s, which made him popular, because their period piece settings logically featured characters whose maximum light source would have been candelabras. His works in horror from 1963 onward are famous for their opulent use of color, with the saturation levels approximating the 3-strip Technicolor look of 1930s Disney cartoons and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). In contrast to these Bava hallmarks, *A Bay of Blood* features realistic lighting and natural rendition of colors, as opposed to garish. The violence and salacious elements are unlike anything he had done before.

So, it’s radically different than his previous work, but of what relevance is this to catharsis? What all this demonstrates is that *A Bay of Blood* is more a reflection of the early 1970s cultural climate in Italy than it is a personal vision of Bava’s. In many cases movies are violent because that is simply the kind of art its creator wants to make. Chilean director Alejandro Jodorowsky was once asked why his films were so brutal. He angrily replied “I like violence. I love violence! I hate the weak person who goes to art and says, ‘oh that hurt me!’ Why make picture for that person? They are blind” (Barnes, 2015). This is a similar sentiment expressed by Quentin Tarantino in response to the same question. His answer was “I think it’s good cinema” (Legge, 2013). These examples show that some directors simply are acting out of personal preference and their work is not necessarily part of some other trend in society. Auteur theory lends itself well to these situations.

However, in Bava’s case, the director owed a tremendous amount of money in back taxes and needed to make a movie as soon as possible (Lucas, 2007, p. 850). He collaborated with producer Dino De Laurentiis who was looking to cash-in on the success of gialli movies at the time. As the Years of Lead were kicking off, Dario Argento’s violent giallo *The Bird With The*

Crystal Plumage (1970) became a surprise hit (Celli & Cottino-Jones, 2007, p. 171) and Bava was merely riding this wave all the way to the blood bank. It was clear that audiences wanted more and more extreme content and Bava was willing to provide it for the paycheck, making him more of a director-for-hire in this instance. Since these other gialli have been mentioned, it's appropriate to note that they were obviously more transgressive than what came before and were responding to Years of Lead as well. However, *The Bird With The Crystal Plumage* is markedly more tame than *A Bay of Blood* in terms of violence. Trying to quantify these variations in extremity can prove cumbersome, so some standards should be used.

The Years of Lead Influence

When *A Bay of Blood* was released in America, under the title *Twitch of the Death Nerve*, it received an R rating. Its distributors had tried to promote it as “The Second Film Rated ‘V’ For Violence”, as a gimmick, but were sued by the MPAA into retracting this (Lucas, 2007, p. 847). So what else was going on in Italy at the time that would lead to such a product? After the Movement '68, what started on campuses soon spread to other industries, with a series of factory strikes in 1969 known as “Hot Autumn” (Edwards, 2009, p. 5). The fallout from these strikes, combined with the 1973 oil crisis, spelled the end of the economic miracle, concluding a period of growth Italy has yet to return to (Carli, 1976, p. 708). In many nations throughout history, a sudden downturn in living conditions will cause the populace to seek the overthrow of the established order via revolutionary means, with various dissident groups competing for control over its replacement. Though starting off as left-wing demonstrations, the turmoil also inadvertently invited dormant fascist organizations to seize the opportunity of chaos.

The first causality of the Years of Lead was a policeman killed in a riot, but soon the violence escalated exponentially when four bombs exploded across Milan and Rome on

December 12, 1969, killing 17 people and injuring 88 (Mackay, 2020). The aftermath of this incident, known as the Piazza Fontana bombing, demonstrates how many of the attacks in the following decades were ambiguous from the public's point of view regarding who was culpable. The initial Piazza Fontana suspects were anarchist groups, leading to 80 arrests. When one of the detainees fell to his death from a police station window, several officers were investigated. One of these officers, Luigi Calabresi, was eventually murdered for his involvement in 1972 by the far-left paramilitary organization Lotta Continua. Even though anarchist novelist Pietro Valpreda and five others had been jailed since 1969 for ostensibly committing the attack, in 1972 police arrested neo-fascist intellectual Franco Freda and members of the far right Ordine Nuovo for plotting the event. The case would go through many incarnations over the decades due to venue changes, lack of evidence, then eventually acquittal and double jeopardy exemption. However, the current consensus is that Freda perpetrated the bombing in an attempt to bring about a return of the National Fascist Party (Mackay, 2020).

This time period also saw the rise in left wing groups taking up arms. One such case is the Red Brigades, a far-left guerilla group who, for two decades, committed numerous robberies, kidnappings, and assassinations, including the American diplomat Leamon Hunt in 1984 (Kamm, 1984, p. 1). Perhaps their most high-profile incident was the 1978 kidnapping and murder of former prime minister Aldo Moro in a machine gun ambush that also claimed the lives of five others in his security detail. These kinds of events were being perpetrated by various left and right factions all over Italy during the Years of Lead, with 659 attacks occurring in 1979 alone (Hoftiann, 1979, p. 28).

Many of the groups who would carry out attacks during the 1970s and '80s had their roots in the student movements of the 1960s, while others also incorporated older figures in their

leadership who'd been involved in dissident politics for decades. The suspects in the Piazza Fontana bombing are illustrative of how these terror groups were comprised of multiple layers including a political wing, a paramilitary wing, and an intellectual wing. The Italian Social Movement or "Movimento Sociale Italiano" (MSI) was the spiritual successor to Mussolini's ideology and the 4th largest party in terms of membership at its peak in 1963 (Hoffmann, 1971, p. 1). This party had ties to the terrorist factions, which caused it to lose public support in the 1970s when the violence got out of control. These terrorist groups were often founded by former politicians who broke off from the MSI, such as Stefano Delle Chiaie's group National Vanguard and Pino Rauti's organization Ordine Nuovo (Mackay, 2020). Pino Rauti was arrested for the Piazza bombing along with Franco Freda (Hofmann, 1974, p. 2). Freda was of the intellectual wing, producing literature and pamphlets through his publishing company *Edizioni di Ar*. Both Freda's writings and Rauti's terror organization were ideologically based on the "School of Fascist Mysticism", perhaps most associated with the works of anti-egalitarian occult philosopher Julius Evola (Colborne, 2022).

These same three layers of political, paramilitary, and intellectual, also describe the left-wing terror groups such as the Red Brigades, founded in 1970 by two students who met at the University of Trento's sociology department (Sundquist, 2010, p. 55). They later joined forces with factory activists and had some affiliation with the mainstream Italian Communist Party. In July of 1970 Ordine Nuovo bombed another train in Rome, killing 6 people (Chalk, 2012, p. 622).

These attacks terrified the public and not only did movies become more violent, they sometimes expressed the conflict of fascism versus communism in their stories. Bernardo Bertolucci's film *The Conformist* (1970) or "*Il conformista*" is one of the best snapshots of the

cultural concerns in Italy at that time. It tells the story of a Marxist ideologue who becomes a fascist bureaucrat with the change in governments, only to find himself tasked with assassinating a former colleague who is now an enemy of the state. Thematically expressing the momentum of history, the main character is tormented by a sexual encounter that happened to him as a child during WWI. He is only able to accept what happened in his youth at the film's conclusion when Mussolini is deposed. Featuring some graphic violence for its time as well as a homosexual subtext throughout, it remains one of the more prestigious Italian works from the catharsis arc's Initium period (1968-1974).

Something critics have observed about American horror films from the late 1960s and onward is not only their escalation in violence compared to what came prior, but also their contemporary settings (Stein, 2003). It was seemingly the standard for many decades to place horror stories in a period-piece location, typically the Victorian era. This was because, although scary stories had always existed, horror as a distinct literary form didn't become popular until the publishing of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and various H.G. Wells novels in the 19th century. When Hollywood was adapting these books, the studios kept the period settings the same for a few possible reasons. One is that the readers of the novels associated those stories with a particular era, so the gothic trappings were part of the intellectual property's brand image. Another reason is that the cruder technology of the 1800s lends itself better to creating feelings of isolation and fear. This is why even today, few horror stories take place in the city because it's much easier to convey helplessness in a remote cabin than in Times Square.

From the 1930s up through the 1950s Universal Studios adapted the classic horror novels with this aesthetic and it wasn't until the late 1960s that *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and

Rosemary's Baby (1968) broke the mold with their modern settings. The following decade was virtually bereft of period-piece horror, with the dominant titles of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Halloween* (1978) and *The Exorcist* (1973) taking place in the current. There is a reoccurring idea in horror history books that after the American public was exposed to graphic Vietnam War footage on television, they couldn't take these gothic turn of the century stories seriously anymore. This same exact situation could be seen happening in Italy if one closely followed the entire timeline. Although the entire genre of horror films had been banned during the fascist era, another one was attempted with *I Vampiri* (1957). Often referred to as the first Italian horror film, *I Vampiri* flopped (Shipka, 2011, p. 22). However, the success of the British work *Dracula* (1958) ushered in a new wave of Italian-produced gothic horror films such as Bava's *Black Sunday* (1960), *The Whip and The Body* (1963), all of which pushed the censors' patience. *The Whip and The Body*, for example, was seized in October, 1963 for "several sequences that refer to degenerations and anomalies of sexual life", (Curti, 2015, p. 107).

Still, author Danny Shipka claims in his book *Perverse Titillation* that these films were allowed a certain leeway not afforded to other genres because their period-piece settings and phantasmagoric aesthetic made the violence and sensuality seem removed from contemporary life (2011, p. 39). The 1960s in Italian horror is called "The Gothic Period" in film literature because theaters were inundated with these stories of castles, candles, and foggy graveyards (p. 38).

The major breakthrough into the modern era came with Argento's *The Bird With The Crystal Plumage* (1970). Argento's movie revolves around a hiply-dressed American writer on vacation with his model girlfriend. The two are stalked around Rome by a razor-wielding maniac. It was in this mold that all other gialli of the early 1970s were crafted. *A Bay of Blood*

also has a contemporary setting, with the murder of teenagers serving as an early prototype for the American slasher film genre of the 1980s. Shipka also argues in his book that gialli movies, in particular, reflected Italy's concern at the time over rising crime rates, something never featured before on television (p. 71). This raises a very interesting question about the catharsis theory. The premise of this thesis is that Italian audiences wanted to see violence in movies because of the brutality of the Years of Lead in particular. It goes without saying that the public's awareness of these events came mostly from the medium of newspaper and television. Shipka's argument adds another layer of variables, in that it's possible that it was specifically the widespread news coverage of the Years of Lead incidents that led to the public's anxiety, not the brutality itself. In other words, it could be that the public's perceptions of violence were shaped more by television than their direct life experience.

As a theoretical example, almost ten times as many Americans died in World War II than the Vietnam War, but the Vietnam conflict was televised with gory combat footage, while WWII was only in the printed page and short theatrical newsreels. So, the public's perception of the Vietnam War was more grounded in the gruesome reality of what was actually happening. The implications of this phenomenon are endless. A separate study could examine how in the present day the world is safer than it has ever been in history, yet any incident of violence is instantly spread through social media, which creates immediate feelings of danger in the viewer. As a radical contrast, journalist Max Frankel wrote a piece in *The New York Times* stating that the paper only mentioned The Holocaust six times during the entirety of World War II (Frankel, 2001).

Information like this and Shipka's television argument inescapably force this analysis to add another small caveat to the catharsis theory, the influence of ever-changing technology

occurring alongside the non-stop flow of cultural events. Even if chaos is going on in society, the public must also have media access in order to emotionally respond to it. In fact, it was mentioned earlier in this thesis that the entire premise of applying catharsis theories to Years of Lead cinema is something only possible with modern technology. Trying to piece this analysis together in a pre-internet and pre-home video era would be nearly impossible because the connections between the films and politics would not be as obvious.

Role of Sexuality In These Films

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Initium period, from today's perspective, is how sexualized the violence was beginning to be. For example, there is a scene in *The Bird With The Chrystal Plumage* (1970) where the killer removes a woman's underwear with a knife before killing her. Although American movies and television shows have featured various forms of gory splatter for decades, this particular type of imagery is still rather uncommon. There is seemingly a universal consensus that adding this dimension to a program pushes it into the realm of taboo. This notion that sexualized violence is perceived differently is not only reflected in movie censorship rating bureaus around the globe, but in the legal system and pop cultural products. *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* is, as of 2021, the longest running primetime live-action television show in the United States (Kennedy, 2019). In its opening disclaimer the narrator states "in the criminal justice system, sexually-based offenses are considered especially heinous", (Knappenburger, 2022). So, when Italian filmmakers during the Initium and especially the Ne Plus Ultra periods presented this kind of content, they were deliberately trying to make the most aggressively confrontational products possible.

In his introduction for *Italian Gothic Horror Films 1970-1979*, Roberto Curti writes about the new decade's approach to the horror genre. "The main factor was sex, which by then

had become a vital ingredient in popular cinema”, (2017, p. 10). In the same section he refers to these works as “hyperviolent thrillers”, (p. 11). This is somewhat odd, considering what one associates with conventional horror movies in America. Yet, this sentiment is consistent with University of Scranton history professor Roy Domenico’s findings from the time. Domenico writes “By the mid 1970s almost half of Italy’s film production could be considered ‘erotic’”, (Domenico, 2021, p. 304). Blending of the hyperviolent with the erotic opens the door for scholars to analyze these movies from a multitude of theoretical lenses, with this thesis opting for the societal catharsis angle. The success of these movies indicates that audiences were in a different emotional state than usual if they were actively seeking out such vicious material. Audiences don’t seem to want to see this kind of material in entertainment normally. This is likely due to just basic human empathy, however there are some other variables that one could speculate about here.

In the modern era, real life violence remains a form of mass entertainment in boxing matches, UFC, and to some extent football and hockey. Throughout history the spectacle of death was the focus of Mesoamerican ballgames, Roman Colosseum gladiator fights, and the animals vs humans game *bestiarii* at Circus Maximus. In the 19th century America, general admission tickets were sold for hangings (McKee, 2017) while numerous figures, such as England’s Charles I and Louis XVI of France, were beheaded in front of raucous crowds. These examples spanning eons and multiple continents, prove that given the right circumstance, humans have the capacity to interpret even the most extreme forms of real-life violence as a type of grand show.

By stark contrast, sexuality is near universally treated as a private activity. Even modern-day strip clubs are more restrictive on their clientele than these above-mentioned historical

venues, which were stadium events in some cases. Perhaps the best example of this dichotomy today is in Saudi Arabia. For decades the Deera Square in Riyadh has hosted public sword beheadings of criminals (Kalin, 2019), yet at the same time, any public display of affection at all is considered a crime. As recently as 2018 a married Saudi couple were arrested for kissing on the cheek (Birchall, 2018). In nearly every movie censorship system around the world, sexual images are judged with less leniency than simulated violence. This relationship is the main thematic focus of the documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006) about the MPAA. The documentarians imply that this phenomenon exists because sexual imagery creates arousal in a viewer that is uncomfortable to experience around other patrons, in a way that watching even the most explicit violence does not (Ebert, 2006).

Violence in cinema is controversial, sexuality even more so. Combining the two creates a synergy of shock. Factoring all this in, it's understandable why most audiences are usually averse to this kind of content, making '70s Italian cinema seem all the more curious. Ruminations on this whole dynamic might seem to be reaching into the armchair psychology jar, but at the same time, it is somewhat necessary to explore considering how many of these films feature things like castrations and similar attacks on female anatomy.

In *A Bay of Blood's* most famous sequence, two teenage lovers' steamy sex scene is interrupted when the killer skewers both to the bed using a harpoon. Understanding the general differences in how sexuality is perceived compared to violence makes it clear that the Italians fused the two for a specific emotional purpose. They created a new type of graphic imagery that is somehow more shocking than the sum of its parts. It's this fusion that generated the initial intrigue to create this thesis, especially its presence during the more extreme Ne Plus Ultra era (1975-1982). When one stumbles across the vintage poster for a film like Sergio Garrone's *SS*

Experiment Love Camp (1976) on a horror movie blog, enormous confusion arises as to what one is even looking at. “What is this?” and “What genre could this possibly be?”, are questions even the most seasoned film aficionado would ask themselves in response. It becomes clear through research that the Ne Plus Ultra films did not emerge in a vacuum, rather they were a natural evolution from the provocative, yet tamer gialli, mondo, and police pictures of the early ‘70s.

Still, *A Bay of Blood* is one of the more egregious titles in the earlier period and it was the only giallo made before 1975 to be banned by the British Board of Film Classification as part of their “Video Nasties” censorship campaign (Feldberg, 2021). There were many others during the Initium phase that pushed the envelope, such as *What Have They Done to Your Daughters?* (1974), *The Weapon*, *The Hour*, *The Motive* (1973), but these didn’t wind up on the BBFC’s list because they were old movies by the 1980s and distributors may not have even tried submitting them for home video release. One other thing to mention; an English speaker unfamiliar with this period might wonder why the titles of these films are so curiously lengthy and could assume it to be a result of the translation process. Long titles were actually a stylistic flourish of Italian filmmakers from about the mid ‘60s to the early ‘80s, but they were not universal. A film like *Your Vice is a Locked Room and Only I Have The Key* (1972), original title “*Il tuo vizio è una stanza chiusa e solo io ne ho la chiave*” could be playing on the same marquee as *Deep Red* (1975) aka “*Profondo Rosso*.”

Of important note for this Initium phase is Umberto Lenzi’s film *Man From Deep River* (1972). This was the first in the cycle of the so called “cannibal films” that would proliferate the 1970s. It’s a genre closely related the mondo documentaries in its origin as well as its appeal. Many mundos, such as the original Jacopetti & Prospero series as well as the Castiglioni brothers’ *Shocking Africa* (1982), feature much footage of indigenous peoples from around the

world engaged in rituals that the filmmakers thought would seem shocking to Western audiences. In 1972 Umberto Lenzi capitalized on the Italian public's interest in this subject with his narrative cannibal film *Man From Deep River* (1972). Although fictional in its depictions of human flesh eating, Lenzi's work does feature real animal death. It's been considered a cash-in on the success of the American movie *A Man Called Horse* (1970) about an English noble captured and treated like an animal by a Sioux tribe. *A Man Called Horse* was released at a time when a few revisionist and brutal American westerns were coming out, including *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *Ulzana's Raid* (1972), both of which have been analyzed as statements about the Vietnam War (Newman, 2006). Perhaps the cathartically violent cinema in one country can resonate with other regions feeling the same anger.

In any case, the success of *Man From Deep River* (1972) inspired a wave of unbelievably brutal Italian cannibal films with titles like *Last Cannibal World* (1977), *Make Them Die Slowly* (1982), and *Mountain of the Cannibal God* (1978). The first two are some of the most censored movies of all time due to sequences of rape, castration, and animal cruelty. *Make Them Die Slowly* rather notoriously features a woman being suspended by hooks through her breasts, itself a reference to the rite of passage scene in *A Man Called Horse*, featured on its poster. *Man From Deep River* was therefore a watershed film of the Initium period considering what it inspired and, not surprisingly, it was banned in Great Britain for theatrical exhibition in 1975 and again for videotape in 1984 (Shipka, 2011, p. 115). It was mentioned earlier that Italian society in 1971 was already experiencing chaos when *A Bay of Blood* was made, resulting in cathartically violent motion pictures, but where did these injections of sexuality come from and why were they suddenly allowed?

Italian Censorship and Sexploitation's Popularity

As previously mentioned in a different section, one of the three preconditions for transgressive cinema to flourish is the existence of a lenient censorship system. Even if a country has a functioning movie industry while simultaneously racked with extreme social unrest, itself a rare combination, transgressive movies will not emerge unless they are allowed by authorities to be distributed. Movies and all media broadly are analyzed as a reflection of a culture, but there is always a limit to how much of the society's attitudes can be represented in media because the distribution channels are controlled by only a small segment of the population. Even in the modern age, where the most exhibition avenues exist, there is always going to be some censorship of content, whether it is by private companies or the state.

If the public has a certain set of beliefs, but content expressing these beliefs is blocked from distribution, then there will be no mass media cultural artifact for humanities scholars to study, so they will have to investigate said beliefs through other means. Thankfully for this thesis, these Italian transgressive films do exist because they were allowed to, meaning that the discussion of why authorities allowed them to be made is equally as important as why the public wanted them to. For the most part, Italian movie censorship eventually changed with the times, updating with whatever the zeitgeist happened to be. This tends to be the case around the world, where conservative countries have media laws upholding either the religious or decency expectations of the populace, while liberal regions are more generous in their freedom of expression.

The history of Italian society in the 20th century is that of transition from a conservative order to a more liberal one. The country had a censorship system in place since 1913, when a parliamentary bill granted a single government office the ability to pass or reject movies for

public consumption (Vivarelli, 2021). Even at this point when the industry was in its infancy, some Italian filmmakers were attempting to push the medium into the transgressive. Giovanni Pastrone's film *Cabiria* (1914), for example, contains an infamous sequence in which naked children are thrown alive into the furnace of Moloch as sacrifice. Far from being merely shocking for its own sake, Martin Scorsese has shared his opinion that Pastrone's work in *Cabiria* deserves the credit for inventing the concept of the epic film (Ebert, 2006), predating later works by DW Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille. The film didn't inspire a trend, but it stands as yet another illustration of how transgressive filmmakers from around the world take influence from each other's products to where it can become unclear as to whether certain striking images are reflecting the culture of its creator, the product of the auteur's imagination, or some borrowed reference from another nation's cinema.

Censorship was expanded during the fascist period of 1922-1943 to include anything critical of the state or its ideology (Dibeltulo, 2017, p. 235). The fascist period serves as another case study for the problem of trying to determine the attitudes of popular culture via cinema because all the works of that era are more a reflection of the power structure's beliefs than anything else. This is not to say that nothing can be gleaned from studying works from this time or any other authoritarian society. It is merely a reminder that if one were to, say, analyze the North Korean film *Pulgasari* (1985), a scholar would have to factor in Kim Il Sung's influence on the project.

In her book *Blessed Cinema: State and Catholic Censorship in Postwar Italy*, Daniela Treveri Gennari states "Film censorship in Italy was as rigorous throughout the 1950s as it had been under Mussolini's regime" (Gennari, 2013, p. 255) During the 1950s and 60s, the Catholic Church was the main driving influence on the censor bureau and served as its moral benchmark

for how to interpret contested images. For context, Christian Democracy was a Catholic-inspired political party that held the largest share of parliament from 1946 to 1994 (Veuger, 2020). The party's goals, along with much of the entire economy was planned around the Catholic Church's vision for post war Italy as outlined by a 1943 document called The Code of Camaldoli (Thomassen & Forlenza, 2016, p. 8). Future prime minister and eventual leader of Christian Democracy, Giulo Andreotti, became the Secretary of the Council of Ministers in 1947 and selected members of the film censorship board that would align most closely with Catholic doctrine (Gennari, 2017, p. 238). Knowing their films would be cut to ribbons, should they include salacious imagery, filmmakers would self-censor their works in advance to not waste time shooting scenes that couldn't be screened. This was the standard practice for many decades because the society felt these decisions reflected their values.

A scholar could make the claim that the sexploitation craze of 1970s Italy had its roots in works of the 1950s and early '60s, but proving that argument becomes dubious due to the lack of concrete examples. What this means is that when one watches Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) or even looks at the poster, it's obvious that the whole product exudes lust. However, the proceedings are conducted with such modest grace that it would be ridiculous to compare it to something completely gratuitous like *Emanuelle and the White Slave Trade* (1978). Oddly enough, it was the so-called "sexy documentaries", such as *Europe by Night* (1959) and *World by Night* (1960) that the censors' scissors came down most heavily on in the early 1960s (Bertozzi, 2013, p. 5). These were travelogues showcasing cabarets, strip clubs, lesbian bars, and other after-hours curiosities that audiences of the time might find titillating, a sort of precursor to the mondo film. Then of course there existed more explicit material, the numerous

“red light” films which, despite having been denied a visa, circulated in disguise on illicit circuits (Maina & Zecca, 2020, p. 2).

A slippery slope emerged with a presidential degree in 1963 that provided that the commission may suspend the outright rejection "by inviting the applicant to suppress or to change individual scenes or sequences or jokes", (Price & Verhulst, 2002, p. 57). This opened the door for filmmakers to protest the censors' judgment on the accusation that the board didn't understand a film's full context and directors could even offer to replace specific scenes. While this is a seemingly fairer practice, it creates a multitude of problems for censorship bureaus whenever they take this stance for a few reasons. One is that the review board must watch the same film again and remember which scenes they originally rejected and agreed to reconsider. There is an opportunity in this situation for a filmmaker to play tricks on the censors' memory to slip something by them. There are notable examples of this happening in America, which has a similar appeal system through the MPAA. For example, Trey Parker, the director of *Team America: World Police* (2004) has stated that in order to secure the graphic puppet sex scenes he wanted for his film, with an R-rating, he intentionally included a plethora of intentionally over the top inserts he knew would be rejected, so that the ones he really wanted would seem tame by comparison (Havrilesky, 2004).

When Wes Craven submitted his movie *The Last House on the Left* (1972) to the MPAA it received an X rating. In response, Wes spliced an MPAA R-rating seal onto the uncut print and sent that version to theaters (Dee, 2020). The only way Wes would ever be caught in his ruse was if he was either reported by a theater, or a member of the MPAA happened to see the film playing in theaters and remembered exactly which scenes were agreed on. One of the things any student of film history will learn in archival research is that there often exists multiple versions

of the same film that vary from country to country or even depending on the region of the same country. This is due to territorial disputes between governments and distributors over contested imagery. All these scenarios can be avoided by just refusing the work in its entirety. This remains the current practice in many countries, such as India, which recently banned the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series (Iyengar, 2015).

How does a society with this paradigm, in this case 1960s Italy, shift to making wild anarchic pictures in a short amount of time? There is, in a way, a formula that explains it and the linear progression of how the events played out can be summarized in a few sentences. First, the culture became more liberal in the late '60s. Then the public demanded more leniency on movies from the government. Once the censors gave in, filmmakers created new products to meet the consumers' appetite. In a sense, the politics of the censorship bureaucracy was downstream from the culture.

Ernest Hemingway's phrase "Gradually, and then suddenly", was used earlier to describe how the Movement '68 seemed to have come out of nowhere and turned Italian society upside down, but these abrupt changes also affected censorship the same year. Hans Schott-Schöbinger's *Andrea the Nympho* (1968) proves to become a breakthrough moment for Italian censorship. The Austrian film featured a woman with a ravishing sexual appetite. First approved by the commission, then seized four days after release, the work resulted in a trial that led to five of the eight review board members resigning in protest (Domenico, 2021, p. 304). The changing attitudes of the board, along with the heated criticism they received in the press, forced a capitulation of their rigid moral standards. In *Italian Gothic Horror Films 1957-1969* author Roberto Curti explains the reason for his title's timeline parameters, saying his book covers "the films produced and released up to 1969, a year which marked a crucial turning point in Italian

society and the film industry as well, with the loosening of morals and the relaxation of censorship after the turmoils of 1968”, (Curti, 2015, p. 3). Curti’s observation is spot on, for the flood of transgressive films that immediately followed were unlike anything before. Pasolini’s *Teorema* (1968) involves a mysterious man who arrives to have sex with an entire family. *Fellini Satyricon* (1969) showcases homosexual longing and hermaphroditism, while the release of Spanish filmmaker Jesús Franco’s *Eugenie...The Story of Her Journey into Perversion* (1969), released in Italy, features imagery true to its rather self-explanatory title.

The violence in *A Bay of Blood*, *Man From Deep River*, and other early ‘70s works was allowed because it was essentially earmarked in with the loosening of sexual restrictions. This is to say that the main push against censorship from the public was coming from the desire to see their newly liberated sexual attitudes reflected on screen. Yet, once Pandora’s box was opened, a whole slew of other controversial subjects became ripe for cinematic experimentation by bold filmmakers. If someone could be shown naked, why not naked while being killed? If sex was permitted onscreen, why not rape? Still, even though the rules were relaxed a bit, they were not abandoned altogether.

In *Mavericks of Italian Cinema*, Curti writes that bans were almost always triggered in instances “where sexuality is associated with aggressiveness and violence”, (Curti, 2018, p. 71). Eager to cash in on this controversial, yet evidently popular mix of sex and violence, a whole series of sadomasochism pictures, such as *The Laughing Woman* (1969) and *The Conspiracy of Torture* (1969), flowed into theaters. These pictures, no doubt ignited by Spanish auteur Jesús Franco’s *Marquis de Sade: Justine* (1969), were the most targeted by the government during this time. Case in point, Massimo Dallamano’s *Venus in Furs* (1969), was blocked from exhibition despite multiple attempts by producers to remove select scenes (Curti, 2015, p. 68). It was re-

released in 1973, abruptly confiscated days later, only to become viewable again in 1975 with a heavily trimmed version. As an additional problem for authorities, film producers would market their films as having been “banned” on their posters, piquing a customer’s curiosity to see something forbidden. The public’s insatiable appetite for, however one would describe this content, is what fueled some of the roughest movies ever made in the following years. It seems that the formula for these Italian sadism pictures, by the mid 1970s, was to choose a setting in which murderous debauchery could believably take place and then to craft a narrative around it. In practice, the setting could be a slave plantation in the American south, as seen in the Italian productions *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971), *Passion Plantation* (1976) and *Mandinga* (1978), or it could be the orgiastic bloodlust of ancient Rome in the case of *Caligula...The Untold Story* (1982). Pasolini’s *Salo: Or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) is essentially practicing this template by employing Mussolini’s puppet separatist state as a locale, while every nazisploitation film uses Eastern European concentration camps as a backdrop for outrageous hellscape.

It should be noted that most of these films are not pornographic, or maybe they are, depending on where one draws the line. This is why the MPAA ratings system is used so much for reference in this analysis because the distinctions between erotic art, sexploitation, and pornography can be vague unless these films are viewed from the perspective of a censor. Likewise, the terms “violence” and “graphic violence” fall into the same trap of conceptual muddling. One thing that can be said definitively is that no matter how egregious these works might be considered, the violence in them is not real, but rather illusions of makeup effects. The same cannot be said for pornographic images and the censors took this into account.

Still, of the movies in this analysis that would be NC-17 equivalent today, most of them would receive such a rating for their violence rather than sexual imagery. The beginning of this

analysis mentioned the presence of genuine deaths in mondo documentaries, but this almost always applied to animals only. It was mostly safari footage of animals eating each other and sometimes hunters poaching. For the cannibal story *Man From Deep River* (1972) director Umberto Lenzi had the performers just kill real animals onscreen, but this was relatively uncommon and only possible because the production was outside of Italy. The one Italian picture this analysis has found that presents genuine human casualties is Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi's mondo documentary *Africa Addio* (1966). The filmmakers lived in Africa for two years to photograph the decolonization process, yet inadvertently captured the only known footage of multiple genocides occurring, as all other press had fled the regions by that point. *Africa Addio* did not inspire a trend of war documentaries because the filmmakers were nearly killed on several occasions. This rendered the acquisition of film insurance for copycat productions virtually impossible. *Africa Addio* predated the Years of Lead timeframe and therefore lacks any connection to the catharsis argument, although it will be mentioned again for its influence on *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). Its mere existence is testament to the notion that many of these films, especially in the Ne Plus Ultra phase, couldn't be made now, or really ever, but somehow exist anyway.

Chapter 4: Case Study #2 and #3

This chapter looks at the films *Salò: Or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). A tremendous deep dive on their production history, as well as Italy's political history of the time is provided. Aside from these two movies, there is a lot of coverage regarding the trends in transgressive imagery of the 1975-1982 period, referencing patterns that would apply to hundreds of films. Because explicit sexuality was commonly featured in these gruesome works, there is lengthy discussion about what exactly pornography even is and how film scholars should think about it.

Ne Plus Ultra (1975-1982)

The late '60s and early '70s Italy saw domestic filmmakers' first attempts at telling stories with images that had been prohibited since motion pictures first appeared in the country, nearly one hundred years before. Every time a person watches a film, they bring their entire life history with them to the experience. In this case, the average Italian movie goer was living through a period of rapid societal transformation. All the traditions and norms they were raised with seemed to be growing more obsolete with each passing day as the spirit of the 60s chipped away at time honored class, gender, and religious expectations. As is evident from all the movies in the Initium phase, the general public was conforming to the new fashion, hairstyles, and opinions that would allow them to seem hip with the times. While everyone was still trying to figure out what was socially acceptable in this new environment, bombs started blowing up random civilians and politicians were shot. The motives of the perpetrators seemed completely outside the love and free expression spirit of the previous decade. With the OPEC oil crash of 1973 affecting multiple industries, one could wonder whether the good times of the "economic miracle" might be gone for good.

A previous section covered a devastating moment during the Initium phase, the Piazza Fontana bombing of '69 that killed 17 and injured 88. This analysis also described fear and anger as the primary emotions audiences sought catharsis from through cinema. When tragic events like these happen, people can cope with their fears if they feel that actions are being taken to prevent similar occurrences in the future. One of the reasons the Years of Lead lasted for 20 years is that, despite the outrage caused by this terrorism, the public's only option was often reprieve due to the ambiguity of who was culpable. As mentioned earlier, many times the true culprits couldn't be convicted due to lack of evidence while innocents were falsely imprisoned during the hysteria. It wasn't until 1972 that Franco Freda and his fascist associates in Ordine Nuovo were even suspected of the Piazza Fontana bombing. Meanwhile the anarchist novelist Pietro Valpreda and five others had already been in jail for 3 years for ostensibly perpetrating it (Foot, 2002). Freda's trial went on for decades and his acquittal has allowed him to continue publishing to this day.

This kind of manic dysfunction would breed a nihilistic cynicism in any population. As it relates to anger, all average citizens can do under normal circumstances is get together and demand action. In this case, even taking to the streets was risky. On May 28, 1974, an IED exploded in the middle of anti-fascist protest in Brescia. This event, now known as the Piazza della Loggia bombing, killed 8 people and injured over one hundred (Kearns, 2015). The fascist group Ordine Nuovo members Carlo Maria Maggi and Maurizio Tramont would not be convicted of this crime until 2015 and this delay of justice inspired vigilantism at the time. Two days after the initial attack, a member of Ordine Nuovo named Giancarlo Esposti was murdered (Ferrario, 2020). In response, Ordine Nuovo blew up the Italicus Express train three months later in the Bologna metro, killing another 12 people. This time the terror organization released a

statement, “We took revenge for Giancarlo Esposti. We wanted to show the nation that we can place a bomb anywhere we want, whenever and however we please. Let us see in autumn; we will drown democracy under a mountain of corpses”, (Bohne, 2015).

One of the essential hallmarks of the human condition is the grieving process. It exists in every society on earth throughout all history. In her landmark book *On Death and Dying* (1969), Swiss-American psychiatrist of “death studies” Elisabeth Kübler-Ross lays out what she calls the “Five Stages of Grief” (Tyrrell et al., 2021, p. 1). Stage five is called “Acceptance” and it is the moment that a person accepts the reality of the situation to its fullest and tells themselves “I’m going to be ok. I can move on” Catharsis is part of this model and it occurs during the “Anger” phase, yet equally important to this analysis is Kübler-Ross’ concept that many are never able to reach “Acceptance” (p. 2). This occurs in situations where a person encounters guilt or some other psychological factor that prevents closure. Individuals permanently trapped in this purgatory may experience depression, drug addiction, or commit suicide. The non-stop terror attacks from ambiguous sources during the Years of Lead would inflict this condition on much of the citizenry because the root cause of their fear and anger could not be resolved. Since suspects were not always caught, closure was delayed. In addition, not only could members of the public die at any time during one of these random assaults, but the entire government could potentially be overthrown. Multiple genres in Italian cinema increasingly reflected this jaded despair by the decade’s mid-point.

Beginning in 1975 and concluding around 1982, Italy produced what is perhaps the largest volume of extreme imagery in all of cinema history. Due to current laws regarding animal cruelty and underage performers, these works could not be recreated today. This was the era of *Ne Plus Ultra* and the film best encapsulating it is *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). *Cannibal*

Holocaust has been banned all over the world for its scenes of cannibalism, rape, castration, and animal cruelty (Ryan, 2021). In 1981 its director Ruggero Deodato was charged with murder. The court believed Deodato had his actors dismembered in order to make what appeared to be “snuff film” sequences in the movie. He was eventually acquitted when the cast arrived alive in court to testify (Rose, 2011). A more in-depth inspection of *Cannibal Holocaust* will be provided in upcoming passages, but an overview of the years preceding it must come first in order to contextualize its place within the arc of catharsis.

The Initium phase was when Italian movies started to include what Americans would consider R-rated imagery. Bloody gunshot wounds, stabbings and slashings occurred alongside some nudity and soft-core sexual situations. *A Bay of Blood* was shocking for its time, but it’s no more transgressive than much of what plays on HBO today. It was one of the two Italian films made before 1975 to be banned by the BBFC during the Video Nasties campaign. By contrast, 21 movies from the Ne Plus Ultra era were banned. This demonstrates how aggressive the imagery got within just a few years. The period between 1975-1982 produced content that would be rated NC-17 today.

Describing what exactly made these movies so egregious to censors necessitates some specificity because it’s not as simple as just comparing them to a gory war film or *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) TV show. While these works often contained their fair amount of splatter, it was more so their sadistic quality that made them especially offensive. For example, in Pasquale Festa Campanile’s film *Hitch-Hike* (1977) a character is forced to watch his wife raped, while in Lucio Fulci’s *The New York Ripper* (1982) a woman has a broken wine bottle jammed into her vagina. It’s imagery like this that puts their violence on a whole other level than most fictional entertainment. There are dozens of nazisploitation pictures, cannibal films, and other oddities

from this period that have their own uniquely degrading and painful looking visuals. *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) will be examined for its thematic connection to the Years of Lead. *Cannibal Holocaust* is also chosen for more elaborate analysis because it seems to contain a little bit of all these other genres. It's unquestionably the definitive Italian cannibal film, but it's also closely related to the short lived "rape and revenge" genre and mondo documentaries.

With all the movies during the Ne Plus Ultra phase, the public wanted to see them to expel their fear, rage, and helplessness over what was going on. Aristotle described catharsis as "purging of the spirit of morbid and base ideas or emotions by witnessing the playing out of such emotions or ideas on stage", (Fancourt, 2017). In some cases, Italian filmmakers wanted audiences to literally purge their emotions. While directing his necrophilia-oriented *Beyond The Darkness* (1979), Joe D'Amato was quoted as saying "We're making a movie to make people throw up. We must make 'em vomit!", (Curti 2017, p. 202). It's likely that audiences were collectively yelling and cursing at the theater screen during many of these films. In fact, the whole formula of "rape and revenge" movies, in particular, is to make an audience furious in the first half so that they cheer at the end when the villain gets justice delivered to them in spades (Wilson, 2021).

There is a school of trauma healing called "primal therapy" that encourages screaming during sessions to alleviate neuroticism (Howes, 2010). Outlined in the book *The Primal Scream* (1970) by psychologist Arthur Janov, primal therapy traces adult anxieties to unresolved negativity experienced during childhood. Developing his theory after years with the Psychiatric Department at Los Angeles Children's Hospital, Janov became famous for a period due to his counseling of John Lennon in the 1970s. It was mentioned earlier in this analysis that all talk therapy originates from Dr. Josef Breuer's "cathartic method", which motivated Sigmund Freud

to abandon hypnosis (Young, 2020). It was Janov's belief that the act of screaming is closer to origin of all pain in the central nervous system, as opposed to talk therapy, which involves higher reasoning areas of the central cortex (Howes, 2010). Janov's largest impact in popular culture is probably Yoko Ono's screaming on John Lennon albums, but his theories have had some clinical resonance with those in the mind-body field of physiology.

The 1990s saw a resurgence in the psychosomatic theory of pain conditions, with the most notable work debatably being Dr. John Sarno's *Healing Back Pain* (1991). Sarno was Professor of Rehabilitation at NYU School of Medicine as well as a personal physician to several celebrities, including Howard Stern and Larry David (Conner-Simons, 2017). It was his belief that many chronic pain conditions, such as back pain, are actually caused by deep emotional anger. His methods were featured in the biographical documentary *All The Rage* (2016). He advocated that patients write about their feelings in a diary. The thoughts in this journaling are ideally probing the most hateful resentment a patient might hold for their family, friends, or themselves. Normally these attitudes are necessarily suppressed to function in life, but the page allows an intimate expression. If the patient fully commits, they can break down in tears to achieve catharsis. *Healing Back Pain* describes the conflicting remedies offered by physiology compared to psychology, noting many patients' reluctance to reject an MRI in favor of introspection (Schubiner, 2017). In fact, Sarno believed that many would prefer the physical pain to the emotional, because the writing may unlock a devastating realization that one was never loved or that their life was wasted.

The catharsis that all these different approaches aim for is depicted at the end of Oscar Best Picture nominee *Good Will Hunting* (1997), when the protagonist's stoic exterior is broken by his therapist into a tearful acceptance that his childhood trauma was not his fault. If one can

consider that talking, writing, or screaming serve as possible outlets for catharsis, it's not a stretch to think that Italian audiences were getting relief on some level from The Years of Lead by enduring very upsetting movies. Additionally, in many of the stories, the victims have the ability to take control of the situation, something the public could not do against real-life terrorism. This has overlap with something called "Control Therapy" (Rehm, 1977, p. 787), sought for those who feel they are but a leaf floating on a mighty river. For an audience, regardless of what part of the brain was being affected, some solace could be found in knowing that, as bad as their daily anxieties were, these films depicted things much worse than their imaginations. Upon exiting a theater showing something like *SS Camp 5: Women's Hell* (1977), regular life wouldn't seem as bad, all things considered.

The Censorship War

The increase in extreme content from Initium to Ne Plus Ultra corresponded to an increase in real life attacks, as 1974 was the deadliest year in the conflict at that point. It's possible that filmmakers would have made more extreme works in the early '70s if they were allowed, but censorship prevented this. Once again, the incremental revisions in law played a major role in the resultant art forms, evolving slowly as the bureaucrats were influenced by the public's changing attitudes. It was mentioned at the beginning of this thesis that the sexual aspects in all these genres tracked along the same rough timeline as the Years of Lead, but for unrelated reasons. Italian sexploitation as a specific genre is not one of the main categories of film this study is applying catharsis theory to because no argument is being made that its popularity during this time was caused in any way by emotional reactions to the Years of Lead. Even so, its novelty during this era, due to censorship changes, meant that elements from softcore, and sometimes even hardcore works, would show up in typically unrelated genres like

horror, action, and documentary films. When the sexual elements were featured, they were often used as an extension of other forms of violence. As an inescapable consequence, any theoretical examination regarding Italy's transgressive cinema during this time would be remiss to not address the sexual content featured in movies that ostensibly advertise brutality as a form of escapist entertainment. When modern viewers look back on Italian nazisploitation films or even thrillers like Aldo Lada's *Night Train Murders* (1975) and Ruggero Deodato's *House on the Edge of the Park* (1980), the amount of cruel sexualized violence is so over the top that any scholar analyzing this period in cinema should explain why sexploitation was creeping into so many genres, seemingly with jarring discordance.

For a modern viewer to even begin to get a grasp on this subject, there needs to be a discussion about what exactly is erotic arthouse cinema compared to sexploitation and especially outright pornography. One of the most famous phrases from any American Supreme Court decision was Justice Potter Stewart's comment "I know it when I see it", referring to the subjective nature involved in determining what exactly classifies material as pornographic (Lattman, 2007). Potter made the remark while presiding over the obscenity case *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964) involving Louis Malle's film *The Lovers* (1958). Throughout history, certain filmmakers have contested obscenity accusations on the grounds that their films have higher artistic aspirations than being merely prurient for its own sake. The 1970s was when this debate reached its peak in America, Italy, and a number of other countries. For the first time X-rated films like *Fellini Satyricon* (1969) incorporated explicit material into their narratives in an unprecedented manner, with influential *The New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael saying of Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) "Tango has altered the face of an art form. This is a movie people will be arguing about for as long as there are movies", (Kael, 1991, p. 2). With all

these transgressive works, there was always some controversy in the press. Critics questioned whether Jacopetti & Prospero's *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971) was the humanitarian exercise its creators claimed or if it was actually "the most disgusting, contemptuous insult to decency ever to masquerade as a documentary", as Roger Ebert wrote (Ebert, 1972, p. 1). To Ebert's credit, *Goodbye Uncle Tom*'s dehumanizing visuals were unavoidably linked to the film's questionable production in Haiti under the dictatorship of François Duvalier.

During this era Italian filmmakers explored the blending of explicit elements with high art, low brow grindhouse fare, and everything in between. For these reasons, it is seemingly impossible to completely separate the concept of sexploitation from the other subgenres covered in this piece, and therefore confine it to a concrete timeline. There is simply too much overlap between a masterwork like Fellini's *Casanova* (1976) and something decidedly more salacious such as Joe D'Amato's *Caligula: The Untold Story* (1982). The word "novelty" was used in a passage above to describe the 1970s appeal of erotica to mainstream audiences and what this means is that when a previously unseen feature arrives to a medium it can result in fads whereby audiences consume more of the new feature than they normally would have had it always been available. This happened in America when the invention of sound movies created a market oversaturated with musicals in the 1930s, dissipating over time to where only a few musicals are released theatrically today (Flint, 2021). A similar situation happened again when for years nearly every blockbuster was released in 3D after the success of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009).

The fusion of sexuality with violence in Italy's transgressive period comes from the independent popularity of sexploitation and pornography, with the latter two treated as separate entities under the law. As far as definitions go, sexploitation is a broad enough term that it can

encompass anything from the psychosexual thriller *Basic Instinct* (1992) to a screwball comedy like *Porky's* (1981). The word is generally used as a pejorative and a critic would be unlikely to use it when describing something they consider a work of art, even when the content is undeniably fairly explicit.

Sexploitative elements can be found in many Italian works to this day and the reason for its persistence is that some subjective proportion of nudity and sexuality is considered by audiences to be within the bounds of taste, either for romance films or romantic comedies. Starting in the late 1960s and continuing all throughout the entire Years of Lead, sexploitation was used for humor in Italy. The genre was called “commedia sexy all'italiana” or “Italian sex comedies” (Williams, 2022). As an example of their popularity, the movie *Malizia* (1973) became the highest grossing box office draw in Italy the year of its release (Celli & Cottino-Jones, 2007, p. 171). Filled with ample nudity, it tells the story of a widower and his three adolescent sons’ competing attempts to seduce their new housekeeper. For many years Italian theaters were filled with these movies using outrageous sexual scenarios for laughs in a similar manner to Hollywood productions like the *American Pie* (1999-2020) series.

The dam broke open for sexploitation with the release of *Andrea The Nympho* (1968) and the censorship bureau scrambled to update their rules. Part of the problem in determining what to censor was that the easing of restrictions made the board’s decisions seem capricious compared to the formerly rigid Catholic doctrine. Curti notes in all his books that there were some rough guidelines in the early 1970s; female nudity was more tolerated than male for example (Curti, 2017, p. 137). All nudity was more acceptable if presented in the ostensibly educational form of documentary. This was likely caused by the precedent set by mondo documentarians of the early 1960s who filmed naked indigenous women around the globe. The nudity in Gualtiero

Jacopetti's *Mondo Cane* (1962) and *Women of the World* (1963) could be excused by the director or justified by the censor board on the grounds that the films merely captured reality as it was, a la *National Geographic*.

Curti provides individual case studies of where these rules were implemented, such as Luigi Batzella's *Nude for Satan* (1974), initially denied for its numerous scenes of lesbian intercourse (Curti, 2017, p. 137). He references the censors' standard that "female and especially male homosexuality were an aggravating factor as far as eroticism was concerned", (p. 137). The somewhat arbitrary nature of all this explains the releases of the Spanish produced *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971) and Lucio Fulci's domestic creation *A Lizard in Woman's Skin* (1971), something unthinkable a few years earlier. Male homosexuality could be hinted at and never morally justified (Curti, 2017, p. 137), only allowed occasionally in things like Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970), which implies the main character's personality is a result of childhood trauma. There was also the notion that comedic sexuality was mostly benign, which is why hundreds of sex comedies were allowed to be made throughout the entire Years of Lead, even somewhat predating the period in the cases of *The Libertine* (1968) and *The Queens* (1966).

Although these rules might seem confusing or arbitrary to a modern scholar, a coherent summation of the commission's attitude towards various images during the early 1970s can be laid out in a short paragraph, as follows. A violent act perpetrated onscreen by an ostensibly evil character was not seen as a challenge to Catholic morality. A sex comedy, while somewhat indecent, was viewed as a fairly benign way for the public to laugh at their own private fantasies and confessional indiscretions. Provocative titillation, when presented for serious dramatic purposes, was considerably more troublesome because the work may be earnestly advocating for infidelity, homosexuality, or pedophilia. This is why a farce like Lucio Fulci's *The Eroticist*

(1972) did not suffer a similar condemnation to *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), which had actual criminal charges brought against it for promoting "exasperated pansexualism for its own sake", (Gussow, 1973).

So, this is the censorship slide that allowed for numerous gialli films to exhibit nude scenes and blend eroticism with violence. However, outright pornography was treated as a completely separate issue. Defining what constitutes pornography has changed over time, but its current distinction from sexploitation lies in its feature of genitalia in close up shots or any visible penetration. It had always been illegal in Italy and not up for debate until the sexual revolution changed public opinion somewhat by the late '60s (Curti, 2017, p. 10). It continued to be illegal throughout most of the 1970s, but with incremental allowances for certain case by case exceptions.

Carmine Amoroso, director of the documentary *Porn To Be Free* (2016), stated in an interview that 1970s Italian pornographers considered themselves counterculture revolutionaries (Carradori, 2016). He goes on to note their affiliation with the "Partito Radicale" or Radical Party of left-libertarians and anarchists. Author Roberto Curti describes the black-market hubs that sold illicit film reels in the early 1970s. Many of these film reels were not even complete motion pictures, but merely explicit scenes of body doubles that were intended to be inserted into regular movies (Curti, 2017, p. 219). As an odd example he mentions the case of adult inserts to be added into the otherwise normal spaghetti western film *The Price of Death* (1971). Professor Roy Domenico has a book called *The Devil and the Dolce Vita: Catholic Attempts to Save Italy's Soul* (2021) where he states that even as early as 1965 "Italy was generally sliding into a pornographic culture", (Domenico, 2021, p. 304). He says that the impossible nature of

regulating these products led five members of the cinema censorship board to resign out of frustration in April 1969 (p. 304).

In the early 1970s Italy, showing these kinds of pictures at all was completely against the law so theaters engaging in this practice created their own clandestine business model. For regular movies, representatives of the distribution company would track the supply chain and ticket revenues from a box office, with the expectation that a film print rental would be returned to them eventually. If a theater was caught skimming the distributor's cut of the receipts, the theater's trust relationship with all movie studios would be ruined. However, with these illegal and cheaply made adult films, the theater owner would just buy the print outright on the black market from whoever was selling it. As an illegal product, it could only be profitable to the seller as a one-time cash transaction, since there was no legal recourse to claim intellectual property. The films would be shown in a separate screening room within the theater, marking the entrance with a red light (Maina & Zecca, 2020, p. 4).

In this respect, the theaters were acting similarly to an organized crime money laundering front, where they were ostensibly offering legitimate services, but savvy customers knew there was another product available. The reason for the inserts was in case a policeman visited the red light section. A projectionist could play a western, comedy, etc and hope the officer left before the insert scenes appeared. However, even if caught, it's clear from the uneven enforcement of many of the films covered in this thesis that the Italian censorship standard for adult films was not a uniform, consistent practice. For example, in 1977 theater owner Luigi De Pedys converted all the programming at his venue to adult content and renamed it the Majestic Sexy Movie (Curti, 2021, p. 2021). It wasn't legal to do this, yet Curti argues this was tolerated by authorities who by this time preferred adult content to be confined to specialized cinemas away

from general audiences. This caused other exhibitors to follow suit, with hundreds of theaters in Italy showing pornography by 1980 (Domenico, 2021, p. 304). Despite this, films were still seized in large numbers by the police all the way into the mid 1980s.

The detailed overview of Italian sexploitation and pornography is relevant to this analysis because so many of the Initium and Ne Plus Ultra movies dip their toes in these ponds. A large number of poliziotteschi such as *Almost Human* (1973) and *Live Like A Cop, Die Like a Man* (1977) contain some nudity and erotic scenes, as do many mondo, particularly the Castiglioni brothers' *Africa* series. *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* (1977) is simultaneously a gruesome cannibal picture as well as a softcore travelogue, while *Giallo in Venice* (1979) is both a suspenseful giallo splatter film and a hardcore porn picture. This remains a unique phenomenon when looking back on world cinema history because even other previously mentioned cycles of cathartic violent cinema, such as the American films from the Vietnam era or the Iraq War-inspired torture films, do not feature this same kind of salaciousness. The reason for this stems from a number of cultural differences between the United States and Italy.

Extensive investigation reveals that the United States never had a comparable sexploitation boom in mainstream cinema as Italy did so the gruesome anti-war movies of the 1970s and '80s do not feature much titillation. This was presumably because directors feared their themes would be misinterpreted if they portrayed a jarring juxtaposition of sex and violence that American audiences would not appreciate. Evidently there wasn't a large demand for this imagery in the United States. The proliferation of sexual content in Italian movies of the 1970s and '80s was driven ultimately by box office ticket admissions, the unavoidable implication being that their audiences simply considered those kinds of images good entertainment whether it was featured in a sweeping love story or a shockingly brutal Nazi experiment movie.

By contrast, the few American cathartic anti-war films to feature any elements of prurience at all treat the subject matter with a heavy dose of reactionary condemnation. *Dirty Harry* (1971) is the story of a heroic detective who steps outside the law to stop a maniac terrorizing San Francisco. Its popularity has been studied as reaction to the public's anger towards institutions following Watergate and the Vietnam War (Gadre, 2021). The titular character has been critically analyzed as an archetypical right-wing authoritarian. He is seemingly abstinent after his wife was killed by a drunk driver and the movie at one point portrays his grudging visit of strip clubs while tracking the antagonist. The actor portraying the villain has stated that he imagined his character as a disgruntled Vietnam vet, driven insane by his hostile domestic reception (Hays, 2021).

Taxi Driver (1976) played with similar themes of Vietnam vets driven mad by war and American society, with Robert Deniro's character lashing out not only at the military industrial complex by way of a thwarted political assassination attempt, but also against degeneracy in his successful massacre of flesh merchants during the final act. The main character's frequent visits to pornographic theaters are portrayed as hopelessly pathetic, especially when he ruins a first date by bringing his love interest to one of the showings. Other examples of sexual aversion in anti-Vietnam War films include the main character's murderous disdain for smut in *Joe* (1970) and the PTSD-driven impotency experienced by Tommy Lee Jones' ex-military character in the brothel shootout of *Rolling Thunder* (1977). By contrast, in an Italian police action film or "poliziottescho" from the same era, such as *Live Like A Cop, Die Like A Man* (1977), the main characters would spend the whole movie sleeping around with women. The posters alone display scantily clad women as enticement in the cases of *Mad Dog Killer* (1977) and *Shoot First, Die Later* (1974), among others. Then there is the case of Iraq War catharsis movies, so called

“torture porn.” Despite the prevalence of this phrase, originally coined by *The New Yorker* critic David Edelstein (Graham-Dixon, 2018), these early 2000s films generally feature little nudity at all. The phrase is somewhat of a misnomer for the unacquainted, with the word “porn” in “torture porn” functioning more as a pejorative, synonymous with “gratuitous excess.”

Virtually all of the *Saw* series are bereft of any titillation at all, with perhaps *Hostel* (2006) and its sequel serving as the only well-known works of that time that could be seen as equivalent to the kind of films coming out of Italy during the Years of Lead. However, even this is a bit muddled by the fact that *Hostel*'s director has stated he is a lifelong fan of 70s Italian horror, leading to *Hostel Part II*'s opening setting in Rome and its allusive production design deliberately echoing gialli specifically (Seibold, 2022). In conclusion, the definitional differences between artsy erotic cinema, sexploitation, and pornography are going to vary from person to person. If this thesis had to give a description of each, it would be that erotic cinema is the genre categorizing critically acclaimed pictures that leave some visuals up to the imagination. Sexploitation does the same, but with less sophisticated technical execution. Pornography leaves nothing unshown. None of these three categories are essential ingredients for violently cathartic movies broadly, but in the case of Italy, they were often a signature trait.

The Blurry Line Between Sexploitation, Pornography, and Art in Cinema

All this description of pornography might seem very out of place for a film studies thesis because in the modern day that industry is relegated to specific websites, completely divorced from the cinema mediums of Netflix, cable television, and especially theaters. This was not the case during the era this analysis covers and it's important to remember that filmmakers and audiences of the time had no idea what direction this new branch of entertainment was headed in. When theaters began showcasing sexploitation and overt pornographic imagery in the early

1970s, this venue was the only way for the public to consume the content. There was no home video and television would not broadcast it either. This meant that not only was the content itself novel due to the lifting of censorship sanctions, but also because of theatrical distribution's technological monopoly. Once these types of images were being displayed on public movie screens, it was inevitable that esteemed directors would try to incorporate similar visuals into their considerably more respectable films playing on the same marquee.

The above-mentioned works of Bertolucci and Pasolini's *Trilogy of Life* series are examples of this phenomenon, but perhaps the best case study is Just Jaeckin's French movie *Emmanuelle* (1974), which had a massive influence on Italian transgressive cinema. The film was based on a French novel called *Emmanuelle: The Joys of a Woman* (1967) written by Thai author Marayat Bibidh (Wayne, 2013). The novel and the film tell the story of a woman who goes on a world tour of promiscuity, learning life lessons along the way. Beyond being a smash hit, the film was marketed with the tagline "X was never like this" on the poster, suggesting its higher artistic aspirations. Roger Ebert gave the film a positive notice, writing "Now that hardcore porno has become passe, it's a relief to see a movie that drops the gynecology and returns to a certain amount of sexy sophistication", (Ebert, 1975).

Ebert's commentary is indicative of a brief period between 1969-1984 in film criticism, called "porno chic", when hardcore was occasionally granted a certain legitimacy in some circles of the mainstream press (DeLameter & Plante, 2015, p. 416). It started with the release of Andy Warhol's *Blue Movie* (1969), the first movie featuring explicit sex to get a widespread release, but it really took off after *Deep Throat* (1972) became the 7th highest grossing film in the United States for 1972 (Blumenthal, 1973).

During the 1970s it seemed that adult content was gradually emerging as a potentially regular feature of cinema that could possibly be incorporated into all the conventional genres of drama, comedy, horror, sci-fi, etc. Italy is one of the few regions where this manifested, as evidenced by the prominence of graphic sexual content in their movies for a period.

Emmanuelle's release in 1974 is a major reason the Ne Plus Ultra period starts in 1975, because of all the other legitimate movies it inspired. "Legitimate" in the sense that they featured professional actors from the Italian film industry rather than full time sex workers. Just the movie *Emmanuelle* (1974) by itself prompted Italian auteur Joe D'Amato to make five of his own imitations, though his *Emanuelle* series feature a slightly different title spelling to avoid copyright infringement. His derivatives continued the Ne Plus Ultra trend of blending sexploitation with brutality. A patron might go to an *Emanuelle* film expecting it to be erotic and somewhat goofy, only to find out it's actually the most vicious thing they've ever seen.

Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals (1978) opens with a nurse having her breast bitten open by a patient in a women's psychiatric hospital, while *Emanuelle in America* (1977) involves an underground torture ring producing snuff films.

D'Amato was an eclectic director of numerous genres including comedies, fantasy pictures, westerns, among others (Vivarelli, 2021). Today he is equally remembered for his post-apocalyptic films such as *Endgame* (1983) and his cannibal films like *Anthropophagus* (1980) as he is for his softcore movies. However, his experience in multiple genres meant that even his lusty *Emanuelle* series had elements from other genres contained within them. The films might start off as a romantic drama before unfolding into something resembling a James Bond, Indiana Jones, or "sword & sorcery" action picture. D'Amato is a case study in how many Italian filmmakers had no qualms about making a gruesome or "sexy movie" in between what might

even be considered “family films.” His *Ator, the Fighting Eagle* (1982), for example, is a PG equivalent *Conan The Barbarian* (1982) styled flick for adolescents, made right after he finished *Erotic Nights of The Living Dead* (1980). This aspect of the Italian industry is necessary for context, if very unusual to wrap one’s head around, as there is virtually zero chance in 2022 that Walt Disney Pictures would hire an internet pornographer to helm their next fantasy picture.

The Convergence of Trends in Pasolini’s *Salò*

Knowing this kind of background information is the only way to explain how an acclaimed filmmaker like Pier Paolo Pasolini would think it was a good idea to take a bunch of teenagers off to a castle for a recreation of the Marquis De Sade’s book. Even attempting to produce something like *Salò, Or the 120 Day of Sodom* (1975) today would result in perhaps a prison sentence for the director. Truth be told, it was likely his clout that saved him from getting arrested during filming, even as lenient as the times were, considering that Bernardo Bertolucci had his voting rights removed for 5 years (Bergan, 2018) as court judgment against his movie *Last Tango in Paris* (1972).

Pasolini was also a very outspoken Marxist intellectual and lent his name to the Lotta Continua’s newspaper as editor to grant it legitimacy (Enache, 2017). Lotta Continua was a far-left paramilitary organization that was implicated in the 1972 murder of police officer Luigi Calabresi (Cazzullo, 2022). The director’s attitude towards moviemaking was of the upmost sincerity, stating “There’s no symbolic or conventional filter between me and reality as there is in literature. The cinema is an explosion of my love for reality”, (Carlorosi, 2009). Other comments like “I think to scandalize is a right, to be scandalized is a pleasure, and those who refuse to be scandalized are moralists”, (Romney, 2019) indicate the contrarian would have probably been more upset to think he made a bad film than to be put on a sex offender registry.

Pasolini was murdered shortly before his movie was released, run over by his own car. A 17-year-old prostitute named Giuseppe Pelosi was caught driving the vehicle and convicted, stating at the time the attack was due to an argument over a specific sex act (Vulliamy, 2018). For decades, public speculation floated that the murder was mafia related, as Pasolini's body was partially burned and his testicles smashed with a metal bar. In 2005 Pelosi retracted his confession, claiming the real perpetrators were three men shouting "dirty communist" (Vulliamy, 2018).

The peculiarities of its production aside, *Salò* remains one of the most extreme films of all time and is, along with *Cannibal Holocaust*, epitomic for the kind of works made in Italy after 1974. It's also the most politically relevant of all the movies in this analysis. This is because the plot itself is preoccupied with fascism specifically, rather than just cathartic violence in some other genre's scaffolding. It tells the story of a group of libertines who, with the help of the fascist military, kidnap teenagers and bring them to live at a palace in the Bologna countryside. From here the youths are subjected to months of sexual abuse before being tortured to death. Overtly metaphorical, as made obvious with the libertines' many philosophical diatribes, the film is broken into different chapters based around Dante Alighieri's 14th century epic poem *Divine Comedy*. The *Inferno* section of Alighieri's piece is referenced for the chapter titles "Circle of Manias", "Circle of Shit", and "Circle of Blood" (Rohdie, 2011).

Salò has split critics' opinions to this very day on whether the piece is a profound statement about fascism or just an excuse for Pasolini to wallow in his own pedophilic torture fantasies. His public romance with Ninetto Davoli, who was 15 at the beginning of their relationship (Nastasi, 2014), further complicates interpretation of the work's imagery. There's a lot to unpack here, so in order to give the film a fair assessment, considerable background info

must be provided regarding Pasolini's upbringing, his previous work, as well as Italy's relationship to Marxism and fascism.

Unlike Germany, where fascism was defeated by the outside forces of Russia and the United States, Mussolini was deposed by Italy's king, backed by popular mandate. After he was reinstated by the Nazis, Mussolini fought a civil war against his own people. Not surprisingly, the Years of Lead neo-fascists blowing up random civilians did not inspire a revanchist support for their cause. However, the 1970s Italian public was not warm to Marxist terrorism either because the country was in the middle of the Cold War and bordered the Soviet Union's Eastern Bloc. It seemed that the citizenry was being squeezed by multiple equally determined forces, within and without.

Salò was produced when fascist terrorism was occurring, yet the story is set in 1943. This means it can be interpreted as a commentary on both time periods. Like any other conflict in the world, The Years of Lead were fueled by the momentum of history. Just as modern political theorists will trace the concerns of today's America with events that took place decades or centuries ago, the same can be done to explain the Years of Lead. It's merely a question of how far back a scholar wants to go and whether a case can be made that there exists a logical chain of events. The simplest explanation is that the Years of Lead occurred because of older ideological grievances that were not put to rest with the conclusion of World War II.

An alternative explanation is that perhaps fascism and Marxism are timeless appeals for the human condition, so they are reincarnated in cyclical fashion under different faces and names. An illustration of this dynamic can be seen in the history of fascism itself. In 1912 Benito Mussolini was the editor of *Avanti!*, the official daily newspaper of the Italian Socialist Party (Renzi, 1971, p. 189). Mussolini considered Marx "the greatest of all theorists of socialism"

(Smith, 1983, p. 7). A few years later, the cataclysmic scope of World War I led to the redrawing of centuries-old jurisdictional boundaries between countries and even the complete collapse of the Ottoman Empire, many of whose territories had neighbored Italy.

The war radically shifted the journalist's opinions towards a diametrically opposite direction on the political spectrum. Being ousted from the Italian Socialist Party for his interventionist views, Mussolini created two nationalistic newspapers and enlisted to fight (Schindler, 2001, p. 88-89). After the war Mussolini continued his activism by forming his 200 member "Fasci Italiani di Combattimento" (Italian Combat Squad) in Milan. These volunteer militia "squadristi" or "blackshirts" would often fight with communists in public demonstrations, a situation King Victor Emmanuel III was hesitant to stop due to fears that Marxists might overthrow the government as they did in the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Ebner, 2017).

In a sense, the Years of Lead factions were a reincarnation of what took place in the 1920s, but using different tactics. Bertolucci's Years of Lead era film *The Conformist* (1970) conceptually deals with this duality of ideologies, having a Marxist academic character become a fascist would-be assassin, tasked with removing his former associates. When Mussolini and 30,000 of his supporters marched on Rome in 1922, the king appointed Mussolini to Prime Minister in order to avoid a civil war. Anyone engaged in terror attacks during the Years of Lead was aware of the potential for rapid governmental transformation in Italy due to the precedent set by this historic coup d'état. The march on Rome was a famous event not only in Italy, but it also inspired Adolf Hitler's own Beer Hall Putsch failed coup attempt in 1923 (Goeschel, 2018, p. 23). In a similar circumstance to Mussolini, Hitler was eventually appointed to chancellor by President Hindenburg to avoid a civil war between supporters of the German Communist Party (KPD) and the NSDAP's own fascist paramilitary SA, or "brownshirts" (Taylor, 1994). Pasolini

was born the year Mussolini came to power and grew up during the fascist period. Raised by a fascist sympathizing father, the young poet didn't question the ideology until his teenage years when he visited Germany of all places (Ireland, 2005).

In July of 1943 King Emmanuel deposed and arrested Mussolini after endless military losses led many in the population to seek a conclusion to their participation in WWII. Even though the king had agreed to an armistice with the Allies, Mussolini was freed from captivity by Waffen SS commandos and placed in power again, this time controlling the northern half of Italy invaded by German forces. This new puppet state became known as the Italian Social Republic, or the Republic of Salò, which serves as the setting and namesake for Pasolini's movie. Even though Mussolini had been instated in '22 in an attempt to avoid civil war, it was seemingly inevitable as it eventually broke out in September of 1943. Pasolini and his family lived within Salò's jurisdiction during this time and it was against this regime that the country fought a civil war.

Many of the Years of Lead filmmakers such as Sergio Sollima, director of *poliziotteschi*, and Gualtiero Jacopetti, inventor of the mondo film, fought in the Italian Resistance (Corliss, 2011). Opposition forces were comprised of the Communist Party of Italy loyalists and other assorted anti-fascists. Nazisploitation films of the 1970s are a reflection not only of Germany's wartime activities, but Italy's as well because the intermingling of their governments was inseparable from an anti-fascist perspective. The atrocities the Nazis became infamous for also occurred on Italian soil under Mussolini's puppet government, such as the Ardeatine massacre of Rome in 1944, itself a retribution against an Italian Resistance attack (Gruber, 2014). As it relates specifically to the settings of "il sadiconazista" films of the '70s, most of them feature very little cityscape photography, allowing them to take place in nondescript locations,

presumably in Germany or Eastern Europe. However, it's possible that Years of Lead filmmakers who were around during the war, depending on their region, may have been aware of Nazi concentration camps located in northern Italy such as Risiera di San Sabba. The Italian Army had also set up concentration camps of their own in Somalia, Eritrea, and all throughout Libya during their conquest of North Africa, but these have largely been forgotten, with some scholars calling the phenomenon "historical amnesia" (Fuller, 2003).

In April of 1945 Mussolini was captured and executed by communist militants who displayed his body hanging upside down in Milan. Mondo director Gualtiero Jacopetti makes a visual reference to this incident in his shockumentary film *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971), with the scene even featuring on the poster in its Italian release. Following the abdication of King Emmanuell III, the government became a republic, with 20% of its legislature represented by the Italian Communist Party, or PCI (Nohlen & Stöver, 2010, p. 1047). The Italian Communist Party membership included Years of Lead filmmakers Lucio "The Godfather of Gore" Fulci as well as Luchino Visconti, notable for making what is debatably the first nazisploitation film *The Damned* (1969).

Pasolini didn't fight in the civil war, as he was working on his university thesis (Rohdie, 2011), although his brother died in combat near Yugoslavia (Moliterno, 2002). The future director had a conflicted stance towards the Italian Communist Party because he felt they became too centrist after the war's devastation. In 1947 he published a decree in the newspaper *Libertà*: "In our opinion, we think that currently only communism is able to provide a new culture", (Gordon, 1996, p. 34). However, The Partito Comunista Italiano, or PCI, was banned due to American pressure in 1947 (Agnew & Muscarà, 2002, p. 210). The largest representation in the Italian parliament from 1946 to 1994 was the Christian Democracy (DC), a centrist party with

Catholic leanings. During the social unrest of the early 1970s, the DC announced an alliance with the Italian Communist Party, which had reformed during the 1950s. This alliance, known as the “Historic Compromise”, was what motivated the Marxist Red Brigade group to murder former prime minister Aldo Moro in 1978 (Willan, 2003).

If one is to view *Salò* through the lens of “authorial intent”, it is a Marxist critique of fascism. Authorial intent is different than auteur theory, in that auteur theory looks for existing patterns in a filmography as a way of defining a particular director’s style (Pickering, 2010). Authorial intent, a literature studies technique, is the attempt to determine what the author was *trying* to express in their creations, whether they succeeded or not (Huddleston, 2012, p. 241-256). Auteur theory is being implemented by anyone who says they enjoy a particular director’s work, whether or not they’re aware of the concept as its described in film studies. In the modern era it can be taken for granted that the director is the spiritual author of a film, despite the fact that movies are a collaborative artform involving writers, producers, actors, editors, etc. Whereas in literature, it’s a given that a book’s contents emerged solely from the mind of whoever’s name is on the cover.

Salò is a Marxist authorial statement because it’s preoccupied with the perversion of power. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx writes “Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another” (p. 244). The film is making the point that once people are allowed total control over others, they become unrestrained monsters. With no accountability, the libertines do not subscribe to the state-proclaimed beliefs of militarism, hierarchy, racial superiority, or whatever else one associates with fascist principles. At one point in the story, a young man gives the Roman salute to his captors, indicating his unrelenting loyalty to fascism, yet they laugh and execute him anyway. The libertines don’t actually espouse

any fascist rhetoric at all, as they are more akin to a deranged Roman emperor than someone with a political cause. This is a common theme in all Italian nazisploitation films, where the antagonists are using their power for sadistic hedonism. Brothels set up in concentration camps were a common setting for these stories, which usually play out like an X-rated nightmare version of *The Great Escape* (1963). Some, such as *Gestapo's Last Orgy* (1977) had alternate titles like *Caligula Reincarnated as Hitler*, further connecting these works to other sadism pictures, rather than to a straight depiction of history.

A major thematic difference between *Salò* and other nazisploitation films is in who the victims are. The libertines in *Salò* are inflicting cruelty on their fellow Italians, while other films involve Germans and captive Jews or sometimes American POW's. In this regard, *Salò*'s message is that fascism is a negative force, not only due to what it does to others, but even its own supporters. One could conceive of Pasolini's film as an updated thematic equivalent to Roberto Rossellini's anti-fascist trilogy of neorealist works in the 1940s, but with more atrocious imagery. With the resurgence in fascist attacks in the 1970s, perhaps Pasolini hoped to create the ultimate anti-fascist film for audience members who hadn't learned the lessons of the past. As Marx said "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce", (Patel, 2018, p. 2).

Whatever his intention, *Salò* was pushing against the limits of censorship in 1975. As previously noted, the most likely classification of motion picture to attract the authorities' ire were those select works that showcased sexual sadism, especially when it seemed as if the viewer was supposed to enjoy the proceedings. It is the proliferation of these sadism pictures that makes it so difficult to ascertain whether something like Pasolini's *Salò* should be judged as an isolated critique on the fascist system he grew up under or rather as one of many shock titillation pieces from the time, such as Mario Pinzauti's *Passion Plantation* (1976). Still, these

contradictions regarding what was objectionable illustrate that the rules were not hardline grounded in Catholicism by this point, but were rather some blend of the censor board's personal tastes. This perceived hypocrisy only led to more permissiveness when highlighted by the newspapers. Curti explains that this slippery slope trend is when even male nudity was permitted in Bertolucci's *Novecento* (1976), although the taboo had been broken earlier with Pasolini's 1971 picture *The Decameron* (Curti, 2021, p. 279). In 1976 the Constitutional Court, ruled that "the state cannot accept any limitation of sovereignty which affects those principles" (Cartabia, 1990, p. 189), with "principles" referring to the 1948 Constitution. The 1948 Constitution's first clause guarantees "freedom of opinion and expression" (Kaye, 2018, p. 2). This court ruling created ambiguous new responsibilities for authorities as it relates to judging obscenity in films.

The permission of basically anything is what led to the creation of movies like *Gestapo's Last Orgy* (1977), which features characters eating fetuses and excrement. Incredibly, this movie was passed with a censorship visa in January of 1977 (Magilow, 2012, p. 29), raising the question to a modern reader of what exactly the commission's purpose was by this point in time. This is not to say that there were not cuts still made to certain films. Such was the case with Bruno Mattei's *Women's Camp 119* (1977). The film portrays a Nazi experiment to cure their soldiers of homosexuality via female prisoners, of which the certification board wrote "the Commission is particularly sensitive to the scenes of torture and of sadism. It offers without any hesitation a total ban", (Magilow, 2012, p. 27). The mere existence of this film demonstrates how radically the content escalated from what the censors' concerns were just a few years prior when they banned the documentary *The Queen* (1968) for its depiction of a New York City drag queen pageant (Giori, 2017, p. 145). Bertolucci's *Last Tango and Paris* (1972) and Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) were also not circulated officially in their uncut form

until 1987 and 1991 respectively. The word “officially” is used because it was noted before that certain red-light districts played films figuratively underground even during the ultra-strict early 1960s and it is unknowable which individual theaters may have engaged in the practice throughout the ‘70s.

Ne Plus Ultra (continued)

During the mid to late 1970s, Italian transgressive cinema shifted away from “stalk and slash” gialli and “shoot ‘em up” poliziotteschi towards heavy gore, sometimes fused with pornography in the cases of *Gialli in Venice* (1979), *Emanuelle in America* (1977), etc. This was when the cannibal cycle thrived. Umberto Lenzi’s movie *The Man From Deep River* (1972) was the prototype, but it wasn’t until the release of Ruggero Deodato’s *Jungle Holocaust* (1977) that imitations started pouring out. These included *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* (1977), *Mountain of the Cannibal God* (1978), *Papaya: Love Goddess of the Cannibals* (1978), and a dozen other pictures.

The reason the public’s appetite for this content didn’t wane was due to the consistent psychological pressure put on them by the Years of Lead. In a February, 1976 issue of *The New York Times* there is an article titled “Rough Road in Italy.” In it the editorial board describes the situation as “Italy’s worst political crisis of conscience and one of its worst economic slumps of the postwar period”, (Oakes et al., 1976). Although attacks were consistent throughout this period, the targets would change. The first journalist to die in the conflict was Carlo Casalegno, killed by the Red Brigades in 1977 (Hovey, 1977). In March of 1978, former prime minister Aldo Moro was kidnapped by the Red Brigades (Willan, 2003). Moro was a leader in Christian Democracy, the largest political party in the country. A centrist politician, Moro oversaw the “Historic Compromise” where the DC created an alliance with the Italian Communist Party

during the '70s. The leader of the communist party was motivated to do this by the 1973 Chilean coup, seeing the event as proof that Marxists could only hold power within multi-party democracies if they formed coalitions (Kleinman, 1975). The Red Brigades did not support this compromise, so they seized Moro and demanded the release of prisoners. When the DC wouldn't capitulate to their demands, the Red Brigades gave Moro a mock trial, executed him, and dumped his body in a trunk (Tanner, 1978).

While 1979 saw the most assassinations of any time in the entire Years of Lead, the most casualties from a single event was the Bologna massacre on August 2, 1980. At 10:25 Central European Summer Time, a time bomb exploded in a railway station full of tourists, killing 85 (Shipler, 1980). The August 4th coverage of the incident featured in *The New York Times* describes the confused terror the Italian public was experiencing in the aftermath. Forty thousand citizens, "many waving red communist flags", protested the explosion (Borders, 1980). As with the mysterious intent of the earlier Piazza Fontana bombing, the August 4th article mentions that anonymous calls had come into a Rome newspaper, with the first stating the act was done by a fascist group, the 2nd call denying fascist involvement, and a third call claimed the left-wing Red Brigades were responsible. On the day of the explosion authorities suspected a faulty boiler was to blame, but soon the neo-fascist Armed Revolutionary Nuclei (NAR) came under suspicion (Borders, 1980). The full extent of the group's involvement would take decades to uncover, with arrests and convictions continuing up to the early 2000's. In what must be one of the most unlikely events of all time, a tourist transferred his old home videos of the Bologna massacre after forty years, revealing a new suspect (Sawyer, 2021) and securing a life sentence conviction for a fascist extremist named Paolo Bellini (Bernabei, 2022). Though members of NAR were previously sentenced for the attack, the group denied any involvement. This had led to much

speculation, as it has with many other Years of Lead incidents, that the Bologna massacre was possibly coordinated with foreign entities.

All of this was occurring within the context of the Cold War, when the United States was willing to use military force to stop the spread of communist governments. Theories abound that the CIA was responsible through Operation Gladio in a manner similar to the Nixon administration's involvement in Chile's 1973 coup (Manera, 2021). Former Italian president Francesco Cossiga claimed Palestinian involvement as recently as 2008 (Mane, 2016). The confusion and rumors of international involvement surrounding these events influenced poliziotteschi movies and other Italian spy thrillers like *Day of the Cobra* (1980) and *Covert Action* (1978), much in the way that the JFK assassination and Watergate scandal spawned the American films *Three Days of the Condor* (1973) and *The Parallax View* (1974).

***Cannibal Holocaust* as the Period's Embodiment**

Cannibal Holocaust (1980) was produced at a time when the Italian public's patience was at its breaking point and there was no censorship system left in place to prevent extremely primal, anarchic movies. The above coverage of Italy's cinematic censorship during this time was essential support for the application of catharsis theory for a few reasons. The first is that the Italian leniency explains how transgressive films from the Years of Lead could be exhibited in way that other countries wouldn't allow. Most regions would pre-emptively block the production of these kind of works regardless of what audiences wanted to see. A second justification for the thorough coverage of Italy's rules becomes apparent when comparing them to those of select countries that also had permissive censorship rules. One might assume that the lack of content control is solely responsible for Italy's transgressive films existing, but this can be proven otherwise via comparison to the United States. America is likely the reference point a reader of

this piece will have for establishing baseline standards regarding what kind of content one can expect when attending a movie theater. As hard as it might be to believe, American cinema was actually more tolerant of these kinds of visuals during this time, but the same volume of shocking content wasn't made simply because there wasn't a profitable demand for it like there was in Italy. The claim that the American system would have allowed the manufacture of this sort of extreme content seems dubious at first, but an understanding of US regulatory bodies proves the point.

There never was a national government bureau blocking the production or release of certain films in the United States. Ever since movies started playing around the turn of the 20th century, states and cities passed laws prohibiting certain images such as blasphemy, sex, violence, miscegenation, etc., whatever offended local sensibilities (Wittern-Keller, 2022). Hoping to avert federal regulation, the major movie studios formed a trade commission, called the Motion Picture Production Code, that would self-censor their movies. This organization moderated content from 1934 to 1968 (Dow, 2009).

After 1968 the Production Code was replaced with the more flexible Motion Picture Association of America rating system, commonly referred to as just "MPAA" in the press. The MPAA ratings board was created in response to many of the same late 1960s social changes that affected Italy in its "Movement '68", such as university protests and counterculture. Under the MPAA's new rules, films were assigned a rating of either G, GP, R, or X (Dow, 2009). All of the Italian films that this thesis covers would be equivalent to an R or X rating, but where the American system was laxer came in its application. Censorship was the domain of a government bureau in Italy and all films had to receive an approval certificate in order to play in a theater, while American moviemakers weren't legally obligated to do this at all. The only muscle the

MPAA had was in its contracts with distributors who agreed to not play films unless they passed through the ratings process (Cones, 1997, p. 116). Pornography in the United States was still subject to state obscenity laws and eventually multiple Supreme Court cases throughout the 1970s, but there was no legal limit at all on violence. Herschel Gordon Lewis demonstrated with his film *The Gore Gore Girls* (1972) that the most violent imagery imaginable could still be distributed, albeit with an X rating. If a filmmaker wanted to release a work with gratuitous violence, but didn't want it to have the association with pornography that an X rating carried, they could release it unrated as George Romero did with his picture *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

This type of conflict is what led to the creation of the NC-17 rating in America. The NC-17 rating didn't exist until 1990, when it replaced the X-rating that was standard for 20 years (Yates, 2022). In the 1980s the art films *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986) and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989) had run into censorship troubles with the MPAA and their directors refused to compromise. The distributors of these two movies eventually decided to release them unrated after years of negotiating with the MPAA. Once critics saw how sophisticated the intentions of these two movies were, they lobbied for a new rating option.

On the show *Siskel & Ebert* (1986-1999), the critics explained that there should exist some new label for adult only works that are non-pornographic and this kind of publicity eventually resulted in the NC-17 rating (Ebert, 1990). Even pornography was treated more liberally in the United States than Italy, at least from a de jure perspective, especially in major cities like Los Angeles and New York. The so called "porno chic" phenomena in the United States never had an Italian counterpart because the content was officially banned in Italy. An Italian citizen could illegally visit a red-light theater, but it would be unlikely for a critic to write an article praising something playing there. This should be a surprise to the reader considering

the lengthy section above detailing the prevalence of sexploitation during the Years of Lead, but it's because the Italian censorship system delineated a stronger barrier between "normal" cinema versus pornography than America did. What this means is that in Italy a tremendous amount of leeway was given to titillation and violence as long as it was within some bounds of restraint and confined to what most people would consider a real movie. It was the solely pornographic that was outright prohibited. Whereas in America the same X rating was applied to the Oscar-winning *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) as it was to the porno *Deep Throat* (1972) or an HG Lewis gore picture. Factoring all this in, it means that Hollywood could have made these kinds of movies in mass numbers, but there just wasn't a demand for it.

Cannibal Holocaust (1980) tells the story of a group of documentary filmmakers who travel to the Amazon, hoping to capture the grisly practices of one of the last known cannibal tribes. Shortly after arriving, the crew disappears. An NYU anthropology professor is hired by the TV network that financed the expedition to find the lost documentarians. Ingratiating himself to the tribe by trying some human flesh, the professor finds the crew's corpses and film cannisters. He returns to New York City and watches the lost crew's footage, with the mystery unraveling after each reel. It turns out the crew found the cannibal tribe too benign to make captivating footage for their documentary "The Green Inferno" and even felt some of the grisly affairs were amusing. In their frustration with the project's failure and constant infighting, they begin raping indigenous women and burning down the tribe's village. They film the chaos with the intention of presenting it without its true context. Various members of the crew are then gang raped, castrated, and disemboweled by the natives in retaliation. Struggling during the attack, the crew's cameras capture their own deaths, allowing Professor Monroe to watch the unbelievable events unfold from the safety of his office in New York City. Meanwhile, he has a meeting

scheduled with the Pan American Broadcasting System, a fictional media conglomerate akin to NBC. The network's contract with the documentarians was for a hotly anticipated primetime special. Although the film cannisters are technically the network's property now, the professor is too embarrassed to show them the final footage. Encountering tremendous resistance, the mortified professor eventually screens the last reel for the room and the network agrees the documentary would be shameful to air. As *Cannibal Holocaust* ends, Professor Monroe asks himself "I wonder who the real cannibals are."

Cannibal Holocaust ran into distribution problems around the world for its mix of gore, rape, and animal cruelty. At one time it was blocked in Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Iceland, and Singapore, although the movie has been subsequently marketed as "banned in over 50 countries!", (Rose, 2011). The reason for its enduring censorship in the modern era comes from its authentic scenes of a pig blasted with a shotgun, a monkey having its head smashed in, and the decapitation of a massive Arrau turtle. In 1985 the movie received an American theatrical release in its uncut form (Waddell, 2016, p. 22), serving as further proof that these movies were allowed to be screened in the U.S., yet there wasn't enough demand to motivate similar productions domestically.

At its initial debut in Italy the movie was seized by authorities after ten days and its director Ruggero Deodato was put on trial for murder (Rose, 2011). The courts believed the death sequences were so convincing that they couldn't have been fabricated. To further complicate matters, Deodato had gotten his actors to sign contracts agreeing not to do any press or other movie projects for one year. This was intended to give the movie a certain notoriety as the public would naturally wonder what happened to the performers. Eventually the actors were

brought in to testify and the film's special effects were explained to a jury. The producers received probation and the movie would remain banned in Italy for another 4 years (Ryan, 2021).

Director Ruggero Deodato had already made a series of cathartically aggressive pictures, perhaps most notably *Jungle Holocaust* (1977), the film that ignited the cannibal craze. Immediately before production on *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), he completed another piece banned in Great Britain, *House on the Edge of the Park* (1980). That film involves a blue-collar rapist who uses a straight razor to torment a party of elitist snobs. The lead actor David Hess had been typecast as a villain in a subgenre called "rape and revenge" films (Slotnik, 2011) after starring in Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972). As a parable about class struggle, *House on the Edge of the Park* jerks viewers' sympathies around with its bizarre narrative. The movie opens with the antagonist assaulting a random woman. From here he is invited to a small party hosted by rich urbanites at their opulent mansion. The yuppies belittle the antagonist and his friend over their wardrobes and unfamiliarity with upper class preoccupations. The hosts' behavior is so repugnant, the audience is compelled to see them be verbally put in their place. Instead, the antagonist goes into a fit of rage, slashing the men and raping the women. Having gone too far in his retribution, the audience is forced to side with the wealthy victims, who symbolically shoot the antagonist's testicles off.

Deodato would play with this misdirection of cathartic violence again in *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). From one perspective the natives are shown to be truly savage, removing a tribe member's fetus from her body as punishment and burying it in mud, while another native girl is impaled vertically. Yet, it's clear from the later proceedings that the documentary crew is comprised of opportunistic rapists and murderers. Even the story's media conglomerate is proven to have no scruples about showing execution montages if it will boost their ratings.

In a sense, *Cannibal Holocaust* is an indictment on the whole human race, fueled by a decade of Years of Lead cynicism. It's commonly seen as a critique of media practices (Jauregui, 2004), though it's broad enough in its visuals to be interpreted as a statement about colonialism, or just as a failed art project inducing catastrophic trauma on everyone involved. There is a good argument for the latter, as the actors playing the documentary crew were said to have protested the killing of the animals, crying and vomiting when it was done anyway (Yorke, 2005). Lead actor Robert Kerman has said of Deodato "He was a sadist", and shared his belief that the director "had no soul" (Yorke, 2005).

Still, from a catharsis standpoint, the movie embodies everything that characterizes '70s Italian transgressive cinema. Designed to be as shocking as possible; it is unthinkable that anyone could watch it and not feel tremendous amounts of rage and disgust. If it were screened for a theatrical audience in 2022 it would almost certainly provoke yelling, cursing, and walkouts. These boiling emotions were felt by the director during its production due to the political climate of the time, with Deodato saying in an interview "It was the time of the Red Brigades. Every night on TV there were very strong images of people being killed or maimed", (Rose, 2011). It's clear that Italian audiences had a similar need to vent something as well, either through this film or the many others like it.

Condemnation of mondo practices is the least abstract theme to draw from the movie as the insidious documentary crew are essentially mondo filmmakers. Ruggero Deodato has stated that *Cannibal Holocaust* is a jab at mondo pioneers Gualtiero Jacopetti & Franco Prosperi, but also mondo filmmaking in general, over its exploitative practices (Goodall, 2006, p. 31). Portions of *Cannibal Holocaust* are visually inspired by mondo films as well, occasionally dipping into the realm of documentary. While most of the story is told using conventional

narrative filmmaking, the image format changes when the movie cuts to the crew's footage. These portions are grainy, shaky, and handheld. Before the invention of modern camera stabilizing gimbals, shooting with a handheld camera while running would result in shaky footage. Documentary crews capturing warzones, riots, and other chaotic events would wind up with the kind of wobbly images that result from not having their camera attached to a tripod or dolly. Since no one would ever make their footage look this way on purpose, it's associated in the minds of viewers with a certain authenticity. Even to this day, this shaky effect is what immediately tells a news viewer that the video they are looking at must have been taken with a cell phone, rather than a professional broadcast team. Mondo filmmakers were wise to the effect and sometimes would capture their staged scenes in this frantic style.

The mondo film *Savage Man, Savage Beast* (1975) was a direct inspiration on Deodato, specifically a scene where a man is eaten by lions (Goodall, 2006, p. 28). Most of *Savage Man, Savage Beast* is a polished National Geographic style documentary about mankind's relationship to nature. It showcases animals eating each other, curious indigenous penis rituals (possibly staged), as well some big game hunting. Events unfold with context provided by a pedantic narrator, pontificating on whether humans really are all that civilized by comparison, or just more intelligent. At one point the film cuts to grainy handheld footage from a 16mm home movie camera. The narrator explains that it was shot by a safari tourist group documenting one of its members attempt to photograph lions up close. Footage of a man being peeled open by the large cats is overlaid with the narrator's sardonic lamentation about the tourist's stupidity and mankind's hubris. *Savage Man, Savage Beast* avoided the Video Nasties panic in the UK by having nearly ten minutes trimmed for animal cruelty (Kerekes & Slater, 1994, p. 85), but it's yet another example of how the transgressive energy of Years of Lead filmmaking spilled over into

many genres. More importantly, as it relates to *Cannibal Holocaust*, is the effect of the lion sequence. Even after 47 years, no one has been able to definitively prove whether the lion incident is even real because the filmmakers never publicly stated otherwise (Kerekes & Slater, 1994, p. 86). To this day, internet forums have tried and failed to verify the lion scene's authenticity and here is where the mondo film conceptually occupies a unique space in the study of mediums.

Mondo documentaries are notorious for mixing real life graphic images with fabricated ones. The pioneers of mondo, Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi, stated in an interview that they faked the footage of the self-immolating monk scene in *Mondo Cane 2* (1963). Their film used a dummy (Martin, 2011) to portray the famous real-life event in which Thích Quảng Đức set himself on fire to protest Buddhist oppression by the South Vietnamese government. In *Cannibal Holocaust*, the executives show Professor Monroe the crew's previous documentary called "The Last Road to Hell." It depicts executions in the Congo and resembles Jacopetti & Prosperi's mondo *Africa Addio* (1966). This sequence was actually comprised of real-life stock footage (Stallone & Murawski, 2000).

When *Cannibal Holocaust* was released, the shaky handheld portions of the crew's death were the main reason Ruggero Deodato was accused of murder because they don't resemble a normal movie. Other influences on Deodato's technique came from his friend Roberto Rossellini, the prolific director of neorealist pictures during the post war 1940s. At its initial release, Deodato's fellow director colleague Sergio Leone sent him a letter, "Dear Ruggero, what a movie! The second part is a masterpiece of cinematographic realism, but everything seems so real that I think you will get in trouble with all the world", (Slater, 2002, p. 108). *Cannibal*

Holocaust was also scored by Jacopetti & Prospero's longtime composer collaborator Riz Ortolani, further drawing signs of meta commentary, homage, or perhaps even parody.

In fictional literature, there is a technique some authors have used called a "false document" whereby a claim is made within the work that it depicts true events, when in fact, it does not (Baker, 2014, p. 54-88). When this manipulation is discovered by the public, the author can justify it on the grounds that, rather than being a hoax, the false document was added as an artistic stroke to give their work a certain verisimilitude. Examples in cinema include *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Fargo* (1996), which both contain the phrase "This is a true story", written on their opening credits, despite both being fictional stories.

Mondo movies take this practice to the extreme by intersplicing staged images in between real-life death footage. The American series *Faces of Death* (1978-1995) is notorious for this, with the first film's make up effects technician estimating some 40% of it was actors wearing wigs and fake blood to match newsreel outtakes (Blunt, 2008). Since audiences are not informed of this dynamic, mondos are often dabbling in what postmodernists would call "hyperreality", or "the generation by models of a real without origin", (Bakhtiari, K. (2020)). This philosophical conundrum, originally coined by French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), is what inspired Ruggero Deodato to make *Cannibal Holocaust*. One of Deodato's quotes was used above to show a link between his film and real-life political chaos, but he actually included an element of media criticism in his full comments. "It was the time of the Red Brigades. Every night on TV there were very strong images of people being killed or maimed. Not only killings but also some fabrications. They were increasing the sensationalism of the news just to shock people", (Rose, 2011). Deodato was experiencing an inability to distinguish the real from simulation, which is Baudrillard's concept. However,

Baudrillard has explained over the years that “When I describe hyperreality or the media or whatever, there is no positive or negative judgement, well maybe from time to time, but in principle there is no judgment neither of morality nor of truth”, (Smith & Clark, 2015, p. 32). Baudrillard doesn’t use the term as something that should be cautioned against because it is unavoidable when engaging with media.

Its application to news has been the subject of much academic literature, but it also applies to entertainment. When watching fictional movies, many audience members may feel as if they have learned a profound life lesson from the experience, despite, in many cases, the entire proceedings being just a product of some author’s imagination. The audience now has a new worldview, a new conception of reality, even though it was molded by something completely made up. In this regard, *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) can be interpreted as a sort of multi layered meta reflection on the Years of Lead and the era’s media forms. On its surface it is the most extreme of the cannibal film cycle. Basic subtextual analysis would say it is a critique of the media’s manipulative characteristics. However, by having the performers sign disclosure agreements and disappear, the film becomes a hyperreal false document that is equally deceptive as whatever Red Brigades news programs inspired it. This intentional sensationalism and killing of real animals also negate its ability to critique mondo with any moral high ground, as the film has become an exploitative mondo itself.

Cannibal Holocaust’s legacy in world cinema is in its influence on the “found footage” genre of horror movies (Ryan, 2021). This subgenre includes the best-selling *Paranormal Activity* (2007-2021) franchise spawned by the global success of *The Blair Witch Project* (1998). Scholars studying the found footage phenomenon usually mention *Cannibal Holocaust* as a progenitor, although it’s unclear the makers of *The Blair Witch Project* (1998) ever saw it. The

fact that the producers of *The Blair Witch Project* used the same disclosure agreement disappearance tactic is highly coincidental. Spanish filmmaker Paco Plaza has admitted the direct influence of *Cannibal Holocaust* on his *REC* series (2007-2012) of handheld camera horror pictures (Heller-Nicholas, 2014, p. 187).

Whatever else can be said about it, *Cannibal Holocaust* was the Ne Plus Ultra peak in the Arc of Catharsis. It's as good a contender as any for the title of "most controversial movie ever made", as *The Guardian* wrote (Rose, 2011). Despite its short release, the movie inspired other Italian directors to make *Cannibal Terror* (1980), *Eaten Alive* (1980) and *Cannibal Ferox* (1981). These works would feature the same subgenre hallmarks that made *Cannibal Holocaust* so provocative, but they lacked the prowess to rise above what is essentially a hokey premise. Of course, all these flicks wound up on the BBFC's ban list in the UK along with other assorted works from Italy at the time.

Chapter 5: The Arc of Catharsis curves downward

This chapter explains the notion that Italian movies reached a point of peak nastiness around 1980 and then gradually became more conventional throughout the 1980s. It's argued this was because the political climate cooled around the same time. Movies in the action and horror genres were still made of course, so this chapter describes what the trends were. The exodus of pornography from Italian cinema is also covered.

Trends in the Remaining Ne Plus Ultra

One of the most consistent and curious patterns in Italy for several decades was, what are basically copycat pictures, trying to replicate a hit movie. It's fair to say this trend exists in Hollywood to some extent, where, for example, the success of the *Rambo* series (1982-2019) led to Schwarzenegger's *Commando* (1985). The Italians differed from this by creating products that engage in blatant copyright infringement. Unauthorized sequels like *Alien 2: On Earth* (1980) and *Terminator II* (1989) are too numerous to list and in the case of *Great White* (1981), Universal Pictures sued (Billick et al., 1982, p. 1) over its similarity to *Jaws* (1975). *Jaws* would receive another Italian rip off with Bruno Mattei's *Cruel Jaws* (1995), marketed in some regions as *Jaws 5*. This behavior was in full swing during the Ne Plus Ultra era. George Romero's American film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) was co-financed by gialli director Dario Argento in exchange for international distribution in non-English speaking territories (Kennedy, 2021). Argento was allowed to edit his own version with a heavier emphasis on gore and a hard rock soundtrack. Released as *Zombi*, this edit became a huge hit in Italy and ignited a wave of brutal zombie films, all oddly possessing the sexual sadism Italian cinema was known for. Lucio Fulci's unofficial *Zombi 2* (1979) features ample nudity and notorious gore, such as a sequence a woman has a giant splinter slowly squeezed into her eyeball after exiting the shower. *Zombi 2*'s

success led directly to *Zombi 3* (1988), *Zombi 4: After Death* (1990) and *Zombi 5: Killing Birds* (1988).

However, these late 80s sequels were among the last of their type to come out of Italy, which had lost interest in gory movies broadly by that point. They were the lingering remains of the post *Zombi 2* (1979) content that thrived in the early 1980s Italy such as *Burial Ground* (1981), *House by the Cemetery* (1981), *The Beyond*, and *City of the Living Dead* (1980). It's important to note that while *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) was released all over the world to great success, it only ignited a wave of imitations in Italy. This thesis would argue this is because zombie films are an easy template for portraying nonstop chaos and gore, something Italian audiences also wanted to see in the other templates of jungle cannibal stories, ancient roman settings, nazi camps, etc. Case in point, Umberto Lenzi's *Nightmare City* (1980) features zombie-esque contaminated people that run around stabbing women's breasts and drinking their blood throughout the film's entire duration. There are only a limited number of plots that could accommodate such imagery without being completely incoherent, but it makes sense with this zombie apocalypse formula.

In the late 1970s America there were a few brutally violent Vietnam War movies that swept the Oscars for their harrowing portrayals of the conflict's carnage. In Italy these movies were quite popular, with audiences reportedly clapping during the infamous Russian roulette torture scene in *The Deer Hunter* (1978) when De Niro's character gets revenge (Regis, 2009, p. 153). It also received standing ovations at its conclusion. Author Tiziana Ferrero Regis argues in her book *Recent Italian Cinema: Spaces, Contexts, Experiences* (2009) that *The Deer Hunter* resonated because of the negativity surrounding prime minister Aldo Moro's murder and its subsequent prosecutions. She writes, "The April 7 arrests focused media attention and public

opinion on only one of the aspects of the left-wing movements of the 1970s: terrorism”, (p. 153). She proposes that audiences were cynical toward the aspirational ideals of the Movement ’68 by the late 70s. This section of her book is implying that an audience can displace their frustrations with one group of people in real life onto a fictional one, at least when watching a movie. Her above point about *The Deer Hunter* is suggesting that the Viet Cong villains in that film reminded Italians of their own political problems somehow.

This is similar to what American critics have said about *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969), and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) as they relate to the Vietnam War (Nayman, 2020). Similar in the sense that the plots of those three works don’t involve war on their surface, but can be read as having something to say about that conflict, thematically. Finding fictional films of any era that explicitly reflect the politics of their time is not always easy because directors may avoid such a blatant approach for a few reasons. One is that trying to craft a consistent ideological message into a story might conflict with the other elements that contribute to engaging storytelling. There are many films throughout history made by directors with political activist intentions, but without the storytelling ability to make a satisfying product. Case in point, the above-mentioned *Nightmare City* (1980). The modern critical assessment of this film is that it’s a ridiculous and sleazy gross out picture. However, its director Umberto Lenzi has emphatically stated in interviews that his film was a strong statement against nuclear energy contamination, going as far as to claim *Nightmare City* (1980) predicted the AIDS epidemic (Revok, 2010). His intentions were not rewarded with prestigious accolades. Another reason filmmakers may not make a film explicitly addressing the politics of their time is out of preference for allegory and the extra layers of creativity it requires.

With the subject of this thesis, the connection between The Years of Lead and cinema has been observed by scholars previously in the case of police action “poliziotteschi” (Bondanella & Pacchioni, 2017, p. 479), but even the plots of those films are only vaguely related to what was occurring in real life. Poliziotteschi stories almost always revolve around the Mafia or just street crime broadly. Tiziana Ferrero Regis’ comments about *The Deer Hunter* are interesting because displacement is woven into the concept of cinematic catharsis, at least in the way that this thesis applies it. If one can entertain her idea that Italians displaced their political frustrations onto an American movie about Vietnam, then one can understand how this might happen with cannibal films, nazi films, etc.

This doesn’t mean there aren’t a few occasions in transgressive Italian works that make obvious references to The Years of Lead. Even in Bruno Mattei’s zombie horror picture *Hell of the Living Dead* (1980) there is a terrorist hostage sequence, very evocative of Aldo Moro’s famous kidnapping. Yet, these kinds of instances are few and far between in most of the films this analysis covers. Returning to the discussion of trends, the popularity of *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) led to multiple gruesome Vietnam-set stories such as *The Last Hunter* (1980) and *Tiger Joe* (1982). Eager to cash in on the success of hit movies from multiple genres, Italian cinema combined the Vietnam war template with cannibalism for *Cannibal Apocalypse* (1980). Jungle cannibalism fused with zombies for *Zombie Holocaust* (1980), while hardcore porn’s box office potential led to *Porno Holocaust* (1981).

Director Lucio Fulci was still making movies from genres that were popular in the 1970s, updating them with more extreme violence. His mafia film *Contraband* (1980) is considered one of the last poliziotteschi, notable for a scene where someone gets their face burned away with a blow torch. His giallo *The New York Ripper* (1982) involves a duck-quacking serial killer who

attacks women with a box cutter. When *The New York Ripper* was viewed by British censor Carol Tposki, she characterized it as "simply the most damaging film I have ever seen in my whole life", (Howarth, 2015, p. 87). Despite Fulci's defense that the film was a tribute to Alfred Hitchcock, it was banned in the UK for twenty years (p. 88).

These films were the end of an era as the political front was beginning to change by the early 1980s. In 1981 Prime Minister Giovanni Spadolini was instated. Considerably different from the Christian Democracy party, Spadolini was a former professor of political science at the University of Florence who pursued fascist activism in his youth and even joined the Republic of Salò during the civil war (Cowell, 1994). His resignation in 1982 was followed by the appointment of socialist Bettino Craxi to prime minister (Tagliabue, 2000). After 1982 the number of terror incidents began to diminish to the point that the chief Public Prosecutor of Florence said the mafia was a larger national concern (Willey, 1982, p. 468). Some scholars have even considered 1983 to be the real endpoint for the Years of Lead (Massimiliano, 2020, p. 1).

At the same time the public soured toward over the top nastiness in cinema. Pornography gradually faded out of mainstream movies due to technological changes. This is not to say there wasn't an attempt to keep it going. Success by these Italian filmmakers in blending explicit content with conventional genres led Hollywood to hire Tinto Brass for directing the American epic *Caligula* (1979). In retrospect, *Caligula* (1979) was the apex of Italian sexploitation cinema as well as sexploitation broadly, in terms of sheer scale, the ambition behind its production, and what would soon follow it. Its producer Bob Guccione was an American business magnate of Italian ancestry, most famous for creating the magazine *Penthouse* in 1965 (McFadden, 2010). At one time he was one of the wealthiest people in the world and he used this fortune to partially

fund the motion pictures *Chinatown* (1974) and *The Longest Yard* (1974). Having never financed a film in its entirety, Guccione conceived of creating his own blockbuster movie that would have both high production values and hardcore adult scenes. This project would become *Caligula*, the most expensive pornographic film of all time with a \$17.5 million budget, \$65 million in today's terms (McFadden, 2010).

Attempting to make the most legitimate movie possible, Guccione hired Roberto Rossellini's nephew Franco Rossellini to produce it (Shah, 2019, p. 26). With arthouse intentions, Guccione planned on having Academy Award nominated Italian filmmaker Lina Wertmüller at the helm, but her script was rejected and she declined to direct. Italian director Tinto Brass was contacted after Guccione viewed Brass' erotic nazisploitation film *Salon Kitty* (1976). The hiring of Brass, in many ways, caused the resultant production to be an Italian effort, considering that it was shot in Rome, lensed by Silvano Ippoliti, scored by maestro Bruno Nicolai, and cut by Nino Baragli, the editor of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) as well as every film ever made by Pasolini. *Caligula*'s costumes and production design were created by two-time Academy Award winning artist Danilo Donati, a frequent collaborator of Fellini on *Roma* (1972), *Amacord* (1973), *Satyricon* (1969) and Pasolini's *Trilogy of Life* series. It's fitting that these artists from Italy's transgressive cinema period worked on *Caligula* because what they created fit the financier's original conception of the piece, with Guccione's saying "I maintain the film is actually anti-erotic. In every one of its scenes you'll find a mixture of gore or violence or some other rather ugly things", (Prince, 2002, p. 350). *Caligula* was a modest box office success in the US and the few other territories it was allowed to be released, barely recouping its \$17 million budget with a \$23 million gross (Schertz, 2020, p. 105). Its success in America was likely due more to the curiosity surrounding the production rather than an American predilection

for the subject matter, considering it didn't start a trend. In Italy it was a hit, at least for a weekend, until all copies were seized by the police (Kasby, 1979). Sensing a potential market, Italy quickly churned out Joe D'Amato's *Caligula: The Untold Story* (1982) and Bruno Mattei's films *Caligula and Messalina* (1981) and *Nero and Poppea - An Orgy of Power* (1982).

With the global market in mind, *Caligula* demonstrated that adult content could be featured in even the most expensive Hollywood productions and actually turn a profit. Before *Caligula's* release in 1979, the only adult motion pictures playing in the United States to achieve box office success were extremely low budget and poorly made American productions or they were the considerably more sophisticated works coming from Europe where sexploitation was more popular. Serious appreciation from critics during the so called "porno chic" era was almost exclusively directed towards foreign art films like *The Story of O* (1975) because American adult entertainment had plots so thin that they could barely even be considered real movies, with the possible exception of Radley Metzger's satirical X-rated comedies such as *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1976).

The reason that esteemed critics reviewed many of these American works at all was because they were playing publicly in mass media headquarters like New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago where the critics' newspapers were located. Whether he was assigned to review these films by the *Chicago Sun-Tribune* or was merely there on his own curiosity, Roger Ebert's embarrassment from watching them can be felt in his review of *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973). Ebert writes "It's the best hard-core porno film I've seen", but he offers the disclaimer "I'm not a member of the raincoat brigade", (Ebert, 1973). *The Devil in Miss Jones* would go on to become the 10th highest grossing movie in the United States for 1973 while *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) ranked 7th., (Krämer, 2006, p. 50).

Caligula's production was fueled by the box office momentum generated by all these other works, but it was intended to be bigger and better. Peter O'Toole, Helen Mirren, Malcom McDowell, and John Gielgud were some of the most acclaimed performers of stage and screen in the English-speaking world during this period, so if they could star in *Caligula*, one would expect to see more grand-scale adult movies going into the 1980s. Granted, *Caligula* has the critical reputation of being one of the worst films ever made. Digging through the archives of contemporary reviews, *Variety* called the proceedings a "moral holocaust" (Werba, 1979), while Ebert decried it as "sickening, utterly worthless, shameful trash" (Ebert, 1980).

Still, the international box office of *Caligula* raised the question of whether these Years of Lead elements could consistently translate to other countries. However, the arrival of the new decade brought with it the technology of videotape. Home video had technically existed for some time prior, with VHS debuting in America in 1977 and video rental stores since 1978, but the players were too expensive for regular consumers to afford. A *New York Times* article from the period lists the price of VHS machines as being \$1,700 in 1975, then cut in half by 1980 (Silverman, 1984). As the decade rolled along, the devices got cheap enough for virtually anyone in the developed world to afford and video rental stores spread globally. This thesis opened with the controversy surrounding violent content that came with the invention of VHS, but the technology also had the unforeseen consequence of practically ending the presence of hardcore pornography in what is typically considered cinema.

Once the ability to see any content in the privacy of one's home emerged, few in the public would continue to endure the mortification involved in going to an adult movie theater. With the theatrical distribution model dead, there was no reason to shoot the footage on the higher image-resolved, but considerably more expensive celluloid, so the industry switched to

low quality videotape recording. The ability to fast forward a videotape also removed the necessity for even the most basic pretense of a porno narrative, pushing subsequent products outside the bounds of film studies, for the same reason that a YouTube video of someone fishing is not considered “cinema.”

These industry changes served as the plot for Paul Thomas Anderson’s Oscar nominated picture *Boogie Nights* (1997), taking place between 1977 and 1983. In the film Burt Reynolds plays an aging Los Angeles pornographer who makes low budget, yet profitable “exotic pictures”, bringing him conflicted shame. It is his dream to direct an adult film possessing enough narrative sophistication that it stands out as a real movie rather than amateur smut. Within the story, the Burt Reynolds character fulfills his dream, but soon the industry switches to videotape. The format conversion removes whatever modicum of legitimacy his niche had, evaporating any notions that its creators were genuine movie stars or filmmakers. In real life, some Italian filmmakers more or less achieved the Reynolds character’s dream during the Ne Plus Ultra period, but just as in *Boogie Nights*, videotape destroyed the niche artform.

The complete disappearance of a genre from theatrical exhibition has happened many times in the history of motion pictures as a competing medium emerges. In the pre-television era, war footage, boxing matches, and other world events were displayed in theaters. After the invention of television, it would be inconceivable to watch a news program or a recording of sport contests in a theater, months after they occurred. This is all to say that Italian transgressive works of the Years of Lead were heavily influenced by the adult films that were inextricably linked to cinema broadly through their shared distribution medium. Although hardcore veered off into VHS territory during the 1980s, milder forms of sexploitation remained in Italian cinema

and possibly never went out of favor completely, depending on where one draws the line as to what constitutes it.

The End of An Era

In his book *Europe's Troubled Peace: 1945 to the Present* (2012), Oxford professor Tom Buchanan goes into detail about Italian prime minister Bettino Craxi's changes to society. Serving from 1983 to 1987, Craxi was the leader of the Italian Socialist Party, yet Buchanan describes this premiership as "unencumbered by traditional socialist concerns", (p. 182). Bettino's business friendly policies often faced union opposition, yet he captured the vote of upwardly mobile yuppies. The oil crisis of '79 had ended and a combination of cheap labor and technological improvements stirred economic growth.

In 1984 there was a national poll conducted in Italy where citizens were asked what they thought historians would consider the country's most significant development of the previous 50 years (Drake, 1999, p. 62). The top response was "terrorism" at 36%. Yet, the year 1984 is considered the beginning of a "new economic miracle" for Italy by historians. Buchanan writes that Craxi "embodied a new sense of national pride" and that he became the longest-serving prime minister up to that point (p. 182). While certainly facing problems, the country had moved out of the disaster of the 1970s. The Years of Lead is considered to have officially ended in 1988 because that's when the Red Brigades disbanded (Re, 2020, p. 275), but its chaos peaked during Ne Plus Ultra (1975-1982). The term "Years of Lead" was actually coined around this time and is generally considered to have originated with a West German film *Die bleierne Zeit* (1981). This movie was released as *Anni di piombo* or "Years of Lead" in Italy and as *Marianne and Juliane* (1981) in English speaking territories (Rossi, 2018, p. 1). Its plot involves two sisters advocating for women's rights. One becomes a journalist while the other joins a terrorist group.

Violent Italian movies persisted during the remainder of the '80s, but the works were of a more lighthearted nature. One could locate dozens of pictures from the period that would be R-rated equivalent, but the sadistic tone of the previous decade is noticeably absent. It seems filmmakers during this time were catering to a “violence as fun” appeal, as opposed to using it as a painful endurance test. It was mentioned very early in this thesis that the Hollywood movie *Sorcerer* (1977) has retroactively been considered by some scholars to be the end of a trend in depressing mainstream American movies that followed the Vietnam War. *Sorcerer* was a big budget, gritty story about truckers carrying nitroglycerine in the jungle, blowing up when they hit bumps. The movie failed horribly as it was released at the same time as *Star Wars* (1977). The success of George Lucas' franchise fueled the blockbuster family films that characterized the following decade.

Although not exactly the same, a similar phenomenon happened in Italian cinema during the 80s, spawned by the improved societal outlook and runaway success of various Hollywood adventure, science fiction, and fantasy films. The Italian public simply lost interest in seeing characters be tortured, eaten alive, and raped in bizarre porno-hybrid flicks. Using the phrase “violence as fun” contrasted with “violence as painful” requires some explanation, but it's something that factors into most people's perception of how to interpret this kind of imagery. As an easy reference point for the reader, there are many Hollywood action films like the James Bond series that feature a high body count. The main character goes from place-to-place shooting countless enemies, sometimes reaching the point of parody for spoofs like *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1998). Violence in these kinds of action flicks is choreographed and edited in such a way that the audience feels no emotional sting from what just occurred. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) there is a sequence where Indiana Jones is challenged

to a duel by a sword wielding enemy, but decides to abruptly shoot him instead. This scene gets a laugh in every country the movie played in (Lopes, 2022).

These are examples of “violence as fun” in entertainment. By contrast, most of the films in this thesis are intended to induce wincing and groans from an audience. They show the psychological and physical damage done by aggressive behavior. Censors are more lenient of the extreme imagery if they feel it is done for important thematic reasons. *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) contains more onscreen gore, and more realistically portrayed, than most of the films in this analysis, yet it was released with an R-rating because the MPAA saw it as culturally important (Brennan, 1998).

Controversies arise when a filmmaker seems to be portraying vicious imagery in a way that an audience is supposed to enjoy somehow. This has been the most consistent criticism labeled at Quentin Tarantino throughout his career. However, even Tarantino sees a distinction between “violence as fun” and “violence as pain.” In an interview with Charlie Rose, the director explained that there are two drastically different ways that graphic scenes are conducted in his movie *Django Unchained* (2012). Cruelty against the slaves is treated with the utmost realism and seriousness, while retribution against slaveholders utilizes fluorescent fake blood, pressurized to simulate exaggerated bullet impacts (Rose, 2012). The audience is supposed to enjoy the revenge, so it’s depicted as more cartoonish.

Italian action, horror, and fantasy pictures of the mid to late 1980s is more in this comic book fashion when showing people being harmed. Enemies get shredded by machine gun fire in Bruno Mattei’s Rambo-inspired *Strike Commando* (1987) and of course *Strike Commando 2* (1988), but it’s clearly intended to be popcorn fluff. Exploitation cinema during this decade was dominated by Hollywood rip offs galore. *The Terminator*’s success led to Sergio Martino’s

Hands of Steel (1986), while George Miller's *The Road Warrior* (1981) fueled the post-apocalyptic Italian imitations *2020 Texas Gladiators* (1983) and *Warriors of the Year 2072* (1984). Many of these movies are fusions of Hollywood's *Escape from New York* (1981), *The Warriors* (1979) and bits and pieces of whatever other American action movies were a hit the previous season.

Ruggero Deodato, who had cut his teeth on "rape and revenge" and cannibal films during the 70s, was now making Rambo/Indiana Jones styled pictures like *The Raiders of Atlantis* (1983) and *Cut and Run* (1985). Even the horror pictures still being made were taking on these lighthearted aspects. Lamberto Bava's movie *Demons* (1985) was a smash hit, generating two sequels and a television show. *Demons* is the story of a movie theater taking over by hideous monsters when the film the audience watches comes to life. Taking cues from American works like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Evil Dead* (1981), *Demons* is replete with jokes and squishy gore prosthetics. Continuing the '80s trend in more lighthearted horror, there was a series of *Poltergeist* (1982)-inspired ghost movies, such as *Ghosthouse* (1988), *Witchery* (1988), and *Beyond Darkness* (1990).

By the end of the decade, most of these popular genre templates had all but vanished, and the few transgressive works still in production were of such limited release they wouldn't constitute a societal phenomenon anymore. Dario Argento is perhaps the one exception, seeing as how he continued making brutal, confrontational movies up to the present day. Argento's case is different in that he always achieved a level of international box office success and critical notoriety that others really didn't.

On the political front, the early 1990s saw the complete dissolution of the Christian Democracy party and the Italian Socialist Party, creating a new republic whose relevance is

outside the purview of this thesis (Tagliabue, 1994). The last person killed by the Red Brigades was in 1988, the generally considered endpoint for the Years of Lead (Bocchi, 2021). Other incidents have taken place in the decades since, but without enough frequency to be considered a societal trend. Even as recently as April, 2021, France arrested seven leaders of Italian leftist movements from the era who had been granted refuge for decades despite their convictions in absentia for old crimes (Rose, 2021). One of those arrested was convicted of murdering Luigi Calabresi, the officer involved in the first large attack in the Years of Lead, the Piazza Fontana bombing of 1969. With these arrests, the period is perhaps definitively over, even if their extradition serves as nothing more than an epilogue.

In 2021 Italy's Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini abolished the film censorship system that had existed in one form or another since 1913 (Vivarelli, 2021). Filmmakers are now free to shoot and exhibit whatever they want, pushing much of this analysis' findings further into the tombs of history. Director Lamberto Bava of *Demons* (1985) and *Demons 2* (1986) fame was interviewed in 2012 to reflect on the whole period. Bava expressed "I think today, there are no Italian horror movies. At one time, Italian horror films were bloodier and crueler, but today I think they are all the same. We see good horror films from all over the world, even small countries make great films. Today it's global and it wasn't like that earlier", (Juvinal, 2013). In his view, there is no money to make Italian productions anymore, at least not on the scale he was used to. When asked about his own work and collaborations with Dario Argento, he said "We are proud of this time, but I don't know, the public is seeking change; they don't go to the cinema anymore. People stay home and watch DVD's and Television. When films were good in Italy, many people went to the cinemas, but today, not so much."

Chapter 6: Auteur Perspectives on Catharsis

Because the concept of catharsis is found both in analysis of drama as well as in modern psychology, how it works with cinema is a speculative topic for both rhetorical writings about narrative as well as studies conducted within the field of social psychology. If a researcher wants to know how catharsis is achieved through viewing violent entertainment, they could seek the opinion of filmmakers, film critics, psychologists, or the audiences themselves, in the hope that a synthesis of conclusions may emerge. Luckily, directors of gruesome imagery from all around the globe have spoken extensively about this subject.

Unlike humor, which is contextual to specific cultures and difficult to translate, violence is a universal cinematic language. Many who conduct it for motion pictures forge friendships with other directors trying to achieve similar effects on an audience. For example, Sergio Leone, himself known for making gritty westerns, was friends with Sergio Corbucci (Ebiri, 2013), who made some of the most brutal films in Italy during 1960s. Leone once wrote a letter congratulating his friend Ruggero Deodato on the graphic realism he achieved with his film *Cannibal Holocaust* (Slater, 2002, p. 108), which itself borrows Italian neorealism techniques Deodato learned from his mentor Roberto Rossellini. Auteur directors of violence are often invited to international festival panels to discuss the topic. This has led to friendships between Quentin Tarantino and Brian De Palma, Takashi Miike and Guillermo del Toro, as well as Oliver Stone and Martin Scorsese. These relationships are mentioned in order to justify the inclusion of American directors' opinions toward catharsis, rather than confining the discussion to only Italians. All of the filmmakers included in this thesis are borrowing techniques and intentions from other works of world cinema, whether it be an outright imitation of another's entire product, or merely borrowing a previously perfected piece of camera trickery from someone

else's movie. Sometimes a director from one country will outright ask a director from another region how they should execute a scene. Danish filmmaker and winner of the Cannes Film Festival's best director award 2011 (Turran, 2011), Nicholas Winding Refn, did just this when he contacted his friend Gaspar Noé, a director of the New French Extremity movement. Seeking input on his film *Drive* (2011), Refn said "I actually called up Gaspar Noé and asked him how he did the head smashing, because he's the king of head smashing", (Jagernauth, 2012).

Due to the public nature of cinema and the sensationalist features of violent films, many creators have been asked to comment on their content at one time or another by the press. Responses are varied, with comments from acclaimed auteurs falling more in line with this thesis' propositions while B movie schlockmeisters tend to dismiss any kind of psychological underpinnings in their work. The American exploitation pioneer Herschel Gordon Lewis, often called "The Godfather of Gore", once said "I see filmmaking as a business and pity anyone who regards it as an art form", (McLevy & Vanderbilt, 2016).

On the other end of the artistic spectrum from Lewis lies David Cronenberg. Cronenberg is a director perhaps best known for popularizing the subgenre of "body horror" in the 1970s and 80s, (Kennedy, 2021). His filmography spans box office sensations like *The Fly* (1986) to more obscure critical favorites such as the NC-17 rated psychological thriller *Crash* (1996). His forty-year career has inspired numerous academic writings and ceremonial accolades, culminating in an honorary Golden Lion Award at the 2018 Venice International Film Festival, (Anderson, 2018). His induction to the Order of Ontario, the province's highest official honour, was prefaced with the territory's Lieutenant Governor proclaiming that Cronenberg was "Canada's most celebrated internationally acclaimed filmmaker", (Ferguson, 2014). Over the years, many

an interviewer has asked Cronenberg why his movies are so viscerally affrontive and his answers provide insight into their endurance across generations.

The director has stated his belief that "Catharsis is the basis of all art", (Garber et al., 2018, p. 230). In his opinion, audiences seek to prepare themselves for confrontations they anticipate and the primal nature of horror films allow a viewer to experience the worst from a safe distance. Cronenberg alludes to the third tenet necessary for transgressive cinema to exist, as laid out earlier in this thesis, when he says, "It's only when cultural imperatives require that we avoid the discussion of things like death and ageing that the impulse is suppressed" (Mikulec, 2021). Just as audiences seek to experience danger through the barrier of cinema, the director explains "any artist is trying to take control of life by organizing it and shaping it and recreating it. Because he knows very well that the real version of life is beyond his control", (Mikulec, 2021).

The above-mentioned filmmakers of the Vietnam War era knew they had little control over public policy, but they could control who the heroes and villains of their own stories were. Auteur directors during the Italian Years of Lead could not control what was going on in society either, but they could depict what they were feeling onscreen, and audiences responded to it. Cronenberg believes that a filmmaker must be able to depict the most heinous imagery if that's where they are led, ignoring the constraints of societal morality during their time. In the documentary *Long Live the New Flesh* (1986) Cronenberg concludes by stating "So, at the time you're being an artist, you're not a citizen. You don't have the social responsibility of a citizen. You have, in fact, no social responsibility whatsoever" (YouTube, 2009).

The opinions of other directors known for making violent films are varied regarding what they feel its purpose is. Sam Peckinpah made a handful of extremely violent movies from the late

1960s and throughout the 70s. The controversy around his work stemmed mostly from his penchant for featuring gunshot squibs, but the censors also took issue with a lengthy rape sequence in *Straw Dogs* (1971). Sue Matheson, a Canadian professor of English and Film Studies at University College of the North considers Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) the most violent western of all time as well as being one of the most violent films ever made for any genre. However, she quickly notes the film "is generally considered to be one of the number of movies in the late 1960s and early 1970s that recontextualized the Vietnam conflict", (Matheson, 2013, p. 1). This makes it all the more curious that Peckinpah himself once commented in a 1976 BBC interview "I made *The Wild Bunch* because I still believed in the Greek theory of catharsis. That by seeing this we would be purged by pity and fear and get this out of our system. I was wrong" (YouTube, 2013).

Perhaps the filmmaker most associated with gratuitous violence in all of cinema history is Quentin Tarantino. In a 2012 interview with NPR, the director was asked about his decision to blend cartoonish violence with the serious subjects of slavery in *Django Unchained* (2012) and the Holocaust in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). Tarantino explained "I do think it's a cultural catharsis, and it's a cinematic catharsis. Even — it can even be good for the soul, actually", (Cornish, 2012). It was his view that the typical films dealing with these subject matters in the most formal ways tend to be emotionally draining on an audience to the extent that they may not want to even engage in the material at all. By adding the element of revenge and an adventure setting, the audience can vicariously purge their anger through the hero's actions. In a 2013 interview with Channel 4, the director explained that there are actually two distinct types of violence in his revisionist history pictures. One is the realistic and historically accurate brutality committed by the oppressors, "then there's the cathartic violence of Django paying back blood

for blood”, (Guru-murthy, 2013) which is considerably more over the top. Tarantino also mentions in a 2012 Charlie Rose interview that, as it relates to western settings, director Sergio Corbucci “had the most brutal, violent, bleakest west” of any director. Tarantino attributes this to Corbucci “still dealing with the fascism leftover from World War II”, (Rose, 2012).

Martin Scorsese is another filmmaker associated with abrasive imagery. In his review of *The Departed* (2006), *Today* journalist Michael Ventre wrote “When most cinephiles think of Scorsese, they think of violence, elevated to a saintly level. At once operatic and visceral, the action usually comes in shocking and bloody staccato bursts, like they often do on the unforgiving streets of Scorsese’s favorite turf”, (Ventre, 2006). This is in reference to the criminal underworld settings of Scorsese’s films, be they the period gangster epics *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995) or the New York urban decay landscape depicted in *Taxi Driver* (1976).

In the case of these pictures, the brutality of certain set pieces conveys to an audience the world in which these biographical characters occupied. *Goodfellas* and *Casino*, in particular, are a retelling of real-life crime syndicate events while *Taxi Driver* is heavily inspired by the diaries of Arthur Bremer, who shot George Wallace in 1972 (Rothman, 2016). It is for these reasons that Michael Ventre of *Today* also writes “Rather than be gratuitous, Scorsese’s violence is once again organic to the story-telling process.” Scorsese himself was asked about this topic in a 2010 interview with ABC’s George Stephanopoulos. The director responded, “I guess it is a big theme, I keep being drawn to it” (Stephanopoulos, 2010). Seemingly searching for a deeper meaning, the director continues, “What are we really as human beings, that part of our nature which is purely physical animal in a sense where survival kicks in?” Although critics might compartmentalize grisly scenes in Scorsese’s work as being an appropriate reflection of reality,

the director has acknowledged there exists another component inherent to them that can't be avoided either.

During the press tour for *Goodfellas*, Scorsese sat down with Anthony Decurtis of *Rolling Stone*. With the film already generating notoriety over its extreme content, Decurtis asked, "But getting back to the point about censorship, you must think about the potential impact of your films. You were shocked when audiences responded in an almost vigilante fashion to the end of *Taxi Driver*", (Decurtis, 1990). This question has several layers of relevance that perhaps readers of *Rolling Stone*, Decurtis, and even Scorsese may not have perceived at the time. *Taxi Driver* was granted an X rating when it was originally submitted to the MPAA in 1975 due to the intensity of its climatic brothel shootout (Taubin, 2000). In a 2009 piece for the New Zealand channel *Sky Movies*, Quentin Tarantino was asked to do an introduction for *Taxi Driver* in which he told a Hollywood legend surrounding its censorship (YouTube, 2010). The story goes that Scorsese, upon hearing about the X rating, was told by an executive at Columbia Pictures, the studio that produced the film, that the director would have to make concessions. According to the lore, Scorsese stayed up all night drinking and holding a loaded gun, intent on murdering the executive. Over the course of the night, several filmmaking colleagues tried talking the auteur out of this potential crime, to no avail. By the morning Scorsese decided to desaturate the blood in the final scene and this decision allowed the film to pass with an R rating.

Returning to the *Rolling Stone* article, the second half of the question involves a film's potential impact. It was reported in a 1982 issue of *The New York Times* that during the trial of John Hinckley, the thwarted assassin of President Reagan, his defense made the case that his behavior was inspired by his obsession with *Taxi Driver* (Taylor, 1982). These details are pertinent to the context surrounding Decurtis' question, but the journalist was specifically

commenting on how audiences cheered during the film's shocking shootout ending. Scorsese demonstrates his understanding that what an audience derives from art is not always aligned with what the artist intended. The director replied "You can't stop people from taking it that way. And you also can't stop people from getting an exhilaration from violence, because that's human, very much the same way as you get an exhilaration from the violence in *The Wild Bunch*", (Decurtis, 1990).

Interestingly, nearly twenty years later, Scorsese would address the censorship surrounding his infamous film again in a conversation with the *Director's Guild of America*. Over time he seemed to change his opinion that the controversial ending should purely disturb audiences, saying "I mean, the violence, it's catharsis, it's so true. I felt it when I saw *The Wild Bunch*", (Chagollan, 2019). With forty years of hindsight the director explained that, although he didn't realize it at the time, he harbored much of the same resentment as the titular character, "I thought it was a special passion project that had to be made because we all had those feelings. I had feelings of this disconnect and this rage. But the rage, I mean, ultimately, we don't cross that line that Travis crosses. But we understood it and we didn't have to say much about it", (Chagollan, 2019). These comments are in line with this thesis' propositions because they indicate that the type of transgressive cinema that emerged in Italy during the 70s can occur in any place that allows for the preconditions outlined earlier in this analysis. In the case of *Taxi Driver* (1976), the New York City homicide rate had doubled between 1960 and 1970 (Severo, 1971). The anxiety stemming from this prompted Scorsese, a Queens native, to make *Taxi Driver* despite his belief that "I thought nobody was going to see the film", (Chagollan, 2019). More importantly this climate of danger is why audiences cheered at X-rated brutality.

Academy Award nominated Dutch director Paul Verhoeven has made statements about the violence in his films that reveal the complexity of not only what motivates someone to create this imagery, but what audiences get from the experience. Verhoeven's filmography has straddled the line between art cinema of the highest order and rock bottom schlock. His film *Turkish Delight* (1973) is the most successful Dutch film of all time and in 1999 it received The Golden Calf Award at the Netherlands Film Festival for "Best Dutch Film of the Century", (Schneider, 2004). Twenty years later his \$50 million Hollywood NC-17 rated sexploitation film *Showgirls* (1995) won the "Worst Director" award at the Golden Raspberry Awards (Scott, 1996). His most recent work *Benedetta* (2021) was entered into competition for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (Mintzer, 2021).

However, despite these accolades and missteps, he is most famous for his violent psychosexual drama *Basic Instinct* (1992) and the unbelievably brutal series of science fiction films he made between 1987 and 1997. His *Robocop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990) and *Starship Troopers* (1997) all received an X or NC-17 rating from the MPAA at their initial submissions, as did *Basic Instinct* (Barton-Fumo, 2016, p. xv). When asked why his work is so characterized by heinous scenes, he stated "With regards to the irony of the violence, much of that probably comes from my childhood experiences during and immediately following the Second World War", (Barton-Fumo, 2016, p. 58). As a child during WWII, his family's home was in The Hague near a German military base housing V-1 rockets. This facility was continually targeted by the allies and his neighborhood was accidentally bombed on one occasion. "The whole quarter of The Hague was ruined, it was all flames and ruins and dead bodies wherever you looked", (Tobias, 2007). Despite living in perpetual danger for a time, Verhoeven interpreted the experience as a sort of "great adventure" (Barton-Fumo, 2016, p. xxi), comparing his childhood

to the comedy movie *Hope and Glory* (1987). As an adult, his personality was warped to have a cynical irreverence for nearly everything, with his gruesome sci-fi pictures becoming acclaimed for their satire. In an interview with *The Los Angeles Times*, the director explained that when staging scenes, “If someone tells me I can’t do something, I simply have to do it!” (McKenna, 1987).

Beyond being merely a provocateur, the director does concede he is emotionally working through something from his childhood when making movies. Statements like “In fact, if it hadn't been for the German occupation and then the American occupation, I would have never been a filmmaker”, and “when I show violence it most often appears, in one form or another, as visions that I am unable to escape”, (Barton-Fumo, 2016, p. 40), are similar to what other artists mentioned in this analysis have expressed about their creative impulses. Verhoeven believes people enjoy seeing violence in movies because conflict is the basis of drama. He says “The human being is bad and he can’t stand more than five minutes of happiness. Put him in a dark theater and ask him to look at two hours of happiness and he’d walk out or fall asleep. It’s boring and you can’t construct art with it. Dramatic art requires difficulties that must be overcome”, (McKenna, 1987).

His opinion of how violence is often used is nearly identical to the template of Italian “rape and revenge” films. Verhoeven explains “The way pictures are normally set up is the hero is tortured, thus programming the audience to feel the hero is justified in doing whatever he wants for the rest of the picture. On principle, I suppose it’s immoral to set up an audience that way, but it’s very dangerous for people to go around saying, ‘This should not be.’ That’s fascism”, (McKenna, 1987).

Italian directors from the Years of Lead have also commented over the decades on how they feel about their work, as well as the effect cinematic violence has on audiences. Lucio Fulci was a director of various genres, but his boldness in horror earned him the nickname “Godfather of Gore.” His statement “Violence is Italian art” serves as the opening sentence for an article in *Diabolique Magazine* called “From Caravaggio to Gentileschi: The Ecstasy of Death In Italian Renaissance Art”, (Deighan, 2016). That article is a formalist study of some of the films mentioned in this thesis, comparing their high contrast “tenebrism” lighting and exuberant bloodiness to paintings of the Baroque period. It serves as an example of how different theories can be applied to this same material to reach alternate conclusions regarding how it should be appraised.

In 1982 Fulci was interviewed by *Starburst* magazine, a British publication. This is notable because many of Fulci’s films were banned in the UK at the time. Asked about the X-rated gore in his work, the director expounded “I’d like to point out that the audience usually applauds once a horror scene is over, not while the horror is on the screen. People are wrong when they accuse my films of gratuitous horror; censorship is wrong about my films being an incentive to violence. Far from participating in this violence, the spectator, on the contrary, is rid of it, freed from horrors he holds within himself, the film being the catalyst for this liberation”, (Rinaldi, 1982). Lucio is describing catharsis, using other terminology.

Ruggero Deodato, director of *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) did an interview in 2011 in which he was asked a complicated question about his film. The inquiry involved the conundrum of whether some viewers might be sadistically enjoying the proceedings even though he intended the picture to be an indictment of Italian news, specifically those covering the Red Brigades in the ‘70s. Deodato replied “I’ve always noticed the reaction to the scene, where they’re sitting in

the projection room and watching the killing and finally the last one dies and the camera falls; Alan Yates is dead. Each time, invariably, the audience gives a sign of relief it's over, it's gone", (Whitfield, 2011). He is referring to the final sequence in which the corrupt journalists are punished by the natives.

A common sentiment expressed by these Italian directors is the notion that what they created was nothing to apologize for. Deodato concludes his interview, "All this violence, it's just marginal. I arrived with my daughter at the festival. She laughed! She joked, played with the actors, for her it's a holiday. To her *Cannibal Holocaust* is a joke. I don't understand it but there it is." These filmmakers acknowledge the cathartic appeals their films have, but only when asked to delve deeper by the interviewer. On the surface, they usually make statements like Deodato's, "For me, film is entertainment. That's what cinema is", (Whitfield, 2011).

Another example of the humility and humor of these directors can be found in the words of Antonio Margheriti. His Vietnam war action picture *The Last Hunter* (1979) was seized in the UK as was his *Cannibal Apocalypse* (1980). In a 2017 interview he stated, "I sometimes do pictures, when I need the money, where I just read the agreement and not the script, I say: 'OK, that will be a very beautiful picture' and afterwards maybe I am ashamed, but I keep working." When informed by the interviewer that Quentin Tarantino was a fan of his, Margheriti replied "Why would he want to collect all these terrible movies? I'm lucky, because at my age, the arteriosclerosis has wiped most of them from my memory", (Cozzi, 2017).

Even though the directors quoted above vary in terms of their nationality and the genres they work with, there are some noticeable patterns in their comments that can be summarized into some overall takeaways. Generally, there is a difference in how these specific Italian directors talk about their violent works compared to how the non-Italian auteurs do and there are

a few reasons why this might be. Critically acclaimed filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, and Paul Verhoeven have received the highest accolades possible for the artform and are used to doing press for prestigious magazines, film schools, and scholarly compendiums. When interviewed, these filmmakers have had to think a lot about why they do what they do and prepare intelligent responses in order to defend their critical reputation. To the contrary, Ruggero Deodato, Lucio Fulci, and Antonio Marghereti were never attached to any prestigious legacy and thus are not accustomed to offering introspective justifications for their works.

There are more comments about catharsis to be found from someone like Scorsese or Cronenberg than Antonio Margheriti because those first two directors want to be viewed as serious artists. Marghereti, on the other hand openly admits he thinks his films are terrible, only doing them for a paycheck. To get a director like Marghereti or Fulci to ruminate on cerebral concepts like cultural catharsis, an interviewer would have to really press them on the subject. This is unlikely to happen in a magazine like *Fangoria* or *Rue Morgue*, which is where these Italian directors were occasionally interviewed.

Despite the dismissive attitudes held by some of these directors regarding the societal importance of their work, it's necessary to include their comments because the director of a film is the person most equipped to describe what the intended emotional purpose of cinematic violence is. At the very least, their opinion is as valid as anyone else's. Directors of violent cinema will often anonymously attend screenings of their films to find out if audiences cry, laugh, or cheer during specific sequences, as they hoped. Filmmakers assess the script during pre-production for what the overall tone of the project should be. There are many cases where a

director is replaced during production and the resultant picture takes on a markedly different mood than previously intended.

Filmmakers of violent imagery will devote tremendous attention to conducting gruesome sequences in a way that gets a specific reaction. The staging of actors, lighting, and even lens choices can make a difference in whether an image is perceived as serious, comedic, or ironic. Mark Twain said, “Humor is tragedy plus time”, (Greengross, 2012). Even with all the footage in the can, the editing process can turn a cheesy special effect into something truly horrific, or vice versa. Editing is a way of controlling the rhythm in a scene, manipulating whether the audience is somber or laughing. Whatever kind of catharsis a filmmaker is trying to evoke follows some mysterious formula known only to the artists. Choices like these show that much attention is devoted to the psychological impact of every section of a story and one change can completely alter the emotional timing, thus affecting what scholars would interpret a movie’s purpose to be. Since directors are devoting so much attention to these dynamics, it makes sense that they would be a source when trying to understand catharsis. However, the concept of achieving catharsis, in the way this thesis proposes, is such a niche subject that filmmakers are usually not asked too much about it.

There have been several attempts by media theorists to conduct meta-analyses on books about the effects of media violence and whether there is any credence to the catharsis theory. Dr. Douglas A. Gentile is a Director of Research for the National Institute on Media and the Family as well as a Professor at Iowa State University. In 2013 he published a piece called “Catharsis and Media Violence: A Conceptual Analysis” that tries to examine the subject in the most empirical way possible. He describes the clinical definition of catharsis as “a reduction in negative feelings”, something this thesis agrees with. Gentile distinguishes between how those in

antiquity talk about catharsis versus the way it's often referred to in modern media. Much of his article is debunking what's known as the "aggression catharsis hypothesis" or the idea that someone can lessen their likelihood of attacking someone if they consume gruesome media. It's a topic often broached in news debates about the content in video games or the latest splatter extravaganza playing theaters.

Gentile writes "hundreds of studies demonstrate that people become more aggressive after consuming media violence, not less." His article explains that people become desensitized to imagery and that viewing things repetitively is actually the way learning occurs. He backs this assertion up with neuroscience. Gentile's article separates the aggression catharsis hypothesis of modern times from the psychoanalytic conceptions of catharsis found in Freud's writings. Freud treated catharsis as a purge of negative emotions, not specifically to stop external aggression, but internal neuroticism (Gentile, 2013). Gentile's piece also examines Aristotle's use of catharsis, which also didn't involve aggression, but rather what he termed "purification." Passages of *Poetics* are featured to show that Aristotle argued art must be created in a specific structure to "create men of good character", something modern media, and especially Italian transgressive cinema, mostly does not.

Interestingly, Gentile delves into the physiological responses to this kind of media and why it can be so fun to watch. "There is evidence that violent video games result in increased physiological arousal, including increased heart rate, blood pressure, and release of glucocorticoids and catecholamines (adrenaline, nor-adrenaline, cortisol, and testosterone) into the blood stream." He explains that after this dissipates, consumers feel tired and might perceive it as emotionally cathartic, but the sensation is purely a temporary "flight or fight" response. It is this cycle, in his opinion, that causes the cathartic theory of violent media to persist in society.

The proposition, that Italian transgressive cinema alleviated negative emotions for audiences during the Years of Lead, is something Gentile would likely find either dubious or completely ridiculous. However, his findings are not in total contradiction to what has been put forth in this thesis. This thesis does not argue that Italian audiences would have been more prone to violence had they not seen, *Gestapo's Last Orgy* (1977), for example. Rather it suggests that the frustrations, fears, and anger of artists led them to create these works, and audiences attended them for similar reasons. What they got out of the viewing experience may not have been true catharsis, in the sense of long-term relief, because the public kept going to these pictures for nearly a decade. Yet, people continue smoking cigarettes for decades because they do achieve relief on some level. Gentile's explanation that these films induce a measurable chemical response, actually pushes this thesis further into the realm of physical science than was intended. What audiences walked away from these screenings with is likely unknowable and unmeasurable, especially 40 years after the fact. However, even in the present, it's difficult to quantify what one would get exactly from watching more respectable cathartic pictures such as *Schindler's List* (1992) or *12 Years a Slave* (2013).

Since these extreme Italian films already exist in large numbers, a humanities scholar should at least assume the public was working through difficult emotions from their tumultuous society. Suggesting anything else would likely be just another indictment of audience tastes, something film criticism is hardly in short supply of. Occam's Razor would say the simplest answer is the likeliest. In the case of 50's monster movies, the simplest answer is that the public just enjoyed monster movies. However, an inquisitive writer should wonder if their popularity had something to do with fears of the atomic age. With Italy's transgressive cinema, the laymen kneejerk reaction is that Italy had a sizeable portion of voyeuristic sadists and perverts. The

thoughtful scholar would wonder if there was something more going on there involving the seemingly nonstop bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations during the '70s.

The research conducted for this thesis is a new contribution for those wanting to understand any of the films featured herein. The catharsis theories aside, the paper's findings are novel because it's unlikely that many scholars have written about mondo, gialli, cannibale, nazisploitation, and sexploitation all simultaneously. Without the theories about the Years of Lead, there would be no reason for an author to necessarily see any parallels between these different genres and how they influenced each other. This is to say that few other writers would see anything in common between the works of Bernardo Bertolucci and the porno gore films of Joe D'Amato, but with a bird's eye view of 70s Italian cinema, it's clear their works were part of a broader trend in transgressive imagery.

So even if a reader rejects the catharsis premise entirely, this document serves as a reference point for crafting theories of their own about films they didn't initially perceive as connected in any way. This has precedent with books such as Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1993). Professor Mauro Giori has a book called *Homosexuality and Italian Cinema: From the Fall of Fascism to the Years of Lead* (2017). Though these films are old, they can be written about forever because a writer can always select a different theoretical lens from their rolodex, which will yield completely different conclusions. For example, a post-colonial scholar may not have even been aware that cannibal films existed or that they are historically linked to American westerns and mondo documentaries about the indigenous. A feminist scholar studying misogyny in American slasher films can look to gialli films for more material, learning of sexploitation's impact on that genre as well. Someone interested in studying race in cinema might be curious to learn how Italians treated the subject of

Antebellum slavery in the films *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971), *Mandinga* (1976) and *Passion Plantation* (1976). This thesis serves as a deep reservoir for knowledge that took years to acquire and synthesize. It is a treasure chest for anyone interested in Italian cinema, horror films, or violence and sexuality in media history.

Conclusion

For any film scholar exposed to them, the vast number of transgressive films pouring out of Italy between 1969-1988 will raise questions as to what inspired their origin. They are simply too provocative to not inspire at least some intrigue. These productions are so numerous and span over such a long timeframe that they cannot be understood as the imaginative products of a few auteurs. Like any other national film movement, their creation can only really be understood as a byproduct of a particular culture during a defined window of time. Art styles, whether they be painting, music, or film, have cycles where they peak in popularity before falling out of favor. The Baroque period's prominence in Western Europe, for example, lasted from the 17th to 18th centuries (Mandarino, 2020), while Expressionism's heyday was in the early 20th century (Harrison & Wood, 2003, p. 65). In a similar vein, the transgressive period of Italian cinema had its own genesis and exodus.

To understand the culture of this time, a scholar must familiarize themselves with Italy's history. Once a critic learns that the period in which these movies emerged was called The Years of Lead (Regalia et al., 2015, p. 1), the connection between their content and the nation's politics becomes obvious. Audiences wanted to see more extreme imagery as their society became increasingly chaotic. An initial response to this proposition might be to posit "correlation does not equal causation", however there are very few, if any, conceivable competing explanations available for what caused this bizarre cinematic outpour. Proving direct causation in

a situation like this is always going to be more of an interpretive proposition rather than an empirical observation due to the infinite number of variables in human affairs that are simply unknowable and impossible to account for. A chemistry experiment can demonstrate reliability when stating that water boils at 212°F because it happens every time, but there is no way to prove that certain societal conditions will always lead to predictable outcomes. No study can recreate the conditions of 1970s Italy to see if these types of films would become popular again.

Another factor that must be noted is that this thesis is written from an American perspective, separated from its subject not only by decades of time and the physical distance of a separate continent, but also by the additional barrier of language. Anthropology is the study of cultures, a field this thesis is dabbling in on some level when making claims about a foreign society. One unavoidable caveat to any anthropological observation is that it is necessarily filtered through the researcher's own culture that they use as a frame of reference to some extent. Unfortunately, due to individual differences in life experience as well as psychological temperament, there exists no neutral vantage point from which to view one's own culture, much less a different society altogether. For this reason, a film scholar must be afforded a reasonable amount of leeway in their propositions when attempting to understand a societal phenomenon to the best of their ability. Their arguments should still stand up to scrutiny, but the discipline of interpretive film criticism simply doesn't have the luxury of objectivity afforded to a field such as chemistry, where water boils the same in Switzerland as it does in Swaziland. With this understanding, the most a humanities research author can hope for is that their own unique explanations of culture make intuitive sense to their readers.

This thesis has argued that one way Italian citizens dealt with their fears and anger was to see the violence that characterized their politics reflected in their fictional entertainment. It uses a

concept dating back to antiquity, called “catharsis” to explain how and why human beings could react this way. Catharsis theories argue that negative emotions can be purged through exposure to certain types of experiences. This analysis has included mention of catharsis application in the fields of modern psychological therapy, although the oldest conception of catharsis described it as an emotional reaction to art (Berndtson, 1975, p. 235). The idea that catharsis can be achieved through watching violent movies is something film critics have written about for half a century and even a few psychological experiments have been conducted to see if it can be measured. Outside of clinical settings, directors of violent cinema have shared their opinion on the topic and the concept is found in popular culture to some extent. Although some studies have concluded that witnessing these images doesn’t lead to a reduction in anger, determining what exactly causes viewers to engage with this material is harder to prove. When someone punches a wall in anger, it may not have actually reduced their stress, yet they still punched the wall in response to their emotions. Likewise, studies have shown that smoking cigarettes doesn’t reduce stress levels (Parrott, 1999, p. 10), but it’s undeniable that many smokers believe it does on some level, therefore they engage in the practice. Italian directors made these films and mass audiences consumed them for decades. Only the viewers of the time could say if there was any therapeutic effect during that stressful period.

Cathartic motivation for creating and purveying gruesome cinema is not unique to Italians on a human level because critics of the past have argued this relationship for other countries’ cinema at one time or another. This thesis explains the unique characteristics Italy had that allowed these kinds of works to thrive in an almost completely unrestricted fashion. Perhaps the most important accelerant of this was the country’s lenient censorship standards, debatably more liberal than anywhere in the world. This happened at a time when the country was racked

with terroristic upheaval. For a reader to fully understand the overall argument of this analysis, several major things had to be accomplished by the writer. Firstly, “transgressive” was defined and elaborated on. With such a subjective phrase, every individual is going to have their own opinion as to what classifies something as boundary pushing. For this reason, various censorship bureau standards were used, not as a moral authority, but as a tangible reference point for what a society considers taboo cinema. The American MPAA censorship system was elaborated on so that its ratings could be applied to the movies in this piece, as a sort of content description shorthand. During the introduction to this thesis, the United Kingdom’s BBFC was mentioned as another governing body that reacted with absolute panic to the existence of Italy’s transgressive movies when they hit the home video market of the 1980s. All the films that the catharsis argument is being applied to are characterized by extreme violence. Some also contain a heavily sexualized component. This thesis argued that the sexualized aspect in those cases stemmed from the popularity of sexploitation and pornographic films, which were shown in theaters at the time.

The introduction to this thesis began with a description of a bureaucratic crackdown that occurred in the UK during the early 1980s, something called the “Video Nasties” panic (Phelan, 2014). This was featured because this censorship panic was the closest that these Italian films ever came to being politically relevant for the readers of this analysis. Even though these films are entirely absent from American cultural discussions now, there was a time when the British controversy received some airplay on American nightly television. From here the introduction examined the notion of trying to understand any society through its artistic products, especially those that become a definable trend. In a section called “Why Transgressive Cinema” matters, this thesis explained that considerable film studies literature has been devoted to interpreting specific decades of American society based on what movie genres were popular at the time.

Examples include the '50s monster films, the 1960s space race pictures, and the Vietnam war-themed stories of the 70s. It is demonstrated that the catharsis theories woven throughout this thesis have been applied before to the violent movies that followed the Vietnam War and those that emerged during the Iraq War. There is even a mini “Arc of Catharsis” for American cinema noted here, when the gritty films of the '70s transitioned into family friendly blockbusters of the '80s.

The next section in the introduction was called “Prerequisites for Transgressive Cinema.” Its purpose was to remind the reader that most countries in the world could not and do not make the kinds of works featured in this analysis because they fail to meet a certain criteria. There are three things a country must possess to have a trend in transgressive cinema. First, they must have a working movie industry. Then they must also have violent social unrest, something which often paradoxically precludes the first requirement from happening in most regions. Lastly, there must be a liberal or lenient censorship standard in place, something only a handful of countries have ever had in all of global cinema history. Elaborating on the three prerequisites, as they pertained to Italy, is what serves as the bulk of the entire thesis.

Catharsis is treated to its own lengthy portion of the introduction, as it is the explanation for why graphic movies become a trend in any time and place. The “prerequisites” above are the “how” this trend becomes manifest; “catharsis” is the why. Catharsis is a broad term and how it’s experienced emotionally is something contested by virtually anyone who has written about it. Aristotle thought that certain narrative structures could bring it about, believing it to be a cleansing response to theater (Sifakis, 2001, p. 88). Independent of its relationship to art, psychologists saw achieving catharsis as the main goal of psychotherapy (Guttman, 2001, p. 2). Numerous sculptors, writers, and movie directors were quoted herein as saying they are

motivated to make their creations because of unresolved feelings that they hope can be alleviated through their work.

The body of the thesis began by placing boundaries around the vast volume of Italian cinema the paper applies catharsis theories to. This was done through the implementation of genre classification. The genres of mondo documentaries, cannibal films, gialli slasher pictures, and Poliziotteschi crime stories served as the main movie categories that this analysis is referring to, all of which have notorious reputations for their violent imagery. There were still a handful of other films which could not easily fall into these categories, but were included anyway because the catharsis argument would also apply to them. This thesis was structured in a historically chronological way, so that the reader could understand the progression of events on the topics of political violence, censorship, and movie trends as they happened concurrently. There is an overriding postulation in this analysis that the movies became more extreme over the two-decade Years of Lead until they reached a peak. After which, they gradually became less shocking until the transgressive elements faded out altogether by the end of the 1980s. It is shown how this rise and fall relationship coincided with the intensity of the real-life political violence. This rise and fall was termed “The Arc of Catharsis” and broken into two periods, one for 1968-1974 and another for 1975-1982. These periods are titled “Initium” and “Ne Plus Ultra”, respectively. The years of 1983-1988 were mostly absent that much transgressive imagery, so they are not granted their own title or extensive analysis. By the mid to late 1980s, the worst of the Years of Lead was over, and Italy’s cinema reflected this, with more lighthearted action-adventure fare becoming more prominent.

The Initium Period (1968-1974) is described in the analysis as the first time movies in Italy became markedly more violent than any other country in the world. Many of the works

from this era are still illegal to distribute around the world and were the subject of specific legislation targeting them. It's explained that much of the controversy stemmed from their mixture of sexuality and violence, which somehow created a product more offensive than either of those individual elements on their own. The popularity of explicit sexuality in cinema was occurring alongside this explosion in violent imagery, even though the motivations behind the two elements was different. While the grisliness in the films is argued to have been inspired by terror attacks and assassinations, the salaciousness was really stemming from sexploitation, which was novel for audiences at the time. Essentially, movies in Italy, America, and a number of other European countries were increasingly featuring more nudity during the 1970s, which was directly related to new attitudes brought on by the sexual liberation politics of the 1960s. Once cultural taboos were broken, audiences wanted to see more risqué imagery at the theater and movie studios met the demand. Many X rated pictures were among the highest grossing films throughout the decade in America as well as Italy. Esteemed newspaper critics even wrote reviews for some hardcore porn films as part of a brief period of quasi-legitimacy called "Porno chic" (DeLamater et al., 2015, p. 416). Adult films made so much money during the '70s that some of the performers became semi-famous movie stars, with the whole period now being called "The Golden Age of Porn" (Tucker, 2013). Sexploitation is different than hardcore pornography in that it's milder and leaves some imagery up to the imagination. While all this erotic content was popular, Italy's societal chaos prompted a strange fusion of sexploitation with extremely brutal elements, which was also successful with audiences.

Analysis in the Initium section of the thesis describes what was allowed in Italian cinema before the late 1960s and gives an overview of what the political climate was preceding the Years of Lead. This was necessary to provide because the events of the 1970s didn't suddenly

emerge in a vacuum. Rather, they were a logical progression of what came before. As a comparable thought experiment, one could imagine a scholar writing about American society in 2022. How far back in the historical timeline should the writer look to explain current dynamics? They could trace the record back as far as they wished. In the case of this thesis, the Years of Lead (1968-1988) was a conflict between Marxist and fascist terrorists. These two ideologies have a rich history in Italy, with one originating there in the 1920s. For this reason, much detail was given regarding Mussolini's rise and fall, as well as the Italian Civil war's impact on 1970s filmmakers. It was argued in this section that the sexual revolution in Italy was part of a broader social movement in the 1960s. This movement was an outgrowth of the "Italian Economic Miracle", a period of newfound prosperity for the citizenry (Di Martino & Vasta, 2018, p. 1). Formerly working-class families were able to go to universities for the first time, and as a result took interest in restructuring the religious, class, and sexual politics of Italian society. The pressure from this activism via the press and protests is what opened the door for erotic arthouse movies, sex comedies, and hardcore porno. However, the economic miracle ended in the late 1960s, resulting in strikes, riots, and eventually many murders. The movies began to reflect these changes. On the one hand their treatment of sexuality was as liberal as any nation's cinema ever was, yet the intensity of the violence clashed heavily with whatever sentiments of "free love" inspired it. Thematically they are often ambiguous to an American viewer because the imagery can't easily be construed as progressive nor reactionary. The cruel misogyny in a film like *Emanuelle In America* (1977) certainly is not aligned with any kind of feminist bodily autonomy objectives of the previous decade. Yet, it is a work that also would have never been allowed under the fascist era or the Catholic controlled censorship system of the 1950s, considering it's an extremely gruesome sexploitation film/hardcore porno. Even characterizing some of these

movies as pornographic is a bit of a misnomer because of the imagery that description conjures. When unfamiliar with these works, one might imagine non-stop sex scenes. However, these are full length narrative stories like any other film, except they periodically feature scenes that cross over into X-rated material.

Mario Bava's *A Bay of Blood* (1971) was chosen as the embodiment of the Initium period's trends. It straddles the line tonally between the carefree swinging '60s and the savagery that would define the next decade and a half. The Years of Lead had already begun when this movie was made, entering production a year after the Piazza Fontana massacre. Unquestionably the most violent movie ever made in Italy up to that point, *A Bay of Blood* (1971) was heavily censored around the world and has been retroactively assessed as an inspiration on the American slasher films of the 1980s (Vorel, 2021). Still, it's rather tame compared to the works found during the Ne Plus Ultra period, so it serves as the beginning point on the Arc of Catharsis, when there was still some restraint. The movie's success guaranteed the employment of its special effects technician and generated demand for others who could accurately depict anatomical destruction on camera. Its director Mario Bava was used in the analysis as a reference point for how much Italian movies were changing to accommodate audience tastes and why auteur theory fails to explain the larger societal picture. It's argued that although film criticism often treats a work as a singular artist's vision, the financial nature of the industry complicates how a product should accurately be assessed. This is to say that with the mediums of painting or literature, the cost of materials is cheap, therefore an artist is not bound to profit incentives. By contrast, movies are so expensive to make that they require outside capital, which usually will only invest if there is enough audience demand to turn a profit. Bava's situation was that he desperately needed a paycheck (Lucas, 2007, p. 847) and the public wanted to see more violent movies, as

indicated by the success of Dario Argento's *The Bird With The Crystal Plumage* (1970). Bava's filmography was explored because it defined the horror films of the 1960s and was considered the most transgressive of its time, even though his works would likely be rated PG today.

Whether he desired to make more extreme works in the 1960s, is unknowable and irrelevant, because he was bound, as all filmmakers are, to the audience tastes and censorship restrictions of their time. The relative tameness of Italian cinema from the 1920s through the 1940s was due to fascist restrictions, and censorship standards remained mostly unchanged through to the mid 1960s (Gennari, 2013, p. 255).

Beginning in the Initium section, the thesis comprehensively details the minute year by year changes regarding what was allowed in Italian movies. It is noted when a change in movies occurred alongside major political events. For example, it was argued that the groundbreaking Austrian sexploitation film *Andrea the Nympho* (1968) would not have been released if not for the social unrest backdrop of Italy's "Movement '68." Within a few years, the content that made *Andrea the Nympho* controversial was widespread in numerous sex comedies and gialli like *A Bay of Blood*. As it relates to censorship, there is a section in this thesis after the analysis of *A Bay of Blood* called "Quantifying Transgressive Imagery." This section explained the importance of using concrete terminology when describing the transition movies made in their content between the Initium and Ne Plus Ultra periods.

The premise of the "Arc of Catharsis" concept is that the movies got more extreme as the political violence escalated. In order to show how they got more extreme, their content must be described, but it would take too long to detail every single film's imagery. Describing something as "violent", "transgressive", or "provocative" is also very vague, so movie ratings are used as a standard for developing a clearer picture in the reader's mind for what these genres were like.

Anyone reading this thesis is familiar with what kind of content distinguishes a PG rated film from an R rated one, but they may not be aware of what X rated violence looks like or that the NC-17 rating even exists. A refresher on these ratings allows the reader to understand a quick shorthand for this document, but it also demonstrates that America has an established protocol for dealing with the kinds of images covered in this piece. Moreover, it proves that America could have produced the same kind of content Italy did in even larger numbers, but didn't because audience demand simply wasn't there. This raises the question once again of why Italians wanted to see this content, which the thesis explains. Specifying exactly what one means by "violent" is important because an Italian cinema scholar could point out the existence of violent Spaghetti Western films from the early to mid 1960s. Since those predated the Years of Lead, the entire catharsis argument of the thesis would be rendered untenable. By using the MPAA rating systems, it can be explained that, although those westerns did feature violence in a sense, they'd be considered PG or PG-13 today, something on a whole different level than the R and X-rated equivalent works in the 1970s. This raises an interesting rumination that it is not the narrative action of violence itself that makes these works transgressive, but rather the act of showing it.

After this important censorship section, the thesis covers the exact events of the Years of Lead. The impact of terrorism on the psychology of the public is explored, along with information about the perpetrator's beliefs. Left wing radical groups disapproved of the Italian Communist Party's diplomatic approach, preferring direct action. Some, such as the Red Brigades, emerged from the organizations conducting student protests in the 1960s (Westcott, 2004). Far right terror groups derived their ideas from anti-egalitarian philosopher Julius Evola and the "School of Fascist Mysticism" (Casadio, 2015, p. 455), prominent during the Mussolini

era. Both dissident groups sought to replace the democratically elected government by any means necessary. The public was often unaware of these factions' objectives because their motives were not declared, even with several of the high-profile bombings. It is detailed how these attacks were consistent over the course of the 1970s, and that it was the cumulative effect of them on the population that caused a seemingly never-ending stress. Another observable trend in Italian cinema, covered in this section, was the shift from period piece settings, common in the 1960s, to contemporary stories in the next decade. Spaghetti westerns transitioned into police action "poliziotteschi", while 19th century gothic horror was abandoned in favor of cosmopolitan gialli. A similar phenomenon has been noted in American cinema from the same time period. The Hollywood western had been a staple of the industry from the 1930s to the '60s, but has mostly died out since the post-Vietnam war police stories popularized "action movies." Much scholarship has also been devoted to arguing the television impact of the Vietnam War on rendering gothic American horror antiquated in audience's minds. "The Years of Lead Influence" section of the thesis also considers the possibility that the medium of television specifically is what contributed to these changes in America and Italy. This is the idea that, for example, even though World War II was more catastrophic than the Vietnam conflict, the Vietnam War was televised in gory detail, while the earlier conflict was not. Therefore, people living during the Vietnam War would have a more negative attitude towards the state of society compared to the earlier generation, who lacked television access.

A section called "The Role of Sexuality in These Films" addresses a major unavoidable component when discussing these works. It explains that filmmakers were experimenting with newly allowed images acquired through censorship victories during the sexual revolution. Generally, horror films deal with the subject of mortality whereas romance and erotic stories

focus on the exact opposite, passions and lust for life. By combining elements from both, movies like Sergio Martino's *Torso* (1973) created something that goes beyond the spooky macabre into an area that is downright shocking. The impulse for directors to do this, and for audiences to consume it, is something that comes from a place of rage. Italians were not the first to figure out this dynamic, but they pushed it farther than any other nation. This section also speculates on the venues where violence was historically treated as a public spectacle in a way that sexual activity was not. It's something that universally plays a role in how censorship bureaus treat images intended for public consumption.

The next portion of the thesis provided continued coverage of Italy's censorship history, making the case that the societal transition from conservatism to liberalism is reflected in what stories and images were allowed. It was mostly happy love stories "Telefoni Bianchi" and musicals that were allowed during the fascist era (Andreeva, 2020, p. 1). From the post war period until the mid 1960s, the Catholic church served as the guiding moral framework for the themes that stories should have and what images were permissible (Gennari, 2013, p. 255). This influence of the Catholic church extended to the society more broadly through the dominant political party Christian Democracy. The question is asked how much cinema can ever be seen as a reflection of an entire culture when the expressions are controlled by such a small governing body. By the 1970s, filmmakers were freer than ever to make what they wanted and for audiences to consume as they pleased. Therefore, what was popular in the '70s is a more accurate reflection of what the society was feeling compared to previous generations' movies. How movies were regulated, in practice, is also covered because all throughout movie history certain filmmakers have tried to circumvent regulations through a variety of tricks. Just because a scene is demanded by authorities to be cut, doesn't mean the director won't sneak images back

in. This is why the total ban of select works is still in practice around the globe, to avoid the games filmmakers and distributors sometimes play.

One way that it can be proven that a particular piece of art reflects the attitudes of society is by measuring its popularity. If a movie is popular with the public, there must be something about it that resonates with them. Box office records from the Years of Lead are difficult to locate, as they are often still only available in paper archives for Italian house organ magazines. However, Dr. Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones' book "A New Guide to Italian Cinema" contains an appendix of the top ten grossing films in Italy for each year that this thesis covers. This appendix reveals that the nazisploitation films *Salon Kitty* (1976) and *The Night Porter* (1974) were very successful, while every single one of Dario Argento's gruesome gialli made the annual lists (Celli & Cottino-Jones, 2007, p. 171). Perhaps the best argument that these films reflected Italian society is the large number of these works in existence because they would only continue to be made if they were profitable. If the public was entirely uninterested in these motion pictures, there certainly wouldn't be so many in existence to constitute whole genres. This supply and demand relationship is how the movies gradually became more extreme over time. What started off as quirky erotica in the late 60s turned into sadomasochism within a few years. Censors would concede more and more ground to placate public demands, until eventually all was permitted.

The Ne Plus Ultra period (1975-1982) was the main focus for the second half of the thesis. This was when the most internationally banned works were produced. By 1975 the effects of the 1973 OPEC oil crisis had damaged many Italian industries (Silk, 1974, p. 61), while 1974 had two massive bomb attacks, the most casualties up to that point in the Years of Lead (Agnew, 1999, p. 1). Times were tough all over and the movies became noticeably more aggressive

across multiple genres. It is proposed in this section that perhaps the unresolved nature of the terror attacks disrupted Italian society's grieving process, referencing the famous Elisabeth Kübler-Ross "Five Stage Model." There is also some coverage of how various psychologists over the decades have encouraged different ways of achieving catharsis, some through journaling, others through screaming. It was mentioned in the introduction that horror films, at least when screened in a theater, are the only public place in society where it is societally acceptable to scream or exhibit symptoms of a panic attack. Within this later overview of the Ne Plus Ultra period, it's explained how the formula for "rape and revenge" films, such *Hitch-Hike* (1977), *Night Train Murders* (1975), and *House on the Edge of the Park* (1980), are designed to make the audience furious in the first half of their duration. Although not horror films per se, these works afford audiences a similar freedom to publicly vent their emotions. A patron completely fed up with the horror in the news could attend one of these screenings, throw an absolute fit, and no one in the audience would find this behavior inappropriate, considering the outrageousness of what's onscreen. In fact, it would be more unusual for someone to watch these films and not react this way. The subsequent section, titled "The Censorship War", contextualizes Italian sexploitation within a broader scope that includes America's own relationship to adult cinema in the '70s. Although not a truly global phenomenon, considering most countries banned this material, there was a brief window of time when adult movies played alongside regular films in portions of the Western world. These images had never been readily accessible in motion picture format before and the novelty led to several adult films topping the box office in America and Italy for a few years. Film critics were asked to write about the subject for the first time, debating about whether this should be considered cinema or something else. In Italy, many conventional theaters converted to showing only pornography because it was so

profitable (Bar, 2020). Though both America and Italy experienced this brief industry boom, there were still some distinctions. One is that pornographic films were illegal in Italy throughout most of the 1970s, though regulated unevenly (Carradori, 2016). Another difference is that, in Italy, adult content commonly merged with conventional cinema genres, in a manner that never occurred in America with any proliferation. America also didn't have an onslaught of violent works like the ones covered in this thesis.

Pier Paolo Pasolini's movie *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) was one of the two case studies for the Ne Plus Ultra period. It was chosen not only because it's arguably one of the most controversial things ever made, but also for its themes, which are more obviously connected to the 1970s politics of Italy than most of the other works in this thesis. The Years of Lead was a conflict between Marxist and fascist groups. It's therefore relevant to examine a movie from the time period, whose plot involves fascism, made by a Marxist director. More literature has probably been written about *Salò* than any of the other movies in this analysis. This is because its worldwide controversy continues to generate intrigue, yet it's made with enough sophistication that critics hesitate to dismiss it completely. Movies that have straightforward narratives and universal interpretations are less likely to inspire deeper analysis than those works possessing enough ambiguity for every viewer to come up with their own equally valid opinion about it. Of course, this is a subjective assessment of film criticism, but how it plays out in practice can be shown with a simple example. Suppose a group of friends go to see the latest movie in the *Fast & Furious* series (2001-present). The movies in this series are constructed in such a methodical way that it's reasonable to expect that, upon exiting the theater, the hypothetical friend group will reach some consensus about the meaning of what they just saw. To the contrary, a group of friends exiting a screening of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966)

would debate all night about the film's purpose because its imagery is as cryptic as an inkblot test. *Salò* falls more into this second category. There are simply too many unanswered questions a viewer will have during a screening to feel they fully understood all of it. Where do the libertine characters come from? Does the state sanction what they are doing? Why do two of the soldiers dance with each other at the film's conclusion? It's these mysteries that generate intrigue fifty years after its release. This thesis argues the movie only would have and could have been made when it was. The director Pier Paolo Pasolini grew up under fascism, an ideology Italians had left behind with the conclusion of World War II. With the rise in fascist terrorism in the late 60s and early 70s, suddenly the subject was relevant again. Pasolini chose to make a bold statement about it, using the newly afforded victories against censorship. These victories included a liberation of semi-pornographic imagery due to the sexual revolution, as well as a liberation of onscreen violence stemming from the public's rage over terror attacks. Like most of the other movies in this thesis, *Salò* is not pornography, but it's brushing shoulders with it.

The second case study is *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). This movie was chosen because it's somewhat of a mixture of the other genres covered in this paper. It demonstrates how the chaos in Italian society was affecting what audiences wanted to see, merging and morphing genres into various bizarre hybrids. The movie is mostly a jungle cannibal story, but it also contains elements of sexploitation, mondo documentaries, and "rape and revenge" films. Its director, Ruggero Deodato, said he was inspired to make it after watching multiple news stories about the Red Brigades on Italian television (Rose, 2018). He suspected the TV footage was either manipulated or completely fabricated for ratings. *Cannibal Holocaust* is a fictional story about a documentary crew that goes to the Amazon so that they can film grotesque footage of cannibal tribes there. Upon arrival, the crew realize their footage is rather uninteresting, so they start

wreaking havoc on the natives to capture sensationalized images. The movie was produced in 1979, the year with the most assassinations in the Years of Lead conflict (Seaberry, 1979, p. 1). Prime minister Aldo Moro had been murdered the year before. *Cannibal Holocaust* was released the same year as the Bologna bombing, which caused the most deaths of any attack in the entire 20-year period (Armstrong, 2020). These details were elaborated on to emphasize that the public's emotions were at their all-time boiling point when this movie, and others like it, were playing theaters. The analysis section covering this film also delves into America's censorship system around that time to show that there was nothing preventing similar productions from being made by Hollywood, other than a lack of interest from the public. It's to prove a point that having a lax censorship system doesn't automatically lead to tons of gruesome movies if the public has no desire to see them.

More background is given for *Cannibal Holocaust's* production history and legacy, for the purpose of explaining that the whole project was coming from a place of frustration with Italian politics. It was made at a time when authorities often had no ability to know who was causing devastating attacks and Deodato felt the news was either profiting from this horror or maybe even misleading the public for some agenda. The director's comments over the years show he feels that being concerned over fictional images is absurd considering how violent and insane the news can be (Conterio, 2011). However, the analysis also notes that whatever message he was trying to get across gets muddled by his use of real animal cruelty. There is some discussion in this section about how one should interpret media that deceptively blurs the line between reality and fiction. Examples include mondos, which are often fake documentaries about very serious subjects like war and death. Or in the case of *Cannibal Holocaust*, it's presented as a fictional movie, yet actors are being psychologically abused and animals are killed for real.

After the *Cannibal Holocaust* analysis, the thesis details trends in the remaining Ne Plus Ultra period, which lasted until about 1982. The early 1980s generated many brutal works in various genres. On several occasions these genres would blend into one another. For example, a cannibal film like *Cannibal Apocalypse* (1980) also contains elements of Vietnam War movies such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), which was very popular in Italy. Extreme gore was at an all-time prevalence due to the runaway success of zombie movies. It's very easy to connect these popular transgressive subgenres, from this time, to each other via their shared elements and even their titles. The success of Lucio Fulci's *Zombi* (1979) and Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) led to Marino Girolami's *Zombi Holocaust* (1980). Popularity of pornographic films led to the horror hybrid *Porno Holocaust* (1981). Soon after these movies' release, a new Prime minister was instated and the political climate began to change. Terror attacks became increasingly fewer and far between, while there was talk of a "new economic miracle" as national industry rebounded (Pezzotti, 2014, p. 121).

Pornographic scenes stopped appearing in theatrical movies, but for technological reasons rather than political. Once videotape became widespread, the novelty and demand for explicit sex in theatrical movies faded away (Celli & Cottino-Jones, 2007, p. 117). It's explained that Tino Brass' *Caligula* (1979) was the most expensive one of these transgressive works and it serves as sort of a swan song crescendo for the excesses of Ne Plus Ultra. Beginning in about 1983 and continuing until the end of the decade, Italian horror, sci fi, and action films took on a considerably lighter tone. Popular movies like Bava's *Demons* (1985), Bruno Mattei's *Strike Commando* (1987), and Joe D'Amato's *Endgame* (1983) were comparable to mainstream motion pictures playing in America at the time. These works, and dozens more in the same vein, contained some violent imagery, but it was more in the style of Rambo or Indiana Jones stories.

The previous decade's motifs of rape, cannibalism, and softcore pornography were gone for good. A completely new government was formed in the early 1990s, while the last person killed in the Years of Lead was a senator in 1988 (Montalbano, 1988, p. 1). It's argued at the end of this section that after the Years of Lead, multiple genres of Italian cinema completely died out for the most part. Italy is not known for its current horror, action, or sci fi films anymore and hasn't been for several decades. In 2021 some Years of Lead attackers were arrested in France for decades-old crimes they committed (Balmer & Rose, 2021). The same year, Italy abolished all film censorship (Vivarelli, 2021). These two occurrences are somewhat of a bookend for a time period which might as well be ancient history at this point, considering how much has changed since then.

The final chapter in the thesis examines what movie directors and psychologists think about the catharsis theory. This portion of analysis is trying to determine if anyone else would agree with the notion that watching violent cinema is somehow cathartic. It's argued that many things found in art are culturally specific, in the sense that one cannot immediately understand certain themes and symbols if they are not from said culture. However, violent imagery and how that would work cathartically, is something innate in all peoples, assuming catharsis is a real thing that can be extracted from art. Therefore, violence is a universal cinematic language that needs no translation. For this reason, the comments of directors from around the globe was examined, to see if there is some consensus. There are a handful of filmmakers whose whole international brand is associated with making gory movies. These include Quentin Tarantino, Martin Scorsese, Paul Verhoeven, Nicholas Winding Refn, Sam Peckinpah, and David Cronenberg. While there are probably dozens of other directors with the same reputation, these were the ones selected because they are outspoken and don't shy away from the press. It's clear

from their comments that these directors all believe that catharsis is a real phenomenon that can be experienced through their films. An assortment of quotes collected from interviews show that many Italian filmmakers featured in this thesis are of the same opinion. While a creator's beliefs are certainly not the final authority on how their work should be interpreted, it's argued that their opinion is as valid as anyone else's, considering the devotion given to every element within their works. A supplement to these director's comments is a study conducted by the psychologist Douglas A. Gentile. His thoughts on the "aggression catharsis hypothesis" are covered in the thesis' final portion, as a way of including a more empirical perspective on this whole subject. Gentile was studying whether watching violent movies can make someone less likely to commit aggressive acts. His conclusion was that, not only is the aggression catharsis hypothesis wrong, but that these movies actually make people more violent (Gentile, 2013, p. 1). This assertion is not a complete surprise, considering that this belief has served as the foundation for movie censorship around the world by every government. However, the premise of this thesis is that the catharsis Italian audiences felt was some kind of purge for negative emotions, but not necessarily in any kind of clinical way. There was no assertion that these movies prevent people from being violent, but there was also no claim audiences were prone to violence anyhow.

What an individual gathers from art is an extremely subjective, sometimes ephemeral experience, which is why the attempt to understand a work's purpose lies within the field of humanities rather than the natural or medical sciences. It is the domain of the interpretive, speculative, the anecdotal. For decades, the movie *Forrest Gump* (1995) has resonated with American audiences, but can that film's emotional impact really be measured by a psychologist? Would a psychologist ever prescribe that movie for one of their patients? Probably not. Regardless of whether one believes in catharsis or not, this thesis serves as a valuable resource

for anyone looking for a window into Italian cinema of the 1970s and '80s. It's unlikely that anyone has written about the connections between gialli, cannibale, poliziotteschi, and mondo as part of a broader trend in Italian cinema that this thesis terms "transgressive." This is because the connections are not immediately obvious and only emerge after considerable research. The way that these transgressive works were also overlapping with sexploitation and pornographic movies from America is also not something usually explored. The cultural and language barrier makes the connection from one country's cinema to the other, something most would not discover. The films included herein are so provocative and historically unique that there is no way to exhaust everything there is to say about them. A scholar could approach this material from a different theoretical lens and generate a completely new perspective on all of it. Catharsis is but one in an infinite number of explanations for why these films exist and what can be learned from them.

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