Northumbria Research Link

Serb your enthusiasm: Anti-fandom and *A Serbian Film*

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Abstract:
In the years since its release, *A Serbian Film* (Spasojević, 2010) has been discussed in academic terms largely within the context of its director's stated intention of presenting an allegorical story about Serbia's troubled past. This article is based on an original research project concerned with the experiences of English-speaking audiences of *A Serbian Film*, the vast majority of whom make no mention of the historical knowledge upon which all academic textual analyses rely. It investigates the viewing strategies of audiences of this notoriously violent film. In focusing on only those participants with the most negative experiences, this article engages with literature on anti-fandom (including Gray, 2003; Harman and Jones, 2013, Pinkowitz, 2011; Strong, 2009) to examine discourses relating to the film itself and other audiences of it. Findings suggest a variety of distancing strategies put in place by disapproving audiences and highlight a practice of pre-meditated anti-fandom, which accounts for instances where participants' expectations of *A Serbian Film* are echoed in their reasons for their disapproval.

Keywords: Audiences; fandom; *A Serbian Film*; horror

Introduction

In his seminal work on anti-fandom, Jonathan Gray (2003) argued that the nature of a text changes depending on the investment levels and viewing strategies of those who watch. 'It is not possible to read an anti-fan's or a non-fan's text off a fan's', he states. He emphasises a need to study these different groups due to their often vastly different experiences in order to achieve a fuller picture of audiences' activities (Gray, 2003: 65). Bethan Jones, thirteen years after Gray's article in an exploration of her own anti-fandom of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Taylor-Johnson, 2015), states that fan studies scholars still ignore negative experiences with media (Jones, 2016: 30). This article uses original audience data together

with the concept of viewing strategies developed by Martin Barker et al. (2001) – the idea that audiences *prepare* and *are prepared*, in a variety of ways, to see a film – to discuss the nature of *A Serbian Film* (2010) for the most disapproving audiences and examine processes and expressions of anti-fandom. As evidenced in other work by Gray (2003), Harman and Jones (2013) and Alters (2007), the study of anti-fandom helps to provide a fuller picture of audiences' engagements with the film, beyond the usual positive experiences and reviews of professional criticism.

Academic engagement with *A Serbian Film* includes textual analyses of the film (Featherstone and Johnson, 2012; Featherstone, 2013), examinations of its production history and critical reception (Kimber, 2014), a discussion of the effect of piracy upon the film's available meanings (Kapka, 2014), and a study of the film's audiences based on questions of morality and aesthetic pleasure (Weir and Dunne, 2014). The reception of *A Serbian Film* by the media has been examined in great detail with emphases on perceptions of Serbian national identity (Kapka, 2014), taste cultures (Kimber, 2014), and moral and aesthetic judgements (Weir and Dunne, 2014). With this being the case, professional criticism and news coverage is not considered in this article.

Mark Featherstone's (2013) textual analysis, as in his and Beth Johnson's (2012) earlier article, explores a singular meaning of *A Serbian Film* in line with director Srdjan Spasojević's stated political message (Sélavy, 2010). This meaning, Featherstone states, can only be understood within the context of Serbian history (2013: 127). Alexandra Kapka notes that many critics overlooked this Serbian socio-historical context of the film (2014: 5). Her important driving point, regarding audiences, is that illegal downloads of *A Serbian Film* were without the director's introduction included on the UK retail versions of the film. In this way, Kapka states, informal distribution had a significant impact upon the range of meanings available to these audiences (2014: 7).

Kenneth Weir and Stephen Dunne (2014) analyse anonymous (and anonymised) audience data, combining professional and amateur criticism from online reviews of *A Serbian Film* in the cinema and on home video. They sought patterns in those reviews which describe the film as moral/amoral and as aesthetically good/bad, within the context of the censorship debate (2014: 83). The nature of their found data restricts them from being able to provide basic contextual information about their subjects, which is problematic when dealing with moral judgements. However, their systematic coding of responses to the film emphasises the importance of aesthetic factors for audiences and presents an effective argument in opposition to the interventionist model of censorship employed by the BBFC (2014: 90).

This research was undertaken to investigate English-speaking audiences' responses to *A Serbian Film* regardless of their prior knowledge of Serbian history. Among its aims was to build on the work of Weir and Dunne (2014) with newly generated audience data which, in the same way, further our understanding of the film beyond that of authorial intent or discussions of morality. This article looks at how encounters with the film are described and the implications of this on participants' views concerning the film's censorship, the film's

fans and the film itself. Discourse analysis of these negative experiences furthers our understanding of viewing strategies for violent films and investigates everyday audiences' encounters with one of the most controversial films in recent memory.

Anti-fandom

Anti-fans and non-fans, being those who dislike a given text and the middle ground of people who have no strong feelings either way, are often neglected in audience research. Their views are less easily analysed and their responses less easily gathered due to hostility or apathy towards the text in question (Gray, 2003: 76). Studies of anti-fans began in earnest after Jonathan Gray's call for audience researchers to move beyond a tendency to focus their research only on the most enthusiastic viewers of any given text (2003: 78). Gray states that it is not good enough to extrapolate from one type of viewer's responses to determine the reception of a text with everyone: 'it is […] not possible to reader an anti-fan's or a non-fan's text off a fan's' (2003: 65). He states the text becomes 'an entirely different entity' when viewed by a fan, a non-fan or an anti-fan (Gray, 2003: 75). In studying the reception of a particular text, examining only the most positive responses leads to a distorted view of the text.

However, there are some similarities between fans and anti-fans. Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones show how anti-fans of *Fifty Shades of Grey* act as an interpretive community and approach the film in a similar way to fans with comparable levels of investment (2013: 952). Jacqueline Pinkowitz, in a study of the online 'Anti-*Twilight* Movement', also describes high levels of investment where anti-fans perform close readings of the texts in order to better criticise them and their fans (2011: 12.2-12.3). Bethan Jones (2015) describes a variant of this form of anti-fandom, calling it 'anti-fan activism', in her study of a Welsh community's protests to have MTV's *The Valleys* (2012-2014) taken off air. Rather more official anti-fan activism is demonstrated well in the BBFC's bias towards arthouse cinema, as discussed by Kapka (2016), with regards to their rejection of *Hate Crime* (Bressack, 2012).

A much-noted aspect of anti-fandom is that expressions of it are often thinly veiled acts of 'symbolic violence' (after Bourdieu, 1977: 4) on the fanbase of the text concerned. The two most-cited series in studies of anti-fandom are *Twilight* (Click, 2009; Pinkowitz, 2016; Strong, 2009) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Jones, 2016; Harman and Jones, 2013). Both series were enormously successful in both book and film form, and their success with young, female audiences is taken as a defining problem in anti-fan discourses with anti-fans portraying their fans as uncritical, uneducated and often hysterical (Strong, 2009: 1). The justifications by the BBFC (2012) in tightening their guidelines on sexual violence in films, prompted by questionable research which included *A Serbian Film*, are framed by such an act of symbolic violence. They employ what Barker (2016: 123) calls a 'figure of the audience', a hypothetical, worst-case-scenario spectator who will potentially be aroused by and inspired to copy what they see. The BBFC cite concerns from the general public, as a result of the Ipsos MORI report, about 'young men with little experience, and more vulnerable viewers, accessing sadistic and sexually violent content, which could serve to

normalise rape and other forms of violence and offer a distorted view of women' (BBFC, 2012: 1). There is clear crossover here between studies of anti-fandom and censorship, which, while discussed by Gray (2003: 71) and Alters (2007: 354-355), has not been explored in any depth.

A Serbian Film is a very different proposition to Twilight or Fifty Shades of Grey, being an independent and relatively obscure film trading on its controversial elements with no clear designs on appealing to younger female audiences. The exclusive focus on popular Hollywood cinema in previous studies of anti-fandom leaves room here to explore expressions of anti-fandom of a very different kind of text. Gray's (2003: 71) and Alters' (2007: 354-355) hypotheses about links between anti-fandom and censorship are here explored using anti-fan discourses from a very different scenario, being a highly controversial, heavily censored film. Audience data is examined in this study to better understand the workings of anti-fandom on a local level and the machinations of censorship on a larger scale.

Methods

An online survey of closed, quantitative questions and open-ended, qualitative questions generated data suitable for both discourse analysis and for suggesting wider patterns. A number of questions were based on work from the Lord of the Rings international research project, including the helpful wording of demographic questioning and the prompt for participants to categorise the film (see Barker, Mathijs and Trobia, 2008). (Please consult the appendix for the full survey.) I sought a diverse, typological sample of participants (after Barker, Mathijs and Trobia, 2008: 222) hoping for a wide range of different audiences and responses to reflect the diversity of investment levels of everyday audiences (after Barker and Brooks, 1998: 232). The research was not limited to British audiences so as to allow for the transnational 'terrain of debate' (after Barker et al, 2001: 12) made possible by the Internet.

A link to the survey was posted on every YouTube upload related to the film, on every forum relevant to horror cinema on the Internet Movie Database, on a wide range of horror- and film-related sub-Reddits, and on Horror.com, the FrightFest forums, and FanEdit.org (to capture more non-horror fans). Seeking the help of social media super-connectors (generous people with a number of different social circles and many followers) and snowballing personal contacts was also vital to the recruitment process. Direct requests were made to Twitter users who posted about recently watching the film to capture responses from those who do not frequent forums and other websites used in the promotion of the survey. The survey was open to responses from April 13th to May 25th, 2016. A longer window of opportunity for participants to volunteer their responses would have been advantageous, but a suitably wide variety of participants was recruited.

The survey drew a total of 307 responses from thirty countries, with a heavily skewed male-to-female ratio (81.1% male to 16.9% female) and more responses from the USA (36.8%) and the UK (28.7%). In terms of how the 307 respondents categorised their

relationship to films generally, the survey generated a respectable level of variety with groups represented as follows: 157 film fans (51.1%); 43 academics (14%); 46 genre fans (15%); 33 film professionals (10.7%); 20 casual film viewers (6.5%); and 8 who just watch new releases (2.6%). The differences in how these groups rated the film out of five are slight, with the highest average rating coming from the genre fans (2.98) and the lowest coming from those who just keep up with new releases (2.12) and academics (2.44). The majority, being the film fans, averaged at 2.64. With these differences being rather slight, respondents are not divided by these self-categorisations in this article, but by how they rated the film. This article concentrates on the most negative respondents who rated the film one out of five (fifty-eight participants).

With that said, it is important to note that not every participant who rates their enjoyment of the film as one star should be classified as an anti-fan. ('Stars' are a useful shorthand with one star being the answer 'Not at all enjoyable' corresponding to the 'What did you think of *A Serbian Film*?' question, and five stars is its opposite, 'Extremely enjoyable'). It is not the aim of this article to apply reductive labels for the sake of placing participants into neat groups. Rather, I will examine responses to determine different viewing strategies at work in all who watched the film and analyse how these relate to expressions of anti-fandom in those who rated the film the lowest.

Many participants specifically sought *A Serbian Film* out in search of a strong negative experience. The working definition of anti-fandom in this study hinges on this intensity of feeling, and so strong emotional investment is taken here as an indicator of anti-fandom in the same way that it is used to identify fans (Sandvoss, 2005: 8). However, this is combined with a low rating of the film, since negative emotional responses to a horror film may still result in a positive encounter. For example, participant #269 states that it 'shocks and disturbs like true works of art should' and participant #107 describes it as 'a calculated assault on the viewer', calling it 'exhilarating'; both rated the film five stars out of five. Matt Hills' affective theory of horror reception discusses how much of the pleasure to be found in horror films comes from the way horror texts trade in creating affective states (such as anxiety or unease) before providing objects (e.g. monsters, acts of violence) which transform these objectless states into cognitive emotions (and vice versa), meaning strong negative responses may still produce a positive, meaningful viewing experience (2003: 30-32). This affective theory places great stock in what Hills calls 'anticipatory anxiety' and 'anticipatory reading', wherein the affective state (non-object-directed emotion) is created via hints at the horrific object to come (2003: 30-31). This may take the form of a 'teaser' of the monster, such as the glimpses of a velociraptor during the attack that opens *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) or the implied demonic presence in the opening Iraq sequence of *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973). Gray's (2003: 25) conception of paratextual materials, particularly 'entryway paratexts' encountered before seeing a film (e.g. trailers, reviews), as something akin to an 'airlock' leading to the film itself attest to how anticipatory reading of paratexts may act as part of the horror experience. Anticipation anxiety may be stoked, fuelling the eventual encounter, by reading before-hand about *A Serbian Film* as 'the nastiest film ever

made' (Macnab, 2010). Many participants who did not enjoy the film also appear to have sought out the film for an intense negative experience, which will be discussed later in this article in the context of pre-meditated anti-fandom.

Judging the emotional involvement of a participant calls for a degree of interpretation, therefore the following are here taken as markers of anti-fandom: lengthy responses as an indicator of high investment (after Barker et al, 2016: 62); describing *A Serbian Film* as an exceptional film, being the inverse of strong emotional expressions which demarcate fandom of a text (Sandvoss, 2005: 8); and expressing pro-censorship views, after Gray's (2003: 71) and Alters' (2007: 354-355) conception of censorship as a form of anti-fandom.

Dismissal of the film is not an act of anti-fandom; it is an act of non-fandom. As an example, participant #76, whose 'Enjoyment explained' response reads 'Gratuitous nonsense', describes the film as a 'one-note pony' and states that 'far better movies have been censored for far less'. The film is treated as unremarkable. Participant #100 shares similar sentiments to #76, but is much more vocal about his disapproval. His 'Enjoyment explained' response is sixty-six words long, compared to #76's two-word response. Whereas #76 says the film is without artistic merit, #100 says 'I honestly have a hard time calling it a film'. Participant #100 also expresses pro-censorship views using an artistic discourse, calling the film's censorship 'a victory against a hackneyed director.' In this way, participant #100's views can be seen as an expression of anti-fandom whereas participant #76 does not meet the criteria.

Interpretive Communities/Viewing Strategies

Deborah Kaplan's work on fandom emphasises that 'fans are members of an active interpretive community' (2006: 135). There is a shared knowledge environment of which fans' acts of interpretation are a product (there are other interpretive communities to which these fans will also belong). 'It is not the properties of the text but the interpretative assumptions and strategies performed by readers, situated in interpretative communities, which determine the outcomes of interpretation', states John Storey (1999: 69). Harman and Jones conclude that anti-fans of *50 Shades of Grey* operate in the same way (2013: 952). A common interpretive framework for *A Serbian Film* emerges from this study's data, constructed from prior knowledge and expectations resulting from word-of-mouth. This applies to all audiences of *A Serbian Film*, but it may inform our understanding anti-fan responses.

When asked why they watched the film, sixty-three participants (20.5%) state 'A recommendation from a friend'. 77.8% of these were told of the film's extreme nature:

Heard from a friend it's the most horrible movie he ever watched. (#67)

I heard that a friend of mine could not watch more than 5 minutes into the film. (#38)

> I heard about the film in great detail regarding what happens in the story from multiple friends who couldn't help but share. (#78)

> It was the worst film ever. Online and at school. (#249)

> Borderline crazy, disgusting, disturbing, mind-shattering. (#191)

Such recommendations are the basis for an interpretive community with shared knowledge (one of many each participant will be part of) which expects and, indeed, may *hope* for an encounter with 'the most wretched movie ever' (#198).

'The most ____ film/movie ever' is a construction used by many participants to describe what they had heard about *A Serbian Film* with the most common being 'most disturbing' (fourteen instances). 'Shocking', 'worst', 'extreme' and 'disgusting' trailed behind (three instances each). No noticeable differences are present with regards to star-rating trends or censorship views for those emphasising the reputation of *A Serbian Film* as 'the most ____ film ever', so it does not appear to function as a justification of responses to other questions. It may function as a justification for watching the film in the first place, however, which is a source of shame for participants of all star-rating groups. These participants state that the film was recommended to them on the grounds of its being exceptional and uniquely disturbing/shocking/etc., e.g., 'On the Internet it is widely regarded as one of if not THE most violent and difficult to watch film' (#25).

A number of participants demonstrated unease at the thought of being known to have seen the film, e.g., 'I haven't recommended it to anyone I know and haven't even told my significant other that I've seen it, because I feel like she might think badly of me for watching it' (#278). Participant #9 states, 'I did not necessarily want some people to know I have seen it'. Others discuss a need for privacy, if not outright secrecy like #9, e.g., 'I'm not going to watch such a film with other people' (#34). Participant #82 watched alone as he was 'Unsure of personal reactions'. Participant #242 stated, 'I'm not gonna watch that movie with someone it feels weird watching it alone, can't imagine if my brother was with me'. This phenomenon is more common in responses from one-star raters. Of one-star raters, 19% express discomfort at the idea of watching the film with others (excluding those expressing concern for the discomfort of others), over twice as many as any other star-rating group.

Citing word-of-mouth about *A Serbian Film* being a unique curiosity ('most ____ film ever') and discussing the shame of being seen as part of the audience of the film distances these anti-fans from a perceived 'true' audience for the film (i.e., a targeted audience who will enjoy it). Some criticise those who recommended the film to them. Participant #40 stated he watched it because of 'a bunch of dumb Redditors thinking it was notable' and #145 heard about it from a 'friend who was a bit weird'. This talk distances anti-fans from the decision-making process which led to the viewing of the film.

The 'True' Audience

The same process features in responses from one-star raters to the question 'What type of person do you think might enjoy *A Serbian Film*?' What this question does, essentially, is ask for a 'figure of the audience', a hypothetical spectator (after Barker, 2016: 132). Such hypothetical spectators are often deployed by the press and the censors, providing a worst-case-scenario viewer (invariably a young male) who will be damaged by or inspired to copy the actions depicted on screen. The 'figure of the audience' is a discursive strategy, a construct or myth, even, that is used in criticisms of media based on moral arguments. A good example of this is provided in the pro-censorship campaign against *Crash* (1996) in the British press which suggested the film would serve as inspiration for reckless, young joy-riders (Barker et al, 2001: 7).

Klaus Schoenbach (2001), writing on 'the myth of "the dangerous new medium"', provides an argument for why myths, including the copycat-viewer scenario, fall into popular use. He states that these myths become popular, despite a grounding in no proof whatsoever, because 'they comprise a clear-cut and convincing explanation of the world' and present 'straightforward cause-and-effect chains' (2001: 362-363). Schoenbach states: 'myths do not only lack systematic proof, they are often not expected to be proven by reality – at least not totally' (2001: 369). In Ingunn Hagen's (1999) discussion of how audiences are perceived by media institutions, she discusses how they construct 'audience images', essentially a 'figure of the audience' en masse. These audience images represent the operationalisation of audiences by institutions in order to fulfil certain purposes, e.g., segmented audiences create different target markets for television shows (1999: 146). 'The myths of media and audiences in their sensuality and simplicity are often more convincing than the scientifically established but complicated answers', Schoenbach states (2001: 271). Their simplicity gives them power in discourse.

A 'figure of the audience' appears frequently in the BBFC-commissioned Ipsos MORI research on sexual violence in the cinema – the research has been heavily criticised by Barker (2016) – and this figure, 'young men with little life experience', was the basis for the justification of enforcing stricter censorship guidelines (BBFC, 2012). This question, asking for a hypothetical spectator, comes with this baggage, especially when asked of such a violent film and especially for those with anti-censorship views. Many participants refuse the question on the grounds of it appearing to be a question about media 'effects'. However, it is still of use in examining how participants engage with this idea. This article explores the use of audience myths for violent media, as used by participants, which is manifested in the 'figure of the audience'.

The creation of a 'figure of the audience' requires three ingredients: 'the powerful message; the viewer, with weaknesses or dangers; and some resultant harm' (Barker et al, 2001: 9). However, this construct is also a common feature of anti-fan discourses, often about texts which encounter no censorship problems, such as *Twilight*. This speaks to the idea of anti-fandom and censorship being on the same spectrum, with censorship being an extreme form of anti-fan activism (Gray, 2003; Jones, 2013).

Evidence of a powerful message in texts which provoke anti-fandom may be taken as a film's violent scenes, as in the case of *Crash* and, here, *A Serbian Film*. However, violence does not necessarily have to be the defining factor. As discussed previously, series with young, female fanbases are frequently the subject of anti-fan activity, the series' power perhaps evident through their incredible commercial success. *Twilight* fans are treated as lacking the 'cultural competence' (Bourdieu, 1984: 2) necessary to engage with more 'legitimate' films and novels and, therefore, as insufficient (Strong, 2009: 1). This is the 'viewer, with weaknesses or dangers' (Barker et al, 2001: 9). Catherine Strong (2009) analyses Internet forum discussions between anti-fans of *Twilight* and demonstrates how anti-fans, in an act of 'symbolic violence' (after Bourdieu, 1977: 4), portray *Twilight*'s largely female, teenage fan base in disparaging terms as uncritical, unthinking and emotionally unstable (Strong, 2009: 1).

The 'harm', in anti-fan constructions of 'figures of the audience', may be taste-based: those who enjoy a 'bad' text are harming themselves by forgoing 'better' media. Anti-fans make concrete Bourdieu's claim that 'tastes are first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others' (Bourdieu, 1984: 56). There is considerable crossover between *Twilight* anti-fans' unflattering representations of *Twilight* fans and anti-fans of *A Serbian Film* (including the press and the BBFC) constructing their own 'figures of the audience'.

Thirty of the fifty-eight one-star raters (51.8%) responded with a negative hypothetical spectator, including the following: 'Pretentious nutjobs' (#226); 'A dumb person who's trying to be as "edgy" as possible, but ultimately has terrible taste' (#40); and 'A Croat :D. No, but seriously a Serbophobic person or just a violent person' (#202). Barker et al (2016: 109) ask a similar question to explore participants' perceptions of the different kinds of audiences of *Alien* (1979)*. The biggest difference they find between high-raters and low-raters of *Alien* is that the former claim the film will be most enjoyed by intelligent people or people with extra qualities, such as patience (34% of high-raters state this; 12% of low-raters), and this aligns with the findings here. Such self-flattery can be found in five-star-rater responses to the question concerning *A Serbian Film,* e.g., 'An awesome person' (#81) and 'Film lovers, deep thinkers' (#177). It is worth noting that Barker et al.'s study of *Alien*'s audiences is framed to concentrate on positive experiences, with the lowest rating of the film available to survey respondents being 'Not that good' (Barker et al., 2016: 121). However, there are still useful comparisons to be made here concerning how respondents discuss the film and other audience members.

Low-raters of *Alien* tended to emphasise the film as 'standard', whereas high-raters emphasised qualities which made it stand apart from other films (Barker et al., 2016: 110). *A Serbian Film* reverses this trend: only three five-star raters identify it as unique with twice as many instead stating that it is merely 'well-made', despite awarding it the highest rating. One-star raters of *A Serbian Film* emphasise, rather than it being one of many, that the film is uniquely shocking, disgusting and 'Once seen, never forgotten, unfortunately' (#189). Those who rate *A Serbian Film* the highest appear to want to legitimise the film by

emphasising its similarity to other films, whereas those who rated *Alien* the highest appeared to want to mark the film as exceptional.

However, the trend found by Barker et al. (2016: 110) regarding participants' perceptions of kinds of audiences for the film, being on a spectrum with high-raters being most complimentary of imagined audiences, holds true for *A Serbian Film*, albeit with more vitriol at the lower end of the rating scale. There is more 'othering' of *A Serbian Film*'s audiences rather than the talk of *Alien*'s 'mass appeal' (Barker et al., 2016: 110). Whereas *Alien*'s low-raters emphasise their own uniqueness apart from the masses who enjoy *Alien*, those who did not rate *A Serbian Film* highly instead emphasise the uniqueness of those who enjoy the film, often employing a discourse of mental illness. Both groups distance themselves from the perceived 'true' audience in the same way, the audience is just different (masses for *Alien*, individuals for *A Serbian Film*).

Social Viewing

When asked who they watched the film with, fifty-eight participants (18.9% of the overall data set) report that they watched it with friends. Many stressed the importance of the social context in response to their prior knowledge of the film, e.g., 'Honestly it would be weird to watch this gore-porn alone' (#25), 'Would never watch it alone, as much as I love horror films I like to have someone with me during the most disturbing movies' (#55).

Others' responses can be a significant factor in participants' viewing strategies:

> I had other friends who I routinely watched movies with so we figured we'd watch it together because seeing each other's reactions would be fun. (#100)

> Because my friends are hilarious, their reactions were very entertaining. (#123)

> We were drunk after a party and trying to scare each other. (#135)

This participatory nature of groups viewing *A Serbian Film* here presents itself in a number of ways: as a support system for #55; as an entertainment which completes the experience for #100 and #123, akin to Annette Hill's (2011: 151) discussion of how, for paranormal television shows such as *Most Haunted* (2012-2015), 'the audience is the show'; as a contest and testing of boundaries for #135 and #123, who states that 'Only me and one other friend made it to the end'; and, finally, as a fulfilling of a 'group curiosity' (#262) or sharing of mutual interests, e.g., 'We enjoy discussing these sorts of films afterwards together' (#248). The aforementioned viewing strategies were informed by expectations of strong emotional responses to the film, both for the participant and others watching with him/her.

These viewing strategies demonstrate a wide range of possible motivations for watching, and for behaviours during the viewing experience. This complicates attempts at generalised conclusions about how 'the audience' feels or acts and the kinds of pleasures available in an encounter with a film. Especially, 'game-playing' (Barker and Brooks, 1998:

144), by using the film as a test or a prompt for commentary or spectator performance, is a popular way for participants to engage with *A Serbian Film* in groups, e.g., 'my friends' […] reactions were very entertaining' (#123). This viewing scenario distances the participant from the problem audience put forward by the BBFC, being the young male watching alone, 'getting ideas'. Examples of such a discursive construction are commonplace in Ipsos MORI's 2012 report, which is the source of the BBFC's young, male 'figure of the audience', e.g., 'All it is doing is putting ideas into people's heads' (Female, 30, London, in Ipsos MORI, 2012: 23). In treating the film as a form of game, the emphasis is placed on the film's aesthetics, rather than its 'ideas'.

This study drew responses from 103 males under twenty-five who may be considered potential members of the problem audience cited by the BBFC (2012). From quantitative data, no significant differences can be found between their responses and the rest of the sample except for a 10% higher proclivity for labelling the film as 'torture porn'. This is perhaps understandable as the genre is marketed at this age group. There are no differences large enough from which one may draw any conclusions, other than the conclusion that there is no difference in how this group received the film.

Qualitative data reveal, for participants in males-under-twenty-five group, regardless of their rating of the film, a heightened awareness of potential judgement from others for reacting to the film in a certain way, or even for watching it in the first instance. Participant #209 states 'Fear of judgement from family' as his reason for watching the film alone and another responds, 'I don't need people knowing I watched this' (#16). There are fourteen such responses in the data set, with half of these coming from males under twenty-five. While this is not an enormous margin – especially considering 41.4% of all respondents are males under twenty-five – this may suggest a productive avenue for future research and does here, at least, demonstrate responses from a group singled out by the censors. Theresa Cronin states that recent censorship discourses of 'appropriate' spectator responses to films position the spectator, rather than the censorable text, as the subject of the discourse, and that audiences are well aware of this and police themselves accordingly (2009: 18). This is evident for *A Serbian Film* through these expressions of shame of watching the film.

Pre-meditated Anti-fandom

The prior knowledge demonstrated by all participants, including fans, non-fans and anti-fans, testifies to many watching the film to earn a 'badge of honour' for enduring it or to test their personal boundaries – '*A Serbian Film* seems to exist primarily as a dare' (#46) – but it also suggests pre-meditated anti-fandom. As discussed by Hills, many horror fans may of course gravitate towards a film which they expect to be shocking and disturbing and with which they expect an incredibly disturbing experience (2003: 30-31). This has certainly shown to be true for *A Serbian Film* and is also evident in how the film was marketed; the US poster uses a quote from Twitch.net above the titled calling the film 'Brutal. Unflinching. Devastating. Moving.' However, many participants who gave the film one star out of five,

people who did not have a positive experience despite their negative reactions, displayed foreknowledge of the film which indicated not only that they expected it to be a difficult experience but that they expected it to be a rather pointless and disappointing one.

This pre-meditated anti-fandom where on watches a film expecting to dislike it is akin to *Twilight* anti-fandom as discussed by Jacqueline Pinkowitz (2011). Anti-fans perform of *Twilight*, she discusses, perform close readings of the books in order to engage in 'qualified rejection' of them (2011: 12.2-12.3). For *A Serbian Film*, these could be instances of failed boundary testing, where the film goes beyond a participant's comfort zone. However, the amount and kind of prior knowledge for some expressing anti-fan views may be explained by pre-meditated anti-fandom where qualified rejection appears to have been the end goal.

Participants' reasons for watching, in some instances, echo their justifications for supporting its censorship, suggesting a viewing strategy centred around a desire for qualified rejection. For example, participant #47 heard the film was 'a 'sick' movie, not in a positive or good way', watched an uncut version of the film, and justifies a pro-censorship view by stating, 'This is indeed a sick movie'. Participant #250's prior knowledge was 'That it was absolutely disgusting and extreme. Also the "Newborn Porn" part. Yuck.' He then expresses disapproval of the film and supports its censorship on the grounds that 'the images borderline show child pornography'. Participant #166, who rated the film one star, had heard 'that it's a complete waste of time', yet watched it anyway. This is very different from the approach of the horror fan who expects a challenging and negative experience with a 'good' film (Hills, 2003: 30-31).

The above-quoted participants would fall neatly into the role of 'Film-Refusers' defined by Barker and Brooks as those who could not imagine any pleasure being derived from the film (1998: 292-293). However, whereas those studied by Barker and Brooks (1998: 294-297) chose not to watch *Judge Dredd*, anti-fans in this research did engage with the text. (People who refused to watch a newsworthy, controversial film would make for a fascinating study, but this falls outside the scope of this project.) With 78.2% of all participants watching an illegal copy of *A Serbian Film*, and with the popularity of the illegal upload on YouTube (with 3.8 million views as of March, 2016) (Graves, 2014), it is tempting to conclude that the rise of piracy has resulted in more pre-meditated anti-fandom and qualified rejection. Whereas once such a film would only be available in its uncut form via sellers of bootleg VHS tapes, taking at least some effort to obtain, there have been very few actual barriers to access for those who wished to view *A Serbian Film* in its entirety, even in the UK. While the film was not carried by major streaming services, it was available on DVD (cut or uncut, to any country), and a simple YouTube search for the trailer would even produce the whole film (Graves, 2014). One might reasonably assume that this led many who would have otherwise been deterred by cost or by locating the film were more likely to watch it for free at the click of a button. Of course, such claims are almost impossible to measure accurately. There are numerous complex factors which need to be studied to understand the motives for film piracy. However, the ease of access to unauthorised copies

of the film has unarguably lowered the barrier to entry for those with low levels of investment.

These participants seeking the film out despite expecting not to enjoy it demonstrates the same kind of anti-fan viewing strategy discussed by Pinkowitz (2011: 12.2-12.3). Anti-fandom a mainstream franchise such as *Twilight* may manifest in audiences of a very different text with a very different target audience. The desired outcome, though, is the same: to 'fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences' (Bourdieu, 1984: 7). Annette Kuhn, in her model of censorship, emphasises that censorship can be a productive force, producing censorable texts which are marketed through controversy (1988: 4). Premeditated anti-fandom appears to be a consequence of that productivity. The film's marketing draws in not only those who may enjoy the film but also those who already know they may not.

Mental Health Discourses

As previously discussed, when participants are asked, 'What type of person do you think might enjoy *A Serbian Film*?', some refuse the question. They do so here in one of four ways: some do not answer; high-raters refuse the 'effects' premise of the question, e.g., 'a variety of people will enjoy this film for a variety of reasons' (#245) and 'Any type' (#70); and one-star raters reject the question's premise by stating that they know of no-one who might enjoy it (#121, #48, #19) or that the film simply cannot be enjoyed (#167, #90). As in Question 2, concerning the participants' own enjoyment, there are also responses, such as 'This film is not meant to be enjoyed, but, rather, experienced' (#247), which reject the question due to generic expectations. The question was worded to prompt stronger responses, which could be viewed as problematic. Asking for a 'type of person' may have prompted more participants to provide stereotypes and reductive, negative labels, such as 'art critic, psychopath, hipster or edgy teen' (#209). However, any variation of this question would suffer similar problems due to the baggage associated with its premise – it is not a problem which can be eliminated through word choice – but it is a question still worth asking. The problematic wording of the question is only a problem should the potential impact of the wording and the question's premise go ignored. Each participant was asked this question, so the value of the question, being a question about 'effects' in disguise, is that it still provides an insight into how participants engage with this discussion.

A predictable trend in responses is that the one-star raters offer 'people with bad taste' (#204) more often (20.7% compared to 12.5% from two-star raters) but there are also many references (29.3% of one-star raters) to mental illness. The word 'disturbing' appears in thirty-six responses to the earlier question about prior knowledge of the film and is the most common descriptor for the film in these responses ('extreme' being second with twenty-six mentions). Due to the small scale of this study, it cannot be claimed from these survey responses alone that this discourse of mental illness is representative of the wider reception of the film. Although it is the most prevalent trend in these responses, it still only occurs in 11.4% of them. However, it does present both in the YouTube comments (Graves,

2014) on an unauthorised upload of the uncut film as one of the most frequent descriptors (182 instances, after a word frequency analysis of over 5,000 comments) and in media coverage of the film (e.g., Macnab, 2010). When taken into consideration alongside the proliferation of the word 'sick' in the same materials – it was the most frequent descriptor in the YouTube (Graves, 2014) comments (249 instances) and featured in media coverage (e.g., Longworth, 2011; anon., *The Sun*, 2010) – it is clear that a discourse of mental illness is intrinsically linked to *A Serbian Film*. The number of mental health discourses generated by this rather provocative question, then, is in line with responses to earlier questions on prior knowledge of the film and with a wealth of found data online and in the press.

Responses to the question of who might like *A Serbian Film* which draw upon a discourse of mental illness often use mental illness as a comparable state to that a social group of which they disapprove. This is often as 'teenagers' (#36), or used to disparage those who may defend the film. They cite a wider appeal for the film which will include someone suffering from mental illness, e.g., 'A severely deranged psycho might genuinely enjoy it, and some hipster douchebags might pretend to enjoy it just to be contrarian and indie' (#25). The use of adverbs in participant #25's description of someone who is 'severe' in his/her illness and 'genuine' in his/her enjoyment of the film works together with the downplaying of those who may 'pretend' to like the film to limit discussion of the film's potential for gaining approval. Actual approval of the film is therefore linked to mental illness and has limited possibility for anyone else other than those pretending. Those who pretend are pluralised in casual language ('some hipster douchebags') and marginalised, described as trying to be 'indie' and set themselves apart from that which is popular. Casual pluralisation of the 'hipsters' and talk of a singular 'psycho' leads to a scenario in which just one 'psycho' is a problem, whereas there is no number of 'hipsters' who could present any kind of threat; their goals – to be contrarian and indie – are harmless. The speaker is positioned outside of the film's sphere of influence, as neither 'hipster' nor 'psycho', defusing the hype.

Descriptions of lone 'psychos' are frequently coupled with descriptions of their enjoyment, whereas descriptions of others' pleasures gained from the film by low-raters are rarely treated as genuine, e.g., 'Someone who hates women or "likes" things because they're controversial' (#110). Pleasure, for the 'psycho', is described by a number of participants. Participant #75 describes 'A person who enjoys watching extreme agony and torture for amusement.' Participant #55 describes 'Someone who has a high tolerance for gore/horror/abuse, someone who appreciates the "art" or message behind the film, or, most disturbingly, someone who actually enjoys torture/rape/assault against women and children.' The last example from participant #55 and participant #75's 'psycho' are such that they evoke the image of a singular person who is amused or enjoying him/herself, the participant presenting a moral discourse wherein the subject, the imaginary spectator, is immoral. To admit to liking the film, within the boundaries set by these participants, is to admit to immoral thoughts or to be pretending. No other positions are offered.

Participant #55, whose 'figure of the audience' is one who may enjoy witnessing the

rape of women and children, describes *A Serbian Film* as 'a film about the worst crimes of men', suggesting a male theoretical spectator. Gender is otherwise rarely mentioned concerning the film's potential audiences. Whether the theoretical spectator is a negative construction or a positive one, he/she is almost exclusively described as 'someone', 'people' or a 'person'. This is potentially an artefact of the survey sample, being 81% male. It may also either suggest a taken-for-granted male stereotype at play, where participants presume maleness of anyone who may take 'inappropriate' pleasure from the film, or a lack of gender specificity concerning 'psychos'. Without further qualitative research, it is impossible to say.

This lack of specificity does not apply to talk of age. Mental illness and age groups are paired frequently by participants when asked to describe the target audience for *A Serbian Film*. References include: 'A simple person/teenagers' (#166); 'Edgy teenagers, masochists and maybe pro film critics' (#36); and 'I could only see it appealing to young adults who need something unique to hold onto, and also those who are desensitised by the increasing shock value of controversial films' (#138). Constructing the pleasure to be gained from *A Serbian Film* in this way places young people and the mentally ill, or the 'desensitised', beside one another as audiences not 'in their right mind' (#197). This echoes the 'symbolic violence' Bourdieu describes whereby the tastes of the less powerful are denigrated and seen as less legitimate (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 4). Strong describes such violence in the treatment of *Twilight*'s young, female fanbase in anti-fan discourses (2009: 2). *Twilight*'s fanbase, Strong states, are portrayed as 'uncritical, overly emotional consumer[s] of culture' (2009: 2). Discursive associations made here between the young and the mentally ill perform the same function. They re-enforce existing power relations which feature young people at the bottom of the ladder.

Conclusions

The responses to the survey that generated data for this article support Kapka's notion that, for viewers of *A Serbian Film*, 'it is difficult to interpret the metaphor from the film text alone, obscured as it is by shock value, sex, and highly stylised bloody violence' (2014: 8). More importantly, however, they point to a number of different ways in which the film was watched, beyond a quest to interpret it in a political and historical context and aside from those fans seeking out intensely challenging experiences (Hills, 2003: 30-31). Some viewing strategies go beyond even treating *A Serbian Film* as a film at all.

A Serbian Film may be a horror movie or a political allegory. It may act as a personal challenge or a group dare or bonding experience. It may even work as a coping strategy, which ties into Hills' notion of horror's pleasures arising from taking a viewer's affective state and giving it a form as a cognitive emotion (2003: 30-31); participant #128 states, 'Brutal, hard to watch movies help to dissociate me from symptoms of CPTSD'. This research has examined everyday audiences and emphasises not only participants' talk about their assessments of the film as a work of art, but also their affective experience with it, their reasons for watching it, and the construction of different viewing strategies based on prior

knowledge which can lead to wildly different viewing experiences. Even those participants who state they have watched the film more than once (#127, #250, #183, #188) describe a different experience on the second viewing. In line with Weir and Dunne's (2014) findings, there is evidently a great deal more at stake in audiences' interpretations of *A Serbian Film* than issues of morality or censorship. It is plain from data generated by this research that to try to define the one thing that *A Serbian Film* is 'really about' and the one thing that people seek from their experience is to miss the complexity of everyday audiences' processes.

A focus on the prior knowledge of anti-fans reveals not only different viewing strategies but also viewing strategies which seem to suggest pre-meditated anti-fandom. Where prior knowledge and justifications for criticism or pro-censorship views align, pre-meditated anti-fandom may be one possible explanation. This would support accounts of anti-fans engaging in 'qualified rejection' (Pinkowitz, 2011: 12.2-12.3). However, whereas *Twilight* anti-fans engage in qualified rejection of a blockbuster Hollywood franchise with a great deal of media exposure, anti-fans of *A Serbian Film* have no online fan base to antagonise. There are few defenders of this newsworthy but relatively obscure low-budget, independent, foreign-language film. There are myriad complex viewing strategies employed by audiences and a wide range of possible pleasures to be had from *A Serbian Film*, including the 'badge of honour' of sitting through it. Evidently, there is also the pleasure of being able to express displeasure with the film.

Participants are aware of censorship discourses of 'appropriate' responses, as per Cronin's (2009: 4) argument about changing censorship concerns. They are aware of the myths surrounding such violent films and 'figures of the audience' are commonplace in anti-fan talk of those who may enjoy *A Serbian Film*. This suggests that anti-fandom of *A Serbian Film* may often be a by-product of censorship discourses. This is further suggested by *A Serbian Film*'s lack of success, should one attribute success (especially with a young, female audience) to the fervent anti-fan activity surrounding *Twilight* and *50 Shades of Grey*.

An awareness of censorship discourses and myths of 'dangerous viewers' may also be evident from consumption habits which favour group game-playing. This viewing strategy is very different from the image of the 'problem audience' or 'dangerous viewers' (being young men watching alone) and encourages a participatory environment where 'the audience is the show' (Hill, 2011: 151). This greatly lessens the importance of authorial intent, or what the film may be 'really about', emphasising aesthetic judgements over moral ones (as per Weir and Dunne, 2014).

The 'figure of the audience' is an incredibly useful concept in considering discourses of anti-fandom, such as in anti-fan discourses which present fans of a given text in a negative light. Such strategies manifest here in participants' concerns about 'people with bad taste' (#204) who enjoy 'bad' texts. Bourdieu states that 'It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, [tastes] are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes' (1984: 56). In anti-fan responses, it is possible to note significant efforts which are taken to not only reject the film but also to reject its perceived 'true' audiences through distancing strategies. These manifest both in discourse and in viewing strategies, such as

game-playing. Censorship and anti-fan discourses, supporting Gray's (2003: 71) conception of censorship as a form of 'anti-fan activism' (Jones, 2015: 1.4), employ similar discursive strategies, such as audience myths manifested as 'figures of the audience'. The construction of a 'figure of the audience' is as important to anti-fans' concerns about *Twilight*'s 'rabid teenage girls' (Strong, 2009: 1) as it is to censorship discourses and *A Serbian Film*'s 'psychos'.

This research has investigated audiences of the most controversial film in recent memory to investigate viewing strategies for a notoriously violent film and discursive strategies used when rejecting it. Non-fandom is outside the scope of this study, but most participants here do not conform to either extreme fandom or anti-fandom, with the highest and lowest raters accounting for only 25.2% of participants. An emphasis on fans and anti-fans creates a danger of overlooking the majority of audiences and experiences and, despite the methodological problems of capturing non-fan responses, this is an important avenue which requires further exploration. This look at the extreme negative end of audiences' experiences with *A Serbian Film*, however, has shown that it is a different film to different people at different times, and that a negative experience is not necessarily an unexpected or even an unwanted one.

Acknowledgements:

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Appendix: Survey Questions

1) What did you think of 'A Serbian Film'?

      Extremely / Very / Reasonably / Hardly / Not at all enjoyable

2) Please sum up your response to the film in your own words.

3) When did you last see the film?

      Recently / Not that recently / A while ago

4) How would you categorise the film? (Please choose up to three.)

Arthouse film, Black comedy, Controversial film, Cult film, European film, Exploitation film, Extreme cinema, Grindhouse film, Horror film, Independent film, New European Extremism, Political allegory, Pornography, Splatterpunk, Thriller, Torture Porn, Video Nasty, War film, World cinema, Other...

5) Please briefly explain why you chose these categories.

6) What had you heard about the film before you watched it? Where did you hear it from?

7) What were your main reasons for watching the film? (Please choose up to three.)

Is the trailer/adverts interested me, I enjoy horror films, I enjoy European cinema, I enjoy controversial films, I was curious about the controversy, Recommendation from a friend, Recommendation by a film critic, I had no choice/it was just on, No special reason, Other...

8) What for you was the most memorable part of the film?

9) Did you watch the cut or uncut version of the film? (Note: all official UK releases of the film are cut.)

Cut / Uncut / Not sure

10) How important was it for you to see an uncut version of the film?

Extremely important / Important / Not important / I wanted to see the cut version

11) Do you feel the British Board of Film Classification were justified in censoring the film?

Yes / No / Undecided

12) Please briefly explain your answer to the above question.

13) How did you first watch the film?

Cinema, Film Festival / Retail DVD or Blu Ray / Official video stream (including Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc.) / Unofficial video stream (including unofficial YouTube uploads) / Illegal download / Bootleg or pirate DVD / Other...

14) Who did you watch the film with?

Family / Friends / Partner / Alone / Alone at the cinema / Other...

15) What made you choose to watch the film in this way?

16) What type of person do you think might enjoy 'A Serbian Film'?

17) Gender

18) Age

19) Which of the following comes closest to describing your occupation?

20) What is the highest level of education you have reached?

21) What is your nationality?

22) In which country do you live?

23) What kind of film viewer would you class yourself as? (Please pick the one that comes closest to describing yourself.)

I am a casual or occasional film viewer / I am a film fan / I am a film student or scholar / I follow particular kinds or genres of film / I like to keep up with new releases / I am a film expert or professional

24) Is there anything else you'd like to mention which you feel was not covered in this survey and which might help to explain your feelings about the film?