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## Shock Value: Audiences of *A Serbian Film* on Censorship

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Martin Ian Smith

### Abstract:

This article argues that censorship studies must concern themselves with matters beyond the actions of the censors if they are to understand how an instance of censorship occurs. It is based on a new study of the experiences of English-speaking audiences of *A Serbian Film* (2010), which was heavily censored by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). It employs discourse analysis on responses to a mixed-methods survey to examine how audiences discuss media violence and censorship. This article identifies four key competing discourses used by respondents with very different implications, along with the relationships between these discourses. It demonstrates the complexity of the reception of *A Serbian Film* and theorises the workings of the censorship debate more widely. The invocation of “public opinion” by the BBFC to justify censorship decisions necessitates a better understanding of how everyday audiences talk about censorship.

**Keywords:** BBFC; censorship; extreme cinema; audiences; discourse.

Upon the release of *A Serbian Film*, *The Independent* (Macnab, 2010) asked ‘Is this the Nastiest Film Ever Made?’ An answer in the affirmative came from *The Village Voice* in a review headlined ‘The Sickest Film Ever’ (Longworth, 2011). Wherever *A Serbian Film* was reviewed in the English-speaking world, it was reviewed in terms of sexual violence and the controversy around its censorship (see Floyd, 2010; Bradshaw, 2010; Scott, 2011). Prior to its UK release, the BBFC found *A Serbian Film* to be at odds with their Guidelines (BBFC, 2014: 3). The Board specifically cited the need to remove sequences which present ‘the juxtaposition of images of children with sexual and sexually violent material’ (BBFC, 2011: 48). The film, which was banned outright in Australia, New Zealand and Norway, among others, was shorn of four minutes and eleven seconds in order to secure a British release. At the same time that it was released uncut with an “NC-17” certificate in the USA,

*A Serbian Film* had the dubious honour of becoming the most heavily censored theatrical release in the UK for sixteen years (Bailey, 2010).

In a study of the censorship of early cinema, Annette Kuhn presents a working model of an instance of censorship as a process fuelled by power relations between a number of different parties, including various “causal mechanisms” such as public debate/outrage and the actions of the press (1988: 126-127). Kuhn states that ‘there is more to censorship than cuts, bans and boards of censors’, and that any study of an instance of censorship which concerns itself only with these things will miss the all-important wider context (1988:2). Nowhere is this argument supported more clearly than in how the BBFC cite “public opinion” as a driving force behind the formation of their guidelines (2014: 3).

Research commissioned by the Board, such as 2012’s Ipsos MORI report, is very much in line with this stated approach, seeking to determine people’s attitudes towards depictions of sex and violence rather than seeking any proof that such depictions are potentially “harmful”. In their Guidelines, the Board state that ‘Media effects research and expert opinion on issues of suitability and harm can be inconclusive or contradictory’, thus justifying their focus on “public sensibilities” and what is acceptable to “broad public opinion” (2014: 3). However, the guidelines in the document are still framed in terms of the “harm” which may result, including “moral harm”, rather than in terms of “public opinion” (2014: 3). A fascinating debate between BBFC director David Cooke (2015) and Martin Barker (2016) examines this focus on “public opinion” from both sides, drawing on Ipsos MORI’s (2012) research which included *A Serbian Film*. The influence of “public opinion” on the BBFC’s actions – or simply the Board’s reliance on the spectre of “public opinion” as a justification for decisions based on flawed “effects” research

(see Gauntlett, 2001) – is irrefutable, regardless of how effectively this consensus is determined. This lends credence to Kuhn’s model of the workings of censorship (1988: 127).

This article does not attempt to determine what “public opinion” on the censorship of *A Serbian Film* may be, should such an endeavour even be possible. Instead, original empirical data on audiences of *A Serbian Film* is analysed to investigate the experiences of and complex relationship between different audiences, as manifested in discourses of violence and censorship. This study highlights *how* people talk about censorship. This may inform our understanding of the reception of controversial films for everyday audiences and in the media, examining how censorship debates function and how “public opinion” may be constructed and contested, or simply how it is invoked by others. One need only look to the “Video Nasties” era for evidence of the power of censorship discourses in such matters (see Egan, 2007). However, Barker et al’s research into the British press campaign to have *Crash* (1996) banned also highlights how censorship discourses produce a range of new possible meanings for the film in question, even when the film in question is *not* censored (Barker et al, 2001: 145). There are consequences, as a product of censorship discourses, not only for the fate of the film but also for the experiences of everyday audiences.

Discourse analysis is employed to explore responses to an online survey detailing audiences’ encounters with one of the most controversial films in recent memory. Kuhn’s (1988: 127) model of censorship suggests a framework for studying audiences of *A Serbian Film* not only in terms of respondents’ relationships with the text, but also in the context of their relationships with one another. These relationships are more complex than the critical reception of the film would suggest

and can also tell us a great deal about how people engage with a controversial and violent film and use it in identity work. It is through discourse analysis that the implications of censorship for audiences and their experiences with the film can be investigated.

In a study of the film's audiences, Kenneth Weir and Stephen Dunne (2014) use found data from online review sites to analyse key patterns in evaluations of the film. They use their findings to challenge the need for interventionist censorship by the BBFC. Weir and Dunne found that the film is discussed as much in terms of its aesthetics as it is in terms of its morality, concluding 'If there is a need for protection here, it is a need felt much more by those acting on behalf of the audience than the audience itself' (2014: 89). Weir and Dunne's (2014) use of anonymous found data comes with limitations in terms of providing contextual data about their reviewers and in the specificity of the writings analysed. However, they demonstrate well the complexity of the reception of a controversial film, something which this study aims to build upon using a survey method which allows for more pointed analysis.

The fact that 73.7% of British respondents watched the uncut film, despite the BBFC's actions, raises questions about the effectiveness of censorship in the digital age, but this research is not concerned with a "need" for such actions, as were Weir and Dunne (2014). Neither is this study attempting to determine *what* people are saying about censorship. The value of this study is in determining *how* they are saying it, by exploring discursive strategies and processes that may lead to censorship and how these are framed in the relationships between the film's audiences.

## **Methods**

This study was conducted via an online survey which gathered 307 responses from 30 countries between April 13<sup>th</sup> and May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016. The survey method was selected in order to generate quantitative and qualitative data and to quickly obtain a respectably sized data set which would allow for detailed discourse analysis and some statistical analysis which may suggest wider patterns. There was a large gender imbalance in the responses, with 81.1% of responses coming from men, though it is unclear if this reflects the appeal of the film or the demographics of the websites used to publicise the survey (Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, horror and film discussion boards). Some sub-groups were too small to be able to make any reasonably valid claims about them. For example, only 21 people rated the film five stars, making it harder to make valid claims about patterns in responses from those who most enjoyed the film. However, the survey was able to generate a sufficiently diverse typological sample of different kinds of responses (after Barker, Mathijs and Trobia, 2008: 222).

The survey being conducted in English naturally produced more responses from the USA (36.8%) and the UK (28.7%). Despite the censorship of the film in the UK being a focus of the research, responses from other countries were analysed and are included in this study. While many respondents from outside the UK were unfamiliar with exactly what had been cut from the British release, they nevertheless proceeded to answer in terms of *any* censorship of the film, often drawing on experiences with films which had been censored previously in their own countries. For many respondents, especially those in Australia and New Zealand where the film was banned, their prior knowledge of *A Serbian Film*, often being

that which drew them to the film, was of its controversial nature and censorship troubles.

The use of responses from other countries with varying attitudes towards censorship was instrumental in being able to fully develop an understanding of a wide variety of possible discursive strategies concerning censorship. A danger of using only British responses was that the research would attract only a narrow sample of horror fans who had seen the film and wished to defend it, and therefore only a narrow range of viewpoints. The fact that 65 out of 88 British respondents had made the effort to seek out an uncut version of the film suggests that this would have almost certainly been the case. An international sample permitted a much broader selection of attitudes and discourses which better reflects the heterogeneity of responses to the film beyond those of the committed, devoutly anti-censorship horror fans. These efforts ensured a much more thorough focus on the *how* of censorship discourses rather than the specific *whats* of this case, resulting in findings which are generalisable and therefore still illuminating for this specific instance of British censorship.

The survey questions pertaining to the censorship of *A Serbian Film* read as follows:

- 11) Do you feel the British Board of Film Classification was justified in censoring the film? (Yes/No/Undecided)
- 12) Please briefly explain your answer to the above question.

Question 11's phrasing is not without baggage. The very act of asking the question evokes a set of assumptions about the researcher's motives, especially a researcher recruiting in informal, online settings who is a young(ish) man (ticking two of three boxes for the hypothetical problem audience of "young men with little experience"

discussed in the BBFC's 2012 announcement concerning their tightening of censorship guidelines).

There are a number of ways Question 11 could be asked, e.g.:

- Do you agree with the BBFC's censorship of the film?
- Do you disagree with the BBFC's censorship of the film?
- Do you think the BBFC was right to censor the film?
- Would you have censored the film?

The impact of such wording choices is debatable, but it is important to bear in mind the immediate context of responses, being first and foremost the question respondents have been asked. The use of the word “justified” ultimately set the question as a moral one within a discourse of justice and democracy rather than of scientific proof. There is also a legal undertone to the question, perhaps encouraging replies about censorship as a system, but the decision to use the word “justified” was ultimately one designed to evoke strong responses. The use of “Do you feel” rather than “Do you think” was also intended to invite more emotional responses.

Prompting strong responses was necessary to combat the study's distance from the film's initial production and reception; only 48 respondents (15.6%) had seen the film “Recently”. The impact of memory on audiences' talk would be interesting to consider in relation to this highly controversial text, but it is beyond the scope of this study. I deal here with respondents' memories of interpretation and responses to the film, but they are re-interpreting their encounter with the film in the present, and it is this re-interpretation which is the focus of this study.

This research draws on Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA), a form of discourse analysis which specialises in describing how discourses dictate language use within a



kind of “discursive economy” which has implications for people who are placed in subject positions by said discourses. One such implication is that resistance to dominant discourses, then, must come from within the subject positions determined by the dominant powers. Willig states, ‘Since discourses make available ways of seeing and ways of being, they are strongly implicated in the exercise of power’ (2003: 171). FDA is heavily invested in looking at power and resistance in discourse, and how resistance is shaped by that which it resists. This is something which clearly comes through in this study as those who discuss censorship always do so in relation to other positions. A view cannot be expressed without being placed in relation to an opposing view, either implicitly or explicitly, and it is in this that FDA specialises. FDA also interrogates subjectivity, how people think or feel in relation to discourses (Willig, 2003: 172). This, too, makes it a suitable approach for analysing responses to a controversial, provocative and, for many, deeply affecting film.

A discourse, by Ian Parker’s (1992: 3) definition, is ‘a system of statements which constructs an object’ along with ‘an array of subject positions’ (Parker et al, 1995: 39). Analysing discourse, after the FDA approach, involves examining differences in how discursive objects (e.g. censorship) are constructed, what subject positions are offered by this construction, and what possibility for action is offered by these positions. (Willig, 2003: 173-175). This highly structured method of analysis is well-equipped for exploring the construction of censorship discourses and discussions of taste.

## **Discussion**

Analysis of quantitative responses was undertaken to identify patterns and groups of interest for discourse analysis. Of the total 307 respondents, 54 people (17.6%)

state that the BBFC were justified in making cuts to *A Serbian Film*, 76 are undecided (24.8%); and the majority, 177 respondents (57.7%), oppose the cuts. From the quantitative analysis, patterns emerge demonstrating links with respondents' enjoyment of the film. Those who enjoyed the film the least most favour its censorship; 58 respondents gave it the lowest rating of one star and 34.5% support the cuts while 39.7% oppose. Of those who rated the film the highest (20 people awarded the film five stars out of a possible five) none were in favour of its censorship. This suggests an element of taste factors in censorship views.

Question 4 asks respondents to choose up to three categories which they think best fit *A Serbian Film*. Together with the data from the question about whether the BBFC was justified in cutting the film, this act of classification is enlightening about differences in respondents' "viewing strategies" (after Barker, 2005, being 'interpretative "moves" that different audience members deploy to generate a working understanding of a film, and how (far) these cohere into an overall account of the film'). Differences in categories chosen are mostly subtle, with slightly more of those who agreed with the film's censorship (the 54 "cutters", for the sake of brevity) selecting categories with negative connotations, such as "torture porn" (53.7% compared to 37.3% "non-cutters" and 38.2% "undecideds") and "pornography" (16.7% to 6.8% non-cutters and 10.5% undecideds) and shying away from categories with fewer negative connotations, such as "arthouse film" (9.2% cutters; 21.5% non-cutters; 22.4% undecideds) and "black comedy" (7.4% cutters; 16.9% non-cutters; 5.3% undecideds).

The biggest difference between cutters and non-cutters is the number of respondents categorising the film as "political allegory"; 41 non-cutters (23.2% of

that group) and 15 undecideds (19.7% of their group) are close, percentage-wise, but only 3 cutters (5.6% of their group) choose this descriptor for the film. This suggests a refusal of any deeper meanings by cutters, an insistence that it ‘relied entirely on shock value’ (#25). This is a common theme in negative qualitative responses. From this analysis of the quantitative data, questions arise about the impact of censorship on audiences’ viewing strategies and discourses of taste which are reflected in the categorisation choices of “political allegory” and “torture porn” by embracers and refusers of the film respectively.

### **Four Discourses**

The terms used in responses to the question about whether the BBFC was justified in cutting the film vary between the three groups (cutters/non-cutters/undecideds), and also within these groups. However, there are four identifiable discourses within which these respondents’ constructions of censorship, as the discursive object, tend to fall: these discourses are 1) legal; 2) artistic; 3) affective; and 4) moral.

#### *Legal Discourse*

Markers of a legal discourse are found in responses such as the following through their references to the duties of the BBFC:

The BBFC have to abide by the Obscene Publications Act and couldn't have released it uncut, mostly because of sex scenes involving or featuring shots of a child, whether directly involved or not (#188)

I am generally opposed to censorship, but I can see the difficulties when the images borderline shows child pornography. It is a grey area and a tough decision. (#250)

Within this legal discourse, there are those who write of the BBFC's duties and there are those who express uncertainty about the decision to censor. There is also empathy for the censors, emphasising the difficulty of their position. Another respondent (#148), the only other besides #250 employing a legal discourse and questioning the censorship decision, states, 'I suspect that their justification on legal grounds was perfectly legitimate. Whether the law is correct is another question.'

The doubts of #148 and #250, and the empathy for the censors inherent in other responses, when placed in a legal discourse and taken with their support of the decision in the previous question, downplay the respondents' responsibility for their censorious views. This takes their personal views, such as #250's stated opposition to censorship, out of the equation. Emphasising how "legitimate" the BBFC's "tough" decision was - especially when invoking the possibility of the film veering into child pornography - has the same effect as #188's response which emphasises legal limitations on the BBFC and uses a construction of censorship as being carried out by a "reluctant censor". This positions the respondents using this tactic as reluctant supporters of this censorship decision. Other responses talk of "necessity", whether stating 'It is a brutal film therefore the classification was necessary' (#15), speaking of 'Gratuitous unnecessary violence' (#116), or describing the need to protect the public. The censors, in this framework, have no choice but to cut the film; it is the law, so they must obey, and people need protection. Respondents using this branch of the legal discourse place themselves in a similar position, a "the law is the law" approach.

This construct of the "reluctant censor" serves to de-centre pro-censorship rhetoric, locating the origin of the expressed opinion as being the institution of the BBFC and the acts of law to which it must adhere, rather than being the opinion of

the person expressing it. It limits discussion of artistic merit or the scientific (non-) validity of “effects” claims and moral objections to censorship. The subject position suggested by this legal discourse is that of “law-abiding citizen” who cannot approve of an illegal act, and framing *A Serbian Film* as potentially illegal in its uncut form makes the case for censorship very strong within a legal discourse. The use of a legal discourse also limits discussion of the film in any other terms, except as a list of potentially illegal sexual and violent acts, disregarding any narrative or generic context.

Importantly, the “law-abiding citizen” subject position also suggests its opposite for those who do not share the same pro-censorship viewpoint. Placing talk of a censored film in a legal discourse and adopting a “law-abiding citizen” subject position demarcates those in opposition to the BBFC’s actions as “bad citizens”. These are law-breakers or irresponsible people unconcerned with the impact of the censored material on society. ‘It crosses the line between art and something that can be deemed offensive and borderline illegal at points’ says one respondent (#11) to justify his support for the film’s censorship, questioning the legality of the film and, by association, the character of those who watch an uncut version. The respondent, in this way, adopts the “law-abiding citizen” subject position through his disapproval.

Conversely, a legal discourse is used by some who oppose the BBFC-imposed cuts, but in those instances the emphasis is not on laws but on rights: ‘Every individual should be able to decide for themselves what is right or not right for them. The BBFC should have the right to set the age limit to see the film, but after reaching that age, everyone should have the right to access that film’ (#128). Impersonal word choices - ‘individual’ instead of ‘person’; ‘access’ instead of ‘watch’ or ‘see’ -

and a focus on rights, both of the BBFC and audiences, place this response in a competing legal discourse.

In the anti-censorship legal discourse, censorship is constructed as an infringement on people's rights and the repeated use of the word 'should' suggests an ideal world wherein censorship does not infringe upon these rights. Censorship, here, is a hardship, but there is more to this response than simply stating a preference. As in the use of a legal discourse for those supporting the BBFC's actions, this anti-censorship version of it contains subject positions employed in identity formation and maintenance. Just as pro-censorship responses within a legal discourse present binary subject positions of "law-abiding citizen" and "bad citizen", so too do anti-censorship responses which focus on rights. They permit the subject positions of "victim" and "rebel". Emphasising the rights which are being infringed upon by censorship stresses not only the apparent defeat of "victims" who ignore or accept censorship, who allow their rights to be trampled upon, it also grants the respondent special status as a "perfectly capable" adult.

In this instance, watching a censored film in its uncut form becomes an act of nonconformity. This act of nonconformity, protest even, is different from the act of the "bad citizen" in that it is morally justified by the respondent. The spectator of the uncut version in this alternative legal discourse is standing up for him/herself, not being a "victim". This can clearly be seen in responses such as 'Censorship in any form is dishonest and manipulative' (#241) and 'Censorship is never justified to appease weak-minded people' (#269). The former constructs victims out of those who have been manipulated and the latter suggests strength on the part of those who reject censorship.

The premise upon which the “censorship-as-hardship” construction of the anti-censorship legal discourse is based limits discussion of artistic merit in the same way as does the “reluctant censor” construction. This construction valorises films which push boundaries and offend others with no consideration of artistic merit necessary. Such valorisation of extreme cinema subsequently reflects back upon those who choose to watch it; they become non-conformists, non-victims, and the act of watching an uncut film is an act of defiance.

Both varieties of the legal discourse drawn upon - the “reluctant censor” construction and the “censorship-as-hardship” construction - position the BBFC in different ways, as duty-bound public servants or as nannyng destroyers of human rights. However, both constructions serve in identity construction and maintenance for those speaking and limit discussion to exclude the qualities of the film itself, good or bad, for anyone else. Regardless of the quality of the film, it either must be cut or it must be allowed to be seen, and the legal discourse offers up these subject positions and limits some actions (such as criticising censorship for good/bad citizens) while giving others extra meaning (viewing uncut films become defiant acts).

### *Artistic Discourse*

The artistic discourse around the censorship of *A Serbian Film* is in stark opposition to the legal discourse, even though there is much talk of artists’ rights. Explanations of support for the BBFC’s decision within this discourse are criticisms of the quality of the film rather than legal justifications, such as in the following responses:

It was a deeply unpleasant film, with a mean and cynical eye on events - the gratuitous violence throughout didn't add to the experience, but acted as a

barrier to a more important story. If it had been handled differently it could have been interesting. (#53)

I understand pushing the envelope and yet again, can appreciate hyper violence. But this movie doesn't have artistic intent beyond shock value in my opinion. Far better movies have been censored for far less. (#76)

These responses focus on the perceived poor quality of the film. The implication of #53's response is that if the film had been interesting, censorship may not have been necessary. Cutters' concerns about the film's apparent lack of substance, it being 'an endless loop of torture' (#265), justify pro-censorship statements from respondents who are then still able to express general anti-censorship attitudes to negotiate an escape from the "victim" subject position offered by the legal discourse. The resulting subject position they adopt is one in which they are not duped or weak-willed, as "victims" of the legal discourse are. They dislike the film and, therefore, for them, it cannot reflect poorly on them for refusing to defend it against censorship.

Such statements imply disapproval of previous censorship decisions which, together with the act of watching this film in its uncut form - all but one (who was unsure of which version he saw) of those employing an artistic discourse to explain pro-censorship sentiment watched the film uncut - allows for a "pro-censorship rebel" subject position for this film. The "pro-censorship rebel" subject position allows a respondent to express pro-censorship sentiments while presenting themselves as anti-censorship, as in the following response:

This is one of the rare instances where I agree with censorship of a film, however it's a petty one. The more censored it is, the less of the desired effect is reached, and it feels like a victory against a hackneyed director. (#100)



A general anti-censorship stance is suggested by stating that this is a “rare instance” of pro-censorship feeling prompted by disapproval of the director and his “desired effect”.

The “pro-censorship rebel” subject position permits negative talk about a censored text while permitting positive talk of other censored texts, broadly condemning the BBFC while supporting them on a micro level. This leaves open the possibility of future instances of censorship which may produce anti-censorship sentiment should the right kind of film, the “artistic” film, come along. Pro-censorship sentiment, in this subject position within an artistic discourse, is an affirmation of distaste which prompts an opportunity to discuss their preferred tastes, in line with Bourdieu’s (1984: 56) assertion that ‘tastes are first and foremost distastes’, for the ‘far better movies’ (#76) which suffered censorship before *A Serbian Film*.

The same can be said of anti-censorship statements made by respondents who focus on the film’s status as art and the filmmakers’ rights, that it allows for discussion of their tastes and distastes. A focus on artist’s rights is about artistic integrity, not legal concerns. These statements draw on auteur discourses and, though censorship is discussed in legal terminology, the filmmaker’s vision is the primary concern: ‘I find censoring of films to be like putting black out tape on a Picasso. It’s art and it’s made how the artist envisioned it’ (#96). Such a comparison, according to Bourdieu (1984: 2), is made to demonstrate the respondent’s familiarity with “great art” and his conception of film as such. It displays the respondent’s cultural capital as he adopts a subject position of “art appreciator”. This activity is evident in the differences in categorisations of *A Serbian Film* discussed earlier, with cutters favouring categories with non-artistic implications (“pornography” and “torture porn”).

Based on the responses to this survey, there appears to operate a sliding scale whereby the more censorious a respondent is the more likely they are to classify the film in non-artistic terms, while his or her opposite emphasises the film's status as art. As briefly touched upon earlier, *A Serbian Film* is labelled “torture porn” by 29 cutters (53.7% of them) and only three people (5.6%) in the same pro-censorship group describe it as “political allegory”. In comparison, 66 non-cutters (37.2% of anti-censorship respondents) choose “torture porn” and 41 (23.2%) label it “political allegory”. (It must be noted that the label, “torture porn”, may not have the same negative connotations for all respondents.) The sliding scale is further evidenced by the undecideds (76 total). *A Serbian Film* is classified as “torture porn” by 29 (38.2%) undecideds, while 15 of them (19.7%) classify it as “political allegory”. The undecideds fall clearly between the two extremes of the cutters and non-cutters when it comes to the categorisation of the film (see figure 1).

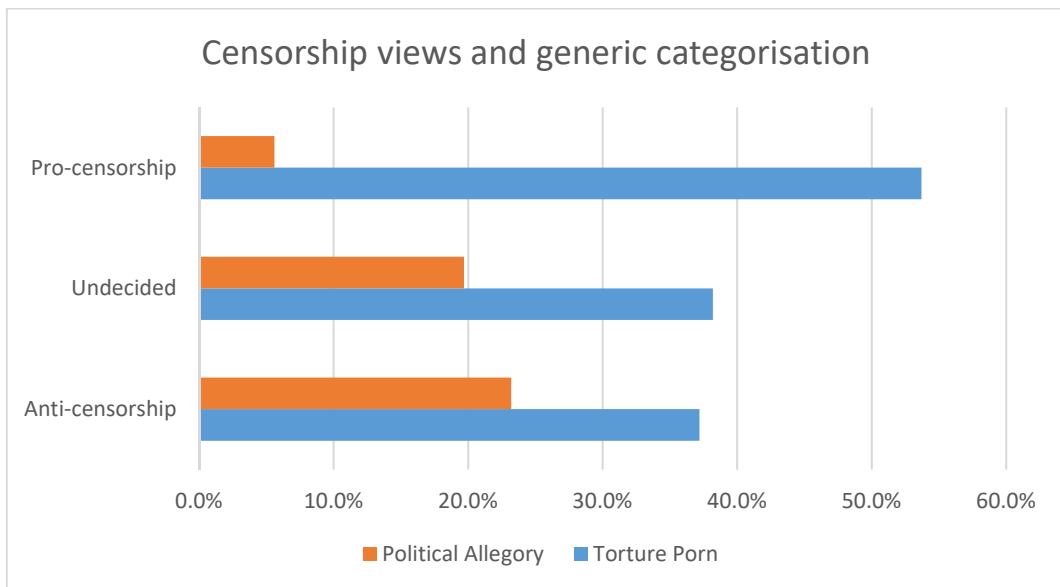


Figure 1

Non-cutters who classify *A Serbian Film* as “political allegory” are divided between two approaches to classifying the film as art. First, there are those who create binary oppositions between *A Serbian Film* and other, less “artistic” films of its ilk, e.g. ‘It

seems incredibly intentional, not just going for disgust like *The Human Centipede* (#209). The second approach is to take up arms to defend a range of similar films, e.g. 'It exploits the niche popularity of gory, but not meaningless films, from the end of the last decade' (#259). The first approach is similar to that of the "pro-censorship rebel" in that wider judgement is reserved, while the second is more in line with the "art appreciator" whose stance on censorship is immovable and linked to conceptions of artistic vision which must not be compromised.

Using an artistic discourse to discuss censorship in relation to *A Serbian Film* functions to aid in the construction and maintenance of personal identity, whether that is by expressing distaste at the film (as for the "pro-censorship rebels" for whom the film deserves no defence due to its shortcomings) or demonstrating artistic knowledge (whether by talking of artistic integrity or by being able to see art where others do not, e.g. in "torture porn"). Taste factors are an important consideration in any discussion of censorship. This was recently argued by Alexandra Kapka (2017) with regards to the BBFC's bias towards arthouse cinema, and the artistic discourse in these respondents demonstrates how these taste factors manifest on the personal level in censorship talk.

### *Affective Discourse*

A discourse of affect can be identified in responses from cutters by the use of terms and concepts such as those generated by or associated with "the effects tradition" in media and communication studies. The discourse of affect comes in two varieties for cutters, talk of personal trauma and talk of the film's potential influence over other "problem audiences". Both feature in responses to questions asking for explanations of the respondents' rating of the film and their view on whether the BBFC was justified in cutting the film. The discourse of affect is the most popular

with cutters (artistic discourses are most popular with non-cutters). The consistent use of affective terms like ‘disturbing’, ‘disgusting’, ‘shocking’ and ‘sick’ is a reliable indicator of this discourse, which is a powerful tactic most frequently deployed in the press in instances of censorship (see Barker et al, 2001; Egan, 2007; Smith, 2015).

Many respondents write of the film as an assault on their person:

A brutal assault awakening fear and disgust as well as interest and empathy.

(#5)

Be warned: this is the most explicit film you will ever see and it will likely stain your soul forever. (#29)

Movies like that shouldn't be made. It's just horrible to watch. The amount of mental anguish I felt while watching alone should make this film illegal.

(#18)

The implication of this discourse of affect, or, more accurately, personal trauma, is that the respondents are “self-identified victims”, emphasising their suffering at the hands of the film and the need to protect the public from such harm. This position permits pro-censorship statements as a matter of necessity with the primary focus being the pain inflicted on the respondent in order to present the pro-censorship statement with accompanying evidence (the respondent’s testimony of being harmed by the film). The above responses construct censorship as a public good and the censors as protectors. Respondent #29 adopts this “protector” role as a subject position, something which other respondents do in stating, for example, ‘Most people don’t have the stomach to watch a movie like this’ (#213) and ‘This is indeed a sick movie that can bother many people and is absolutely not suitable for youngsters’ (#47).

The manner in which this discourse of affect invites pro-censorship discourse for “the public good” is reminiscent of “third-person perception”, a concept originated by W. Phillips Davison (1983). In Phillips Davison’s words, the “third-person effect” hypothesis ‘predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications will have on the attitudes and behaviour of others’ and that ‘the impact that they expect this communication to have on others may lead them to take some action’ (1983: 3). The impact of a particularly persuasive communication will not be felt by “me” or by “you”, TPP dictates, but by “them”, so action – here, censorship – must be taken (Davison, 1983: 2). Phillips Davison states that the ‘phenomenon of censorship offers what is perhaps the most interesting field for speculation about the role of the third-person effect’ (1983: 14). Both the “self-identified victim” and the “protector” subject positions encourage calls for censorship and support the BBFC. At the same time, responsibility for respondent’s reaction to the film is displaced. In this scenario there is nothing wrong with the respondent and this film will harm any “normal” human being. (Note: this is a discursive strategy, so this study makes no claim that there is, indeed, something wrong with said respondents.) This means preventative action must be taken and the film must not be made accessible.

Responses from non-cutters within an affective discourse also often describe the film in violent terminology as an assault: ‘A veritable clawhammer of a film’ (#14); ‘In terms of content it is not a pleasant film to watch but in terms of the creativity and calculated assault on the viewer it was exhilarating’ (#107). However, the majority describe the film itself, rather than its impact upon them. They use the same descriptive words as cutters - e.g. “shocking”, “brutal” - but with less emphasis on what impact it had on them or may have on others. The film is described in terms of affect, but largely without the autobiographical element

common to cutters' accounts of their experiences. The film is described as brutal for non-cutters, whereas cutters describe the film as having a brutal effect upon them. This allows for distance in the non-cutters responses, more emphasis on film as an artistic medium distinct from reality and, therefore, as something which cannot be "harmful".

### *Moral Discourse*

The designation by non-cutters of *A Serbian Film* as "only a film" in their response explaining their enjoyment level for the film, rather than *A Serbian Film* being an entity with the ability to assault audiences, most frequently results in the use of a moral discourse in their discussion of why they do not condone the BBFC's censoring of the film. In practice, there are only minor differences in language use between these responses and responses within a legal discourse which are concerned with their rights as citizens to choose their own entertainment - the "law-abiding citizen" subject position of the legal discourse also applies here to opponents of non-cutters employing a moral discourse - but these differences between legal and moral anti-censorship discourses are significant.

The difference between legal and moral discourses used by non-cutters comes down to a phrase which appears more than any other in the data set: "I don't believe..." There are 21 instances of "I don't believe..." offered in responses from non-cutters about not supporting the film's censorship. In the legal discourse of non-cutters there is a focus on creating "victims" of those who do not oppose censorship. Here, however, there is a construction of censorship as an immoral act which they oppose on grounds of being "non-believers" in censorship. This prohibits discussion of the film itself, including industrial criticisms (the film and its marketing being provocative), protectionist agendas (sparing potential spectators

from trauma) and artistic shortcomings (i.e. “The film is bad, therefore its censorship does not matter”).

Structuring anti-censorship statements within a moral discourse allows effective countering of the “law-abiding citizen” subject position from which people may argue that screening graphic sexual violence in public is an immoral act. It also protects the film from artistic criticism from the “pro-censorship rebel” and places the responsibility for the traumatic experience of the “self-identifying victim” on his/her own head, as best exemplified by #279’s response: “This out of the gate was labelled as extreme. This wasn't like there was a newborn scene in *The Lion King*”.

The “non-believers” are in complete opposition to the censorship of films intended for adult audiences, but many qualify their strict anti-censorship stance with concessions to a ratings system as an alternative, as in the following response:

I don't believe in any form of censorship. Have a rating system and have warnings but show it as the director intended. We are adults and can make our own mind up what we watch, or not. (#292)

Such a move pre-emptively closes off protectionist avenues of discussion which create hypothetical situations in which children watch the film. This protectionist argument is frequently employed by the press which positions censorship as a public duty and often writes from the “self-identifying victim” subject position combined with that of “protector” (e.g. Tookey, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

Four key discourses are drawn upon by respondents when explaining their enjoyment of *A Serbian Film* and their views concerning its censorship. There are a set of subject positions offered within these discourses which work to construct or reinforce personal identities and redefine acts of film consumption to that end.

When a respondent adopts the “rebel” subject position offered by the legal discourse, for example, the act of viewing a censored text becomes an act of defiance and a marker of non-conformity.

These discourses intersect and anticipate one another. Respondents talking of the film within one discursive framework pre-empt statements from competing discourses. For example, to employ a legal discourse to express pro-censorship views is to adopt the subject position of “law-abiding citizen”, refusing to discuss the film as anything other than a catalogue of violent scenes which may be in breach of the law. This effectively limits exchanges about the film’s artistic intent and shifts the responsibility of a respondent’s pro-censorship views onto the legal system. Censorship debates, in this way, can be defused and avoided, because “the law is the law” and the respondent takes no responsibility for his/her pro-censorship views. Positive self-image is maintained through discursive moves which position the respondent at all times as an active agent, either standing up for oneself or protecting others. Even “self-identified victims” are open to the possibility of action by becoming “protectors”, their talk serving as a warning for others.

Taste is a key way in which someone can define their identity, and for many respondents taste is integral to discussions of censorship. Kuhn presents a model of censorship with a focus which extends beyond laws and censors to include outside influences, such as critics, industrial factors and everyday audiences (1988: 2).

Censorship produces censorable films, Kuhn (1988: 4) states. The variety of responses to *A Serbian Film* demonstrate that not only do the tastes of everyday audiences create the demand for censorable films, they also create the demand for their censorship, and much of the debate in-between.



This study demonstrates that there are many factors which must be considered when studying responses to censored texts, including judgements of taste. The perceived quality of the film is an important consideration for audiences when forming judgements both for and against censorship. Also warranting further consideration in such studies, as evidenced in discursive strategies here, is how people use censored texts in the construction and maintenance of personal identities. Respondents' talk about censorship highlights the varied motives for and ways of expressing censorship views and, as a result, the difficulty in making any claims about "what audiences want" (as per Weir and Dunne, 2014: 89) or what counts for "public opinion" (as per the BBFC, 2014: 3).

Understanding the construction of censorship discourses is an important step in deconstructing instances of censorship, particularly while the BBFC continues to justify their decisions based on "public opinion", and research into the same, concerning depictions of sex and violence on film. A recent attempt by the BBFC (2018) to consult the public (from June 4<sup>th</sup> to August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018) took the form of an online survey conducted by Panelbase. It allowed for no qualitative input from respondents who were merely presented with randomly generated Hollywood releases with their BBFC ratings and asked whether they agreed with the rating. Even upon disagreeing strongly, respondents were only presented with a further closed question, as follows:

And was this because you believed this film was suitable for children younger than the certificate suggested, for older children or should have been restricted to adults only? (BBFC, 2018)

This was to be answered with a check-box, the options being 'Younger', 'Older' and 'Adults Only'. A check-box list also asked respondents to select the three most

important areas of concern for them, listed under the categories of Language, Sexual Content, Violence, Horror, Drugs, and Other. The survey included a single open-ended question, and this question concerned only one's satisfaction with the BBFC website. Such research, which strips respondents of their voices and provides no opportunity to discuss contexts or definitions, has little hope of providing useful insight into people's views on screen depictions of sex and violence. This public consultation, for all intents and purposes, appears to be a tick-box exercise for the BBFC as much as it is for any members of the public who participate in the survey. Should the Board continue to justify censorship by invoking the spectre of "public opinion" – even though their 2014 guidelines are still inexplicably framed by the threat of potential "moral harm" despite their acknowledgement that the evidence is not there (BBFC, 2014: 3) – one would hope more effort would be made to attempt to determine exactly what public opinion might look like, and what those opinions mean to the people expressing them.

'Film censorship is a matter of relations[...] it is a process, not an object', states Annette Kuhn (1988: 127). This study has investigated these relations, as prompted by *A Serbian Film*, between the audiences and the censors and between those who support the film's censorship and those who do not. It is these relations, for the respondents discussed here, which give the film and its censorship meaning, all the while reflecting back on the respondents themselves. Censorship does not occur in a vacuum, influenced as it is by government policy, marketing practices, citizen action groups, and the censorship debate in the press, among many other things. Similarly, censorship discourses cannot be separated from the contexts of their production, being an enormous variety of viewing strategies, personal identities and discursive moves. While each instance of censorship is the result of a different process, of a different interaction between various opposing and complimentary

forces, there is a clear structure to censorship discourses that works for the good of the individual's self-image and anticipates contradictory opinions. In this way, the meaning of a controversial film, as with film censorship, is also a matter of relations.

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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.)

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?