“Dead Art”: Aesthetic Sensibility in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*

“That guy cut the hell out of himself. Do you think you could do that to yourself? It takes something, just to do—that—to yourself....”

—Franklin Hardesty in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*

Open with scene from *Un Chien Andalou*

Like the eye being sliced open, as we see in the 1928 surrealist avant-garde film *Un Chien Andalou*—a paradigmatic moment of self-consciousness about the nature of vision—horror film represents a visceral attempt to make visible the practices of seeing. As Carol Clover, J. P. Telotte, and a host of other scholars have noted, horror film is obsessed with eyes, with the acts and effects and problematics of looking; in film studies, at least since Laura Mulvey, scholars have been consumed with the assaultive quality of the gaze, an assaultive quality made manifest, though not always unproblematically, in horror films. In the film I want to discuss today, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* of 1974, the assaultive gaze is enacted in many ways, perhaps most famously in the dinner scene. The content of extreme horror, too, has rendered the ethics and aesthetics of looking frighteningly visible; who would take a camera and film an evisceration, in all its bloody detail? Why is it on the screen at all? Should we watch such scenes? Much less watching, should we enjoy them? What is their purpose?

In contemporary reviews of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, these questions were posed emphatically—and the answers were almost universally similar. Tom Shales’ review of the film situates it within an emergent “sub-genre” tellingly described as “gorenography”; though it “shows restraint” and is “well done,” for “what it is,” he says, its use of extreme violence is the end in and of itself—there are no “clever contrivances” and its “violent elements are not...punctuation or embellishment or [used] within any sort of dramatic context, [but are] instead the *raison d’etre* of the film. Watching these movies is like watching target practice, with human beings as targets” (*Washington Post*, November 21, 1974 C13 c-d)

Despite the rise of cultural studies and the study of popular culture, despite the increase in interest about cult film, and despite the dramatically altered reputations of many early extreme horror films, such films are still viewed as “gross,” code, as Linda Williams has pointed out, for those “excesses...we wish to exclude” (2), or as Robin Wood has described it, those cultural elements typically repressed or othered in daily life (Jancovich, 28). There is something, however, about this desire to exclude that extreme horror fans and filmmakers, and yes, even critics, take pleasure in, for it helps to define culture and subculture. In *Skin Shows*, for instance, Judith Halberstam suggests the monster speaks to broad anxieties about the popular consumption of scandalous or degenerate material, threatening to turn the consumers of such work into monsters themselves. Thus, such films are also always about the various struggles of identity politics, especially insofar as taste communities and strategies of reading are concerned.

The extreme horror film itself has often been seen as a monstrosity, a category error in the pantheon of film genres, in part because it embodies the spectacle of abjection, the desired/fearred object that becomes the site, as Julia Kristeva notes, “where meaning collapses,” threatening and threatened. The monster becomes a repository of all which is not-me, and like the abject, it both “highlight[s] the ‘fragility of the law’” (Creed 39) and solicits regulation and expulsion. Not only is the monster, or the victim, something to-be-looked-at, then, but the film, as well; the horror film, according to Carol Clover, “is somehow more than the sum of its monsters; it is itself monstrous” (*Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 168). Clover goes on to point out what fans of cult cinema and horror have long felt, that horror is perhaps “the most self-reflexive of cinematic genres” (168), an observation that is not at all undermined by the recent criticism examining the citationality of horror. (One way in
The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, for instance, has been wrenched out of the gutter is through various analyses of its status as a remake of Hitchcock's Psycho.\textsuperscript{vi}

Outside of scholarly interests in postmodernism, pastiche, and citationality, however, horror and the gothic has long been invested in the trope of monstrous creation—indeed, pastiche can be read as, itself, a form of monstrous creation, stitching a whole of parts. Judith Halberstam reads Victor Frankenstein's “filthy workshop of creation,” from which issues the horrifyingly patched-up body of the monster, as an analogue for Shelley's own act of creating Frankenstein, her “hideous progeny.” Clearly a reference to Shelley's novel, the “hideous progeny” is also the 19\textsuperscript{th} century Gothic novel as a genre (11). The number of horror films that draw on such tropes is long, and to my knowledge, no full catalog has been done—indeed, Frankenstein is in many ways an originating myth. Victor is the scientist-as-bad-artist, and his medium is, problematically human flesh. In The Brain that Wouldn't Die (1962), Eddie Carmel plays the “monster in the closet,” deformed by Dr. Bill Cortner's experiments with the transplantation of body parts; Re-Animator (1985) is a modern filmic Frankenstein with a good dose of camp and gore. The scientist-creating-horror genre has a lot of permutations—consider Les Yeux sans Visage (1960) and Doctor Blood's Coffin (1961). Herschell Gordon Lewis' Blood Feast (1963), a deranged Pygmalion tale, features an Egyptian devoté who attempts to bring new life to the statue of his beloved goddess by sacrificing to her a variety of body parts culled from healthy young women. In Color Me Blood Red (1965), another film by the Godfather of Gore, an artist who had been criticized by the art community for poor use of color turns to murder when he discovers, of course, that blood makes the perfect shade of red. Abel Ferrara's disturbing Driller Killer (1979) features another painter—who snaps when his dealer mocks a new canvas; he takes to the streets of New York City and kills the homeless with a portable drill. The ultra-sleazy Maniac (1980) tells the story of Frank, the son of a prostitute, whose desire-slash-hatred of his mother is reproduced on the bodies of various young women whom he murders and transforms into sculptural objects by placing their scalps atop mannequin bodies. In Vincent Price's House of Wax (1953), the sculptor is himself disfigured, and he uses dead human bodies as the models for his museum pieces. The horror-comedy spoof by Roger Corman, Bucket of Blood (1959), the slightly unbalanced busboy at a local beat café and gallery wants desperately to become an artist, but apparently has no talent. After traumatically murdering his landlady's cat, he discovers his medium—covering dead creatures, humans primarily, with clay, creating what the art critics hail as a dramatically modern form of realism. Paint it Black (1989) takes this central trope as the point of departure for a tale of a killer who covers his victims in clay to dispose of them; a local sculptor is accused of the crimes. The Body Shop (1973) features a plastic surgeon, the perfect amalgam of scientist and artist—we should have no trouble seeing where that one is going! The recent horror comedy Murder Party (2007) has a social misfit show up, courtesy of a mysterious Halloween party invitation, to an art kid collective's piece de resistance, where the murder of our unfortunate protagonist is to be the centerpiece in a kind of performance-art installation. The list is long, and for every terrible movie there's a pretty good one in which artists, always a little sketchy, finally figure out what works: Blur (2007), Candyman: Day of the Dead (1999), Benny's Video (1992), Murder-Set-Pieces (2004), Portrait in Terror (1965); there's even been a documentary about artwork by serial killers, Collectors (2000).

In much of this sub-genre, murder is literally rendered as a twisted form of art, and one that blends easily into the work of the filmmaker. “Like an x-ray or a scalpel,” as Tietchen notes, “the camera has the power to dissect and fragment the body” (100). Explaining the “death/creation paradox” of contemporary horror in a media-saturated environment, Tietchen argues that “destruction is...recontextualized into multiplying acts of creation” (101) to be replayed in news venues and on true crime shows.\textsuperscript{vii} We are all familiar with the parade of victims in horror and slasher cinema, in which the bodies of the unfortunate young men and women become the killer's canvases. Such an emphasis on the body foregrounds what Tobin Siebers says in The Body Aesthetic: “the making of any object, out of any substance, by a human being is also in some way a making and remaking of the human. The
object of human craft is the human being, and the most immediate sign of the human and the material out of which we craft it is the human body” (3). In horror film, it seems, indeed, to be almost so commonplace as to escape mention. While many of the films touched on earlier make the artist/murderer trope explicit, the emphasis on the eye, the assaultive gaze, and the assaulted viewer renders the trope always implicit in the horror film. Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) initially foregrounds the mapping of murderer onto artist onto filmmaker and film by opening with a scene calculated to confuse the viewer and destabilize the narrative; a series of flashbulbs illuminate fragments of a rotting corpse, and when we see the scene in its entirety, the unknown graverobber has wired the corpse to a headstone. A radio news announcer in the diegetic world of the film describes it as “a grisly work of art,” which comment several film critics have picked up on as a point of departure for any number of readings. John Kenneth Muir describes the camera pulling back “to reveal that this dead body has been ‘posed,’ as if indeed a masterpiece of art” (55). However, few have read the implications of this framework further—though the film gives us ample reason to do so, as we'll see. Hooper’s film consciously explores its own aesthetic status as a confrontational work, turning the emphasis on the eye and the assaultive gaze onto its own surfaces and modes of creation.

It is my contention that such inevitable self-consciousness translates into a specifically aesthetic self-consciousness in 1970s horror films, epitomized by *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Camp films of the 60s and 70s, like many of those by Herschell Gordon Lewis, Ed Wood, and Roger Corman—or the ridiculously-titled *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies*—not only, as Gary Hentzi writes, “grin and shrug their shoulders at their own badness,” but also “ask to be judged according to the specialized criteria applied to movies made expressly for the drive-in and grind-house circuit” (209). These films know they're bad art and revel in the sheer awfulness of it; they represent a very deliberate form of camp entirely like a John Waters-esque desire to push well beyond the limits of taste. Hooper's film, however, is more invested in exploring an alternative and deeply critical contemporary aesthetic. As Vera Dika has described it, Hooper and Henkel’s filmic images—the “exposed, assaultive surfaces of the film” (69)—deplete the various shields we have in place against the real (68). Not only are these ultra violent films of the 70s startlingly steeped in a realistic mode—often filmed on grainy stock, in gritty, dirty color palettes, with hand-held cameras—but they are also given over to elements of cultural specificity, like the 1970s New York punk scene in *Driller Killer*, or temporal specificity, like the dating of the events in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Narratively, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* takes place not only during the summer of 1973, but more specifically, August 18, 1973; this specificity evokes a profound sense of currency and contemporaneity, a contemporaneity bound closely to the filming process—it was filmed over the course of four weeks in 1973, from July 15 through August 14. Many of these films thrust ordinary characters into senseless circumstances—even cosmically senseless circumstances—that invert or annihilate all the conventional appearances of normality. Robin Wood characterizes horror films of the 1970s as “apocalyptic” visions—the country’s “collective nightmare” writ large. (Matt Becker takes Wood’s argument a step further and suggests that horror films of the 1970s draw their power from an enactment of the counterculture’s political ambivalence, and in Dika’s terms, a “‘counterculture’ depleted of its energy” [70].) Like other extreme horror films of the 1970s, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* definitely cultivate shock value, and they are often read as a kind of critical intervention in or response to the political realm. However, they can also be read as aesthetic interventions, not only by presenting us with shocking images, but also by breaking the diegetic divide and thematizing the act of filming confrontational content. The self-conscious use of *cinema verite* techniques, documentary narrative frameworks, and contemporary settings collude with motifs of aesthetic production bound deliberately to the horror unfolding before us. In the interests of time today, I will examine only a few key scenes and motifs that help us read this particular brand of self-reflexivity—as this is a work in progress, I will reserve my tentative conclusions until the end.

The film's notorious opening sequence sets the tone and theme for the story to come.
Significantly, the film as a whole is framed by voice-over narration. John Larroquette's voice-over (he of *Night Court* fame) frames the horrors of the *Massacre* in a faux-documentary form of reportage, aligning the terror within the film with the film itself:

The film which you are about to see is an account of the tragedy which befell a group of five youths, in particular Sally Hardesty and her invalid brother, Franklin. It is all the more tragic in that they were young. But, had they lived very, very long lives, they could not have expected nor would they have wished to see as much of the mad and macabre as they were to see that day. For them an idyllic summer afternoon drive became a nightmare. The events of that day were to lead to the discovery of one of the most bizarre crimes in the annals of American history, The Texas Chain Saw Massacre.

Ambiguously, “The Texas Chain Saw Massacre” refers both to the film itself and its content, like Shelley’s “hideous progeny.” As Vera Dika has noted, there is “no reference to an actual event,” despite the documentary formula that’s invoked; rather, the crawl references “the totally fictitious story [which is] presented as the subject of the film itself” (68). Taking this observation to its logical conclusion, we learn that *this* film, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, directed by Tobe Hooper, written by Hooper and Kim Henkel, and starring Marilyn Burns, distributed in 1974 by Bryanston Distributing, is “one of the most bizarre crimes in the annals of American history.” The film itself is the “bizarre [crime]”—perhaps one of the “most bizarre [cinematic] crimes” in “the annals of American [film] history.” A reader is hard pressed, in other words, to dissociate the macabre cinematic text of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* from the “mad and macabre” events to unfold. The film announces itself, in all seriousness, as a kind of commentary on aesthetic creation, and from the beginning, its viewers are being calibrated to view the film as such.

This opening narration is much like another visual documentary process, which we are introduced to after the voice-over and date, both of which emphasize the fiction of authenticity. We hear the sound of digging and cracking wood against a black screen. An unidentified gardener seems to be shoveling and depositing dirt, and this is the sound that contextualizes the flashbulb. After the unearthing occurs, we hear and see a series of six flashbulbs, each of which illuminates a portion of decomposing flesh, covered with adipocere. The sixth flashbulb sound is grotesquely extended by the sound editors, emphasizing the mechanical, made quality of the noise—here, the diegetic becomes the extradiegetic. Each extension in the sound marks out a choppy series of still shots on a decaying, waxy face, which, when the story begins, we find to be the face of the corpse posed disturbingly atop an obelisk headstone. This unknown vandal uses the camera to document his work, associating the act of vandalism with the act of reporting and documenting.

In daylight now, Hooper's camera opens on the head of the posed corpse, zooming out to encompass the entirety of the macabre arrangement implicitly documented by the camera in the dark. This first full scene is accompanied by the sounds of digging and metal clashes fading into an increasingly intelligible radio broadcast describing the “top story,” an incident of “Grave robbing in Texas” brought to the attention of authorities via an anonymous tip, further linking the grotesque act to its report in the police blotter. The radio narration recounts the reporting officer's description of the scene as “a grisly work of art, the remains of a badly decomposed body wired to a large monument,” and mentions the fact that concerned families—including the Hardesty family, two members of which we will meet—have been visiting the graves to see whether their loved ones have been removed. The radio broadcast goes on to describe other news, as the opening credits roll over stock footage of violent red sunspots: exploding storage units, the fear of a “cholera epidemic” and a few confirmed incidents of the “infectious disease,” a puzzling “outbreak of violence touched off by a suicide”, the collapse of a twenty-story building. After the opening credits, the camera lingers on a dead armadillo—taxidermied by xxx into what is described, in the commentary track, as not just a prop but “dead art.” Finally, we get our first glimpse of the main characters, a VW van full of young travelers that have stopped to allow the wheelchair-bound Franklin to urinate by the side of the road. The swift passage of a large
eighteen-wheeler blows Franklin over the hill, and he tumbles down and out of his chair, blotting out the incessant bad news of the radio broadcast.

This opening sequence situates the sound of the flashbulb at the apex of a narrative triangle—the flashbulb marks out the specific act that binds the documentary and extradiegetic voice-over, describing the film and its horrors, to our initial encounter with the main characters and their world. The series of high-contrast, abstract images of decaying human flesh, illuminated by the sound and light of the camera flash, signify an important causal force in the narrative, for it is this work by an unknown installation artist that drives the plot as we experience it.

The question of the unknown installation artist is soon unraveled amidst an emerging story that implicates the Hardesty family—and Franklin most overtly—in the macabre world documented by the opening camera flashes. When Sally, Franklin, and their traveling companions depart the scene, they unfortunately pick up a Hitchhiker, who turns out to be the grandson of the Family's decrepit, mummy-like patriarch ensconced in an attic room with his dead wife. It is at this point, while the van passes an odorous slaughterhouse—the film includes eerie pick-ups of drooling cattle that align the young hippies in the van with the animals, suggesting, as John Muir has noted, that people are nothing more than meat (61)—that we learn the Hardesty family has more than just neutral ties to the area. In fact, the Hardesty's grandfather, whose grave they'd visited, owned the very slaughterhouse just passing.

“That's where Grampa used to sell his cattle,” Franklin notes, continuing to describe an uncle who still works at “one of those places outside of Fort Worth.” The camera pans out to show a vast sky and a tiny strip of road, along which the van slows to pick up the equally tiny man; the complete and striking lack of sound during this scene seems to punctuate the incessant sounds of the radio, Franklin's previous imitation of the airgun used now, instead of a sledgehammer, to kill cows, and the violent mechanical sound of the flashbulb. Marginalizing their rather hypocritical fears that he will “smell just like [the] slaughterhouse” the van had just passed, the companions ultimately transpose their fear onto the Hitchhiker's fetish for his camera. In the van, against the bizarrely jaunty music playing on the radio, the Hitchhiker informs Franklin that he was just “at the slaughterhouse,” that “my brother worked there, my grandfather, too—my family's always been in meat.” After a strange conversation about the cost-benefit ratio of the sledgehammer versus the air gun, two technologies of death, one merely more modern than the other, and in response to Franklin's interest in whether he had ever seen the killing room, the Hitchhiker takes out a stack of Polaroids documenting the process of slaughter.

As the Polaroids are passed around, to expressions of universal disgust, a curious network of themes emerges. The Hitchhiker's documentation of his past and present coincides with the young hippies' expressions of intense desire to “not talk about it,” because it makes them “sick.” While the conversation flows, Franklin takes out a pocketknife to trim his nails; the Hitchhiker, after putting his Polaroids back into a bag made of an animal skin, head attached, plucks the knife away and proceeds to slowly, deliberately, gouge a deep slice in his hand. The expressions of horror and surprise on the travelers' faces suggests the audience's reaction to the scene, as well. The Hitchhiker is here performing in miniature the slaughter to come. Focusing our attention on his perverse act of looking through a lens, he seems to be gauging his audience's reaction to his performance—displaying his own razor, he takes out his Polaroid land camera and looks through the viewfinder at his horrified and astonished audience. He takes a picture of Franklin, and invites the group home to dinner—at this point, the travelers' discomfort becomes awkwardly apparent, and they try to get rid of him. When they reject his offer, and his picture, he performs a ritualistic burning of the image by placing the Polaroid atop a piece of aluminum foil, sprinkling magnesium on it, and setting it angrily alight. The magnesium flashes, and the travelers react much like the audiences have reacted to the film itself—cringing, screaming, struggling to get away. The Hitchhiker quickly tucks the smoldering image into his animal pouch, takes out his razor, grasps Franklin's arm, and slices on it a corresponding gouge. As the razor passes over Franklin's forearm, the sound of the flashbulb creaks mechanically, ominously across the ear. We do not know why this happens, any of it; the young travelers are ignorant, as well; indeed, this is one more
instance of the disorder and the chaos of an increasingly defamiliarized world.

The sound of the flashbulb documenting the opening sequence of the film at this point entangles the various narrative threads within a single, aural component. While Larroquette's voice-over aligns the terror within the film with the film itself, encouraging the audience to see the film as an exercise in the "mad and macabre" that binds the diegetic to the extradiegetic to the real, the sound of the flashbulb documents the nature of that self-reflexive folding over, capturing it in a much more immediate and compressed manner. The voice-over enables us to distance ourselves from the horror, to see it as something that happened in the past, but the flashbulb brings that past into the present, into the spectatorial now. When the Hitchhiker cuts a companion gash on Franklin's arm, he seems at once to force an acknowledgment of a similarity and to mark him out for slaughter. And yet, the Hitchhiker's strange and apparently unaccountable actions offer an opportunity for Franklin to meditate; he muses, "That guy cut the hell out of himself. Do you think you could do that to yourself? It takes something, just to do—that—to yourself...." The camera flashing at the moment of the cut, coupled with Franklin's meditation on the difficulty of it, suggests a central recursivity. Franklin reads the Hitchhiker’s action as evidence of a kind of strength or fortitude that he and his companions don’t have. It is also the kind of fortitude that many viewers don’t have. Do you think you could do that to yourself? It takes something, just to watch—to watch that.

As a machine to capture images and transform them into consumable commodities, the camera is analogous to the director's eye, and it often stands in for the eye of the audience—but it is also an eye that can, itself, cut. The sound of the flashbulb emphasizes the act of taking the picture, of creating a consumable commodity; thus, we are seeing a knife making visible the logic according to which it cuts. After taking his picture of Franklin, the Hitchhiker tries to sell it for "two dollars," but he has no takers; the picture would have been worth much more in twenty years. In the film, the Hitchhiker becomes a figure for the creative act—and particularly, I argue, for the artist working in the specific medium of human flesh and its de- and re-formation, perhaps one reason why he and Franklin are so closely aligned in the scene we just watched. Truly, this particular brand of aesthetic creation, this particular kind of cinematic product, sets itself apart from other products by virtue of its explicitly visualized violence and its exploration of cultural and social taboos, rendering it thematically like the very work that Hooper and Henkel do in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. This is not only a tale of murder, cannibalism, and cross-dressing in human skin, but also a tale about the complicated pleasures of watching such an ever-increasing litany of awful things, perhaps even a tale about the end point, if it exists, of such a spiral. We also learn that the opening flashbulb sequence, now contextualized and elaborated by this scene in the van, offers a kind of first-person window into the Hitchhiker's aesthetic process. What we were witnessing in that opening sequence was the Hitchhiker's photographic documentation of his graveyard installations. The very memorability of the sequence, with its repetitive flashes of decaying flesh and its equally repetitive, mechanical flashbulb sound, situates the film within a frame provided by the Hitchhiker's bad aesthetic. As Franklin meditates on the recent startling events, pressing his knife into his palm in imitation of the Hitchhiker, “That guy cut the hell out of himself. Do you think you could do that to yourself? It takes something, just to do—that—to yourself....” It “takes something” to watch, it “takes something” to perform, and it “takes something” to film—especially in a cinematic context that, while becoming more experimental, is still governed by a sense of cinema as dependent on fully realized characters working through a plausible problem in equally plausible ways, in a filmic style that maintains the fourth wall. [features of classic hollywood narrative film].

When we first see Leatherface, perhaps the single most iconic scene of the film, we are as shocked—if not moreso—as when the Hitchhiker slices Franklin's arm to the sound of the flashbulb. This iconic scene and those immediately following tie the visual shock to the accompanying sounds, but also elaborate the scene as one of aesthetic composition. Instead of the flashbulb, this scene is punctuated by the squealing of pigs as they are being slaughtered and the mechanical droning sound that first occurs when the opening credits roll over the cruel red sunspots. After Kirk's unauthorized
entry into the homestead and his astonishing disposal by Leatherface, Pam enters in search of him, tripping into a room filled with bones, teeth, and feathers. The droning, mechanical clashes accompanying the image of the Hitchhiker’s grotesque graveyard sculpture and the opening credits register her horror at seeing not only the bones littering the room she finds herself in; she is like the film viewer, trapped in a kill room and unable to escape. Even stranger, she is horrified to see a bench the size and shape of a loveseat made out of and decorated with bones. This grotesque furnishing becomes a sign of the Family’s particular aesthetic of interior design, along with a lampshade made of human faces, various wall decorations, and mobiles made of bones and feathers—a horrible parody of normal life and a disturbing extension of utilitarianism. While [xxx] describes these objects as xxx, I think that the wealth of supporting evidence encourages us to read more here.] The Family’s aesthetic of interiority is also bound up with the film’s particular brand of dark humor—after all, the arms of the bench are, literally, arms. In the Family’s homestead, as in Leatherface’s studio, the hanging mobile sculptures seem to serve no other purpose, as the loveseat nominally does, but are instead purely decorative. One is reminded, here, of Roger Ebert’s issues with the film’s apparent purposelessness, despite his acknowledgement that it is “well-made, well-acted, and all too effective,”: Chain Saw struck him as “without any apparent purpose, unless the creation of disgust and fright is a purpose.” What are we to think of a house decorated with and in the remains of their long career in the meat business? And even more saliently, what are we to think of a film set perhaps most horrifying in the way it normalizes, through a particularly macabre lens, the aesthetics and ideologies of this parody of middle America? Perhaps these are the tastes of a middle America turned in on themselves, inverted, and returned to the viewer with a complicit wink and nudge.

The flashbulb recurs throughout the film text at similar moments especially significant for the mutual exploration of horror, visual shock, and aesthetic sensibility. Jerry, in quest of his doomed friends Pam and Kirk, both of whom were waylaid on their way to the swimming hole by the sound of a generator and, ultimately, Leatherface, finally discovers the Family homestead and, like the others, enters without invitation. When he hears a noise coming from the freezer, he opens it up and Pam, now removed from the meathook where she had been unceremoniously hung to serve as captive audience for Leatherface’s artistry with the chainsaw, jerks violently about. The initial shock of her movement, again, is punctuated by the flashbulb sound, flanged and echoed several times as in the opening sequence. The sound continues as Leatherface enters and knocks the inquisitive and unfortunate Jerry on the head with the sledgehammer. Here, the aural extenuation of the flashbulb clues the viewer in to the significance of this particular moment. The flashbulb becomes an anchor in the film, tying the Family’s aesthetic practice to their historic occupation to the spectatorial shocks and grotesque and self-aware violence of the film itself.

The flashbulb has much in common with the sounds of the mechanical, droning, clashing, atonal percussive effects that punctuate the opening credits, read by critics as a sign of the overarching meaninglessness—the “total negativity,” as Wood puts it—of the world in which the travelers, ourselves included, find themselves. In the sonic landscape of the film, the flashbulb is metonymically linked to this mechanical atonality, which is repeated at several other moments of surprise and horror, documenting the character’s or the viewer’s response to the sight—even with the use of other instruments of horror, like the Hitchhiker’s knife, or the chainsaw, Leatherface’s chisel on flesh, his medium of choice. [for instance, this scene; play] After Kirk, Pam, and Jerry have been missing for so long that night has fallen, Sally and Franklin leave the van to seek them. In the woods, they encounter Leatherface, who slices through the wheelchair-bound Franklin to the sounds of both the chainsaw and the strange mechanical drone. In her flight, Sally ultimately finds the homestead and, within, the room where the Grandfather and Grandmother—attended by taxidermied pets of old—sit in mummified, decaying state, illuminated by the harsh light of unshaded lamps. When she sees them, the flashbulb sound recurs with force, stretched out and flanged with each look she—and the camera—takes. Clearly, at this point the flashbulb effect is bound up with Sally’s horrified sight of the Grandparents. This
moment directly mirrors the gravedigging scene illuminated by the flash and sound of the Hitchhiker's camera; however, at this point, the aural landscape begins to warp, and the mechanical droning sound becomes more like the whine of the chainsaw, both merging with the elongated, echoing flashbulb Foley. **[I could go on—there is evidence enough—but I will close here.]**

Self-reflexive filmic textures emphasize what Wood says of the horror film in general—that it examines cultural repressions and refusals—and the oft-touted nihilism of TCM, but instead of annihilating itself, the film opens a space for us to view extreme creative expression as potentially the only worthwhile thing left in a world filled with chaos and uncertainty. By destroying the ordinary—even the characters in *Chain Saw* are, as Vera Dika has noted, “exceedingly ordinary”—on this most primary level, TCM imagines a new space of creativity, a way to press chaos into a shape, any shape.

Lawrence O'Toole discusses modern American horror film—and especially its vast appeal—as a sign of “decadence,” itself the response to “a world out of control.” After all, he notes in “The Cult of Horror,” “if the world is out of control, psychologically it may be easier to revel rather than worry” (248). Obliquely, we discover that the flashbulb sequence represents this Hitchhiker's grotesque art. He visits graveyards not to grieve or commemorate lost family members, as the young travelers do, but to exhume corpses and create obscene sculptures using the medium of death itself.

Binding the diegetic to the extradiegetic...

suggesting that the sight of this awful parody of communal life must

According to Vera Dika and

assaultive quality of the film duplicates the assaultive quality of the family, but with a difference the Family is able to subsist, to continue (and, it should be noted, the number of sequels and remakes validates this claim in another register), though perhaps not to flourish; however, our hippies in the van are, for the most part, not. As Dika argues, the hippies in the van recycle the paradigmatic sign of the Western, the hero on horseback, becoming “a ‘counterculture’ depleted of its energy” (70). They seem singularly lacking in political ambition, as well; they cannot change anything. While many contemporary viewers of the groundbreaking 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* ga According to Matt Becker, in “A Point of Little Hope: Hippy Horror and the Politics of Ambivalence,” this sense of d

In promotional material, the experiential realism of the film created by the documentary techniques is reiterated—here, however, the audience is cast as potential survivors—”Who will survive, and what will become of them?”

The film's ability to spur a physical response—walking out, in some cases; shrieking or cringing in others—becomes the only possible effect a film can have any more. Protest doesn't work...

in general: artist/scientist as murderer a common trope; however, stylistic differences, shifting historical contexts, and new modes of reading, however, require us to break the trope down into its specific articulations and attempt to see them in full.

“Like an x-ray or a scalpel, the camera has the power to dissect and fragment the body. ....[R]ecently we have seen a cinematic transformation from science to art. Now the slasher's knife, once metaphorically linked to surgeon's tools acting out psychosexual impulses, has become wedded to the brush, photograph, and computer mouse. In the new, evolved conventions, murdered bodies are arranged as artistic displays, then afterward reconfigured into yet another mode of visual or written
representation. In other words, the body—once a playground for psychopathic male 'surgeons'--has now become a canvas, with its blood serving as paint and its murdered image multiplying in media-driven hypertexts” (Titchén, “Samples and Copycats: The Cultural Implications of the Postmodern Slasher in Contemporary American Film” 100).

“death/creation paradox”; act of “destruction is...recontextualized into multiplying acts of creation” (101)

“the boudnary between event and representation has increasingly become a dotted line through which the real and the simulated share a mass bank of visual references” (102)

—feminism, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, gay and lesbian activism.

; by radically breaking or experimenting with the boundaries of ethics, morality, and taste, they created startling visions of modern life in an era itself rife with social and cultural revolution—the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, feminism, gay and lesbian activism.

The correspondence of scientist and film-maker is logical through the technology endemic to the cinematic medium; such characters are creators, and as creators, they are artists.

“Within the history of embodied deviance, monsters always combine the markings of a plurality of differences” (5-6). The

“The body that scares and appalls changes over time” (8). Shelley's “hideous progeny,” clearly her novel, is also, according to Halberstam, the 19th century Gothic novel as a genre (11), speaking to broad anxieties about the popular consumption of scandalous or degenerate material.

“Gothic film horror...produces models of reading (many in one location) that allow for multiple interpretations and a plurality of locations of cultural resistance” (23); the term “Gothic” itself, according to Halberstam, is “the breakdown of genre and the crisis occasioned by the inability to 'tell,' meaning both the inability to narrate and the inability to categorize” (23). In some ways, then, the postmodern is always Gothic, produced as it is from other parts, other genres, other stories, in citation. As John Fiske has noted, this kind of polysemy opens the text to allow multiple subcultures to create the kinds of meanings that help cohere those subcultural identities, in line with what Gina Marchetti describes as the oppositional specificity of the viewing experience or what Jeffrey Sconce has termed “reading strateg[ies] that [render] the bad into the sublime” (113). Indeed, subculture itself has often been identified as a form of deviance—in order to be distinguished, it must deviate from a presumed norm. In cult film studies, that deviance is especially vivid in taste preferences and viewing practices.

Halberstam's reorientation of the Gothic is helpful in my reading of The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, because

Lawrence O'Toole discusses modern American horror film—and especially its vast appeal—as a sign
of “decadence,” itself the response to “a world out of control.” After all, he notes in “The Cult of Horror,” “if the world is out of control, psychologically it may be easier to revel rather than worry” (248).

Julian Smith notes: “[b]esides, anyone who expresses himself with a chainsaw can't be all bad” (qtd. in Staiger 247)

Janet Staiger has noted the intertextual depth of the relationship between Hitchcock's Psycho and The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, tracing the slow observation of the film community's growing awareness of the connections; however, as she notes, the intertextuality is also part of the techniques by which humor is produced for the viewer, who becomes interpellated into a superior viewing community. For Vera Dika, who draws on Staiger's reading, ...

cult film studies is typically more interested in reception and audience than in the various expressions of auteurism.
In the study of cult film, much attention has been paid to the role of the consumer or the reader, the specific practices of intertextual reading, and the deliberate reconfigurations of critical value that render a film like Plan 9 from Outer Space a (paradoxical) cult classic through its sheer awfulness.

“Mary Shelley's Frankenstein...functions as an allegory of Gothic production” (11)

When Herschell Gordon Lewis, the “Godfather of Gore,” began his collaborations with the noted exploitation filmmaker David F. Friedman in the early 1960s, the face of popular cinematic entertainment would change altogether—profit was king, and shock, leavened with a healthy dose of erotic nudity, was the way to go. In the mid- to late-1960s, Lewis moved away from the strict exploitation offered by his collaboration with Friedman towards the modern world of horror. Shoestring budgets and true independent production values led to ever more extreme cinematic choices—in The Gruesome Twosome (1967), one victim is scalped with an electric knife, a spectacle impossible not even a decade earlier. In Blood Feast, a deranged Pygmalion tale, an Egyptian devote attempts to bring new life to the statue of his beloved goddess by culling a variety of body parts from healthy young women, including a tongue grotesquely and deliberately ripped out by the root. In this instance, Lewis used a sheep's tongue which, to enable the most revolting shot, had to remain in the actress's mouth for some time and almost caused her to asphyxiate. Lewis's later films took gore and splatter to such an extreme that the films became not only self-conscious but also self-parodic. This very brief sketch of Lewis's film history is useful because it highlights a paradigmatic effect of the desire to shock and awe through extreme aesthetic and bodily transgression.

A self-consciousness about the text's aesthetic status permeates many films from the golden age of modern American horror—the 1970s. Much of this self-consciousness has to do with such films' radical experimentation with the boundaries of taste, ethics, morals, and cinematic expectations, as well as with the changing realities of filmic production and distribution. By the late 1950s, the Hays code had become less than effective in monitoring the kinds of films that came before the public, and by the 1960s, the code disintegrated into early versions of the MPAA rating system. In part, this dismantling of the code reflected new developments in technology as well as social and cultural revolution on the ground. Feminism, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, Gay and Lesbian activism forced changes in mainstream representations of “American life.”

I: Documenting, Policing, and Consuming the Macabre
Unlike Pam, hung unceremoniously on a meathook, we are able to walk out of the film. Literally a captive audience to Leatherface's artistry with the saw, Pam witnesses the horror as if it were a scene in a horror film.

Leatherface carves Kirk with his chainsaw, while NAME has been hung on a meathook, a captive audience—unable, like a filmgoer, to leave the building.

Sally tied to her brother—she can't go to the swimming hole with her friends, because Franklin can't go with her; only once he—and the rest of her friends—is dead, can she escape.

Echoing kettledrum sound, as if the action of the film were taking place within a metal container; indeed, as Sally—escaping the house by leaping through a secondstory window—flees the pursuing lesatherface, her screams fade in the face of the echoing, droning sound of the drum and the accompaniment of the chainsaw.

Armchair in which Sally is tied, after her attempt to escape Leatherface by running to the filling station manager, is made again of bones with whole arms for arms

floor lamp made of a human skeleton, with a light glowing from the chest cavity

Flashbulb sound occurs again, in a truncated form, when Sally's hand is cut for the Grandfather to feed on, a moment that duplicates the Hitchhiker's actions in the van and linking it more closely to the theme of assaulted spectatorship developed throughout;

And yet, the Hitchhiker is only part of a much larger Family, with a great many interests both aesthetic and, of course, gastronomic.

“That guy cut the hell out of himself. Do you think you could do that to yourself? It takes something, just to do—that—to yourself,” pressing the knife into his palm in imitation of the Hitchhiker.

The blood smeared on the side of the van resembles, according to Sally, a form of “writing,” a grotesque sign-system illegible to the travelers but eminently readable to the Family.

As the van speeds away, we see the Hitchhiker cavorting excitedly in its wake, and through the window, we catch a glimpse of his protruding tongue. Literally sticking his tongue out at his earlier audience, we can figuratively read this moment as a commentary on the expected reception of the film, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

“See those buildings over there? That's where they'd kill 'em—they'd bash 'em on the head with a big sledgehammer.... It usually wouldn't kill 'em on the first lick.... I mean they'd start squealing and freakin' out and everything, and they'd have to come up an bash 'em two or three times, and then sometimes it wouldn't kill 'em.... Aw, but they don't do it like that anymore. They've got this big air gun,
that shoots a bolt into their skulls and then retracts it. BOOM, ssschunck—BOOM, ssschunck—BOOM, ssschunck...”

Obliquely, we discover that the flashbulb sequence represents this Hitchhiker’s grotesque art. He visits graveyards not to grieve or commemorate lost family members, as the young travelers do, but to exhume corpses and create obscene sculptures using the medium of death itself.

links the slaughterhouse to the gravesite installations

The flashbulb Foley, which frames the film and its horrors, becomes an ambiguous sign also of police reportage.

Thus, the flashbulb is not only a highly aesthetized sign of the Hitchhiker’s art and a documentarian sign of authenticity that binds the horror of the event to the horror of the film itself, but also an icon of criminality, a sign of the process by which laws are broken, criminals defined, and crimes documented for prosecution.

; a close look at the opening sequences that form the context for the use of the flashbulb.

Above all, however, the flashbulb sound is just that—a sign, repeated throughout The Texas Chain Saw Massacre at significant moments.

“Crime linked to elements outside the state”

When the group of friends pick up the Hitchhiker, their bourgeois interest in the ragged man turns almost logically to fear and distaste.

When the young travelers leave the gravesite, the audience discovers another curious point of intersection between them and the past they’ve ostensibly left behind. The stench of a nearby slaughterhouse wafts in through the van’s open windows, and Franklin excitedly points out the attraction. We learn that the Hardesty family shares much in common with that other Family; Franklin and Sally’s grandfather, whose grave they had been to visit, owned a slaughterhouse. “That’s where Grampa used to sell his cattle,” Franklin notes, continuing to describe an uncle who still works at “one of those places outside of Fort Worth.”

The Family is marginalized not only because of their slaughterhouse work, a form of work bound to the hand rather than the machine, but also because of the relationship between their work and their art. Unable to sell freshly butchered meat to a local populace—they have fallen behind the line in the push toward mechanized, economical, and uniform production values—the Family takes a detour, making grotesque but somehow beautifully elaborate pieces of functional art out of the bodies of their victims: lamps made of faces, armchairs made of bones, mobiles made of feathers, hair, and still more bones, paint made of blood. While the film’s silent center is the ultimate taboo of cannibalism, I speculate that the visible center is aesthetic perversity; each center, one silent yet present and one present yet routinely disavowed, illuminates the other.
This term, “assaultive gaze,” is Clover's.

In much feminist film analysis, the cinematic gaze is not only gendered, the camera eye a stand in for the masculine “sadistic-voyeuristic gaze,” but the object of the gaze is fetishized, often by being taken apart; in Clover's important *Men Women, and Chainsaws*, these issues of primary and secondary identification take center stage, since, as she notes, “horror movies spend a lot of time looking at women” (8), but she rejects the assumption that male viewers identify only with the assaultive gaze of the killer/camera. Clover focuses instead on the process through which male viewers identify with the female victim-hero, the so-called Final Girl, as an Oedipal surrogate in an identity game.

Robin Wood has viewed American horror films as the nation's “collective nightmare,” pointing out that horror “responds in the most clear-cut and direct way” to what a culture represses, typified in the figure of monstrous other (28).

It lies, as Clover says, “[a]t the bottom of the horror heap” (21), with other “body genres” like pornography. One has only to look at the early reviews of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* to witness the manner in which extreme horror highlights both the contours and the fragility of the law; it has been called a “despicable film” (Gross) filled with “unrelenting sadistic violence as extreme and hideous as a complete lack of imagination can possibly make it” (Koch). While Roger Ebert described it as “well-made, well-acted, and all too effective,” he took issue with the “purpose” of the film—it seemed “without any apparent purpose, unless the creation of disgust and fright is a purpose.” “Drenched in taboo and encroaching vigorously on the pornographic,” as Clover writes, “the slasher film lies by and large beyond the purview of the respectable (middle-aged, middle-class) audience. It has also lain by and large beyond the purview of respectable criticism” (21)—at least in 1992, when Clover was writing. Yet, such films are fascinating, as the slew of remakes, sequels, and other returns—those at the box office, for instance—emphasize, and they are also increasingly, especially with the study of popular culture, making their way into the realm of critical respectability (much to the chagrin of some).

One is confronted, here, with the virtually ubiquitous rhetoric of the extreme horror response: I can't watch, I must watch.

[cut]by drawing our attention to the work of the camera and its ability to consciously and through the specific trope of the camera-flash sound effect, which not only opens and frames the film, but is repeated throughout and in particularly telling moments.

Loosely based on the Ed Gein case, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* thus also references the recent past and Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which captured the first on-screen image of a toilet and employed one of the most notable instances of misdirection in filmic history. Hooper's film, too, employs a key instance of misdirection; while the film has often been understood as the story of the horrifying experiences of a young group of friends traveling across the country to revisit a family grave site, it might more properly be viewed as the story of the Family's attempts to survive in a world that no longer recognizes or has room for their work. The tension between these two competing stories forms the basis of the film's horror as well as its aesthetic. Are we watching a film about America's future, or are we watching a film about America's past? But we might also understand these two competing interpretive threads as themselves yet another, more primary form of misdirection. Perhaps, instead, we are watching a film about the struggle to say something meaningful, played out as embodied commentary on the current state of cinematic art.

After Franklin's farcical spill, the young travelers continue on to the gravesite where his and his sister Sally's grandfather is buried. A large number of people have gathered to see whether their loved ones' rest had been vandalized, but an equal number appear to be rubber-neckers, curious bystanders eager for sensation, much like us in the audience. Under the aural cover of the van radio, which describes curious atmospheric events portending doom, Sally confers with the attending officers presumably there to document (with cameras?), investigate, and ultimately prosecute the acts of vandalism and violence perpetrated by an unknown installation artist.

When the Hitchhiker enters the narrative thread, he does so under the sign of the slaughterhouse, the disavowed past of Sally and Franklin Hardesty—and perhaps, by extension, the young travelers who seem so much of the immediate present but without roots of the kind that the Family clearly has. And yet, the Hitchhiker is only part of a much larger Family—as, we begin to learn, are the Hardestys. When the travelers stop at a gas station-cum-barbecue, the manager of the filling station tells Franklin, who had requested directions to an old swimming hole near a house he remembered, that exploring such places “is dangerous, you're liable to get hurt. You don't want to go foolin' around other folks' property. Some folks don't like it, and they don't mind showin' you.” The proffered directions arrive when Franklin reveals—to both the gas station manager and the audience—that “Oh, my father owns it,” apparently legitimating their
visit through a historical economic and class authority. Franklin's close discursive relationship to the Hitchhiker and his family is further revealed when, unable to enter the abandoned house with his friends because of his wheelchair, he frowns, cackles, and puts his tongue out petulantly. Perhaps Franklin is closer in many ways to the Hitchhiker because his physical difference mirrors the Hitchhiker's aesthetic and gastronomic difference—and this is indeed a significant area to explore. However, at this point I am more interested in emphasizing the continuities to more fully explain the film's aesthetic self-consciousness as one deeply indebted to, in part, an economic or class-based system of difference. In the story of the slaughterhouse, we find a concrete and persuasive image of economic progress that offers progress only, in fact, for a subsection of the American workforce, the middle classes that have risen out of manual labor to own the slaughterhouses that others work in.

xii The scene metonymically links these sounds to the Hitchhiker's performance, however, through the trope of the sledgehammer, that “much better”—and less modern—way to kill.


xiv Of course, this is deviance predominantly viewed from a mainstream perspective, though members of a subcultural group often claim that designation themselves as a mode of authenticity, a sign of having escaped from the conformity of mass culture (see for instance Mark Jancovich, “Cult Fictions,” or Jeffrey Sconce's concept of paracinema or counter-cinema in “‘Trashing' the Academy”). Conversely, as Janet Staiger has written of her own transformation as a film viewer under the pressure of The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, “[o]ne way to reassure oneself that one is not perverted is to find a community of others—a subculture of like-minded individuals who mirror one's own nature” (246), someone to “authorize [her] laughter” (248).

xv See ...

xvi Curiously, this reading of the Family's work puts The Texas Chain Saw Massacre in a subgenre of art/horror films like Corman's A Bucket of Blood, where despite the title, the artist is a sculptor of radical realism—his art pieces are dead bodies covered in slip and put on display in the local Beatnik bar. Herschell Gordon Lewis contributed greatly to this subgenre with Color Me Blood Red and .... In fact, this subgenre was very much alive in 1950s and 1960s independent film—it is possible that 1970s horror, with its emphasis on pushing the boundaries of taste by pushing the boundaries of the body, inherits the aesthetic goals of the art/horror subgenre, providing an interesting prehistory and context to even modern horror.