

Cannibalistic Capitalism and other American Delicacies: A Bataillean Taste of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*

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‘My family’s always been in meat’
- Hitchhiker

Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) is one of a number of American horror films spanning the 1970s, in which the transgressive – indeed cannibalistic – potential of capitalism is explored as a source of horror. Other examples in this vein include George Romero’s seminal zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) (and sequel *Dawn of the Dead*, 1978), and Wes Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). However, *Chain Saw* is exemplary in its terrifying, nightmarish (but bleakly parodic), vision of an America, metaphorically and literally *devouring* itself. ‘Home, sweet, home’ becomes the slaughterhouse and consumers become the consumed as ‘cannibalistic capitalism’ (embodied by a family of unemployed but murderous abattoir workers), wreaks havoc on the lives of a hedonistic group of youths, as the ‘Age of Aquarius’ comes to a bloody end. As a horrific parody of American values, the film’s theme of ‘cannibalistic capitalism’ plays out the tensions borne of the historical and political circumstances of the period of the film’s production. The far-from-triumphant end of the Vietnam War, the loss of confidence in political authority and integrity following the Watergate scandal, the oil crisis (which disrupted the lives of ordinary car-driving Americans) leading into a major stock market crash and recession, were among a number of challenges to the

American 'way of life' in the early to mid 1970s. In light of these threats to American society at large, *Chain Saw* offers a model of horror that is both deeply rooted in American ideology, taboos, and the key (and interdependent) institutions of the family, the worker and capitalism, yet produces aberrant and transgressive versions of these same social units. This paper will explore these seeming contradictions surrounding the social aspects of horror depicted in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in relation to Georges Bataille's theory of taboo and transgression.

Loosely based on factual occurrences, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* tells the bizarre story of a deadly encounter between a group of five teenagers (Sally Hardesty and her disabled brother Franklin, Sally's boyfriend Jerry and young couple Pam and Kirk), and a demented family of cannibals (brothers 'Hitchhiker' and 'Leatherface', father 'Cook', and 'Grandpa') in rural Texas in 1973. The teenagers' road trip through the Texan countryside is diverted at the news of local grave desecrations, which prompts them to check on the grave of Sally and Franklin's Grandfather and visit their Grandparents' abandoned, dilapidated farmhouse. A search for gas for their van brings them into contact with the neighbours – a family of ex-slaughterhouse workers made redundant by technological advances, whose transgressive practices include grave robbing, self mutilation, torture, murder and cannibalism. In order to make ends 'meat', the cannibals continue to practice the family 'business' by selling human flesh as 'barbecue' at the local gas station, unbeknownst to their customers / victims, who include the youths in the film. One by one, the teens are butchered by the chain saw wielding 'Leatherface' with the exception of the last surviving member of the group, Sally, who is held captive. After a long night of torture and humiliation at the hands of this all-male clan, a hysterical Sally finally manages to escape.

From this brief description of the film's plot, it becomes apparent that the theme of 'cannibalistic capitalism' emerges in two ways. This notion is most prominently embodied by the family of unemployed abattoir workers who direct their idle skills towards the butchery of humans. As Hooper's film indicates, technological advances leading to the redundancy of workers

has been a consequence of capitalism's ongoing pursuit of increased productivity (greater output, in less time, for less money). But this is not the only example of capitalism's monstrous excesses in *Chain Saw*: the encounter between the murderers and their victims is prompted by an effect of the same system. It is ironic that a near-empty gas tank restricts the travels of the group of young people. While Sally, Franklin and Jerry wait at the old Hardesty house, Kirk and Pam seek help at a nearby homestead. This precipitates Kirk's fatal exploration (transgression) of the cannibal's home: he is a consumer soon to be *consumed*. These narrative events presumably represent the effects of the 1970s international oil embargo, in which nations of the Middle-East withdrew exports of petroleum to selected countries (including the United States) as punishment for Western involvement in Arab-Israeli conflicts. The embargo resulted in a gigantic surge in oil prices and long term gas shortages, as illustrated (with horrific consequences) in Hooper's film.

In the scholarly attention *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* has received, the excesses of capitalism as a source of horror has been noted. Robin Wood, for example, suggests (in relation to 1970s American horror films such as *Chain Saw*, *The Hills Have Eyes* and *Night of the Living Dead*) that 'Cannibalism represents (...) the logical end of human relations under capitalism' (Wood 1984, 189). Other critics such as Kendall R. Phillips (2005, 114), Tony Williams (1996, 187), and Joseph Maddrey (2004, 54) have also interpreted *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as a commentary on capitalism, but this issue has not been examined in the depth that I would argue is warranted. Nor has Hooper's film (or the horror genre at large) been explored in detail using Bataille's ideas – an opportunity and challenge that I take up in this paper. Perhaps these 'gaps' in horror film scholarship are indicative of the prominence of psychoanalytic approaches to horror, which generally focus on the psychical life and make up of the individual and family dramas revolving around repression, Oedipal fantasies, castration anxieties, and the authority of the patriarchy. In this respect, Robin Wood's theory of the horror film based on the Freudian notion of the 'return of the repressed' has been an exemplary model. In his influential paper, *An*

Introduction to the American Horror Film, Wood argues that central to the horror genre is ‘the actual dramatization of the dual concept, the repressed / the other, in the figure of the Monster’ (Wood 1984, 171). He elaborates:

(T)he true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses: its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, the “happy ending” (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression. (Wood 1984, 171)

In the context of the American horror film, Wood identifies female sexuality, the proletariat, other cultures or ethnic groups, alternative ideologies, homosexuality or bisexuality, and children, as examples of marginalised groups which threaten society in their ‘otherness’, and emerge as monstrous incarnations in the horror film (Wood 1984, 171-172).¹ Applying Wood’s psychoanalytic approach to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, it seems the disenfranchised family of redundant slaughterhouse workers are the repressed / oppressed party pushed to the fringes of society, who return as monstrous cannibals. However, this psychoanalytic approach is limited as a means of examining the *social* structures and forces (in this case, the capitalist system) which organise and enact repression.

In *Dread, Taboo and The Thing: Towards a Social Theory of the Horror Film*, Stephen Prince presents an interesting response to Wood’s psychoanalytic model. Prince argues that Wood’s account (or indeed other subsequent psychoanalytic approaches), have inherent limitations which prevent them from satisfactorily coming to terms with the films as social manifestations (Prince 1988, 20). For Prince, the risk of the psychoanalytic approach is the conflation of social phenomena and the psychic life of the individual. In response to this problem, Prince advances a social / anthropological theory of the horror film based on the concept of taboo, which he defines as:

¹ A plethora of sources of horror, such as those groups named by Wood, have been taken up and explored in depth by other critics. To cite just one significant example, Barbara Creed’s commendable exploration of the ‘monstrous feminine’ in horror cinema employs Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory of abjection as its theoretical framework (Creed 1993).

(A) set of explicit prohibitions governing speech or behaviour which are surrounded by powerful social or supernatural sanctions, the violation of which is accompanied by a sense of sin or defilement (Prince 1988, 21).

Prince does not formulate this alternative model based on taboo in order to replace or renounce psychoanalytic accounts, but rather to confine their influence, and therefore preserve the category of the social (Prince 1988, 20). He draws on the work of Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach, who regard language, society and culture as systems of order which allow humanity to emerge from the disorder and ambiguity of 'an unbounded natural world' (Prince 1988, 21). The necessity of these organising structures is described by Prince as follows:

Creating systems of order based on a network of culturally constructed classifications – human and non-human, female and male, edible and inedible, holy and profane – is a fundamental prerequisite of social experience. (Prince 1988, 22)

Ambiguities, anomalies, or other non-things, threaten social order and provoke anxieties, by defying (linguistic or symbolic) categorisation, as Prince describes:

Perceptions of malevolent and anti-social powers, then, may emerge from the ill-defined, contradictory lines of the social structure where networks of authority and allegiance are unclear, and the categories which arouse the greatest fear, interest, and sense of mystery are the ambiguous ones. These are the categories which become taboo because they play on the distinction between form and formlessness. (Prince 1988, 23)

He elaborates by contrasting his anthropological approach, with Wood's psychoanalytic account:

Rather than signifying the projection of repressed sexuality or some other psychological process, the monster represents those unmapped areas bordering the familiar configurations of the social world. (Prince 1988, 23)

In Prince's model, the monstrous element is that which is not adequately contained, categorised or defined by society, which provokes anxieties due to

its ambiguity and consequently undermines social cohesion when it cannot be assimilated. If we were to view *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* through Prince's lens, we could argue that without jobs the family of slaughterhouse workers are cast adrift: in their redundancy they are unable to be incorporated within the capitalist system which structures American society – their uncertain position is threatening. However, the family's violent behaviours and motivations are hardly ambiguous, unstructured or formless: they kill to 'make a living'. Their values and organisation reflect, or correspond to, established and interdependent American institutions (the nuclear family, the worker, the capitalist system), but their embodiment of these social units is perverted and transgressive. This suggests that a more paradoxical dynamic is in play.

It is not my objective to dispute the arguments of Wood and Prince – indeed horror films abound with monstrous incarnations of repressed elements (as Wood identifies), and ambiguous elements that disturb categories and classifications (as Prince suggests). Rather, my aim is to explore another essential component of the horror film which is linked to the themes that Wood and Prince foreground, and yet which is skirted around or not addressed directly. This fundamental element is *violence*. This staple of the horror film may be found in the form of a myriad of physical, psychological and metaphorical violations or transgressions, within the film's narrative, through the formal elements of the film and enacted on the viewing audience. Violence is not discerning: it threatens and transgresses the boundaries of social institutions as well as the individual and what is meant to be human. In Wood and Prince's accounts, violence is a secondary issue born of confrontations with monstrous elements (in the case of the former, conflicts with the monstrous 'return of the repressed', and in the latter, threats posed by elements which resist assimilation into social, symbolic or cultural structures). But, what if the emphasis was shifted to *violence* itself as the primary agent of horror?

French philosopher Georges Bataille, who has courted his own share of condemnation and moral outrage for the violent and pornographic content of his work, articulates a theory of taboo and transgression based on his

understanding of the innate violence of humankind. Bataille offers an intriguing perspective on what he terms the ‘seductive boundary of horror’ – the perverse fascination that horror, violence and transgression generate. While Bataille asserts that the ‘main function of all taboos is to combat violence’, he also suggests that the taboo paradoxically begets its own violent transgression (Bataille 1986, 41). This paper explores this seeming contradiction in relation to the representation of ‘cannibalistic capitalism’ in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Most importantly, this paper offers a ‘taste’ of the potential contribution of a Bataillean approach to horror film scholarship.

‘Extreme seductiveness is at the boundary of horror’.
- Georges Bataille (1986, 41)

For Georges Bataille, the *taboo* defines this ‘boundary of horror’ that seduces and invites its own transgression. In regards to the formation and function of taboos, a close reading and comparison of Bataille’s writing and Hooper’s horror film reveals that they have two concerns in common: firstly, the relationship between eroticism, violence, work and taboo; and secondly, the ambiguous division between humans and animals. As such, my analysis will treat *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as a Bataillean allegory about taboo and transgression derived from a vision of ‘cannibalistic’ capitalist excess. A parallel will be drawn between the transgressive potential of capitalism and Bataille’s notion of the undercurrent of violence that persists beneath the surface of humanity, which taboos are created to control. However, an analysis of the representations of ‘work’ and capitalism in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, also suggests that the film simultaneously inverts Bataille’s arguments regarding the relationship between work and prohibitions, which casts further light on the intriguing nature of taboos. While taboos are created to restrain violent urges (thus allowing individuals to dedicate themselves instead to productive ‘work’), Hooper’s film also illustrates Bataille’s claim that the taboo generates its own violent transgression. In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, these repeated transgressions into the seductive territory beyond the ‘boundary of horror’ both ignite the taboo’s

prohibitive power while revelling in and glorifying its violation. Such contradictions illustrate the irreconcilable tension between taboo and transgression that Bataille describes and, I would argue, account for the profoundly ambivalent spectatorial ‘pleasures’ that the film offers.

The opening scene of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* establishes the ambivalent dynamic that characterises the film as a whole. The film begins with the sound of labour and toil – a shovel hitting the earth and the grunting of a man with the effort of the exertion, while the screen remains ominously black. The darkness is momentarily broken as a series of extreme close-ups of various decomposing body parts (including fingers, teeth, a foot, and an eye socket) are briefly illuminated by the flash of a camera, fragmenting and fetishising the corpse, as the photographer’s heavy breathing and animalistic grunting attains sexual connotations. The sense of transgression is heightened by the voice-over radio news report, which tells of the discovery of a ‘grisly work of art’ composed of human body parts, linked to a series of grave desecrations and robberies in Texas. Following this breaking story, a succession of gruesome crimes and violent events are reported (including the imprisonment of a young girl in the attic of her family home), emphasising the brutality and chaos of the world and of humankind. The fade in of the radio report is complemented by the fade in of a shocking image – a close-up of a hideously decomposed face, its mouth agape in a perversely ecstatic manner, as the audience becomes aware that they have just witnessed the grave robber’s work. Slowly the camera zooms out to a long shot that frames a chilling, sexualised ‘sculpture’, comprised of two corpses in an explicit pose seated on a tombstone. The camera pauses and lingers for an uncomfortably long time on this sickening and forbidden sight, as the radio report continues its pessimistic broadcast. The film’s audience is confronted by this fascinating and repellent image, in which taboos surrounding death, sex and labour violently collide and are transgressed, undermining the sense of order and security associated with the taboo, yet stressing its prohibitive power, and establishing the film’s transgressive Bataillean aesthetic.

From a Batailleian perspective, this image of a sexually explicit arrangement of body parts on a desecrated grave would derive its power from the conflation and transgression of taboos linked to sex and death, which Bataille regards as the most rudimentary and potent. While transgressive themes recur throughout the fictional and theoretical volumes of his oeuvre, Bataille's notions of the erotic and violent characteristics of human experience, which he links to the development and function of taboos and work, are most prominently discussed in his seminal text *Eroticism*. In this text Bataille discusses taboo (the imposition of a limit or the designation of a forbidden element) and transgression (the crossing of that limit or the partaking of the prohibited thing) through a systematic survey of various interdependent aspects of human life that revolve around eroticism (sexual activity in excess of the merely reproductive) (Bataille 1986, 8). His discussion of eroticism is premised on the essentially violent nature that he attributes to both human kind and the erotic act: 'In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation' (Bataille 1986, 16). Although Bataille notes that physical eroticism signifies a corporeal transgression, he is more concerned with erotic violation in regards to the dissolution of self, the 'violation of the very being of its practitioners', that occurs in the intensity of the erotic moment as the subject is wrenched from their individual existence to a selfless state that he terms 'continuity' (Bataille 1986, 17). Although Bataille asserts that human beings long for this ambiguous state of oneness or fusion with the other (lost since conception, with death as the ultimate expression of its return), this yearning is fraught with ambivalence, as the loss of self that is a defining feature of the state of continuity is accompanied by an extreme sensation of flux and anguish. The profound ambivalence of this 'selfless' state differentiates eroticism from merely reproductive sexual activity or other banal experiences of everyday life. Bataille argues that eroticism is transgressive as it always involves a breaking down of established patterns and regulated social order, which is linked to our individual discontinuous mode of existence (Bataille 1986, 18). He claims that the 'whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives'

(Bataille 1986, 17). For Bataille the intense anguish evoked by the erotic transgression is perhaps only surpassed by the destructive, fearful and unsurmountable quality of death, because death is ‘a sign of violence brought into a world which it could destroy’ (Bataille 1986, 46). In fatal and erotic moments, the subject transcends / transgresses the self’s boundaries, consumed by the violence of the experience, immersed in the elusive anguish of continuity. Horror film transgressions (especially those associated with sex and death as in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*) also violently wrench the audience (if only momentarily) from the banality of ordinary existence, and therefore exert a paradoxical power over the audience that can be likened to Bataille’s description of the fascinating and repellent anguish of erotic and deadly transgressions.

According to Bataille, taboos surrounding death and eroticism are created to guard against the fundamental transgressive violence of these states, which threaten the world of work, productivity and rationality:

Prohibitions eliminate violence, and our violent impulses (those which correspond with sexual impulsions can be counted among them), destroy within us that calm ordering of ideas without which human awareness is inconceivable. (Bataille 1986, 38)

Bataille locates the formation of taboos in an historical context, initially linked to the development of tools, work and eroticism that marks the transition from animals to humans (Bataille 1986, 30). Indeed, for Bataille, transgression is a defining human characteristic:

The transgression of the taboo is not animal violence. It is violence still, used by a creature capable of reason (putting his knowledge to the service of violence for the time being). (Bataille 1986, 64)

From a Bataillean perspective, the primary function of taboos is to combat violence, thus allowing society to function and individuals to labour with productive efficiency. Consequently, taboos enforce the deferral of pleasure and denial of base instincts, which allows for the accumulation of wealth. However, in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* the logic of Bataille’s position is ironically inverted: instead of taboos safeguarding labour, here violence

and the break down of order actually stems from transgressive *work*. Moreover such work is a symptom of transgression on a larger scale in which humankind's violent potential is symbolised by the unrestrained excesses of capitalism.²

In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the theme of transgressive/cannibalistic capitalism (the violent potential of humanity) is developed through interactions between two contrasting models of the 'family'. A 'family' (of sorts) of young people aimlessly travelling through the Texan countryside in their van, represents the tail end of the youthful, idealistic generation that 'dropped out' and rebelled against the capitalist system in the 1960s; a movement and sentiment which was unravelling around the time of the film's production (1974).³ Although the dress, language and manner of this group is stereotypical, this representation of youth is as coloured by the omissions as those parts that have been presented: the lack of references to their places of work, study, homes or other responsibilities or commitments is an indication of their naïve, drifting, hedonistic lifestyle (Phillips 2005, 117). Their youthful idealism and optimism lends a particular vulnerability to their representation, which will later accentuate the violent transgression of this group at the hands of the second family. The youths encounter a depraved all-male clan who live 'outside' of the restrictions of society in an isolated, rural backwater that allows them to practice transgressions of the most disturbing kind without interruption or exposure. Dislocated from society through unemployment (having been made redundant by technological advancements at the abattoir) the family of ex-

² This also touches on Bataille's theoretical distinction between Restricted and General Economy which he discusses in *The Accursed Share* (Bataille 1991). Restricted Economy is the realm of norms, work and the taboo, where utility accumulation and preservation is valued and the economic is privileged (as in the capitalist model). In contrast, General Economy is concerned with expenditure, excess, loss and waste and is associated with transgression, eroticism and death. While the representation of 'cannibalistic' capitalism in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* amalgamates features of both Restricted and General Economy, exploration of this issue lies beyond the scope of this essay.

³ In the context of my Bataillean analysis, the unravelling of the anti-capitalist, pro-peace movement at the time of the film's production (so clearly represented by the young people) is ironically complicit with Bataille's ascribing of undeniable, irresistible, violent tendencies to humankind.

slaughterhouse workers continue to practice their butchery skills on unwary passers-by, selling their (human) barbecue products at the local gas station. These extreme violations are prefigured in the radio news report about the grave robberies in the opening scene, which prompts the first group to check on the grave of Sally and Franklin's Grandfather. This decision triggers a series of events that fatally interrupt their carefree existence as they are 'consumed' by cannibalistic capitalism.

Initially unperturbed by the pessimistic and foreboding astrological readings read out by Pam as a means of passing the time on their road-trip (another example of their counter-culture sentiment and a futile attempt at imposing order on a violent and chaotic world), the drifters' youthful optimism and open-mindedness initiates an encounter with the perverse excesses of capitalism as they offer a ride to a strange man. In their interaction with this disturbed character (later revealed as the grave-robber from the opening scene), it is discovered that they share the common link of the slaughterhouse: a capitalist and transgressive symbol. Driving along the country road, the youngsters are revolted by the overwhelming stench of slaughtered cattle that begins to permeate their van, to the delight of the odd stranger. The smell of the abattoir prompts Franklin to tell the others about the stomach-churning transgressions he witnessed while watching his uncle work in the slaughterhouse (illustrated by brief shots of the confined and terrified beasts frothing at the mouth), which was also where his Grandfather once sold cattle. Despite the girls' complaints about the explicit descriptions of animal slaughter and the processing of meat (Pam, being a vegetarian, is particularly appalled), the Hitchhiker interprets Franklin's recollections as an invitation to gleefully share (in nauseating detail) his own experiences of transgressive work. Proudly exclaiming 'I was the killer!', the troubled stranger offers the youths his own well-thumbed photographs of skinned and filleted carcasses: mementos of his family's tradition of slaughterhouse work prior to their redundancy. While the Hitchhiker explains in an ironically coded way: 'My family's always been in meat' (a description that gathers multiple meanings as the film progresses), Franklin is unwittingly close to the truth when he mutters in disgusted response: 'A

whole family of Draculas'. This interaction draws attention to the way in which we are conditioned (by family, by culture and its institutions) to observe taboos (or to aberrantly disregard prohibitions and behavioural norms in this regard) and to experience the anguish of transgression. Bataille explains:

Our children do not spontaneously have our reactions (of disgust in the presence of specific stimuli). They may not like a certain food and they may refuse it. But we have to teach them by pantomime, or failing that, by violence, that curious aberration called disgust, powerful enough to make us faint, a contagion passed down to us from the earliest men through countless generations of scolded children. (Bataille 1986, 58)

Taboos regulate and socialise individuals (workers, consumers) through nominating and excluding threatening transgressive elements. However, each of the three generations of ex-slaughterhouse workers represented in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* have been sadistically conditioned by their family's workplace practices to disregard taboos on death. 'Making a living' through killing undermines prohibitions by blurring the lines between labour, consumption, murder, and finally, humans and animals in the act of cannibalism.

In his awkward conversation with the young occupants of the van, the Hitchhiker reveals that his family's unemployment was a symptom of advancing capitalism, in which 'skilled labour' (perversely those workers trained in bludgeoning cattle to death with a sledge hammer), were replaced by an airgun. With this technological development, the slaughter of livestock could proceed with production line efficiency, increasing output and profits, while the airgun also provided a more 'humane' means of killing the cattle. However, in light of the Hitchhiker's insistence that the cattle 'died better' using the sledgehammer, the second outcome of the airgun's introduction – the improvement of the animals' well being – seems incidental to capitalist concerns. The Hitchhiker's preference for the brutal sledge hammer suggests a darkly ironic and transgressive twist to Bataille's assertions regarding the function of taboos – for such prohibitions were

conceived to control violent impulses, which allowed workers to focus on their labour, from which society benefited:

The world of work and reason is the basis of human life, but work does not absorb us completely and if reason gives the orders our obedience is never unlimited. Man has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains in him an undercurrent of violence. (Bataille 1986, 40)

From a Bataillean perspective, in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the slaughterhouse workers' original labour served a dual purpose: firstly by creating meat products to be consumed by society, and secondly, as a way of directing excess energy or violent impulses to a more 'productive' end – ironically, more efficient working (i.e. killing). Therefore, transgressive work also feeds the innate undercurrent of violence that Bataille attributes to humankind. The cannibalistic scenario presented in *Chain Saw*, points to the potentially destructive excesses of transgression, for as Bataille notes: 'once a limited licence has been allowed, unlimited urges towards violence may break forth' (Bataille 1986, 65). Paul Hegarty claims that, as in the case of war, the taboo on killing is lifted in the slaughter of animals – that is, for a particular 'rational' purpose. But, Hegarty also suggests that the relaxation of taboos may provide an outlet for unrestrained transgressions, leading to a 'situation of excess' in which 'lack of such a major taboo unleashes the rest, hence wartime atrocities' (Hegarty 2000, 109). The slaughterhouse workers' suspension of taboos on killing and contact with the dead, leads to the full realisation of humankind's violent potential – 'unlimited transgression'. In Hooper's film, such excesses include grave desecration, fetishism of the corpse, Leatherface's mask of human skin, the furniture made from body parts, Hitchhiker's self-mutilation, torture (especially the prolonged abuse of Sally), the cruel murder of innocent and helpless victims, and most notably, the ultimate transgression of cannibalism. The violent urges of the family of slaughterhouse workers are unleashed by the commercially driven slaughter and consumption of animals. But unemployment deprives them of this 'acceptable' or 'productive' outlet, leading to the murder and consumption of human beings. In 'consuming' the film, the audience's ironic complicity with

the very system being critiqued ('cannibalistic' capitalism), intensifies the ambivalent response.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre engages the audience by exploiting the way in which taboos act as a form of cultural conditioning. Hegarty notes the paradoxical aspect of this social element:

Taboo is a defence mechanism, but also creates a space for what is defended against. [T]aboo aims both to reduce our fear and to maintain it, and this is what is so fascinating in taboo, and what is taboo: seeing a dead body is arguably only fearful once the idea of death as something fearful is in place, and then only really when this fear is not allowed to occur, as in contemporary Western societies (Hegarty 2000, 108).

A taboo provides a sense of order and control by placing the threatening element outside of society through prohibition. However, the security offered by the taboo is undermined by the recognition that is given to the forbidden thing when it is banished or excluded. The taboo, like any law, paradoxically conceives of the crime by *disallowing* it.⁴ In his discussion of Bataille, Michael Richardson emphasises these ambiguities when he asserts that the intention of the prohibitions, 'was not to condemn or forbid entirely: what was prohibited was not denied, but was consigned to a certain limit. This limit was defined by the idea of transgression' (Richardson 1998, 51). Herein lies a fundamental paradox of taboos: the imposition of boundaries actually makes transgression possible and violation of these same limits serves to reinforce the idea or potency of the taboo. Benjamin Noys notes that Bataille resists any possibility of an equilibrium of the difference between these two forces as he quotes from *Eroticism*:

Transgression piled upon transgression will never abolish the taboo, just as though the taboo were never anything but the means of cursing

⁴ In a sense, there can be no crime without law, but also there can be no law without crime - for the latter ironically legitimatises the former as a necessity in respect to maintaining the social fabric. Paul Hegarty notes a resonance between Bataille and Michel Foucault, the latter of whom argues in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977), that crime is actually 'constructed' by the legal system (Hegarty 2000, 108).

gloriously whatever it forbids. (Bataille quoted in Noys 2000, 85)

Indeed, it is impossible to consider taboos independently of transgression, and vice versa, as they are not autonomous – their mutual existence and individual power relies on the other. As Noys astutely observes: ‘What is forbidden must be possible, for example incest or murder, or there would be no need for the taboo’ (Noys 2000, 85). Within taboo, transgression exists as a possibility, potential, or a desire, which beckons with horrible seduction, which threatens to spring forth, that the individual must constantly guard against. Bataille speaks of this unshakable desire as being constitutive of man, ‘the rational being who tries to obey but who succumbs to stirrings within himself which he cannot bring to heel’ (Bataille 1986, 40). The subject is but a puppet to the brutality of his own instinctual urges – futilely resisting the pull of the strings, he is gripped by an ambivalent fascination and repulsion. The taboo draws the subject to that which is forbidden, but on partaking of the forbidden element the subject is flooded with the conflict of pleasure and anguish. However, this model of audience response is more complex than what could be seen as the cliché of the ‘forbidden fruit’, of simply being tempted by that which is denied, as Hegarty claims:

What is at stake, then, is more than simply breaking a rule – it is the replaying of the fact of having rules, and of there being an outside to them. (Hegarty 2000, 109)

The representation of the transgressive excesses of capitalism in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* also reminds us that in creating a social system (defined by laws or boundaries, ‘protected’ by taboos), an outside to, or an excess of, that system (the transgressive family of cannibals), is also conceived, as in the inextricable relation between taboo and transgression. Hooper’s film brings to our attention not only the breaking of a rule, for example, of murder or the consumption of human flesh, but engages us by playing on society’s insistence on prohibitions and of our ambivalent compliance with this inhibitive and protective framework.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre’s ability to manipulate the audience is dependent on the collective understanding of various forbidden elements and

of our general complicity with these socially imposed conventions. From a Batailleian perspective, the prohibitive power of the taboo enforces a denial of the savage core of our being, protecting society and culture (including economic and political institutions) that in turn ‘socialise’ the individual / worker / consumer. However, despite such cultural conditioning, taboos are rarely consciously recognised, until a transgression of the limits reinstates the prohibition. Bataille explains:

If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violating it we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist [...] That experience leads to the completed transgression, the successful transgression which, in maintaining the prohibition, maintains it in order to benefit by it (Bataille 1986, 38).

Likewise, while the audience’s observance or conditioning to taboos draws their attention to horror film transgressions, the violations sensitise the audience’s awareness of the prohibition. The resulting tension feeds the emotive power of both the taboo *and* the transgression. In other words, the transgression (and the audience’s anguished response to the ‘horror’), maintains the prohibitive power of the taboo in order for *both* to exist: a relationship of reciprocation in which the taboo begets its own violation and vice versa. Taboo and transgression find their special privilege and power in the other, as Bataille proposes; ‘The compression (taboo) is not subservient to the explosion (transgression), far from it; it gives it increased force’ (Bataille 1986, 65). This suggests that the irreconcilable tension between these two states contributes to the irresistible desire to partake in forbidden elements for, as noted earlier in this paper, ‘extreme seductiveness is at the boundary of horror’ (Bataille quoted in Jenks 2003, 115). However, the ‘completed’ seduction of the transgression does not dissipate the tension, but exacerbates the pressure and momentum of the turmoil, as the felling of one taboo leads to a endless cycle of collapse and resurrection, for transgressions only reinforce the existence of the boundary crossed. Rather than a cathartic release, the spectatorial ‘pleasures’ of the horror film may be found in this paradoxical self-sustaining cycle, in which forbidden elements are simultaneously acknowledged and excluded, social codes (that both restrain

us and allow for production and progress) are challenged and reinstated, and our innate animalistic violence, denied by the trappings of civilization, is reclaimed and renounced. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* ambivalently engages the audience by exploiting the irreconcilable tension that exists between taboos and transgression. This horror film's play on the coexistence of our ambivalent observance of rules and the impetus to reappropriate our most base desires, derives its force from upholding the taboo, by bringing it into the foreground of our consciousness, through revelling in and glorifying its transgression.

Returning to the opening scene of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the grave-desecrating necrophilic transgressions of the Hitchhiker (combined with the pessimistic radio broadcast) serve as bleak reminders of the violent aspects of humanity uncontained by prohibitions, which effectively undermines the sense of order or security provided by taboos. The conflation of multiple transgressions in the shocking (and prolonged) image of the grave-robber's perverse work, stimulates the audience's awareness of the taboos, which in turn feeds the emotive force of the violations, setting in motion an unresolvable tension and ambivalent interest throughout the film. A film's opening scene aims to captivate the audience, but in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* this objective is fulfilled in a manner that could be likened to Bataille's description of that moment of transition as the line demarcated by the taboo is crossed:

We feel (the anguish) when we are violating the taboo, especially at that moment when our feelings hang in the balance, when the taboo still holds good and yet we are yielding to the impulsion it forbids. [...] The inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire, which leads him to infringe it. (Bataille 1986, 38-39)

The opening sequence skilfully places the spectator in this vulnerable position of bearing the weight of the taboo in the conscious mind, while being given a taste of the anguish of the transgression: the audience is engaged and ambivalently primed for the horror to come.

The early scene in which we are introduced to the Hitchhiker exacerbates the tension established in the film's opening by taking place

within the 'safe' confines of the youth's van, as they drive down the isolated country road. Just as the taboo invites its own transgression, the youths unwittingly invite the infiltration of violent elements into their hedonistic, carefree world through offering a lift to the Hitchhiker. As noted earlier, Franklin's conversation with this odd character establishes the subtext of transgressive 'cannibalistic' capitalism, symbolised by the slaughterhouse. However, the unease produced by this awkward conversation is consolidated by more explicit, literal transgressions that follow. As polite 'small-talk' is exhausted by the growing gulf of disgust and fear, the stranger turns his interest to Franklin's pocketknife. Seemingly transfixed and fascinated by the blade, the deranged Hitchhiker grabs the weapon from the wheelchair-bound youth and (to the horror of the occupants of the van), proceeds to slice deeply into his own palm, letting the blood run freely down his arm. After giving the bloody knife back to its shocked owner, the Hitchhiker continues to absurdly transgress the boundaries and taboos of social conduct by photographing Franklin (without consent) and demanding payment for the Polaroid image. When Franklin refuses, the Hitchhiker places the photo on a dirty piece of aluminium foil, sprinkles gunpowder on top, and sets it alight; symbolically destroying the human subject of the picture. This series of transgressions evoke a claustrophobic sense of panic, aptly conveyed through the tight framing of the scene and the use of low camera angles that create a point-of-view effect in the restricted space of the van's interior. As smoke fills the van, the horrified teenagers finally toss the stranger out, but not before the Hitchhiker slashes the disabled (and therefore more vulnerable) Franklin's arm with a strop razor hidden in his boot.⁵ The

⁵ In the remake of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (dir. Marcus Nispel, 2003), as opposed to the unease built in Hooper's original film by an escalating series of transgressions (combined with the subtext of cannibalistic capitalism), the youths (and audience) are assaulted by the image of a gun-wielding female Hitchhiker 'blowing her brains out' in the back seat of their van. While the representation of 'transgression' created by the camera 'passing through' the hole in her shattered skull is a clever feat of special effects, the response evoked is less the Batailleian anguish of transgression but more a reaction of shock to an exploitative and sensationalized image. I would argue that such extreme images desensitize the viewer (the shock wears off), leaving them craving for a stronger horror 'fix', in

Hitchhiker manages to smear his blood in a cryptic mark on the outside of the van, branding the youths like cattle in the slaughterhouse, reducing them to the level of animals, sealing their fate as ‘consumables’, before the young people speed away.

In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, barbarism, horror and the excesses of capitalism are notably grounded in the transgression of the boundary between humans and animals. As discussed earlier, this demarcation is defined by Bataille in relation to the observance of taboos, and participation in work and eroticism. In Hooper’s film, the divide that exists between animal and human, consumer and consumable, as a type of taboo, is made ambiguous by the slaughterhouse workers’ labour. While the Hitchhiker’s ‘branding’ of the youths in the act of marking their van with his blood is a subtle indication of this ambiguity, it is most evident in the murders of Kirk, Pam and Jerry, by the grotesque figure known as ‘Leatherface’, which occur as each victim transgresses the home of the monstrous family of cannibals. The animalistic traits that are the key to Leatherface’s ambiguous persona, call to mind Bataille’s assertion that taboos are a defining feature of man, which separated and raised humankind above other species, while transgression was a regressive action:

As taboos came into play, man became distinct from the animals. He attempted to set himself free from the excessive domination of death and reproductive activity (of violence that is) under whose sway animals are helpless. But under the secondary influence of transgression man drew near to the animals once more. He saw how animals escape the rule of taboos and remain open to the violence (the excess, that is) that reigns in the realms of death and reproduction. (Bataille 1986, 83)

Leatherface’s animalistic disregard for taboos, combined with his enigmatic identity (heightened by the obscuring of his presumably hideous face behind an indistinctive mask made of human skin, and later through the gender confusion of cross dressing), renders the audience’s ability to identify with

contrast to the irreconcilable tension and profound ambivalence which is maintained by a Bataillean taboo / transgression dynamic.

this figure problematic.⁶ Such ambiguity maintains Leatherface as a transgressive ‘other’ who disturbs / transgresses categories and boundaries (of species, of gender, of individual identity and subjectivity), further stimulating the anguished response of the audience to his brutal actions. The abrupt and apparently meaningless murders (which contrast with the prolonged suffering of Sally later in the film), lack a sense of human emotion or passion; Leatherface simply slaughters his victims without fuss or elaboration, just as though they were cattle in the abattoir, or as a predatory animal efficiently kills its prey. For example, in the first murder, Kirk’s curiosity gets the better of him as he hesitantly enters the neighbours’ farmhouse when he is seeking gas for the van. Once inside the hallway of the cannibals’ homestead he is drawn to the doorway adorned with skulls and other animal trophies after hearing a pig-like squeal. It comes as a shock to discover that the inarticulate grunting comes from the giant figure, Leatherface, who, dressed in a butcher’s apron, with his mask made of human skin, brandishes a sledgehammer as a murder weapon with skill and precision no doubt gained from his years of experience in the slaughterhouse prior to redundancy. After striking Kirk on the head, Leatherface drags his convulsing ‘carcass’ into the ‘trophy’ room / kitchen / slaughterhouse and ominously slams the steel door shut, leading the audience to imagine the worst transgressions possible behind that closed door. The treatment of Pam plays on the ambiguities of the division between animals and humans to an even greater extent. On looking for Kirk, Pam trips over an urn and sprawls on the floor of a room littered with the remnants of both animal and human bodies; feathers, bones, teeth, fur, hair, along with furniture made from an ambiguous mixture of bones, which contrast with bloody tools that are apparently used in Leatherface’s vile labour. The most prominent example

⁶ While no explanation is given for Leatherface’s mask wearing in Hooper’s film, in Nispel’s (much inferior and convoluted) remake of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, it is suggested that Leatherface was teased and ostracized for his facial disfigurements (including the lack of a nose), for which he seeks murderous revenge. I would argue, however, that the tension evoked by the unresolved ambiguity in Hooper’s original film is more engaging and transgressive, than the convenient explanation in the remake.

of this unwholesome amalgam of species is the human skull, hanging by a piece of string, and penetrated by a large bullhorn which emerges through the gaping mouth – a literal transgression in itself. The racking-focus close-up of this particular artefact provides a visual focal point (and conceptual emphasis) within the collection of suspended body parts swinging in the breeze, which draws our attention to the transgression of humanity by animalistic elements.⁷ This theme is reinforced by the repeated zooming shots of a large, filthy hen kept in a tiny cage – trapped, and to be slaughtered like Pam, representing the reduction of humankind to the level, or fate, of animals. Continuity editing principles are rejected in a rapid and disorienting montage of zooms, pans and jump-cuts, which creates a sense of dawning panic and disgust as Pam realises the extent of the transgressions she has stumbled upon and begins to retch.⁸ The sound of a rattlesnake pre-empted the strike of another animalistic predator – Leatherface – who rushes forward squealing and grunting. After capturing his prey and unceremoniously hanging the conscious and terrified girl on a meat hook (like a slab of beef), Pam is forced to bear witness to Leatherface's butchering of her boyfriend with a chain saw. In an additional act of cruelty, Jerry later discovers the (still alive) Pam locked in a meat freezer, before he is also killed with a sledgehammer. Despite the abrupt nature of these murders, the brief screen time devoted to the killing and the relatively moderate level of graphic violence depicted, the transgressions go beyond what would be commonly accepted as 'appropriate' or tolerable, even for a 'lesser' species, such as cattle, which makes these acts particularly horrifying. Like an animal, the ambiguous figure of Leatherface recognises no taboos, yet, like man, he is capable of what Bataille describes as the most deliberate and exploitative of transgressions: cruelty (Bataille 1986, 64, 80). The

⁷ 'Racking-focus' involves a shift of focus between different planes during a shot.

⁸ Continuity editing aims to create 'seamless' narrative action by the application of specific camera and editing techniques that enhance the sense of a relationships between shots, creating a continuous flow of imagery that orients the viewer and facilitates the transfer of meaning. In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* continuity editing principles are rejected in sequences that aim to communicate the psychic trauma of the victim by fragmenting the vision and sound – creating a kind of 'point-of-view' effect.

repeated confusion between man and beast at the level of both transgressor (Leatherface) and transgressed (victims), the consumer and the consumed, insistently calls the boundary between species (as a form of taboo) into question. Just as Bataille resists an equilibrium between taboo and transgression, this issue is left unresolved and the tension unabated in the lead up to the film's climax.

Transgressive themes that destabilise the distinctions between human / animal, consumer / consumed, build to a sadistic climax during the 'dinner party' scene, where Sally is both guest of honour and 'main course'. In this parody of a domestic scene, perverted small town hospitality, demented family values, unrepentant sadism, childish bullying, and cannibalism are absurdly combined. In blurring the line between horror and humour an intense ambivalence is evoked. Furthermore, the application of non-conventional cinematic techniques heightens the sense of anguish by challenging the audience's expectations of the medium.

Immediately prior to the 'dinner party' scene, the audience is re-acquainted with 'Cook' –the seemingly friendly and obliging gas station owner – who earlier in the film ironically warned the group of young people about trespassing (transgressing) on other people's property. In fleeing the chain saw wielding Leatherface (who just murdered her disabled brother), Sally seeks shelter in the gas station, hysterically imploring Cook to lock the door and call for help. However, Sally's (and the audience's) hopeful expectations of Cook are thwarted as he swings between being Sally's protector and her sadistic captor. After overpowering Sally with a broom, Cook places a sack over the bound and gagged girl and drags her to his truck. He is careful to return to his gas station to turn off the lights as he complains about the price of electricity; a banal grievance of capitalism, which seems ironic and incongruous in light of the horrific events. The drive from the gas station to his homestead is made particularly uncomfortable as we observe Cook alternate between playing the hospitable, comforting father figure, concerned for Sally's wellbeing (the father also being the 'bread-winner' in the traditional American vision of capitalism), and sadistic torturer as he pokes her with a broom handle, and delights in her screams of

pain and terror. As they proceed down the driveway towards the house, Cook stops the truck to beat his son, the Hitchhiker, for nearly getting caught robbing the graves (as represented in the opening scene), and leaving his (even more disturbed) brother, Leatherface, alone. Cook's angry reprimanding of Leatherface due to his chain sawing of the front door ('He's got no pride in his home' – the family home being an aspired-for commodity under capitalism), indicates a perverse value system, for his son's gruesome murders are considered a family obligation. This scene is littered with ironic references to 'norms' and priorities under capitalism, which contrast with the ex-slaughterhouse workers' transgressive behaviour. For they embody both the violent potential of this system and its more banal concerns: a combination that is both absurd and horrific.

As Cook returns to the homestead with Sally (dinner guest and 'dinner') he is greeted by the odd spectacle of the towering Leatherface, dressed in an old woman's wig, apron and mask of human skin caked with thickly applied makeup. Enraged by his transvestite son's chain sawing of the front door of the farmhouse, Cook hurls verbal abuse and beats his incoherent, whimpering, cowering (yet monstrous) child with a broom handle and tells him to get back in his place – the kitchen. Through this interaction between father and son it becomes apparent that the cross-dressing Leatherface doubles as the surrogate mother / wife figure, suggesting transgression of the taboo against incest: a variation on the sex / death taboo theme exploited in the opening scene.

Although father / husband Cook admits that he takes no pleasure in killing ('It's just something you gotta do. Don't mean you gotta like it' – in contrast with the other murderous members of his family), he sells his family 'produce' (human meat products butchered by his son / wife 'Leatherface') to unwitting customers at the gas station. This revelation adds a transgressive twist to a seemingly innocuous previous event. Before becoming 'human barbeque' themselves, the teenagers' innocent indulgence in a barbeque meal at Cook's gas station early in the film, seals their fate as cannibalistic consumers helplessly embroiled in the transgressive excesses of capitalism.

At the climactic dinner party, Sally (cannibal and yet to be cannibalised) is tied to a chair constructed of severed human arms beneath a lampshade fashioned from a selection of bones and a human skull, by Hitchhiker who proceeds to poke and tease her like a childish bully. Leatherface joins in the taunting as the two brothers mimic her screams and pleas for mercy. Her offer to ‘do anything you want’ falls on deaf ears, as this group are more interested in torturing and eating the girl, rather than any predictable sexual transactions. Likewise, Cook’s sadistic / incestuous treatment of son / wife, Leatherface, suggests the sexual preferences of these men are hardly conventional. Rather, their aberrant sexuality veers into the indulgently transgressive, which reflects Bataille’s suggestion of the link between cruelty and eroticism, due to the deliberate nature of each:

Eroticism, like cruelty, is premeditated. Cruelty and eroticism are conscious intentions in a mind which has resolved to trespass into a forbidden field of behaviour. (Bataille 1986, 80)

The sexual overtones of Hitchhiker’s harassment of the incapacitated Sally lends a particularly sinister and humiliating quality to the sadistic bullying and seems to match Bataille’s assertion ‘(that) degradation is one of the effects of violence’, as well as of transgression (Bataille 1986, 54).

As Sally’s reasoning and pleading is turned against her by her captor’s cruel mockery, various cinematic techniques are used to portray her point of view of the traumatic events and to convey the anguish of transgression to the audience. The *mise-en-scene* is carefully constructed to stimulate the audience’s awareness of transgression of taboos. Various macabre objects, such as the human and animal bones that both litter the room and form various pieces of furniture, as well as the mummified remains of ‘Grandma’ and pet dogs found in an upstairs sitting room, confront the audience with the violation of taboos surrounding death. Throughout this sequence a wide-angle lens is used to distort the space and objects within the scene: spatial and sensorial distortion symbolising the girl’s (and the audience’s) psychic trauma. The anguish of transgression is also evoked by an unconventional and disorienting combination of canted framing, extreme high

and low camera angles, swivelling camera movements, and a series of rapid jump cuts of Sally's screaming face in close-up. Audio elements heighten the drama: sound editing fragments the continuity of Sally's screaming, matched by nerve shattering, ear piercing sound effects. In particular, the extreme close-ups and jump-cuts capturing that most vulnerable of organs – her eye – induces an uncomfortable sense of violation that is notably Bataillean in nature, considering the repetition of this motif in his oeuvre.⁹

The absurdity of the dinner party reaches its peak when it is decided that Sally is to be slaughtered. In a bizarre show of respect, Hitchhiker encourages his frail, corpse-like, Grandpa to 'have a whack'; to be given the honour of sacrificing their female dinner guest. This strange loyalty is reinforced by Cook's sincere admiration of his father's killing skills as he attempts to 'comfort' the hysterical girl. Cook's dialogue reminds us of Bataille's assertions regarding the role that social conditioning plays in the observance (or transgression) of taboos, as this family of slaughterhouse workers seem to share similarly twisted values:

Now you just hush. It won't hurt none. Ol' Grandpa's the best killer there ever was. Why he never took more than one lick they say. Why he did sixty (cattle) in five minutes once. They say he could've done more if the hook and pull gang could've got the beefs out of the way faster. Now don't you cry none. Ol' Grandpa's the best. It won't hurt a bit.

Cook's paternal words of 'comfort' contrast with Hitchhiker's sadistic command: 'hit that bitch!'. Although the decrepit, vampiric patriarch is temporarily revived after greedily and ecstatically sucking the blood from Sally's cut finger (perversely like an infant hungrily suckling the breast and ironically recalling Franklin's description of the slaughterhouse workers as 'a whole family of Draculas'), Grandpa is unable to deliver his infamous fatal

⁹ In particular, Bataille's pornographic novel *Story of the Eye* (written under the pseudonym 'Lord Auch') repeatedly refers to the motif of the (violated, fetishised) eye in various symbolic forms: the egg, the sun, the anus, the vagina, the testicle, etc. (Bataille 2001). In fact, the quote featured earlier in this paper (regarding the 'seductive boundary of horror') is taken from Bataille's discussion of the attractive, fearful and vulnerable qualities of the eye and the horror produced when the eye (like the taboo) is violated (Bataille 1985, 17).

blow with the sledgehammer. His feeble attempts to strike the hysterical girl, despite the assistance of Hitchhiker and Leatherface, verges on slapstick humour as he drops the hammer a total of eight times and only manages one weak strike. Sally finally manages to escape when the two siblings become impatient and squabble over who should finish the job.

The long shot of the limping, blood-soaked, screaming girl being pursued down a country road in broad daylight by the towering, chain saw wielding Leatherface, and the lanky, comically erratic running action of the Hitchhiker, is equally ridiculous and horrifying. The ambivalence expressed in Sally's crazed laughter as she finally escapes in the back of a utility truck is perhaps mirrored by the reaction of the audience, as horrified disgust is mixed with relief, and perhaps even nervous laughter. In these final moments, the dehumanisation and regression of both the hysterical Sally and the unrepentant and enraged Leatherface, as he wildly swings his chain saw through the air, suggest a Bataillean conclusion to this allegory: while the attraction of transgression is compelling, humanity and civilisation are indeed sustained by the paradoxical rule of the taboo. Despite the film's excessive transgressions, the taboo's power is not relinquished, for even repeated and extreme violations only reinforce the concept of a limit. Thus the audience's ambivalent experience of anguish and gratification, fascination and repulsion, in response to the transgressions represented throughout this film and the pessimistic, open-ended conclusion, is validated whilst remaining undiminished.

In conclusion, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* presents a horrifying vision of the transgressive excesses of capitalism, in which the family who kill to 'make a living', the home which doubles as the slaughter house, the blurring of the boundaries between animals and humans, the consumers who become the consumed, and the cannibals who are cannibalised, represent America 'devouring' itself. Bataille's theories offer a convincing means of examining the origins of humanity's violence, the role that prohibitions play in safe-guarding social structures, and the paradoxical relationship between taboos and transgression, which are played out through the theme of 'cannibalistic capitalism' in this particular horror film. The 'seductive

boundary of horror' invites the transgression *and* upholds the taboo, but ultimately resists the resolution of its effects. While further work remains to be done on this kind of analysis, this Bataillean 'taste' of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, indicates the potential contribution of Bataille's ideas to the theorising of horror and the spectatorial 'pleasures' of submitting to the anguish it provokes.

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