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GORE AND DELIGHT: A BLOODY GOOD TIME?

EXPLORING THE ENJOYMENT OF GORE IN HORROR MOVIES

ABSTRACT

The present study examines why audiences find enjoyment in watching extreme cinematic violence, with a particular focus on the emotional, cognitive, and cultural appeal of gore in horror films. While graphic imagery often provokes fear or disgust, many viewers actively seek out these experiences, suggesting that such content may fulfill deeper psychological and symbolic functions. Drawing on theories including the *paradox of horror* (Carroll, 1990), *excitation transfer theory* (Cummins, 2017), and *cinemasochism* (Heller-Nicholas, 2014), this study investigates how viewers engage with gore not only as a spectacle but as meaningful and affectively charged media.

Based on semi-structured interviews with ten self-identified horror fans from France and the Netherlands, this research explores participants' reactions to gore across different formats (film, anime, and video games) and considers how enjoyment is shaped by emotional, cognitive, and cultural factors. Thematic analysis revealed several recurring patterns: participants described gore as a source of emotional release, narrative intrigue, aesthetic engagement, and, at times, political commentary. Factors such as gender, cultural background, and viewing context significantly shaped interpretation, with some audiences framing gore as cathartic or artistic, and others emphasizing its transgressive appeal.

Overall, the findings revealed that the appreciation of gore is not monolithic, but rather a multifaceted and layered process. Challenging the notion of gore as purely gratuitous and instead positioning it as a site of symbolic negotiation and emotional engagement, this thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of horror spectatorship and the complex cultural functions of violent media in a digital age.

KEYWORDS: horror, gore, viewer engagement, emotional regulation, cinematic violence, gender theory, taste, media study, psychology, visual narratives.

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1. Introduction

Blood. Guts. Screams. Few elements in cinema are as instantly recognizable and polarizing as gore and horror. Whether it is a sudden explosion of violence or a drawn-out sequence of bodily dismemberment, gore confronts audiences with the fragile limits of the human body. For some viewers, these scenes provoke revulsion or anxiety. For others, they fulfill fascination, excitement, or even aesthetic appreciation. This paradox between horror and delight, visceral discomfort and emotional engagement, is the central concern explored in the following chapters.

Gore-heavy films occupy a controversial space in both popular culture and academic discourse. While often dismissed as gratuitous, exploitative, or lowbrow, they are also celebrated at international film festivals, critically analyzed within media and culture studies, and passionately embraced by global fan communities. Recent films like *Midsommar*¹ and *The Substance*² demonstrate that gore can do more than shock: it can explore themes like gender identity, trauma, and transformation while challenging viewers' expectations of cinematic form and meaning. Despite this increasing visibility and complexity, fundamental questions remain: why do audiences seek out films that center violence, suffering, and bodily destruction? What do they find pleasurable, meaningful, or even comforting in such imagery?

This thesis addresses these questions through the lived experiences of horror audiences. The central research question guiding this study is: **Why do audiences find enjoyment in watching extreme cinematic violence, and how do they engage with it emotionally, cognitively, and culturally?** This inquiry builds on a growing need to better understand horror audiences, not just as passive consumers of shocking content, but as active interpreters who make sense of violence in nuanced and often deeply personal ways. While academic work on horror has addressed genre conventions, narrative structures, and representations of gender and trauma, there is comparatively little empirical research on how viewers themselves articulate their relationship with gore. What emotional or psychological needs does this content meet? How do cultural background, gender, or personal history

¹ *Midsommar*, Ari Aster, 2019.

² *The Substance*, Coralie Fargeat, 2024.

influence responses to violent imagery, and what distinguishes an experience of entertainment from one of discomfort or reflection?

Gore challenges cultural boundaries around taste, morality, and the purpose of art. It exists at the edge of what many people are willing to watch, yet it continues to thrive in both mainstream and underground cinema. Its visual excess, raw emotionality, and symbolic potential raise important questions about how we process fear, pain, and pleasure through media. Studying how people engage with gore is therefore not just about horror; it is about understanding how audiences navigate intense affective experiences, negotiate societal taboos, and find meaning in the grotesque.

In a media landscape increasingly saturated with extreme content, the relevance of this topic extends far beyond the horror niche. Beyond horror, participants noted how graphic content is now common in shows, films, and games, making gore more normalized. At the same time, debates about media effects, trauma representation, and censorship remain highly charged. Understanding the appeal of gore, particularly from the viewer's perspective, contributes to protocols for conversations about violence, spectatorship, and the emotional labor of watching.

The enjoyment of gore is a complex, layered phenomenon, one that resists easy explanation. It is emotional, cultural, psychological, and deeply personal. Rather than framing gore as a moral issue, this research treats it as a site of inquiry into how people engage with unsettling, intense, and often contradictory forms of media. By centering audience narratives and interpretations, it offers insight into how viewers manage their emotions, construct meaning, and position themselves in relation to violence on screen. By doing so, it contributes to a richer understanding of horror as a genre, of violence as a visual language, and of spectatorship as an active meaning-making process.

The following chapter introduces the key theoretical framework that supports the research, including perspectives from horror studies, media psychology, and cultural theory. The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative research design and explains how participants were selected and interviewed. The findings and discussion chapters then explore the patterns, contradictions, and insights that emerged from participants' reflections on gore.

Ultimately, this project does not aim to solve the paradox of horror, but to better understand it. Why does gore, something we are taught to avoid, become, for some, a source

of joy, catharsis, or even an artistic connection? In seeking answers, this thesis contributes to a growing field of research that takes horror seriously, not just as a genre, but as a mirror to our fears, fantasies, and fascination with the extreme. Whether you're someone who covers their eyes during violent scenes or someone who rewinds them for another look, this thesis invites you to consider what gore and horror films really mean to those who fear it and who, at the same time, love it.

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding why viewers seek out gory content and the “paradox of horror” requires considering multiple dimensions: not only emotional reaction, but also cultural context, narrative design, and psychological appeal. This study draws upon four key theoretical domains to better understand why people cinematic gore: (1) The Paradox of Horror and Affective Viewer Engagement, (2) Emotional and Psychological Dimensions of Gore Consumption, (3) Viewer Identity, Gender, and the Cinematic Gaze, and (4) Cultural and Aesthetic Contexts of Gore.

These frameworks support not only the conceptual basis of this study but also the practical aspects of research design. They helped shape the structure of the interview guide and provided a basis for the thematic coding strategy used in this thesis, with participants’ emotional, cognitive, and contextual responses.

2.1. The Paradox of Horror and Viewer Engagement

A foundational starting point is Noël Carroll’s (1990, pp.158-206) concept of the “paradox of horror”, which directly addresses the contradictory nature of audience behavior: people are drawn to fictional depictions of events they would normally avoid in real life. According to Carroll, the appeal of horror lies in its ability to provoke both cognitive engagement, through the curiosity about the unknown and the monstrous, and emotional intensity, particularly when a sense of narrative resolution is achieved. While gore typically evokes disgust, Carroll’s framework suggests that this reaction is overridden by a compelling desire to confront and resolve the horrific. In other words, rather than rejecting gore, audiences may be pulled deeper into it by the very intensity of their aversion.

Carroll’s argument is closely connected to Linda Williams’ (1991, p.4) theory of “body genres”, which categorizes horror as a genre that aims for intense bodily responses. Williams argues that, like pornography or melodrama, horror works through the body: it provokes shivers, gasps, screams, or laughter. In the case of gore, these reactions are often amplified by the visual excess of bodily violence, which serves to amplify the sensory experience. Williams’ theory emphasizes the visceral and immediate impact of such imagery, blurring the

boundaries between “low” entertainment and high art by centering the body as a site of aesthetic and affective engagement.

In more recent works, such as Julian Hanich (2010, pp.1-6), this line of thinking has been extended through the concept of “cinematic emotion”. Hanich explores how horror films choreograph viewer responses through the use of suspense, empathy, and emotional release that are crafted via rhythm, sound, and visual framing. These dynamics are particularly relevant in the case of gore, where the viewer’s state often fluctuates between repulsion and fascination. What emerges is an understanding of horror not as a genre that defies logic, but one that activates specific psychological and sensory circuits to achieve its effect. This emphasis on embodied experience and emotional resonance serves as a key analytic lens throughout the present study.

Viewer identification further complicates this embodied engagement. Carol J. Clover’s (1992, pp.33-41) influential “Final Girl” theory illustrates how viewers oscillate between identifying with the victim and the aggressor, producing a layered and often contradictory experience of violence. Applied to gore-heavy films, this dynamic helps explain why some audiences report feelings of empathy and catharsis, while others seek adrenaline or a sense of control. These shifts in identification are shaped by genre conventions, narrative structure, and broader power dynamics, especially those related to gender. Laura Mulvey’s (1999, pp.15-17) theory of “visual pleasure and the cinematic gaze” expands on this by arguing that cinematic spectatorship is conditioned by modes of looking: voyeuristic, sadistic, or empathetic. Both Clover and Mulvey provide crucial insight into how viewers engage with violent spectacle, suggesting that the enjoyment of gore is not simply about content, but about how viewers are positioned in relation to it.

2.2. Emotional and Psychological Dimensions of Gore Consumption

While genre mechanics and identification theories explain *how* gore operates within horror narratives, psychological frameworks help illuminate *why* viewers seek it out. One relevant explanation comes from Mathias Clasen (2017, pp.9-24), who applies evolutionary psychology to horror. Clasen argues that horror functions as a simulation space allowing individuals to rehearse real-life fears such as death, injury, or predation, in a controlled environment. From this perspective, the extreme violence of gore heightens the sense of

danger and survival, but within a fictional frame that ultimately enables emotional catharsis and a sense of mastery.

Clasen's approach complements the "Excitation Transfer Theory" (Zillmann, 1983, pp.215-240; Cummins, 2017, pp.370-371), which posits that physiological arousal from intense stimuli can carry over into subsequent emotional responses. In the context of horror, scenes involving blood, mutilation, or suspense may generate tension and anxiety, but these feelings often enhance the impact of narrative resolution or comic relief that follows. The emotional arousal does not vanish; it is redirected, intensifying the viewer's overall experience. This mechanism helps explain why moments of extreme violence can paradoxically increase the enjoyment rather than diminish it.

This logic is particularly applicable to so-called "thrill seekers", individuals who actively pursue emotionally intense and high-arousal experiences, whether through horror films, extreme sports, or other media. Research indicates that these viewers often report higher enjoyment of horror films and a lower level of disgust sensitivity (Tamborini & Skalski, 2006, pp.225-240). For such audiences, gore serves as a stimulus-rich form of content, delivering emotional intensity that is welcomed rather than avoided. Therefore, the interview design for this study incorporated questions about physical responses, emotional thresholds, and individual motivations for engaging with violent imagery.

Beyond arousal and thrill, scholars such as Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (2014, pp.100-120) introduce more complex modes of engagement. Her theory of *cinemasochism* posits that horror fans may find meaning, satisfaction, and even pleasure in discomfort. Rather than rejecting negative emotions, these viewers embrace the pain, disgust, or anxiety provoked by violent scenes as part of a deeper cinematic experience. This theory positions viewers not as passive consumers, but as active participants who negotiate and reframe discomfort into aesthetic or emotional payoff. Cinemasochism is especially relevant in discussions of extreme horror, where the genre's value often lies not in traditional narrative pleasures, but in how it makes viewers feel and endure.

The emotional labor involved in viewing gory films is multifaceted: It may be a form of thrill seeking, a method of self-soothing, or an intentional act of physiological confrontation. The pleasure of gore, then, is not necessarily perverse or irrational. It can be framed as a process of emotional regulation and self-discovery. This aligns with research in

media psychology suggesting that people use emotionally intense media to manage mood, explore taboo topics, or achieve a sense of catharsis (Bartsch, 2012). As such, this study investigates not only the arousal and intensity associated with gore but also its regulatory functions. Do audiences feel empowered after watching disturbing content? Do they perceive it as a form of stress relief, a coping mechanism, or a means of expressing complex emotions? These questions inform the methodological emphasis on emotional response and regulation as key components of the interview guide (*Appendix A*) and thematic analysis.

In sum, psychological theories reveal that gore is not simply consumed for shock; it is engaged with as a tool for exploring, testing, and recalibrating emotional thresholds. This framework supports the idea that watching extreme violence in film can be a deeply personal and psychologically meaningful act, even when framed as entertainment. It also reinforces the need to explore subjective viewer interpretations, which the qualitative design of this thesis seeks to capture.

2.3. Viewer Identity, Gender, and the Cinematic Gaze

While psychological frameworks shed light on individual motivations and emotional responses to gore, theories of identity and cinematic spectatorship help unpack how social and cultural positioning, especially gender, mediate those responses. These theories suggest that the experience of horror is not universal, but rather shaped by the viewer's subject position, including how they identify with characters, how they are invited to "see" through the camera's perspective, and how these visual and narrative structures reflect broader power dynamics.

Already mentioned earlier, Carol J. Clover's (1992, pp.33-41) work *Men, Women and Chainsaws* introduced the concept of the "Final Girl", arguing that horror films, particularly slashers, often get audience identification toward a lone, surviving female character. This figure is typically subjected to prolonged suffering, but eventually overcomes the antagonist, offering both catharsis and empowerment. Clover suggests that audiences, regardless of gender, are encouraged to identify with the Final Girl's vulnerability and endurance, rather than with the aggressor. Her theory complicates earlier assumptions that horror encourages voyeuristic or sadistic identification, suggesting instead a dynamic interplay between empathy, fear, and survival.

Building on this, Laura Mulvey's (1975, revised 1999) *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* introduces the concept of the "male gaze", implying that classical Hollywood cinema positions viewers, regardless of their actual gender, to adopt a masculine, objectifying gaze. While Mulvey focused primarily on eroticized imagery, her theory has been widely applied to horror, where the spectacle of female suffering is often aestheticized and framed for the viewer's pleasure. Gore-heavy horror, in particular, frequently places women's bodies at the center of violent display, raising ethical and interpretive questions about who is looking, who is suffering, and who is in control.

In this context, viewer enjoyment of gore can be seen as intricately tied to processes of identification and disidentification. Some viewers may experience pleasure through sadistic alignment with the aggressor; others may feel catharsis through identification with the victim or survivor. In that sense, viewer alignment is context-dependent, shaped by narrative structure, visual framing, and the viewer's own eyes. The same scene may provoke radically different responses depending on whether a viewer interprets it as empowering, degrading, stylized, or realistic. More recent scholarship has expanded these debates beyond binary gender positions. Scholars such as Isabel Cristina Pinedo (2004, pp.69-96) and Aviva Briefel (2005, pp.16-27) argue that contemporary horror offers more complex spectatorial modes, including ironic detachments, subversive empathy, and genre-savviness. Viewers today recognize typical patterns in horror films and may consciously resist or reinterpret them. For example, a viewer might enjoy a hyper-violent scene not for its realism or shock, but for its camp value, a steady excess, or metafictional commentary.

Gendered experiences of gore also intersect with broader questions of identity and socialization. Cultural norms around masculinity, for instance, may encourage emotional suppression while valorizing toughness and endurance. This can shape how male-identifying viewers interpret their reactions to horror: they may be more likely to describe their enjoyment in terms of excitement or humor, and less likely to admit vulnerability or fear. Conversely, women and nonbinary viewers may approach horror as a space to explore societal fears of victimization or reclaim agency through survivor narratives. These dynamics are particularly relevant to the study's qualitative design, which encourages participants to reflect on how their background, gender identity, and cultural values shape their engagement with violent content.

Due to the layered and often contradictory nature of identification in horror, this study places particular emphasis on how participants narrate their position in relation to violent imagery to feel aligned with the victim, the aggressor, a neutral observer, or a more symbolic position. Do these identifications shift across different formats (e.g., anime vs. live action) or in different social contexts (e.g., watching alone vs. watching with friends)? These questions are addressed both in the interview transcripts and the thematic analysis, where codes like “empathy”, “over-identification”, “discomfort with sexual violence”, and “political metaphor” are used to map viewer positioning.

In sum, based on theories of identity and gaze applied to horror movies, gore is never consumed in a vacuum. Its impact depends on who is watching, how they are positioned by the narrative, and what social or psychological frameworks they bring to the viewing experience. By incorporating these perspectives, the study moves beyond universalist assumptions and instead attends to the embodied, gendered, and culturally situated dimensions of gore consumption.

2.4. Cultural and Aesthetic Contexts of Gore

While individual psychology and viewer identity help explain micro-level responses to gore, a broader understanding requires situating these responses within cultural, historical, and aesthetic frameworks. Gore functions not only as a narrative device but also as a cultural artifact shaped by artistic conventions, social values, and political conditions. As such, understanding the enjoyment of gore involves explaining how violent imagery acquires meaning within specific cultural and aesthetic contexts.

Stephen Prince’s (1998) concept of “graphic realism” is foundational in this regard. In *Savage Cinema*, Prince traces how developments in special effects, makeup artistry, and digital technology have contributed to increasingly realistic portrayals of bodily harm. This shift has changed not only the visual language of horror but also audience expectations. In earlier horror films, violence was often implied; today, it is often explicitly and artistically rendered. Prince argues that audiences have become desensitized not merely due to volume, but due to increasing sophistication: gore is now expected to be convincing, stylized, and narratively integrated. As audiences grow accustomed to more and more realistic portrayals, filmmakers explore new ways to use gore as a symbolic or stylistic element.

Beyond matters of realism, the cultural meaning-making of gore is deeply context-dependent. As Phillips (2005) argues in *Projected Fears*, horror films function as mirrors of cultural anxiety. The themes, symbols, and types of violence that resonate with audiences vary according to national histories, moral discourses, and political climates. For instance, American horror has long found roots in issues like militarism, racism, and suburban alienation, while French extreme cinema of the 2000s, like *Martyrs*³ or *Inside*⁴, e.g., has been read as dealing with post-colonial guilt and the collapse of national identity (Tarr & Pheasant-Kelly, 2013, pp.20-28).

Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. (2012) extends this idea by framing horror as a response to collective trauma and social anxiety. In his work on *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*, Wetmore suggests that graphic violence serves as a symbolic processing of national and existential fears. In this sense, gore is not merely gratuitous; it can function as a mode of cultural mourning, critique, or confrontation. Films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*⁵, *Hostel*⁶, or more recently, *The Substance*, engage directly with fears of bodily autonomy, systemic violence, and the breakdown of social norms. These narratives transform the body into a set of political and aesthetic commentary.

Wetmore's view is echoed by Phillips (2005), who argues that horror functions as a barometer of cultural tension, revealing anxieties around gender, race, technology, and morality. Gore, in particular, provides a visceral language for expressing what is otherwise inexpressible. The more extreme the violence, the more forceful its symbolic charge. As such, enjoyment of gore may reflect not moral depravity, but a desire to engage with taboo, to transgress boundaries, or to explore unsettling truths. This hypothesis is central to the present study's sub-question regarding whether fans see gore as purely shocking or as aesthetically and narratively meaningful.

Another layer of analysis comes from Adam Lowenstein's (2005) *Shocking Representation*, which positions gore within a modernist tradition of art that aims to disturb, provoke, and reveal. For Lowenstein, horror not only represents violence, but it also makes violence felt, immediate, and unavoidable. This visceral intensity is part of what grants the

³ *Martyrs*, Pascal Laugier, 2008.

⁴ *Inside*, Vasilis Katsoupiis, 2023.

⁵ *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Tobe Hooper, 1974.

⁶ *Hostel*, Eli Roth, 2005.

genre its aesthetic legitimacy. Films like *Hereditary*⁷ by Ari Aster, which combined graphic body horror with explorations of identity, transformation, and trauma, exemplified the trend of what has been defined as “elevated horror”. These works are not simply “extreme”: they are symbolic, allegorical, and politically charged. Gore here operates not in opposition to meaning, but as a medium of meaning, which, in turn, raises important questions about taste, legitimacy, and the boundaries of high and low art. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) famously argued, distinctions of taste are often coded by class and cultural capital. Horror, and particularly gory horror, has long been dismissed as “lowbrow” or culturally inferior. However, recent scholarship (Jancovich, 2002, pp.27-28; Hills, 2005, pp.71-96, 107-118) challenges this division, showing how horror fandom often involves sophisticated knowledge, intertextual awareness, and aesthetic appreciation. Many viewers actively interpret gore as a narrative device, a visual metaphor, or an artistic signature, defying the strict categorization of horror as a non-valuable genre.

These dynamics shaped the study’s exploration of symbolic versus spectacular interpretation as a key theme in the interview analysis. Participants were asked to reflect on whether they perceive gore as a tool of excess, a meaning of storytelling, or an avenue of critique. Additionally, the inclusion of multiple media formats (anime, video games, live-action film) allows for exploration of how gore functions differently across aesthetic and cultural contexts. For example, gore in anime such as *Elfen Lied* may be stylized and poetic, while in films like *The Substance*, it may be hyperreal and politically resonant. These aesthetic distinctions influence not only the emotional impact of gore but also how it is interpreted and evaluated.

Finally, cultural differences in censorship, media norms, and religious or moral frameworks further complicate how gore is received. As Han and Zhang (2024, pp. 86-91) argue, what is considered acceptable, artistic, or disturbing in one society may be perceived very differently in another. This justifies the study’s cross-cultural sampling strategy and prompts participants to reflect on how their upbringing, nationality, and social norms influence their interpretation of violent media.

In summary, gore functions culturally and aesthetically as a complex semiotic system. Far from being merely grotesque or voyeuristic, cinematic violence often serves deeper social,

⁷ *Hereditary*, Ari Aster, 2018.

symbolic, and artistic functions. Understanding the enjoyment of gore thus requires attention not only to *what* is shown, but to *how*, *why*, and *for whom* it is shown. This theoretical lens aligns closely with this study's interview questions about narrative purpose, symbolic value, and artistic intent, and supports a broader vision of horror audiences as active interpreters rather than passive consumers.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

To address the central research question: *why do audiences find enjoyment in watching extreme cinematic violence, and how do they engage emotionally, cognitively, and culturally*, this study employs a qualitative research design. This approach is particularly well-suited to questions that require in-depth understanding of subjective experiences, nuanced interpretations, and emotionally complex phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp.47, 258). Instead of aiming for generalizable patterns, this study focuses on rich, contextual accounts that reflect how participants interpret and respond to violent media.

The methodology is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which assumes that reality is socially and culturally constructed. This perspective supports the investigation of viewers' interpretations of gore, allowing for a multiplicity of experiences shaped by individual background, identity, and context. Semi-structured interviews are employed as the primary method of data collection. These interviews balance structure with flexibility, enabling the researcher to explore key themes while remaining open to unexpected insights. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, pp.2-3, 50-54, 143-147) argue, semi-structured interviews are especially effective when studying affective, cultural, and symbolic phenomena such as cinematic violence.

This exploratory design builds on established theoretical foundations, such as Carroll's (1990) "paradox of horror" and Clasen's (2017) evolutionary approach, aiming to discover new patterns in how viewers experience, rationalize, and interpret violent media. The exploratory nature is not a license for ambiguity but a methodological stance that invites discovery within a previously defined framework.

3.2. Sampling Strategy

Given the qualitative orientation of this study, purposive sampling is used to select participants with direct and relevant experience. Participants were selected based on their expressed interest in horror films, particularly those featuring graphic or gore-heavy content. Recruitment was conducted through horror film communities on social media, personal

networks, and recommendations, including Erasmus University student channels. While not statistically representative, the sample reflects a range of demographic and cultural backgrounds, enhancing the richness and comparative value of the findings.

In response to feedback on the importance of capturing gendered experiences and cultural variation, the sample includes participants of different genders, nationalities, and viewing habits. The intention is not only to explore universal patterns in the enjoyment of gore, but also to illuminate how identity markers such as gender and cultural background mediate these experiences. As Clover (1992) and Mulvey (1999) have demonstrated, horror viewing is profoundly shaped by questions of identification, power, and gaze; issues that are themselves informed by gendered and social positioning.

The anticipated sample size of 10 participants (see overview in *Appendix B*) aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.78) recommendation for thematic saturation in qualitative studies. This size allows for the emergence of meaningful patterns while keeping the volume of data manageable for deep interpretive analysis. Participants include both "casual" and "dedicated" horror fans, ensuring variation in levels of genre engagement. Theme saturation was identified when similar emotional and interpretive patterns began recurring across participants, with no substantially new insights emerging after the eighth interview.

3.3. Operationalization of Concepts

This research identified specific language, emotional reactions, and viewer interpretations as indicators of broader theoretical concepts, such as empathy, catharsis, or symbolic framing. The analysis operationalizes five core concepts through targeted interview questions and interpretive coding (see coding tree in *Appendix C*).

First, emotional engagement is assessed through participants' descriptions of effective and bodily responses during exposure to gore. This includes feelings of fear, excitement, repulsion, or catharsis. Following Williams (1991), the interviews investigate how gore operates as a "body genre", producing visceral responses that are both physical and psychological.

Second, viewer identification is explored. By asking participants about their alignment with victims, aggressors, or omniscient perspectives in violent scenes. Drawing on Clover's (1992) "Final Girl" theory and Mulvey's (1999) gaze theory, this element examines how power, empathy, and subjectivity structure the enjoyment of violence.

Third, symbolic versus spectacular interpretation is examined by asking whether participants perceive gore as gratuitous or meaningful. Do they see violent imagery as representing trauma, transformation, or critique, or merely as sensationalist? This ties into Jancovich's (2002) argument that horror can possess narrative and aesthetic legitimacy.

Fourth, Cultural perception is assessed by exploring how participants' upbringing, national context, and exposure to censorship informed their responses to gore. Censorship is to be understood with two meanings here: educational context or political. This is in line with Phillips' (2005) notion that horror reflects and responds to socio-political anxieties.

Finally, emotional regulation, a theme suggested in the proposal feedback, is operationalized by examining how viewers describe their ability to tolerate or even be soothed by violent imagery. This concept is incorporated as a follow-up question when suited. This connects to Clasen's (2017) notion of horror as cognitive rehearsal and to Heller-Nicholas' (2014) "cinemasochism", in which viewers seek discomfort as a means of effective engagement.

3.4. Data Collection

Data collection took place between February and May 2025, both online via Zoom or in person, depending on the participant's location and preference. Interviews were conducted in either English or French, with subsequent translation necessary to maintain analytical consistency. All participants received a consent form outlining the purpose of their study, their rights, and data confidentiality measures. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized with initials only for all participants.

Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and followed a guide organized around four thematic blocks: horror viewing habits, emotional and psychological reactions to gore, interpretive frameworks, and socio-cultural influences. Open-ended questions

encouraged participants to narrate personal stories and reflect on complex emotional responses. Follow-up questions were adjusted based on each participant's responses, encouraging them to reflect more deeply or expand on contradictions in their statements.

A short stimulus section was incorporated into the interviews to assess whether format mediates viewers' responses to gore. Participants were shown short clips from three sources: the anime *Elfen Lied* ("The Death of Kanae"), the horror video game *Outlast II* ("Killed by Martha"), and the live-action film *The Substance* by Coralie Fargeat ("The Tooth Scene"). These clips were selected for their distinct aesthetics (animated, interactive, and cinematic), levels of realism, and cultural tone. Prior to showing the clips, participants were warned about the graphic nature of the material and asked for explicit consent.

As recommended in the feedback, participants were also asked to compare responses to first-time versus repeat viewings of extreme scenes. For instance, knowing the success of *The Substance*, most of the participants had already seen the tooth scene, either at the movies or on social media, which may have altered their reaction when watching the clip a second time. This helped reveal whether habituation affects emotional intensity, a key concern in both media psychology and moral panic discourses around desensitization.

3.5. Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved both drawing patterns directly from participant narratives (inductive, data-driven) and aligning those insights with theoretical concepts such as viewer identification and emotional regulation (deductive, theory-driven).

The analysis unfolded in the following steps. First, transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content and context. Second, initial calls were created using line-by-line analysis in Atlas.ti. These codes captured key features such as "Shivers, goosebumps", "Hyperrealism", "Social Acceptance of Violence", or "Emotional Release". Third, related codes were grouped into broader themes, e.g., "Emotional Reactions", "Stylization and Spectacle", and "Moral Calibration", which would also eventually be grouped to generate main themes of analysis.

Next, themes were reviewed to ensure both internal coherence and alignment with the research question. For instance, some codes initially tagged under “shock value” were reinterpreted as components of aesthetic engagement, where participants described visual pleasure rather than moral disapproval. Throughout this phase, the researcher moved iteratively between data and theory, ensuring the themes resonated with key frameworks such as Carroll's (1990) “paradox of horror”, Cummins’ (2017) excitation transfer theory, and Lowenstein’s (2005) Theory of shocking representation.

A final stage of comparative analysis examined how demographic factors (gender, nationality, familiarity with horror) shaped variation in responses. This addressed the supervisor's recommendation to account for gender dynamics, particularly in viewer identification and gaze. Patterns were also examined across different media (anime vs. game vs. film), illuminating how format influenced affective intensity and interpretive stance.

To reinforce analytic validity, representative participant quotes were not only used for illustration but also played an active role in defining and refining codes. For instance, the code “Emotional Release” was solidified following multiple descriptions like Participant G’s (24, Dutch) comment: “I often feel kind of relieved from that stress feeling. And that is also a feeling that I quite enjoy.” Similarly, the theme “Beautiful Gore” was grounded in statements such as Participant S’s (34, French) reflection on *Kill Bill*⁸: “There is a kind of beauty in how some scenes are executed.” These moments shaped not only how themes were named but also how they were conceptually defined in the coding tree. This quote-driven approach ensured that participant language led the analysis, rather than fitting narratives to theoretical expectations. Where ambiguity arose, memos were written to capture reflexive decisions and differentiate sub-themes (e.g., “Imagined Pain vs. Performed Pain” under “Medium-Specific Ethics”).

3.6. Researcher Role and Ethics

In qualitative research, the researcher's positionality is an integral part of the knowledge production process. As a movie fan and media scholar, the researcher brings both experiential familiarity and critical distance to the topic. Reflexive journaling was used during both

⁸*Kill Bill*, Quentin Tarantino, 2003.

interviews and analysis to track emotional reactions, interpretive tendencies, and moments where my perspectives as a horror amateur risked overshadowing the participants' voices. One instance occurred when participants laughed during disturbing clips or minimized their discomfort; these moments were noted and revisited during analysis to better understand their emotional reflexes.

Bringing up other films or genres to push the reflection was also a tool for deeper and more comfortable conversation with participants, eventually asking them for movie recommendations in the end. Participants were also allowed to Google movie names or use their Letterboxd account for more examples and broader reflections. These conversational strategies helped participants regain a sense of control when discussing emotionally charged scenes. Several were visibly uncomfortable during clips involving sexualized violence or torture. In these cases, I paused the interview or offered to skip the content entirely. Participants were reminded that distress was valid and that they were not obligated to justify this discomfort.

Ethically, the study complies with Erasmus University's guidelines and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). All participants received detailed information about the study and signed informed consent forms. They were reminded that they could pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any time without explanation. Data were anonymized and stored securely according to Erasmus University and GDPR standards.

Engaging with violent, disturbing, or traumatic material requires not just procedural ethics, but affective awareness too. My reactions, from curiosity to discomfort, were noted throughout. At times, I was tempted to over-intellectualize pain or defend controversial content when participants described scenes I personally enjoy. Recognizing these impulses was part of the work: maintaining a balance between empathy, curiosity, and critique. Ultimately, ethics in this project was not just about institutional compliance but about cultivated trust, care, and humility in the research relationship.

3.7. Methodological Reflection

While qualitative methods offer deep insight into viewer experiences, they also present limitations. Self-selection bias may have skewed the sample toward participants who feel

comfortable articulating their engagement with taboo or stigmatized content. Cross-cultural differences in interpretation, especially between French and Dutch participants, also raised translation challenges, particularly in capturing idiomatic or emotionally charged expressions.

Acknowledging these limitations, the study remained committed to transparency and reflexivity throughout, from designing the interview guide to interpreting participant language within theoretical frameworks. By combining narrative depth and comparative breadth, the methodology enables a rich understanding of how audiences interpret, negotiate, and ultimately derive meaning from gore and horror cinema.

4. Results and Analysis

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the empirical data collected through qualitative interviews with horror film viewers, focusing on their emotional, cognitive, and interpretive engagements with Gore and horror more broadly. Drawing on both theoretical literature and direct testimony, this chapter unpacks recurring themes related to aesthetic appreciation, emotional regulation, social dynamics, gendered experiences, realism, and the boundaries between fiction and reality. It is based on a diverse sample of interviewees ranging in age, gender identity, nationality, and professional background, allowing for rich comparative insight into subjective experiences.

4.1. Affective Responses to Gore: Pleasure, Disgust, and the “Kick”

Across the interviews, participants described a wide range of emotional reactions to horror and gore, from visceral disgust to gleeful fascination. The majority articulated an effective duality where horror films, particularly gory ones, offered both discomfort and enjoyment. Participant M (23, Dutch), for instance, emphasized his attraction to psychological horror with high tension, noting that “not necessarily scared”, they still feel the strong emotional and physiological arousal: “You get like goosebumps everywhere...I turn on it, I would say.”

Similarly, Participant L (30, French) acknowledged being “sensitive” to extreme gore but appreciated the tension, surprise, and cathartic release: “I am someone who seeks extreme sensations...It makes me feel alive”.

Z (26, Dutch) watching horror can sometimes be equated to riding a roller coaster. The thrill comes from managing danger in controlled environments. This emotional complexity reflects what Noël Carroll (1990) termed the “paradox of horror”: audiences are attracted to what should repel them. Participants T (27, Turkish) and L emphasized this tension explicitly, describing the physiological sensations of watching disturbing content, such as goosebumps, sudden drops in the stomach, and jumps, as “making you feel alive”. This echoes the idea that viewers derive pleasure not despite, but because of, their heightened state of alertness and embodied stress. Similarly, another interviewee (Participant PF, 24, French) framed this thrill in casual and funny terms: “Adrenaline, and a cola please”, underscoring how emotional

arousal can become routine and desirable in the horror experience. This is even more relevant since the term “adrenaline” appears recurrent throughout all interviews.

Likewise, Clasen’s evolutionary theory of horror (2017) suggests that horror engages biologically hardwired defense mechanisms in controlled, entertaining environments. Additional participants echoed this emotional ambivalence. Participant G (24, Dutch) described feeling physically tense or nauseated during gory scenes but later experiencing a form of cathartic relief: “I often feel kind of relief from that stress feeling. And that is also a feeling that I quite enjoy.” Participant C (57, French) framed this emotional cycle as a kind of voyeuristic thrill: “It is like watching from the other side of the window [...] disgusting, but I enjoy it.” These statements support the idea that affective responses to gore are not linear but recursive, combining tension with release, and disgust and fascination.

Types of emotions and reactions elicited by horror often appear to be contingent on factors such as narrative structure, visual style, and prior media exposure. Participants described getting the kick from surprise, suspense, and unexpected plot developments, often more than from violence per se. Participant S (34, French) distinguished between aesthetic and emotional reactions, noting that a well-constructed death scene could evoke admiration rather than fear: “There is a kind of beauty in how some scenes are executed. I find the beheading scene from *Kill Bill* absolutely beautiful, for example”. A similar distinction was articulated by Participant V (26, French) who explained: “I would not say that I get pleasure out of this image, but I am not disturbed, like fully repulsed either, because it is just an interesting thing to me. ‘Oh, the blood, they decide to make it that way.’” This suggests that for some viewers, gore can be appreciated less as a shocking spectacle and more as a form of creative craftsmanship, reinforcing the aestheticized lens through which horror is sometimes consumed.

Others mentioned humor and absurdity as emotional vectors. Horror comedies with intentionally over-the-top gore were cited as offering pleasurable distance from real violence. Several participants, especially those who grew up watching horror, socially expressed nostalgia for these hybrid experiences.

These emotional responses demonstrate not only the ambivalence of affective engagement but also support recent scholarship on horror as a complex, affective terrain. Linda Williams (1991) argued that “body genres” like horror provoke strong somatic reactions, whether tears,

screams, or shudders, serving as affective laboratories where viewers test their physical and emotional limits. The consistency across participants' testimonies reveals a patterned dynamic: the oscillation between repulsion and pleasure is not merely individual but part of a shared cultural script, shaped by genre conventions, viewer expectations, and embodied memory. Moreover, this supports Hanich's (2010) observation that horror spectatorship is not passive but involves constant affective self-monitoring, where viewers take pleasure in their ability to withstand discomfort.

4.2. Fictionality, Distancing, and the Camp Aesthetic

Many interviewees expressed that their enjoyment of gore hinged on aesthetic distance and perceived unreality. Participant Z (26, Dutch), for instance, described their preference for 1980s practical effects because "You know, it is fake", highlighting how overt artificiality fosters a comfortable separation from real-world violence. Participant S (34, French) as well as participant L (30, French), similarly appreciated the artisanal quality of all the gore films: "You can imagine the technicians working on it. That amuses me a lot" (S); "I like the DIY side of it, I think it is really fun" (L).

This preference for visible artifice aligns with theories of camp and performativity. Susan Sontag's seminal "Notes on Camp" (1964) emphasized camp's embrace of artifice, exaggeration, and stylization, which many interviewees appear to value in horror. Camp, by virtue of its excessive, performative aesthetic, allows viewers to bracket their disbelief and engage with violent spectacle rather than reality. For example, Z noted enjoying movies that are "so bad they are good", particularly remakes with poor acting and absurd plotlines. Campy horror offers an "aesthetic buffer" that enables critical detachment and ironic pleasure. As S put it, "Even when it is grotesque, there is joy in imagining how the blood splatters were designed. It is theatrical."

The ironic distance also extends to media like *Final Destination*⁹, cited for its implausible but creative deaths that elicit laughter and awe rather than fear or disgust, also evoked by Participant V ("All the *Final Destinations*, I think, it is something that I have in mind because it is really fun and entertaining to me. It is low-key stupid and a little kitsch").

⁹ *Final Destination*, James Wong, 2000.

This aligns with what Hanich (2010) calls “pleasurable fear”, a concept that encapsulates the enjoyment derived from managing intense affect within a fictional frame. For some viewers, the medium also plays a role in how fictional violence is received. As Participant G noted, the absurdity of gore in animated formats like anime made it easier to digest emotionally: “Sometimes the context within gore and horror is a little bit absurd. In that way, I can handle it a little bit better.” This echoes Hanich’s (2010, p.69) idea of “pleasurable fear” being closely tied to framing and distance.

Conversely, viewers like participant L2 (18, French) were more affected by realistic formats, especially when violence was sexualized or mixed with trauma. Here, the line between fiction and reality becomes thinner, destabilizing the viewer's comfort zone. When gore appears realistic or emotionally grounded in trauma (e.g., sexual violence), enjoyment declines sharply. Participants consistently rejected the hyper-realistic portrayals as “not fun” (Z) or “disrespectful” (S), invoking ethical and empathetic limits. Participant L emphasized the discomfort in watching hyper-realistic depictions of violence against women, especially when they lacked narrative or symbolic justification.

Aversion to realism finds support in audience studies literature, which emphasizes the importance of emotional regulation and safe boundaries in consuming effectively intense media (Bartsch, 2012). Thus, gore is tolerated and even enjoyed, so long as its fictiveness is evident or its function is narratively justified.

The function of aesthetic distance highlighted here underscores the critical role of form in mediating affect. Carroll's (1990, pp.8, 35) distinction between “art-horror” and “real-world horror” is particularly instructive: audiences can enjoy grotesque imagery when it is clearly embedded in a fictional, stylized context. In this sense, camp and exaggeration act as affective safeguards. Furthermore, the recurring appeal to theatricality, visible artifice, and retro aesthetics connects closely with Brechtian notions of the alienation effect, encouraging critical spectatorship rather than immersion. The blending of horror with humor and irony also aligns with recent writing by Isabel Pinedo (2004), who identifies postmodern horror as a site where genre rules are knowingly bent, and violence becomes playful or periodic rather than morally punitive. These intertextual pleasures are not detached from ethics but offer viewers a way to process violence safely through form, tone, and genre-savviness.

4.3. Gender, Identity, and Character Identification

Gender identity and viewer positionality emerged as significant variables influencing how participants engaged with characters, narratives, and the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of gore. Several interviewees explicitly discussed gendered experiences of horror, foregrounding both the genre's traditional patterns and its potential for subversion.

Participant Z, A 26-year-old trans woman, emphasized that her appreciation for body horror was deeply personal, stating: "It is mostly about transitions people go through. That is so cool to see." Films like *Titane* or *The Fly*¹⁰, despite their graphic excess, offered Z an opportunity to see the transformation of flesh, identity, and self as central themes. Z's response resonates with Barbara Creed's theory of the "monstrous feminine" (1993), which posits that horror often encodes fears surrounding female corporeality and sexuality. Yet, in Z's account, the body is not a site of revulsion but of possibility, and horror becomes a medium through which marginalized identities can reflect on their embodiment.

Participant L reflected critically on the portrayal of female characters and horror, noting a pattern of reductive archetypes: "The mother figure who is awful, the witch, the victim...That is what interests me most: how women are perceived depending on who writes and directs the film." This critique aligns with Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational argument about the male gaze, whereby women are framed as passive objects of visual pleasure. However, L and other participants also highlighted counterexamples, films that break with these conventions to offer complex, emotionally resonant female leads. *Hereditary* and *Mister Babadook*¹¹ were frequently praised for their depiction of maternal anguish, grief, and psychological unraveling.

The archetype of the "Final Girl" (Clover, 1992, p.35) was frequently evoked, both explicitly and implicitly. Participant S expressed admiration for well-written female characters, suggesting that even in male-dominated slasher films, female protagonists could emerge as sites of agency and identification. Yet, participants were quick to critique those representations that felt formulaic or tokenistic. As L noted, "It is not enough to have a woman survive. The horror needs to reflect her inner life."

¹⁰ *The Fly*, David Cronenberg, 1986.

¹¹ *Mister Babadook*, Jennifer Kent, 2014.

A subtle yet recurring gendered distinction appeared in participants' interpretations of gore, particularly in the way they described their curiosity and interpretive stance. Male-identifying participants tended to express fascination with the human body under duress, imagining what real wounds might look like or how physical damage would unfold in reality. For example, Participants T and M described being drawn to see how far a body could go before it breaks, "What the human body can or cannot endure" (T), while Participant PF mentioned indifference as being familiar with real violent footage on the Internet. This visceral curiosity was often more about realism and the limits of the flesh than about symbolism or style. In contrast, female-identifying participants more frequently articulated an interest in the craftsmanship and emotional resonance of violent scenes. Participant L appreciated the "DIY" aesthetic of special effects, describing gory moments as "Fun when you imagine the technicians behind it," and as mentioned earlier, with the appreciation of the camp aspect of certain horror films. Others, like Participant S, emphasized how the emotional framing of violence affected interpretation, stating that "Violence needs to be justified, it has to mean something." This dynamic echoes Clover's (1992) insight that viewer identification and interpretation are never neutral but are shaped by gendered experiences and expectations. They also support Mulvey's (1975, 1999) notion that the cinematic gaze conditions affective engagement differently depending on the viewer's positionality. In this sample, men were more likely to seek a physical or almost anatomical truth in gore, while women engaged through a lens of narrative, aesthetics, or emotional ethics.

In terms of character identification, viewers frequently gravitated toward leads with emotional depth. Participant M stated, "What a good horror movie does, in my opinion, is put you in the shoes of the main character." This sentiment suggests a preference for empathetic alignment over voyeuristic detachment. When horror succeeds in conveying the protagonist's psychological state, whether through visual style or sound design, or performance, it can evoke not just fear, but a spectrum of affective responses including sadness, empathy, and introspection. As Participant V mentioned, the movie *Seven*¹², where staging and visuals call on the spectator's sensorium to generate empathy through internalization of the experience: "You do not see the scene of death. [...] And this made me feel empathy because if I do not see it on the screen, then I can only imagine it and put myself in the victim's shoes."

¹² *Seven*, David Fincher, 1995.

Gender identity also influenced tolerance for specific types of violence. Interestingly, not all participants found character identification necessary. Participant L2, a trans man, explicitly noted a lack of emotional attachment: “That is the main reason why it does not bother me as much, because I do not see myself in them”. For others, emotional resonance with context-dependent. Participant G described identifying with the protagonist of *Midsommar* during a personal breakup, finding that horror mirrored real-life emotions: “It was like a mirror effect.” These contrasting accounts show that identification is a fluid process shaped by personal experience, affective state, and contextual framing. For example, Participant T (27, Turkish) expressed a distinct preference for anti-heroes over traditional protagonists, stating that logical self-preservation was more compelling than heroism: “In a horror movie, there is not really a thing called a hero.” This mirrors responses from Participant L2, who also gravitated toward morally ambiguous figures. These accounts support Clover’s (1992) notion that the viewer identification can oscillate between empathy and detachment, depending on the character’s framing and perceived agency.

Yet, several female and gender-diverse participants expressed strong discomfort with sexualized violence, particularly when it lacks thematic or narrative justification. These concerns echo arguments made by Isabel Christina Pinedo (1997, pp.6, 69-97), who warns that horror must walk a fine line between subversion and exploitation. Ultimately, the intersection of gender and gore is deeply mediated by cultural, personal, and narrative context. As S observed, horror’s treatment of women often depends on authorship: “It matters who made the film. You can feel it in how the violence is framed.”

Taken together, these reflections support an intersectional approach to horror spectatorship, as outlined by scholars such as Carol J. Clover (1992, p.35) and Bernadette Marie Calafell (2014, p.12), who emphasize that viewer identification is always situated in the nexus of gender, sexuality, race, and embodiment. Participant reflections on gendered violence echoed Clover’s (1992) claim that identification in horror is often fluid and contingent, shifting between victim and aggressor, male and female. Moreover, Z’s experience as a trans woman and L2’s experience as a trans man reframes body horror not merely as a spectacle of abjection, as suggested by Kristeva (1982, p.3), but as a site of personal resonance and agency. As Vivian Sobchak (1992, p.26) argues, spectatorship is embodied and negotiated through personal histories. The participants’ attention to authorship (“You can feel it in how violence is framed”, S) also reflects Mulvey’s (1975, p.19) enduring insight about visual pleasure and narrative control: who constructs the gaze matters deeply in shaping both

meaning and ethics. Thus, character identification, especially in horror, is not simply a matter of narrative empathy but a politically charged negotiation with the film's visual and ideological grammar.

4.4. Gore as Commentary: Political, Personal, and Cultural Frames

A particular rich theme that emerged from the interviews was that the understanding of gore as more than just spectacular or emotional provocation. Participants frequently described gory imagery as symbolically or politically charged, particularly when it served to dramatize broader societal issues or psychological realities.

Participant S, who works professionally in the film industry, articulated this clearly: "Horror is often political. It is not just about fear; it is about what the fear represents." S cited *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Battle Royale*¹³ as examples of films where gore amplified the critique of systemic violence, social breakdown, and authoritarianism. This interpretation reflects a growing body of scholarship suggesting that horror is uniquely suited to allegory and ideological criticism (Phillips, 2005; Wood, 1986). Similarly, participant L noted that confronting extreme visuals could be a way of reconnecting with sociopolitical realities: "The representation of things that are uncomfortable, that remind you this could happen or is happening somewhere in the world, that is what stays with me." This aligns with Robin Wood's (1986, p.14) notion that horror, particularly in its transgressive moments, can be a radical art form capable of contesting dominant ideologies and social norms.

Participant Z offered a more nuanced distinction: gore could either be "fun" or "feel like watching a war documentary." For Z, the enjoyment depended on whether the violence was framed as imaginative excess or brutal realism. This echoes Žižek's (1991, pp.15-32) exploration of ideology in cinema, i.e., how fictional representations can either be obscure or illuminate the truth of social violence. Participant V supported this perspective, reflecting: "If people enjoy *The Human Centipede* in this extreme form of violence, then maybe it reveals that this is what audiences, and younger generations, seek out today." Though V did not

¹³ *Battle Royale*, Batoru Rowaiaru, 2000.

assign any “intellectual purpose” to all gore, she acknowledged that even the most excessive depictions might symbolically mirror societal fascination with extremity and transgression.

Crucially, participants expressed appreciation for gore when it was not gratuitous but narratively or thematically anchored. Participant M mentioned *Saw*¹⁴, acknowledging that while the franchise is gory, its narrative twist and moral dilemmas gave it substance: “It is not just gore for gore's sake. There is a game, a point, a reason behind the pain.” In contrast, films like *Terrifier*¹⁵ were often critiqued as excessive or nihilistic. Several participants noted that without a clear thematic or symbolic framework, extreme gore risked becoming boring or even offensive. These views are consistent with Isabel Pinedo’s (1997, pp.6, 69-97) framework of “recreational terror”, where horror viewers demand both affective stimulation and narrative coherence.

Some participants made explicit connections between gore and internal states. Participant L2, for example, described body horror as a way to explore self-loathing and trauma: “I have deep hatred for my own human body, so to see other bodies distorted is...relieving, and I find beauty in it.” Another referenced *Alfred's Playhouse*¹⁶, a disturbing animated series, as a representation of trauma-induced dissociation: “The gore is inside his head. It is how trauma turns into violence against yourself.” Such reflections align with psychoanalytic interpretations of horror as symbolic language for depression and psychological pain (Creed, 1993, p.6; Kristeva, 1982, p.3).

Thus, gore serves a dual function for many viewers: as a medium of emotional intensity and as a semiotic tool capable of expressing social anxieties, cultural trauma, or philosophical reflection. Participant S's appreciation for the grotesque aesthetics of *Kill Bill*, “The snow, the blood, the choreography. It is trash, but it is beautiful.”, demonstrates how gore can also function as high art, blending stylization and subversion. Participants’ reactions also indicated that the interpretive value of gore is not merely determined by content, but by form, context, and intent. As L observed, “It is not that it is violent, it is why and how the violence is shown.” This suggests that viewer tolerance for gore is deeply tied to questions of representation, ethics, and artistic intent. Family background and early exposure were also significant. Participant L2 also recalled growing up with horror as a normalized genre: “My

¹⁴ *Saw*, Leigh Whannell, 2004.

¹⁵ *Terrifier*, Damien Leone, 2016.

¹⁶ *Alfred's Playhouse*, Emily Youcis, 2007.

mum loves horror. She never flinched, even at the glorious scenes.” Conversely, Participant G noted their father's comfort with gore and how their own tolerance increased with exposure: “Watching gore taught me to handle the feeling of seeing blood in real life.” Several participants also noted the role of Internet subcultures, such as the “cute gore” aesthetic, which combines violent imagery with kawaii visuals to explore paradoxes of innocence and brutality.

In sum, gore is not a monolith, but a mutable and context-sensitive mode of storytelling. The accounts presented here highlight gore as a semiotic device with both emotional and ideological weight, reinforcing the argument made by scholars like Andrew Tudor (1997, p.455) and Adam Lowenstein (2005, p.1) that horror is a “collision space” for public and private anxieties. Lowenstein, in particular, describes horror as an “allegorical moment” where cultural trauma can be worked through obliquely. The participants’ insistence on intent and narrative function mirrors this theoretical stance, suggesting that viewers actively negotiate the ethics of spectacle based on perceived meaning. Furthermore, Žižek’s (2001, p.31) readings of horror as a form of ideology critique, where excessive violence unmarks repressed social structures, are echoed in how participants interpret films like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or *Saw*. These interpretations also reflect a post-9/11 cultural shift toward what Richard Kearney (2003, p.65) calls the “hermeneutics of horror”, where narratives of threat and abjection are mobilized to probe deep existential and political uncertainties. Ultimately, the viewer does not passively absorb gore but interprets it within a web of symbolic, social, and affective relations, marking horror as a uniquely reflective and critical genre.

4.5. Medium and Modality: Film, Animation, Gaming

Participants’ responses to the stimulus section revealed that the medium through which gore is conveyed significantly influences its emotional and interpretive impact. The same visual content, when experienced through different formats (live-action film, animation, or video games), revealed different levels of discomfort, empathy, and aesthetic appreciation. Participant T’s reaction reinforced this medium-specific sensitivity: while he consumed gory manga and appreciated animated gore intellectually, it was the live-action clip from *The Substance*, particularly the tooth-loss scene, that left the deepest impact. He connected the

moment to common anxieties like dental trauma and the fragility of the body: “It is not being a fatal wound, but it is actually more impactful physically”. This highlights how live-action’s mimetic realism can evoke uniquely embodied fear, echoing Sobchak’s (2004, p.59) claim that cinematic realism produces somatic empathy. Many participants identified live-action cinema as the most effective medium for gore. This was attributed primarily to the realism afforded by human actors, practical effects, and high production values. L explained that gore in films, such as *The Substance*, had a strong emotional pull: “It was hyper realistic. You could feel the pain. That is what makes it disturbing.” This also aligns with Janet Murray's (1997, p.156) theory of *immersive narrative environments*. Realism amplifies presence, which in turn intensifies emotional responses. In contrast, games and animation remained distanced unless deeply immersive, a view also shared by Participants M and Z.

Interviewees found animated gore less emotionally disturbing. Participant M described the anime clip from *Elfen Lied* as “stupid”, adding, “It looks fake. You cannot take it seriously.” Participant Z echoed this sentiment: “Cartoon gore feels like watching a parody. I am not emotionally affected by it.” As far as body language is concerned, most of the participants laughed while watching the clip. This perception of animated violence as exaggerated or detached is supported by scholarly work on medium specificity (McCloud, 1993), which highlights how stylization in animation can function as a distancing mechanism.

Video games brought up mixed affective responses among participants. Participant M, who had played *Outlast*, explained that games provide adrenaline and immersion without the same level of discomfort as film: “You play the character, so it is immersive, but still a game.” This distinction between interactivity and detachment recalls Murray's (1997, p.126) notion of the participatory narrative, where agency modifies emotional investment. While interactive media allow players to inhabit characters, the functionality of the game space offers some protection from emotional overload. However, this was not universal. Participant S expressed significant discomfort with certain game content, especially when it blurred the line between fantasy and realism: “Outlast was too much. It felt like you were participating, something you should not be seeing.” This ethical discomfort echoes concerns in game studies about moral decision-making and embodied viewing (Sicart, 2009, p.17).

Participant preferences reflected media familiarity and exposure history. Those who identified primarily as cinephiles are more comfortable with cinematic gore, while gamers and anime fans reported higher tolerance within their respective formats. Participant V noted a

clear preference for film over other formats: “Definitely the movie because that is where I can capture most effects, more filmmaking processes. And I think this is the most interesting part.” However, she also expressed discomfort with certain forms of violence in games, especially involving sexual assault, explaining: “Everything that is sexual violence related is really hard to take for me.” Correlating this reflection, Participant PF showed that his consumption of gore and horror was mainly due to his recent interest in cinema, watching classic horror movies as a rite of passage, and therefore minimizing personal appeal to gore content. This supports the theory of media literacy (Jenkins, 2006, p.169), which suggests that familiarity with genre and format enables more nuanced engagement. Participant V also provided a useful contrast between film and game formats. She found the film clip impactful due to her visual literacy: “The movie had more impact because I watch movies more often”. Yet, she described the video game *Outlast II* as “disturbing because it is so gloomy”, especially where sexual violence was depicted. Her reaction, “I would not enjoy it as a gamer”, underscores how interactivity intensifies emotional involvement, particularly when the player becomes subject to ethically charged scenes.

The differentiated responses across media highlight how modality shapes affective proximity and interpretive frameworks. Scholars like Bolter and Grusin (1999, p.7) have explored this through the concept of “remediation”, where new media reframe and repackage older forms, altering their emotional and cognitive impact. Participant accounts also reinforce McLuhan’s (1964, p.7) foundational idea that “the medium is the message”, i.e., the format in which gore is delivered is inseparable from its meaning. Animated violence, often coded as hyperreal or satirical, invites cognitive distancing (Mittell, 2004, p.5), whereas film’s mimetic realism tends to elicit embodied empathy or disgust (Sobchak, 2004, p.59). Gaming, by contrast, activates an interactive, performative spectatorship that complicates traditional viewer roles (Sicart, 2009, p.17; Murray, 1997, p.126). The participants’ affective calibration across these media confirms that horror is not simply genre-bound but medium-contingent: a function of how realism, interactivity, and stylization intersect to shape the viewer’s ethical and emotional boundaries. This reinforces Barker’s (2012, p.676) call for media-sensitive audience research that recognizes how platform and participation alter affective engagement.

Participant PF also foregrounded sound as a key affective vector, stating “I am more impacted by the sound than by images”, particularly in scenes involving tendon slicing or

subtle body damage in the Korean movie *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*¹⁷. This underscores Hanich's (2010, p 5) insight into the visceral power of horror's acoustic dimension and complements Participant S's earlier observation about discomfort arising from the off-screen realism in *Outlast*. Together, these findings illustrate that affective reactions are not simply dictated by visuals, but by how audio-visual form modulates proximity to the grotesque.

4.6. Social and Cultural Influences

Another crucial dimension shaping viewers' engagement with gore is the broader sociocultural context, including family or norms, cultural taboos, and generational media habits. Participants consistently emphasized that their exposure to and tolerance for horror were mediated by their upbringing, peer groups, and sociopolitical environment. Participant T described a household shaped by religious conservatism, noting his mother's disapproval of horror scenes, just the same as Participant S's childhood environment. This aligns with Participant C's (57, French) recollections of moral discomfort and supports Phillips' (2005, p.9) theory of horror as a site where cultural and moral taboos are negotiated. T and PF also reflected on how past exposure to real violence (stabblings and burglaries) could change the relation to gore, sometimes triggering, sometimes numbing, which supports Žižek's (2001, p.12) view of horror as a site for ideological and affective projection.

Several interviewees cited formative experiences with horror during adolescence, often framed as rites of passage. Participants Z, for example, described watching horror films at sleepovers, emphasizing the social bonding effect: "We would dare each other to keep watching. It was a game." The social dynamic is consistent with Jeffrey Goldstein's (1998, p.271) theory of shared effective risk-taking, which posits that watching horror together amplifies emotional responses and creates group cohesion. Similarly, Participant S recalled sneaking horror films against parental rules, describing it as a "form of rebellion". With the notion that horror can function as a cultural transgression, especially among youth seeking autonomy (Jerslev, 2001, p.18). Such transgression is often not just against family norms but broader societal expectations about what is appropriate, tasteful, or acceptable, as the participant explained growing up in a catholic, bourgeois environment.

¹⁷ *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, Park Chan-Wook, 2002.

Family background also played a significant role in shaping long-term media preferences. Participant M noted: “My parents never liked horror. I think I picked it up from my sister”. Participant S elaborated on this further, stating that her love of horror had no familiar precedent: “It was not something I grew up with, but something I claimed for myself.” These remarks illustrate the personal and sometimes oppositional nature of horror fandom, i.e., it can become a space for identity formation against the grain of normative influences.

Cultural context also proved influential. Participants with different national or cultural backgrounds interpreted gore through varying lenses of normalization or taboo. For instance, Z noted that Dutch society is relatively permissive, which may contribute to her high tolerance for visual transgression: “I have seen it all. Nothing shocks me anymore.” In contrast, Participant L emphasized that French cinema, particularly in the New French extreme movement, had shaped her expectations of what gore could achieve artistically and politically.

Religion, gender roles, and societal values also impacted how participants made sense of gore. Some referenced conservative upbringings for violent or grotesque imagery were strictly forbidden. Others spoke about how gender expectations had shaped their early exposure, e.g., boys being encouraged to enjoy violent media while girls were shielded or shamed. This supports Barker’s (2012, p.15) argument that media consumption is never neutral but always embedded in social processes of identity, construction, and power. Viewers are not blank slates but culturally situated individuals whose interpretations of gore are mediated by lived experience, ideology, and interpersonal history.

These findings underscore the importance of situated spectatorship, i.e., the idea that how we watch and what we are willing to tolerate or enjoy is shaped by our cultural environment, social upbringing, and collective memory. Stuart Hall’s (1980, p.128) encoding/decoding model is particularly relevant here, as it highlights how meaning is never fixed by the media text alone but negotiated by viewers within specific cultural and ideological contexts. Participants’ responses confirm that horror, and gore in particular, is polysemic: it invites multiple, often contradictory readings depending on the viewer’s background. This resonates with Bourdieu’s (1984, p.56) notion of cultural capital, where familiarity with specific genres or aesthetic codes enables greater interpretive fluency and even pleasure in forms considered “low culture” by dominant norms. Additionally, the

generational patterns of viewing horror, described as rebellions, bonding, or identity-forming, mirror the findings of Hills (2005, p.45), who argues that horror fandom itself is a performative identity shaped by both subcultural capital and affective investment. Thus, social and cultural factors are not peripheral but central to how gore is interpreted, filtered, and emotionally processed.

4.7. Catharsis and Emotional Regulation

A recurring theme in participants' narratives was the use of horror, especially gore-heavy content, as a form of emotional release. For many, horror did not simply stimulate fear or revulsion but facilitated a deeper process of emotional self-regulation and catharsis.

Participant L described horror viewing as a kind of purging: "My life is usually calm, so I seek strong emotions. Horror gives me that." This sentiment aligns with the Aristotelian concept of catharsis, in which tragedy, and by extension horror, serves to cleanse the viewer through the experience of fear and pity. Horror, in this context, becomes a safe space to engage with powerful emotions that may be repressed or inaccessible in everyday life. Participant S took this further, claiming that her favorite horror films were those that made her feel sadness rather than fear. She cited *The Orphanage*¹⁸ and *Jacob's Ladder*¹⁹ as films that succeeded in emotionally overwhelming her in ways that resonated more deeply than typical jump scares or gore. "When a horror film makes me cry, I know it has done something right", she said. This reflects the framework proposed by Sienna Ngai (2005, p.34) in her work on "ugly feelings", which explores how genres like horror can evoke affective states like anxiety, paranoia, or melancholy, states often marginalized in mainstream cinema.

Several participants described horror films as functioning like an emotional pressure valve. Participant G (24, Dutch) likened the experience to physical release: "I feel the tension growing when I am directly confronted with my fear of blood. But I feel relieved afterward." This language resonates with psychoanalytic film theory, particularly the work of Julia Kristeva (1982, p.15), who argued that the abjection, the human reaction to the breakdown of meaning caused by the loss of distinction between self and other, lies at the core of horror's

¹⁸ *The Orphanage*, Julio Antonio Bayona, 2007.

¹⁹ *Jacob's Ladder*, Adrian Lyne, 1990.

psychological power. Gore, by displaying the boundary-breaking destruction of the body, triggers a visceral response that may lead to emotional realignment. Participant T described this affective cycle in neurobiological terms, stating that horror “triggers certain endorphin receptors”, making him “fully focused” and “on edge”. His explanation overlaps with Participant G’s concept of “relief” and strengthens the reading of horror as an immersive cognitive recalibration tool. It also ties directly to Heller-Nicholas’ (2014, p.215) notion of cinemasochism, pleasure derived not despite but through discomfort, and with Bartsch’s (2012, p.47) model of mood management through emotionally intense media.

Importantly, these cathartic experiences were described not just in terms of personal emotion but as a way of processing societal or collective anxieties. Participant M, as well as Participant L2 and G, noted that certain films helped them process real-world fears about death, violence, or bodily harm. This supports the idea that horror can serve a ritualistic or symbolic function, allowing individuals to confront what philosopher Ernest Becker (1973, p.220) called “the denial of death”.

Yet the boundary between catharsis and trauma proved less distinct. Several interviewees drew boundaries around what kind of horror was therapeutic versus what was damaging. Hyper-realistic depictions of sexual violence, for example, were often rejected not because they failed to produce emotion, but because they produced the wrong kind: revulsion without resolution. This suggests that catharsis is not an automatic effect of gore, but depends heavily on framing, context, and viewer sensitivity.

The accounts of emotional purging and affective intensity align closely with longstanding psychoanalytic and philosophical understandings of horror as cathartic. Aristotle’s notion of catharsis, as the emotional purification achieved through dramatic spectacle, has been extended by modern theorists such as Noël Carroll (1990, p.81), who frames horror as a genre that elicits controlled fear and disgust in the service of emotional mastery. Participants’ remarks about seeking emotional extremes or feeling “relieved afterward” support this framing, revealing horror as a structured emotional ordeal. Kristeva’s (1982, p.15) concept of abjection is also highly pertinent, particularly in how participants react to bodily transgressions, e.g., teeth, blood, or viscera, as a confrontation with the boundaries of the self. In this sense, and as Participant G testified to it, horror operates as both symbolic and corporeal therapy, allowing viewers to externalize and reframe anxieties too difficult to articulate directly. Furthermore, theories of media psychology (Oliver & Bartsch,

2010, p.126) suggest that “meaningful media” experiences often provoke sadness or reflection, not just pleasure. Participants who cited grief-centered horror like *The Babadook* or *Hereditary* as deeply moving point toward this mode of affective engagement. Horror, then, is not just about shock or thrill but also about emotional depth and existential resonance.

In sum, horror functions as both a mirror and a release valve for complex emotional states. When used constructively, it allows viewers to confront their fears, channel suppressed emotions, and emerge with a renewed sense of psychological balance. As S summarized: “Horror gives you the space to feel things you usually do not let yourself feel, and then it lets you go.’

4.8. Ethics and Boundaries

Throughout the interviews, participants consistently articulated ethical boundaries around their engagement with gore, revealing a nuanced moral compass shared by personal values, cultural norms, and contextual framing. While participants were often open to violence as a narrative or aesthetic device, there were clear lines beyond which enjoyment turned into discomfort or even moral disapproval.

One of the most recurrent themes was the rejection of sexualized violence, particularly when presented without clear narrative justification. Participant L commented: “If it is there just to shock, especially sexual violence, I find it hard to watch. It is disrespectful.” This view resonates with Pinedo's (1997, p.21) notion that horror films risk alienating viewers when they lapse into gratuitous exploitation rather than constructive transgression. Participant S expanded on this, stating that violence in films should be approached with a degree of reverence and awareness: “When we show pain, real pain, there has to be a reason. Otherwise, we are just indulging in cruelty.” This idea mirrors discussions in trauma studies, particularly those by Kaplan (2005, p.18), which emphasize the ethics of representing suffering and the responsibility of filmmakers to avoid retraumatizing audiences or trivializing real-world violence.

Participants often differentiated between “fantastical” gore and depictions closely resemble real-life suffering. For example, while decapitations in *Final Destination* were

described as “fun”, torture scenes in *The Human Centipede 2*²⁰ or realistic portrayals of wartime violence were often deemed excessive. This boundary aligns with Vivian Sobchak’s (1992, p.5) work on embodied spectatorship, suggesting that viewers react not only cognitively but also somatically to filmic content. When the imagery becomes too real, the body withdraws its consent to spectate.

Others linked their ethical discomforts to cultural and historical memory. Participant S noted: “I cannot watch war films with gore. It feels like disrespecting the dead.” This perspective illustrates how genre boundaries intersect with cultural trauma. Films like *Utoya: July 22*,²¹ or *Schindler’s List*²², while not horror per se, evoke stronger aversions due to their historical weight and realism, contrasting sharply with fictional horror’s imaginative license.

Interestingly, some participants believed that even the most disturbing images could be acceptable if done with artistic intent or social critique. L stated: “I’m fine with being disturbed as long as there is a meaning. Empty cruelty is not art.” This reflects an engagement with horror not just as passive entertainment, but as a critical discourse capable of examining taboo, trauma, and the limits of empathy.

Ethics in horror are not governed by a static threshold, but unfold along a spectrum shaped by viewer agency, context, and intention. What is permissible for one viewer may be intolerable for another, depending on how the violence is framed, who it affects, and what it ultimately serves. The participants’ insistence on context, intent, and meaning aligns with Vivian Sobchak’s (1992, p.241) theory of “ethical spectatorship”, which emphasizes that viewers bring moral frameworks to their engagements with visual media, especially when the body is under threat. Additionally, Carol Clover’s (1992, pp.25-29, 213) work reminds us that horror’s treatment of gendered violence must be read through both narrative positioning and affective alignment, who suffers, who watches, and how the viewer is invited to feel. Several participants’ rejection of gratuitous sexual violence without narrative justification supports these concerns, indicating a form of “situated ethics” (Gilligan, 1982, pp.73-74), where empathy, proximity, and identification dictate moral thresholds.

Moreover, this selective tolerance reflects what Linda Williams (1991, p.4) calls “the frenzy of the visible”: horror’s capacity to expose bodies in extremis not simply to titillate or

²⁰ *The Human Centipede 2*, Tom Six, 2011.

²¹ *Utoya: July 22*, Erik Poppe, 2018.

²² *Schindler’s List*, Steven Spielberg, 1993.

repel, but to interrogate the boundaries of what can or should be shown. When those boundaries are crossed without critical framing, participants report emotional withdrawal or moral objection, which might be described as a collapse in narrative trust. This reinforces Barker's (2012, p.676) audience-centered research showing that horror fans are far from indiscriminate consumers; rather, they actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes reject the terms on which gore is presented. Ethics in horror, therefore, is not an external judgment but an intrinsic part of spectatorship, a dynamic process shaped by affect, ideology, and aesthetic intent.

5. Conclusion

This project aimed to investigate a deceptively simple but culturally rich question: What makes some people enjoy gore, and how do they make sense of this experience emotionally, cognitively, and culturally? In response, this research has shown that the enjoyment of gore and horror media is not merely about spectacle or shock, but rather emerges from a complex matrix of affective, interpretive, and social processes. Drawing from a series of in-depth qualitative interviews and situated within theoretical frameworks of horror studies, affect theory, feminist media theory, and audience reception, the findings illustrate how gore serves as a form of emotional intensification, narrative engagement, symbolic expression, and even self-discovery.

Participants described their enjoyment of gore as nuanced, resisting simplistic assumptions about sadism, desensitization, or detachment. Instead, they described a nuanced interplay of fascination and disgust, immersion and distance, control and vulnerability. These responses support Noël Carroll's (1990, pp.158-159) foundational assertion that horror operates on a “paradox”: viewers are drawn to that which disturbs them and extend it by demonstrating how this paradox is actively negotiated through layers of cultural, aesthetic, and personal meaning.

5.1. Emotional and Psychological Dynamics

A central insight from the interviews was that emotional regulation plays a key role in how gore is experienced. Participants frequently described feelings of tension, anticipation, release, and even exhilaration. For some, watching horror, particularly gory content, provides a safe container for exploring extreme emotions, functioning as a kind of emotional exercise. This aligns with both Aristotle's notion of catharsis and contemporary theories of effective engagement (Hanich, 2010, p.62; Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017, p.8), which suggests that viewers actively use media to manage and rehearse emotional states.

Participants often used horror as a tool to express emotions rarely encountered in everyday life: fear, sadness, adrenaline, or even awe. For example, Participant L described seeking out horror for the intensity it offered compared to the otherwise calm life, while Participant S

valued horror that made her cry, suggesting a form of deeper emotional resonance. These findings indicate that the enjoyment of gore cannot be reduced to mere entertainment; it is often an effective strategy for engaging with the self and the world.

5.2. Cognitive Meaning-Making

The cognitive framing of gore emerged as equally critical to understanding its appeal. Participants consistently differentiated between “good” gore, which was narratively justified, symbolically rich, or aesthetically stylized, and “bad” gore, which felt gratuitous, exploitative, or boring. Enjoyment depended on how the violence was contextualized, suggesting that meaning is essential to the affective experience. In this, viewers acted as moral interpreters as well as aesthetic critics.

For instance, Participant Z spoke of gore in *The Fly* and *Titane* as deeply meaningful representations of bodily transformation and identity, while others found value in the symbolic excesses of films like *Battle Royale* or *Kill Bill*. These responses echo horror scholarship that views the genre as allegorical and ideologically charged (Wood, 1986, pp.63-65; Lowenstein, 2005, pp.8-10), where violence becomes a language for speaking the unspeakable, from personal trauma to political critique.

A kind of symbolic engagement was especially clear when participants referenced the intent of filmmakers. Many emphasized that they were more comfortable with gore when it served a narrative purpose, reflected character development, or critiqued real-world violence. This confirms Sobchak’s (1992, p.241) and Barker’s (2012, p.127) findings that audiences use ethical frameworks and narrative cues to determine the legitimacy of on-screen suffering.

5.3. Cultural and Social Context

Enjoyment of gore was also strongly shaped by the viewer’s cultural context, social upbringing, and subcultural affiliations. For many, horror was introduced through familial or peer-group interactions, often framed as a rite of passage or a rebellious act. Participant accounts of watching forbidden films in adolescence or bonding over horror at sleepovers

reflect the role of the genre as a social lubricant and boundary tester, a means of exploring taboo safely and communally.

Additionally, participants' cultural backgrounds informed what kinds of gore were acceptable or off limits. For example, those with more conservative upbringings reported stronger emotional boundaries around violence, while others described national or generational differences in how gore is perceived. These findings reinforce the importance of situated spectatorship (Hall, 1980, pp.130-133; Staiger, 2000, pp.33-35), where the meaning of a media text is not inherent but produced through social context, lived experience, and identity.

These findings intersect with broader conversations in cultural sociology about how taste, trauma, and identity influence media reception. By showing how viewers actively assign symbolic, emotional, and even political meaning to violent imagery, the study reinforces arguments that media violence cannot be treated as monolithic or a universally harmful category. It instead calls for more context-sensitive approaches in public debates and policymaking around violent content.

5.4. The Role of Medium and Aesthetic Form

The study also demonstrated that the medium through which gore is delivered significantly affects its reception. Across the interviews, participants articulated different thresholds of tolerance depending on whether the content was animated, filmed with real actors, or presented in interactive video games. For instance, animated gore was more likely to be dismissed as “fun” or “ridiculous”, whereas live-action depictions, particularly when realistic, were more likely to be perceived as disturbing. Yet, it is interesting to notice that Participant C, being a mother, declared that for her, “A cartoon should not contain such violence. What shocks me the most is the manga because it is supposed to be more childlike.”

These distinctions reveal how modality shapes emotional engagement with the form of the content, its realism, interactivity, and stylization. Media is not just how viewers feel, but how they interpret what they feel. This supports theories of medium specificity (McLuhan, 1964, pp.7-9; Murray, 1997, pp.72-74) and media affect (Shaviro, 2010, pp.4-6), which argue

that each medium structures affective experience differently. In other words, enjoyment of gore is not genre-specific alone; it is deeply medium-contingent.

This also contributes to ongoing debates in media studies around the aesthetics of excess, particularly in relation to platform-specific modes of engagement. As streaming services, video games, and social media increasingly host graphic content, understanding how viewers differentiate between artistic, narrative, and gratuitous violence becomes essential. The study suggests that medium and aesthetic framing are not just stylistic choices, but affective cues that help audiences calibrate ethical and emotional responses.

5.5. Gender, Identity, and Ethical Boundaries

One of the most significant contributions of this research lies in its attention to how identity, especially gender, mediates the interpretation and enjoyment of gore. Female and gender-diverse participants were often more attuned to how violence was framed, particularly in cases of sexualized or gendered harm. This aligns with feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975, pp.6-7; Clover, 1992, pp.35-38; Creed, 1993, pp.151-153), which has long emphasized that horror is a site of contested representation where power, gender, and gaze are negotiated.

For these viewers, gore was acceptable, even pleasurable, when it served to empower or deepen character development, and deeply problematic when it reproduced harmful stereotypes or trivialized trauma. Discernment was not rooted in prudishness, but in critical awareness of media representation and its real-world implications. Their comments reaffirm the importance of authorship, narrative framing, and symbolic intent in determining the affective and ethical contours of gore. For example, Participant C explained: “I think that when it is a woman who is subjected to violence, you can be uncomfortable if it is badly done or represented, because you think it is almost an excuse to make a woman suffer.”

Moreover, the study revealed subtle but meaningful gendered patterns in how participants made sense of gore. Male viewers often expressed a visceral curiosity about the human body’s limits, focusing on realism or the imagined physicality of violent acts. In contrast, female participants more frequently emphasized aesthetic appreciation, emotional resonance, or ethical framing. These distinctions suggest that gender may not only shape

identification with characters, as previous scholarship has shown, but also condition the interpretive lens through which violent imagery is processed.

5.6. Final Reflections

This study examined why some audiences are drawn to extreme cinematic violence and how they make sense of such experiences emotionally, cognitively, and culturally. People do not simply enjoy gore for its own sake: they enjoy what allows them to *feel, question, imagine,* and *confront*. Participants frequently interpret gore as more than a spectacle; it operates as a lens through which emotional thresholds, aesthetic taste, and sociopolitical anxieties are negotiated. This complexity underscores the symbolic density of violent media rather than its gratuity.

By centering the voices of viewers and interpreting their responses through theoretical lenses, the findings complicate simplistic views of horror audiences, showing how interpretations are shaped by personal experience and ethical reflection. Rather than reinforcing outdated assumptions, the findings portray viewers as reflective and morally engaged, drawing on their cultural background to interpret what they see. Additional insights from participants further support this multidimensional understanding. For instance, one viewer spoke about their early exposure to horror through their mother, noting that it became normalized rather than feared. Another discussed how body horror allows them to externalize self-directed discomfort, finding strange beauty in distorted flesh. These reflections emphasized that the enjoyment of gore is not simply an aesthetic preference but can be rooted in personal history, emotional regulation, or even therapeutic identification.

Though based on a Western, media-literate sample, this study provides a foundation for future research on horror audiences. Further work could explore responses across different cultural, racial, or generational groups, or expand into online subcultures where gore is reframed in ironic or stylized ways. In a media landscape defined by algorithmic exposure and shifting ethical boundaries, horror continues to offer a unique site for exploring how people manage fear, seek catharsis, and negotiate difficult emotions through storytelling.

Beyond its contributions to audience theory, this research also holds relevance for media education and regulatory discussions. As concerns around desensitization, censorship,

and platform moderation continue to shape public discourse, the findings support the need for nuanced frameworks that respect both viewer agency and ethical boundaries. Rather than advocating for blanket restrictions, the study advocates for critical literacy: helping audiences, especially younger ones, articulate why they engage with violent content and how they interpret its meaning.

6. Discussion

Through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, this thesis has explored how and why viewers derive emotional, aesthetic, and symbolic meaning from gore in horror media. Using qualitative interviews and a thematically driven analysis, the study highlights how horror audiences actively interpret and negotiate violent content, offering perspectives that complicate dominant narratives about numbness or passive media absorption. In doing so, participants' insights linked to existing theories bring an important contribution to audience studies, horror scholarship, and cultural theory. However, no research is without limits, and it is equally important to critically examine the epistemological, methodological, and ethical dimensions of the work.

6.1. Relevance and Contributions

The question guiding this thesis, why some people enjoy gore and how they make sense of this experience, may seem sensational on the surface. However, the responses gathered demonstrate that gore is not merely about shock or spectacle. Instead, it is a medium through which viewers explore emotional regulation, cultural identity, ethical reasoning, and aesthetic taste. The findings may enrich debates in horror scholarship, especially regarding how viewers interpret violent imagery in light of their personal histories. Still, not all participants saw gore as transformative or artistic. Several admitted to fast-forwarding or disengaging entirely during extreme scenes, particularly those including sexual violence or realistic depictions of torture. These moments of discomfort point to the ongoing ethical tension between affective thrill and moral disturbance.

Given the increasing availability of violent content across platforms (film, streaming, games, anime), participants' insights shed light on how such media is processed and discussed. The study moves away from simplistic "media effects" models and instead

embraces a constructivist and interpretive framework. By centering the voices of viewers and situating their experiences with established theoretical frameworks, it opens a richer space for understanding how horror media functions not only as entertainment but also as symbolic, emotional, and moral engagement. In this context, viewers do not always experience gore as coherent or cathartic. Some reactions were marked by ambivalence or contradiction: attraction mixed with guilt; aesthetic admiration paired with moral discomfort. These tensions remind us that horror's power lies not in providing stable meanings but in its capacity to evoke conflicting responses.

Moreover, the integration of affect theory, feminist critique, and media psychology supports a multidisciplinary reading of horror spectatorship, one that accounts for bodily affect, identity formation, and symbolic interpretation across diverse contexts.

6.1.1. Interplay of Emotional, Cognitive, and Cultural Factors

Although previously discussed separately, emotional, cognitive, and cultural responses often overlapped during interviews, suggesting that the enjoyment of gore is best understood through the intersection of these concepts. This multi-layered engagement was especially visible in participants who described both visceral reactions (goosebumps, tension, nausea) and reflective distancing through humor or aesthetic appreciation. For instance, participants who identified gore as “fun” or “campy” often did so within a broader cognitive framing that distinguished fiction from reality (Participants G, M, and L). This aligns with *Excitation Transfer Theory* (Zillmann, 1983, pp.149-151; Cummins, 2017, pp.31-32), where arousal from fear or tension is recontextualized as pleasure once a sense of safety is restored. However, these responses were not purely physiological: they were filtered through aesthetic and cultural lenses that reframe violence as humorous, cathartic, or beautiful.

Cultural background also appeared to mediate affective responses. French participants, for example, were more likely to offer philosophical or symbolic interpretations of gore, seeing it as a commentary on trauma, embodiment, or mortality; whereas Dutch participants emphasized communal viewing and shared emotional experiences, suggesting a more social framework of meaning-making (Participant L2, Z, C). Additionally, gender influenced narrative alignment and ethical engagement. Some female participants expressed heightened sensitivity to certain types of violence but also described identification with empowered

female characters or “final girls”, reflecting a negotiation between vulnerability and agency (Clover, 1992; Mulvey, 1999, pp.38-39).

Taken together, the findings support a triadic model of gore consumption: emotional intensity is experienced viscerally, cognitively filtered through narrative and genre expectations, and culturally modulated by identity, norms, and context. This layered model reframes gore not as gratuitous but as a dynamic site of meaning-making, where affect, aesthetics, and identity intersect. As shown in Figure 1 (see *Appendix D*), emotional reactions are not isolated but embedded in a broader system of symbolic negotiation, one that reflects both individual psychologies and shared cultural scripts.

6.2. Strong points

One of the study’s strengths was the depth of detail shared by participants during interviews. The use of semi—structured interviews provided participants the space to articulate personal, sometimes contradictory, reflections. Their responses showed emotional nuance, critical thinking, and an impressive degree of media literacy. This aligns with a growing body of audience research that positions viewers as active interpreters rather than passive consumers (Staiger, 2000, pp.31-34; Barker, 2012, pp.126-128).

Another strength is the attention to identity and intersectionality, particularly around gender. By including diverse gender perspectives, the study illuminated how gender identity shapes ethical thresholds, modes of identification, and aesthetic preferences. For instance, trans participants found personal resonance in body horror as a metaphor of transformation, a point that both affirms and extends Kristeva’s (1982, pp.3-5) concept of abjection in productive directions.

Yet another plus of this research is also its sensitivity to contradiction. By capturing both appreciation and rejection (sometimes within the same interview), it reflects the fragmented, affectively intense nature of modern horror spectatorship. Rather than seeking clear resolutions, this complexity invites us to understand viewers as meaning-makers navigating conflicting cultural signals.

A key contribution of this research lies in its attention to medium specificity, examining how gore is experienced differently across platforms (film, animation, gaming). This modality-sensitive approach, rare in horror studies, adds granularity to the findings and echoes media theorists like Murray (1997, pp.71-74) and Bolter & Grusin (1999, pp.60-63), who emphasize that form influences art.

Finally, the inclusion of a reflexive perspective, acknowledging the researcher's own positionality and interpretive frame, strengthens the ethical rigor of the work. Being both academically and personally embedded in horror culture allowed for rich dialogue with participants, though this also introduced interpretive risks, as discussed below.

6.3. Limitations and Challenges

Despite these strengths, the thesis is not without limitations. First, the sample size was enough but relatively small and drawn primarily from Western, media-literate individuals. While this allowed for a detailed account and comparative insight, it limits the generalizability of the findings. Responses from viewers in non-Western contexts, or from communities where horror is less normalized, might yield very different patterns of interpretation.

Second, the study relied solely on self-reported data, while rich, remains constrained by memory, social desirability, and discursive framing. Participants describe what they think they feel, but not necessarily how they respond in real-time. Incorporating methods such as ethnographic observation, physiological tracking, or think-aloud protocols could complement and complicate the findings. Moreover, the influence of digital spaces and niche communities, such as the "cute gore" subculture mentioned by one participant, points toward the evolving cultural ecosystems in which horror circulates. Online aesthetics that blend kawaii visuals with violent imagery exemplify how younger audiences actively reshape genre boundaries. This highlights the need to study not only the formal media but also participatory and subcultural practices and understand how gore is framed, shared, and made meaningful.

Additionally, while the study highlights thoughtful viewer interpretations, it cannot dismiss the possibility that some viewers may enjoy gore in ways that reflect, rather than critique, social harm. The line between catharsis and cruelty is subjective, and further research could explore where enjoyment becomes ethically or psychologically troubling.

Another challenge was the conceptual ambiguity of gore itself. As the data showed, what constitutes gore varies widely between individuals. While this multiplicity was analytically generative, it also complicated efforts to maintain definitional clarity. Future studies might benefit from disaggregating types of gore (e.g., psychological, bodily, comedic, symbolic) to allow for sharper typological distinctions.

Lastly, although gender and embodiment were thoroughly considered, race, disability, and class were less prominent in both the sample and analysis. These remain critical areas for future exploration, particularly given horror's long entanglement with racialized and colonial tropes.

6.4. Researcher Reflexivity

As a researcher with an affinity for horror, I brought an insider's perspective to the project. This enables rapport with participants and deep textual engagement, but it also introduced risks of confirmation bias. At times, I was tempted to frame responses in ways that "validated" horror as meaningful art. Recognizing and resisting this tendency was part of the critical process, and ongoing reflexivity was crucial in balancing empathy with critique.

This reflexivity also extended to emotional engagement. Hearing participants speak candidly about trauma, fear, or identity made it clear that horror is not trivial. It is a genre that engages with death, pain, transformation, and societal anxiety, topics that demand both analytical sharpness and ethical sensitivity.

6.5. Concluding Thoughts

This discussion affirms that the thesis provides a valuable window into the cultural and emotional life of gore, even as it acknowledges the study's boundaries and blind spots. Participant responses indicated active interpretation of violent imagery, influenced by personal values and experiences.

In a time of cultural fragmentation, algorithmic curation, and affective overload, horror offers something paradoxically grounding: a space to feel, to confront, and to reflect. Though exploratory in scope, this research shows that gore is not only watchable but also

thinkable, and can provoke thoughtful, emotionally layered responses that go beyond simple entertainment. Viewers do not just consume gore; they actively interpret and reflect on its meaning.

In the end, this thesis examined not only the appeal of gore, but what it reveals about our deepest fears, human emotion and identity. As seen in Participant Z's reflection on trauma and body horror, these films may provide a distorted but meaningful space for confronting personal fears. For some participants, gore scenes allowed both discomfort and aesthetic appreciation to coexist, which they described as surprising but meaningful.

Some viewers even noted that watching horror alone versus with others alters their psychological engagement, for instance, the calming effect of co-viewing versus the intensification of hallucinations or distress when alone. These moments highlight how affective responses are not only shaped by media content, but by viewers' emotional and mental health context, underscoring the deeply embodied and situational nature of horror spectatorship. By paying attention to how viewers navigate discomfort, negotiate meaning, and assert personal boundaries, this project affirms horror's relevance for understanding the affective and symbolic functions of contemporary media.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

General instructions for interviewer:

- *Short introduction, explain purpose of the research.*
- *Ensure informed consent and confirm participant is comfortable with being recorded.*
- *Use open-ended questions.*
- *Allow participants to elaborate freely and provide follow-up questions when necessary.*

Can you introduce yourself (age, nationality, and occupation)?

Introduction and Background Information

1. How did you get into the horror genre?
2. What type of horror films do you prefer (e.g. supernatural, psychological, slasher, body horror, elevated horror, gore)? Why?
3. Can you recall a horror movie that particularly stood out to you?

Emotional and Psychological Reactions to Gore

→ *Understand how audiences emotionally engage with violent imagery.*

4. Which characters do you appreciate and why?
5. What emotions do you typically experience when watching a horror film?
6. Do you experience any physical reactions when watching violent scenes (e.g. tension, excitement)?
7. Do you find these emotions and reactions enjoyable? Why or why not?

Interpretation and Viewer Engagement

→ *Examine how audiences interpret gore in storytelling and identify with characters.*

8. What do you like about gore?
9. Do you think gore in horror films serves a purpose? Why or why not?
10. Can you recall a film where gore played a key role in your reaction to it?

Stimulus Section: Gore Across Different Formats

→ *Assess whether audience reactions to gore change depending on the medium.*

Procedure: participants are shown brief clips or images of gore in different formats (ensuring ethical considerations and prior content warnings). The formats may include:

- *Live action horror film*

THE SUBSTANCE 1H51

- *Animated horror or anime*

https://youtu.be/AN_G3B2rUFQ EFTEN LIED

- *Video game violence*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBYY89zC8-w> OUTLAST II

11. What is the goriest medium you watch?

12. Do you think the medium affects your perception of gore? Why?

Social and Cultural Influences

→ *Explore how cultural background and social norms shape perceptions of gore.*

13. What does your family think about horror films?

14. How do you think cultural background can influence people's perception of gore?

15. How does watching horror movies alone VS with others affect your experience?

16. Have you ever felt judged for enjoying violent horror films? How do you respond to that?

17. Do you feel like watching horror movies has become more accepted recently?

Closing Reflections

→ *Conclude with broader reflections*

18. Do you believe gore in horror movies can symbolize deeper themes (e.g. societal fear, trauma)?

19. How could you explain your enjoyment of gore-heavy films to someone who dislikes them?

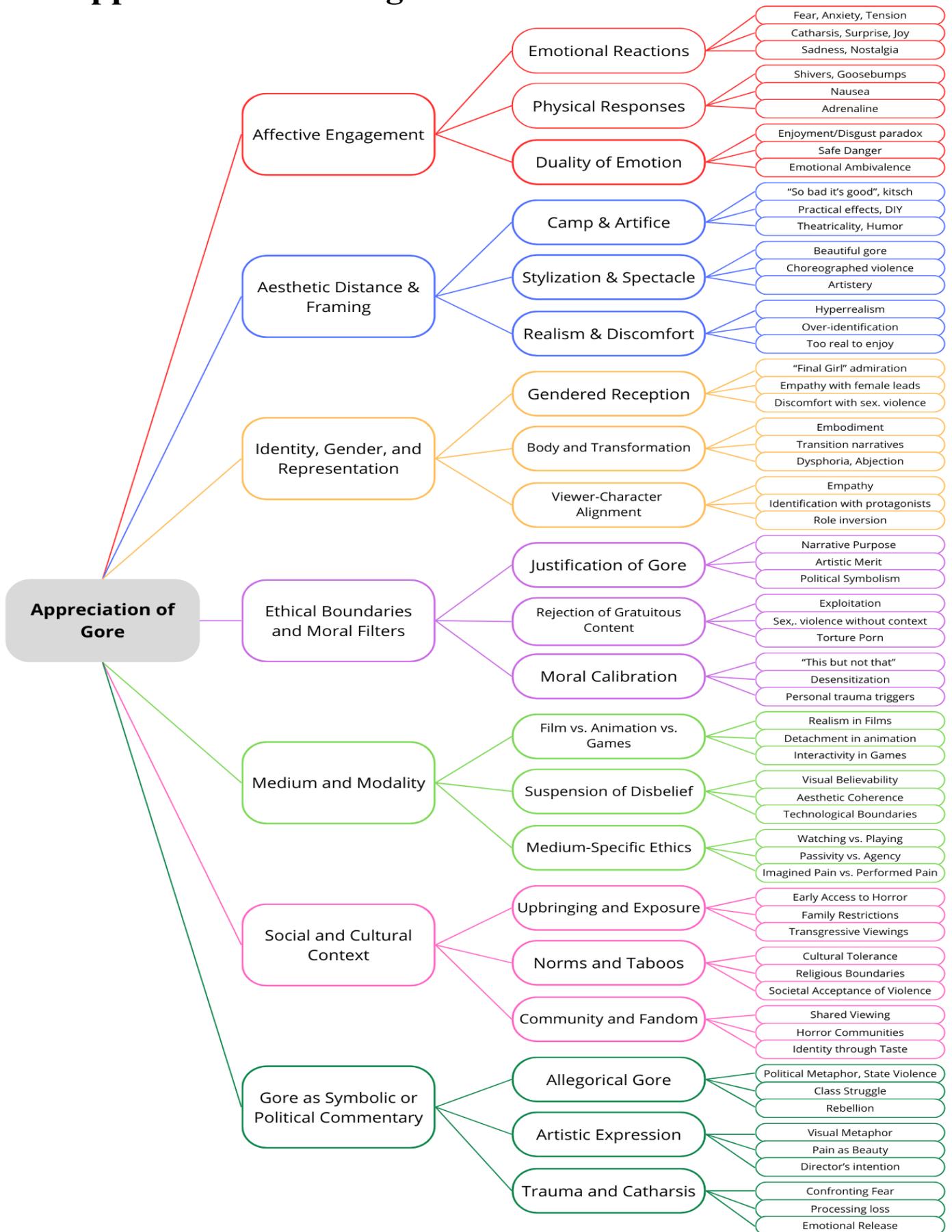
20. Would you like to make a horror movie recommendation?

21. Is there anything else you'd like to share about horror movies and gore?

Appendix B - List of Participants

Initial	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Gender Identification
C	57	French	Optician	Female
G	24	Dutch Venezuelan	Student	Female
L	30	French Vietnamese	Creative director on social media	Female
L2	18	French	Unemployed	Male
M	23	Dutch	Bartender	Male
S	34	French	Movie journalist, press attaché	Female
T	28	Turkish	Bartender	Male
Z	24	Dutch	Student	Female
PF	23	French	Student	Male
V	26	French	Cinema worker	Female

Appendix C – Coding Tree



Appendix D

Figure 1. *Triadic Model of Gore Enjoyment as Symbolic and Layered.*

