

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE END OF EXTREME CINEMA STUDIES

Troy Michael Bordun

Trent University

- 122 KERNER, AARON MICHAEL, AND JONATHAN L. KNAPP. *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. Pp. vii+179.
FREY, MATTIAS. *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers UP, 2016. Pp. viii+298.

Despite critic James Quandt's insistence that "extreme cinema" had been effectively ended by Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009) (Quandt 212), both filmmakers and scholars continue to work in and on this 21st-century art cinema production trend. 2016 marked the appearance of two scholarly volumes on extreme cinema. Aaron Michael Kerner and Jonathan L. Knapp's *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media* investigates the affective potential of the trend, that is, by assessing a number of films' graphic and explicit representations and the implications these representations have for spectatorship theory. Conversely, Mattias Frey's *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* unravels the production trend in terms of its "industrial systems, regulatory systems, [and] reception" (9). Frey's research includes but is not limited to extreme films' exhibition at festivals, their home-market distribution, and importantly, a homogeneous discourse from directors, critics, and academics. Although there is no denying that extreme films share affinities with horror, pornography, and exploitation fare, Frey observes that each of the players in extreme cinema discourse mark the trend "high art" rather than one of the so-called low genres.

On the one hand, Kerner and Knapp rehearse theoretical arguments found in much extreme cinema scholarship over the last decade or so and, on occasion, acknowledge the tension between high and low genres. Frey, alternatively, shifts the focus of recent scholarship: his empirical study of the industrial workings of the trend is a direct

response to the speculations of authors such as Kerner and Knapp.

I

Each volume begins by defining extreme cinema. Kerner and Knapp concede to the definition of extreme cinema as a body of international films with little narrative momentum that nevertheless make use of “abrupt [narrative] ruptures” which include heightened displays of “brutal violence” and “graphic sexual imagery” (1). Strangely, for a trend that is apparently not too concerned with narrative, these two authors will summarize and assess film narratives at great length. Kerner and Knapp also expand the heretofore applied definition of the trend as a body of international art cinema films to include “extreme” representations in comedy films, animated comedy programs, reaction videos, and online pornography of (perhaps) the most disgusting sort. With this addition to the repertoire of extreme cinema, the volume is neither explicitly about art cinema nor auteurism, an institution and a theory often studied by extreme cinema scholars. A few chapters in *Extreme Cinema* focus on films and directors associated with the production trend as defined by Quandt and the authors in Tina Kendall and Tanya Horeck’s edited volume *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (2011), also published by Edinburgh UP. However, for their study, Kerner and Knapp provide no justification for their use of “extreme cinema” and repeatedly confuse a number of trends and subgenres such as “torture porn” and international art house fare.¹

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It is worth quoting Horeck and Kendall here, for already in 2012 extreme cinema scholars were beginning to think beyond the observed negative affects a single film may have on an ideal spectator. In their introduction to the *Cinephile* special issue on “Contemporary Extremism,” Horeck and Kendall present the following warning:

A key task for scholarly work on extreme cinema is to think through fine-grained distinctions between the range of spectatorial dynamics that underpin [the recent] shift from art house extremism to multiplex or horror film festival circuit extremisms. While these [latter] films might share a desire to push the boundaries of the watchable, they are addressed to different audience demographics, and operate according to their own distinctive narrative and genre paradigms, to produce dissimilar affective responses. Again, while recognizing affinities between films that seek to test the spectator’s mettle through relentless exposure to graphic horror, it is vital to recognize, as Hawkins notes, that *not all such ordeals will ultimately “mean the same thing.”* (“The New Extremisms” 7, italics mine)

Kerner and Knapp’s conflation of genres, trends, films, and affects attempts to put a representation of a woman flayed alive (*Martyrs*, Pascal Laugier, 2008) indirectly in conversation with social satire (*Wetlands*, David Wnendt, 2013), for both produce disgust. The result of their attempt is less than inspiring. This poor result is largely due to their expanded boundaries of extreme cinema, lack of refinement in approach,

and neglect of art cinema history.

Where Kerner and Knapp end their history and delineation of extreme cinema in the first few pages of the book, Frey accounts for the trend's recent appearance not as a sudden filmmaking leap into extreme representations of sex and violence; the author instead provides the relevant historical background within the contours of international art cinema. Indeed, "especially explicit sex has long been an important factor in the production and reception of European and other [art] cinemas" (6-7).² Frey counters authors such as Kerner and Knapp with a refined notion of the trend that includes graphic sex and violence to be sure, but also an obvious yet often unremarked upon trait: the sex and violence in these films are aimed at stoking "critical and popular controversy" during their premieres at film festivals and art house cinemas as well as on their DVD jacket designs for home distribution (7). Unlike Kerner and Knapp, Frey then submits the boundaries and conditions for inclusion into extreme cinema, thereby accounting for extreme cinema's place in Anglophone
124 film markets, criticism, and scholarship. He further refines the bounds of extreme cinema by adopting Steve Neale's method of institutional analysis of art cinema ("Art Cinema as Institution"). In Frey's volume, the use value of contemporary theory, particularly "affect," is put to the test against his empirical research.

II

Similar to other writings on extreme cinema and affect, perhaps my own included, Kerner and Knapp employ an unrefined conceptualization of affect to hypothesize the possible effects a film may have on a spectator. The authors define affect as the body's "gut reactions and involuntary spasms," experiences which they "partition" from the emotions (12-13). However, the only affect routinely discussed by Kerner and Knapp is disgust, so I would propose an alternative subtitle for the book: *Disgust in Transnational Media*.³ Indeed, the limited use of affect severely weakens Kerner and Knapp's analyses of specific films and the trend as a whole.

In addition to affect, Kerner and Knapp adopt Linda Williams's articulation of body genres and the corresponding spectatorial bodily responses to assess contemporary extreme representations. The authors unconvincingly add comedy to Williams's body genres (melodrama, horror, and pornography) simply because laughter is also an involuntary bodily spasm (73), consequently missing the thrust of Williams's thesis about genres and their significance for unconscious structures of fantasy. Further theoretical underpinnings in *Extreme Cinema* include Tom Gunning's "cinema of attractions" and his articulation of moving-images' shock effects, William Ian Miller on disgust, and Mikhail Bakhtin's writings about the carnivalesque. Although these theorists have been routinely deployed by extreme cinema scholars, Kerner and Knapp add nothing new to our understanding of their ideas. Rather, they are overly reliant on these theorists at the expense of formulating an original contribution to

extreme cinema studies.

Their first chapter articulates the significance of sound design for affective films. Subsequent chapters address certain effects a film may have on its spectators: pain, laughter, arousal, and crying, respectively. The films discussed in each chapter correspond to one or more of Williams's body genres (comedy included). The structure of each chapter is roughly the same: introductory remarks about Williams, Gunning, or Miller and an example from outside of extreme cinema followed by lengthy descriptive accounts of several films, their narratives, and their affective potential to disgust.

In the first and strongest chapter, the authors adopt the theoretical musings of Jean-Luc Nancy, Michel Chion, and more recently, Lisa Coulthard. Kerner and Knapp describe the means by which the audio design of extreme horror films transmit an affective charge, notably, pain. Extreme cinema "often calls upon sound to articulate what simply might be too explicit to render visually" (33). For Chion and the authors, "sound triggers feelings that are beyond cognition [...] [and] intense affect can overpower cognition" (23). They begin by identifying discrepancies in diegetic and non-diegetic sound in the non-extreme film *127 Hours* (Danny Boyle, 2011). The moment the protagonist amputates his own arm, thereby saving himself from his imprisonment between two fallen rocks, "grinding noise" blends with the score. Thus the authors conclude that contemporary representations of pain blur the boundaries of inside and outside, for this grinding noise may be diegetic, or semi-diegetic, or functions to increase the film's affective potential on its spectators. Similarly, in films such as *Dumplings* (Fruit Chan, 2004) and *Love Exposure* (Sion Sono, 2009), the audio design enhances the gory scenes to thereby render the indexically unreal violent event (it is a fiction film after all) to an affective end. Cracking, snapping, crunching, affect the inside of the body of the spectator—I hear the foley of a cracked bone and involuntarily feel that snap in my own bones. Since we cannot close up our ears like we can with our eyes, representations of pain resonate deep inside viewers. In a nod to Eugenie Brinkema's volume on affect and film form (*The Forms of the Affects*), Kerner and Knapp conclude that an extreme film can, through its audio design, share its pain with spectators.

Next on Kerner and Knapp's agenda of pain is torture porn. This subgenre of horror consists of American films such as *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) and *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and, according to the authors, "violently returns the horror genre to the body and forces us, as viewers, to face our physical essence during a time in which technologies seem to disconnect us from it" (52-53). The authors turn their attention to two European ventures into the subgenre, *Martyrs* and *A Serbian Film* (Srđan Spasojević, 2010), and describe their narratives at length. Interspersed in their recounting of the films' narratives are descriptions of the affective moments, particularly those in which the characters are rendered abject (in Julia Kristeva's sense) or turned into meat (in Gilles Deleuze's sense, reflecting on the paintings of Francis Bacon). In the context of Horeck and Kendall's scholarly caveat, we should heed Adam Lowenstein's note on torture porn: these films may shock to be sure, but they also appeal to audi-

ences' "admiration, provocation, and sensory adventure[s]" (Horeck and Kendall, "The New *Extremisms*" 42, quoting Lowenstein). However, Kerner and Knapp have described the stories and technical embellishments so meticulously and so carefully that I was at pains myself to locate any kind of argument as to their significance beyond their capacity to disgust.

Indeed, the authors' ability to closely transcribe what they see onscreen and speculate on what other spectators might negatively feel is impressive, despite qualifications of affect such as: "this author, for one (Kerner), had hairs standing on end" (103). While Vivian Sobchack's praised and oft-cited conceptualization of the embodied spectator in "What my Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh" begins with a personal anecdote of an embodied response to a film's sensual moment (*Carnal Thoughts* 53-54), and while I am sympathetic to the call for scholars to implicate themselves in their writing, I found Kerner and Knapp's recourse to personal sensations out of place when most of their conclusive statements about extreme cinema's effects on spectators contain qualifiers such as "possibly" and "might," not to mention the contradiction between these qualifiers and other claims as to the "force" or "cause" of an effect—it must be one or the other, but not both. More importantly, in line with Horeck and Kendall's sentiments above, Brinkema observes (*The Forms of the Affects* 32): "the greatest danger in [writing about being personally affected by a film] is that it emphasizes the successful consumption of affect and thus makes theoretical accounts of each private feeling experience complicit with the explicit marketing of feeling from the commercial side of film production."⁴ As readers of *Extreme Cinema*, are we in any way better informed now that we have Kerner and Knapp's accounts of being disgusted by a body of contemporary films that explicitly aim, on a surface level, to disgust their spectators?

The remaining chapters of *Extreme Cinema* are weak at best. In the third, Kerner and Knapp rehearse Bakhtin's notions of the grotesque and carnivalesque as it pertains to the potential laughter produced by a scene of vomiting in *Family Guy* (Seth MacFarlane, 1999-), the consistent vomit found in the *Jackass* series (Jeff Tremaine, 2000-02, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2011), and a corpulent body in *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006) that, confusingly, "might prompt disgust and/or laughter [in/from the spectator]" (89). The authors note that none of the aforementioned videos or films' representations are extreme in the same sense of the art cinema production trend, such as *Taxidermia* (György Pálfi, 2006) (83, 81). Prior to these descriptions, overdone with block quotes from Miller and Bakhtin, among others, the authors produce a rather exceptional reading of reaction videos to *2 Girls 1 Cup* (MFX Media, 2007), articulating the overlap between the affect of disgust and laughter as a response to disgust.

The fourth chapter, on arousal respectively, describes the disgust we might experience while watching and hearing the exploits of *Wetlands*'s teenaged protagonist Helen. Kerner and Knapp walk the reader through the film's narrative and observe the moments where eroticism and disgust overlap in relation to taste and scent, thereby neglecting the scenes of the film in which this author (Bordun) felt arousal without

disgust, such as the sequence of a middle-aged black man, complete with headlamp, shaving the teenaged protagonist's pubic region—a sequence ripe for race and age analysis. The chapter also contains a lengthy description of the narrative of *Helter Skelter* (Mina Ninagawa, 2012), a “misery porn” about beauty and plastic surgery, and concludes with an all-too-brief comment about the convergence of extreme cinema and pornography through a brief discussion of cellphone video “authenticity.”⁵

The last chapter forces melodramatic readings onto several of Shion Sono's films, Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury's *Inside* (2007), and Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997/2008). I simply failed to see the significance of the familial melodrama for the described narratives—despite extreme films' lack of narrative momentum, “[n]arratives [...] are supremely important in the melodramatic genre” (131)—and how this genre worked to produce “dread, disgust, or some other affective response” in the viewer (132). My inability to reformulate the discussion of this chapter leads to my larger criticism of the volume: *Extreme Cinema* has no stakes. Kerner and Knapp's descriptions are wonderfully worded and their speculations are on point. Yet their volume reads more like an intellectual film review than a work of film-philosophy. I am reminded of Stanley Cavell's observation about this kind of formalism:

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So many remarks one has endured about the kind and number of feet in a line of verse, or about a superb modulation, or about a beautiful diagonal in a painting, or about a wonderful camera angle, have not been readings of a passage at all, but something like items in a tabulation, with no suggestion about what is being counted or what the total might mean. Such remarks, I feel, say nothing, though they may be, as Wittgenstein says about naming, preparations for saying something (and hence had better be accurate). (*Pursuits of Happiness* 36-37)

Keeping Cavell in mind, to summarize Kerner and Knapp's volume in their own words: “Where there is cinematic embellishment, we find affective potential” (141)—a tabulation of moments in which a film, through its technical flourishes, might disgust an ideal spectator. The authors could have broached the implications of their work; for example, these films warrant extended description and detail because they say something about our role as effected spectators, possible ethical implications, the ontology of film, cinephilia and the love of disgusting films, the history of horror, pornography, melodrama, art cinema, or film theory. The authors conclude that they have made “preliminary gestures toward identifying general tendencies in extreme cinema,” particularly the recent turn away “from conventional narrative structure[s] and its appeal to our emotions, favoring instead an affecting cinema” (156, 159).⁶ Precisely which cinema is being turned away from is left undecided or undeclared. At the end of *Extreme Cinema*, we are no closer to understanding why this trend is worth studying apart from its instances of cinematic embellishments, and more importantly why, on a global scale, these films are being produced and championed as a specific kind of film art, an art that has great appeal for a large number of geographically and culturally diverse consumers.

Are not Kerner and Knapp's descriptions of affect complicit with the explicit aims of the filmmakers, producers, and distributors? Perhaps film analysis and theory requires an account of the changing terrain of the art cinema marketplace, its functions, its goals, and its discourses. Therein we can find an answer about the significance of extreme cinema.

III

128 Frey's *Extreme Cinema* challenges the majority of extreme cinema studies up to 2016. The author writes that he has no interest in what the hypothetical spectator might feel at the sight of an extreme film (32); rather, Frey will assess what real directors, festival programmers, distributors, critics, and academics say and write about the trend. From this empirical beginning he outlines a precise picture of contemporary art cinema, its functions, and how extreme cinema perpetuates art cinema trends from the late 1950s onwards. The author makes it clear that extreme cinema plays a vital role in our definition of art cinema; is a cornerstone in art film festival programs and arthouses; helps us shape our positions on cinema as a "high art;" and, in his excellent final chapter, observes how the trend fails to negotiate its own intellectual aspirations with the film market.

The ongoing success of extreme cinema as a production trend and its ongoing attention from critics and scholars "depends on two distinctions: (1) the creators' intentions (or pretensions) to produce something more sophisticated than horror or pornography; and (2) critics and consumers' belief to have the rarefied taste to appreciate larger, deeper meanings" (21). In other words, the discourses of transgression and distinction apply to the trend's production, exhibition, distribution, and critical and scholarly writings. Frey then collapses this set of distinctions into what he calls the "aesthetic embrace."

Embracers of the extreme cinema phenomenon position themselves against the accusation that these films are merely sex and violence. *Extreme Cinema*, on the whole, assesses the converging nodes of embracer discourse. The body of the volume begins with a discussion of prominent filmmakers such as Gaspar Noé and Catherine Breillat, both working in France, and Austria's Michael Haneke. It is here that Frey demonstrates how directors' discourse largely guides the reception of the trend. Due to the often controversial nature of their films, auteur filmmakers are expected to discuss their work at length. These filmmakers are well-educated and capable of speaking in both technical and philosophical terms about their films and their place in film history and, during interviews, they rehearse the familiar distinctions between art cinema and horror or pornography: each claims to be an artistic innovator or philosopher that purportedly "know[s] better" than genre filmmakers. Extreme films, they contend, contain analyses of sex and violence via a "moral agnosticism" which thereby broaches or aims to provoke moral questions (27-29). Directors' remarks are

also often controversial in nature, such as Haneke's desire to "rape" the viewer into critical spectatorship" (25); such statements only enhance the marketability of their high art. Further, directors can also provide accounts as to the meaning of the work, thereby giving the authoritative interpretation to their ambiguous narratives and characters as well as position themselves as experts on sex and violence in the media.

In a later chapter, Frey turns to Austrian cinema as a case study to examine the relationship between filmmakers who perpetuate the transgression and distinction discourse by employing self-exoticization and these filmmakers' subsequent critical evaluation. Frey is able to trace a distinctly Austrian art cinema style originating with Haneke's bleak depictions, a style produced in part by the low consumption of domestically-produced films on the one hand and, on the other, Austrian films' relative success in the international market. The more we see these Austrian art films at festivals and in art theatres, the more likely we will see Haneke-inspired productions. The success of Austrian directors largely hinges upon their explicit transgression of the rules of art cinema and their distinction from commercial cinema via their critiques of Austrian culture. Critics, in their praise of these transgressive and critical Austrian films, often resort to directors' own opinions and interpretations to justify the praise. Indeed, directors seem to inform critical reception and critics' adoption of directors' remarks perpetuates the cycle of transgression and distinction discourse.

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Frey observes that scholars, like critics, are also greatly influenced by auteurs' discourse about cinematic violence and representations of sexuality. Directors' words and phrases provide evidence for the claims we make about certain films. Regarding extreme cinema's violence, scholars routinely turn to ethics to justify the graphic representations. The film is violent, we write, but it is also a critique of culture and violence (says the director) through its disruption of conventional narrative and film forms. For example, Kerner and Knapp conclude their research on *Funny Games* by agreeing with Haneke's interpretation of his own film as a critique of violence (150-53; Frey, *Extreme Cinema* 27-28).

Regarding extreme cinema's explicit sex, Frey looks to the numerous essays and pieces of criticism praising the use of "real sex" as a cinematic device. By "real sex," scholars refer to 1) directors' aesthetic choice to use unsimulated sexual intercourse or simply the naked and exposed body, often under (fictionally) vulnerable circumstances, and 2) directors' arguments about the value of "real sex" and its respective distance from pornography. Frey accomplishes his own narrative and formal analysis of a "real sex" film, easily differentiating between extreme cinema and pornography, thus quashing the well-worn debate about how the one is not like the other. Frey then turns to the problem of scholars' deployment of the "real" as extreme cinema's contribution to art cinema and film studies. Beyond the transgression of film form and narrative, academics and critics posit that unsimulated sex adds a sense of intimacy between spectators and actors, since we are seeing actors really performing sex (171-73). But this discourse misses the institutional framework of extreme cinema. As Kerner and Knapp merely reproduce filmmakers' and distributors' discourse about

the value of disgust, similarly, aesthetic embracers merely contribute to extreme cinema discourses that “stoke curiosity and court controversy” (173) rather than properly engage the larger significance of an individual film and the trend as a whole. By perpetuating “real sex” discourse, scholars are complicit in merely reproducing controversy, transgression, and distinction qualifications. As Frey demonstrates, curiosity and controversy are the tools of the trade for extreme cinema filmmakers, producers, exhibitors, and distributors. Frey thus demands that scholars and critics do more than textual methods and analyses (177).

In addition to assessing chatty directors and routine topics in the academy, Frey contributes to a growing body of film festival scholarship by discussing extreme cinema with festival directors. Extreme films factor into festival directors’ two strategies of programming. First, they consider a variety of films, thereby accounting for a global market with a diverse range of styles, topics, themes, etc. Second, festival directors may choose films that cause a scandal. Frey aligns the “diversity of films” programming approach with the strand of transgression and taste discourse mentioned above. Programmers, more often than not, seek to “actively *challenge* taste, to *do* something to attendees, and thereby serve a pedagogical function” (56-57). Indeed, the “difficult film,” “real sex” film, or otherwise extreme film falls in line with these “out-of-the-ordinary” programming goals. An appreciation of such films stresses both the festivals’ and attendees’ intellectual and artistic aspirations.

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In this same chapter on the film festival, Frey makes another bold move. Since extreme filmmakers do not exist in a vacuum, the author traces the importance of corporate sponsorship for festivals and the motivations these festivals have for precisely screening scandalous films. With the aim of financial gain, the author explains how producers fund filmmakers such that their extreme film projects appeal to the most prestigious festivals (festivals are also the location for distributors to purchase films and gain media attention). Film festivals “provide a marketplace for distribution and a breeding ground for their production: festivals increasingly not only incentivize but actually guide and help shape films” (67). We see why extreme cinema scholarship must go beyond the surface of the film: extreme cinema fills a demand for precisely the kind of films critics and scholars have been championing as pinnacles of art cinema.

Once a film is made, often for circulation at film festivals, it is picked up by a distributor. Frey spends a chapter discussing the different modes of DVD and Blu-ray packaging, noting the rather homogeneous jackets for Tartan’s “Asia Extreme” films and the repetition of statements or reviews regarding a film’s scandalous or controversial qualities. He also looks to New York’s Film Forum, a key theatre in the exhibition of art cinema, and their reasons for including extreme films in their programs. Much like festival directors, programmers at Film Forum offer the same discourse of taste and aesthetic quality to account for their film selections. Moreover, in the following chapter on film regulation and classification, Frey discovers the same logic at work: whether in the US or UK, regulating bodies differentiate between por-

nography and films of quality, relying on the aesthetic embrace to redeem what may be a pornographic film. Regulating bodies consider (and/or exoticize) foreign films as products of national importance as well as consider (and/or celebrate) the auteur. Again we must bear in mind the extreme cinema institution: any censorship or ban on extreme cinema only enhances its marketability, either at arthouses or in home distribution. Programmers and distributors know that viewers “derive a rebellious utility from seeing the ‘forbidden’ images that the establishment wants to keep from them; they take delight in defying standards of decency and in challenging the perceived paternalism of authority figures” (121).

IV

Where does this leave the field of extreme cinema studies? Kerner and Knapp demonstrate the limitations of textual methods and analysis, particularly in the application of affect theory. Frey offers a way forward for the field in the final chapter of his *Extreme Cinema*. Putting his institutional considerations to the test, Frey attempts to reveal the stakes of the production trend and its role in the marketplace of art cinema. Despite directors’ discourse about the value of art cinema as well as scholarly arguments championing aesthetics of violence, sexual violence, and “real sex” in fictional films, extreme cinema distributors often resort to a well-known advertising strategy: sex sells. An honest study of extreme cinema should therefore negotiate this tension between filmmakers’ and advertisers’ discourses (178-79).

Frey’s chapter builds upon the above discourses to study what Linda Williams has described as “hardcore art films” (*Screening Sex* and “Cinema’s Sex Acts”). Although much of what Frey writes in the chapter rehashes the same points as the previous ones, an exclusive and more sustained study of the production history and directorial discourse of *The Idiots* (Lars Von Trier, 1998), *9 Songs* (Michael Winterbottom, 2004), and *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013) revealed some striking similarities: 1) a willful adherence to codes of realism that nevertheless blur the boundaries of what constitutes “legitimate and illegitimate [cinematic] representations”;⁷ and 2) the transgression of cinematic codes is an effort to present the “truth.” Frey concludes, “Hardcore art filmmakers’ ways of speaking—defying or subverting pornography, associating explicitness with artistic virtuosity, and committing to authenticity and realism—have a common aim: to justify their projects and validate their films as art works with serious aims and significant aesthetic value” (189). Indeed, my own work on Breillat revealed that the director’s formal and narrative play with the codes of pornography and horror are the means by which she purports to reveal truths about sex, gender, power, and patriarchy (Bordun, “Sex is Metaphysical” and “Seeing Horror, Imagining the Horrible”).

My published work does not go far enough beyond textual analyses and director discourse, although I made some moves in this direction. Rather than reproduce

Frey's findings on the conflict between auteur discourse and advertising strategies, let us consider an example I frequently use with my students when we discuss contemporary art cinema: Breillat's *Anatomy of Hell* (2004). The film was a box office flop even compared to the modest success of other extreme films since 1998—the film earned a mere \$34,506 in the US (Frey, *Extreme Cinema* 190). *Anatomy* was also a critical failure. However, distributors could ride the success of the auteur's earlier features and their controversial status.

132 The YouTube trailer for the film contains this sparse description: "Trailer for a foreign, unrated flick." Already we have elements of the transgression and distinction discourse: a "typically French film" that is so scandalous that distributors did not look for a rating (Barker, "Typically French?"). In the trailer itself, the distributor's logo first appears onscreen, Tartan Films.⁸ The first film image, scored by an ambient soundtrack, is a close tracking shot of the female protagonist's naked body (Amira Casar) overtop which we learn that *Anatomy* was an "Official Selection" at the Toronto and Berlin Film Festivals. The ambience climaxes into a techno-house track and the visuals flash between a nightclub and the large bedroom where most of the film takes place. The second set of intertitles informs us that this is a film "From Catherine Breillat... The Controversial Director of *Romance* and *Fat Girl*..." Black bars with white text then cover various shots of Casar's nude body: "...Comes a Startling...Erotic...Sensual...Vision." The techno track continues as the trailer presents various shots from the film, giving the appearance of a non-stop thrill ride full of eroticism and sex. "Be Warned..." the intertitles continue through flashes of sex and nudity, "these images are eXplicit...eXtreme...eXtraordinary." The DVD jacket equally creates tension between the film's philosophy and the need to sell its sexiness. Casar and Rocco Siffredi's nude bodies appear in the center of the front cover with a bold content warning at the bottom (mysteriously, Casar does not have a nipple in the image). The back cover quotes a *Time Out* review which compares the film to Sade and Bataille. The DVD extras, including an interview with Breillat, suggest this is a work of an auteur. Finally, the poster contains the same DVD cover image and adds the film's festival laurels and another review which calls the film "[Breillat's] most provocative... yet..." (*The New York Times*).

Anatomy is a "low concept" film; that is, it is not able to be pitched based on an accurate account of its story, plot elements, and character motivations—albeit a "real sex" production, it is more so a dialogue-driven drama largely focused on the problem female embodiment causes for amicable relations amongst men and women. As Frey describes, extreme films are not subject to "breezy characterizations" when compared to Hollywood action flicks with a recognizable star. Put differently, the advertising of "high concept films" generally match up with the content of the film while low concept films do not—the latter's advertising thus resorts to generating interest in the sexually explicit elements rather than its artistic or philosophical traits. *Anatomy* is not an anomaly in this regard: Breillat is one of the most interviewed directors and is an exemplary auteur for the transgression/distinction discourse (*Extreme Cinema*

26-27). In conflict with Breillat's philosophical aims is the DVD jacket of *Anatomy*, which uses specific iconography—a central, naked female; obstructed nudity; content warnings and critic quotations about controversy and/or sexual content (192ff)—to mark the film as a specific kind of sexually explicit object, more akin to exploitation fare than the arthouse taboo breakers championed by academics.

Indeed, the “real sex” discourse of directors and scholars matters little in the actual exhibition and distribution of extreme films. Although this discourse has been endlessly explored by scholars, and argued as art films' marked distinction from porn, actual distributors and spectators prove this academic debate irrelevant (201, 205). Frey instead concludes that many extreme films “literally function as pornography” (203), a conclusion I reached as well in my work on Breillat and reception (Bordun, “Sex is Metaphysical”). Fans of extreme cinema upload images and video to pornography sites and the proliferation of extreme cinema, Frey notes, symbiotically operates alongside the proliferation of online porn (205). Regardless of directors' and academics' intellectualization of hardcore art, distributors and fans do not wholeheartedly align themselves with their discourse.

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Institutional analysis reveals broader forms of spectatorship than previously accounted for. A study of aesthetics will only lead to aesthetic answers: “Solipsistic approaches anticipate their own conclusions” (Frey, *Extreme Cinema* 211), something we saw above in Kerner and Knapp's *Extreme Cinema* (namely, these disgusting films generate disgust). Where Frey gets into trouble in his approach in the last chapter is the larger applicability of his findings. While he does provide the caveat that there are exceptions to the rules and that he simply cannot account for all of extreme cinema, his analyses of DVD covers and advertising has too many outliers. In a brief look at my DVD collection, early 21st-century extreme films appear as Frey describes, but more recent DVD covers do not. These examples surely do not undermine Frey's work; however, they do suggest that even within extreme cinema there is an internal tension amongst exploitation-style and traditional art cinema style marketing strategies. For example, the Palisades Tartan release of Seidl's *Import/Export* (2007) could have easily made use of sexual imagery on its cover but instead presents the title with stills of the characters, its selection at Cannes, and its critical praise. There is also a comparison completely overlooked by Frey, between the advertising strategies of extreme films with heterosexual characters and those with lesbian or gay characters—see Strand Releasing's refusal to mention gay characters in the description of Jacques Nolot's *Porn Theatre* (2002) and EI's release of Brillante Mendoza's *Service* (2008).

The significance of Frey's volume is nevertheless apparent. It arrives at a juncture in which one form of extreme cinema studies is perhaps at its end. Frey convincingly demonstrates how scholars' appeal to an ideal spectator, use of unrefined affect theories, and overemphasis on aesthetics often generates tautological conclusions. I would add to Frey's criticism of the current state of extreme cinema studies that without at least some investigation of production history, scholarly essays championing

“real sex” are complicit in possible unethical filmmaking practices. With the details of Maria Schneider’s non-consensual participation in the rape scene in Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) again getting media attention (Nordine, “Last Tango in Paris”), the complaints from the actresses in *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Williams, “Cinema’s Sex Acts”), and the growing number of actresses describing their maltreatment at the hands of some male directors, extreme cinema scholars need to pay heed to the bodies on display in these films (Bordun, “Onscreen and off-screen flesh and blood”). Now that scholars and critics have Frey’s wonderful volume, our future investigations of extreme cinema will hopefully be all the richer.

NOTES

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1. Kerner’s *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensation* similarly extends a production trend’s definition to include otherwise unassociated media.
 2. See Bordwell 561; Elsaesser 83; Neale 32-33; and Lewis.
 3. “Disgust” appears more than 30 times in the Index, likewise “Pain.” No other affect appears in the Index. Kerner and Knapp’s chapter on laughter might be thought of as the affectation of joy or excitement. Their discussion of laughter, however, is described as the effect of disgust, namely, one is disgusted and so laughs at the object of disgust.
 4. See the second chapter in Brinkema’s *The Forms of the Affects* for a game-changing analysis of what she deems the “affective fallacy” in film theory today.
 5. The debate about extreme cinema and pornography is an interesting one that has been taken up by authors in essays and book chapters elsewhere. Among many others, see Downing; Brinkema, “A Title Does Not Ask”; and Williams, *Screening Sex* and “Cinema’s Sex Acts.”
 6. Martine Beugnet, employing the same philosophers and theorists as Kerner and Knapp, already made this claim in 2007 in *Cinema and Sensation*.
 7. Bordwell makes a similar observation in his study of art cinema narration, “From Poetics of Cinema.”
 8. Tartan specialized in the distribution of horror and extreme cinema. It folded in 2008 and sold to Palisades Media. The latter sold the distribution rights to Kino Lorber in 2014.

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