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Abstract

Extreme art cinema has often been placed within a Franco-centric framework whereby the aesthetic and thematic concerns of the narratives are placed within French traditions of transgression. This article seeks to interrogate this trend, and assert that extreme art cinema, and its particular modes of inversion, hybridisation, and provocation, are implicated within an ongoing history of transnational exchanges and conversations. Using landmark examples of extreme art cinema, this article provides a snapshot of the ways cinematic extremity travels between national production contexts, drawing together a series of culturally diverse narratives. Through this exploration, the article puts forth a more expansive canon based around the key principles of transnationalism, and notes the manner in which these narratives share, trade and exchange thematic concerns, aesthetic practices, reception cultures, exhibition platforms and key personnel.

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Reconceptualising Extreme Art Film as Transnational Cinema

Since the early 21st century, a growing number of art films have been recognised for pushing the boundaries of acceptability by distorting the borders between ‘high’ and ‘low’ taste cultures. While some critics, including Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (2011), use the label ‘New Extremism’ to describe, group and provide critique, much of the scholarship concerning these transgressive narratives is still defined by the Franco-centric banner of ‘French New Extremity’. Sanctioned by the likes of James Quandt (2004, 127) and Hampus Hagman (2007, 37), this label promotes France as the epicentre of extreme art production, with filmmakers such as Catherine Breillat, Gaspar Noé, François Ozon, Claire Denis and Bruno Dumont acting as principal figures. Elsewhere, Tim Palmer’s label ‘cinema du corps’ (2011, 57), ‘cinema of the body’, continues this tendency, whilst Guy Austin states France is the instigator of the brutal aesthetic that has characterised this strand of art production (2008, 92). Other authors follow suit, as Lisa Downing talks about the ‘emergence of a recent trend in French filmmaking [. . .] that blurs the boundaries between art film and porno flick’ (2004, 265), whilst Martine Beugnet notes, ‘some of the recent French film production seemingly brings art cinema to new heights of horror or graphic description’ (2007, 16).

This article contests this Franco-centrism, and suggests that the use of transgressive imagery is part of a broader, transnational filmic tradition related to art cinema’s ongoing rejection of mainstream cinematic mores. This notion has been discussed elsewhere, however has always been stifled by the continued reliance on a French foci. For example, Palmer claims ‘the methodologies of this new French cinema have also informed a number of projects made by filmmakers of different nationalities’ (2011, 65). However Palmer’s claim presents an overly simplistic survey of migration, as he categorises Lars von Trier’s *The Idiots/Idioterne* (1998)

as a French-inspired extreme art narrative (2011, 65). Yet, within his earlier list of leading examples of French extreme cinema, only one film pre-dates *The Idiots*, François Ozon's short *See the Sea/Regarde la mer* (1997) (Palmer 2011, 57). This exposes the emphasis on French production which underplays the level of transnationalism in both historical and contemporary contexts.

In order to challenge this tendency, I use the label 'extreme art cinema', as opposed to 'New Extremism', to survey landmark examples of extreme art cinema, exploring the manner in which this hybridised aesthetic comes as a result of a series of transnational exchanges, conversations and trades across porous and permeable national borders. The aesthetic, and the loose category of films that can be placed under the banner of extreme art cinema, are defined by the slippage between 'high' and 'low' taste cultures, wherein they become a fusion of art film and exploitation cinema traditions. Hyperbolic sequences of biologically realistic violence, prolonged rapes, unsimulated hard-core sex, and un-erotic images of intercourse are united with modes of art film experimentation, supplemental camera flourishes, and nonlinear narrative structures. By actively inverting, obstructing and complicating the generic pleasures attached to exploitation filmic devices, extreme art cinema forces the audience to question their consumption of transgressive imagery, and therefore provides a cinematic experience based around provocation and displeasure. These definable characteristics, which are the consequence of various transnational movements, act as a reference point throughout this work, and enable the drawing together of narratives from different cultural and historical contexts.

These extreme art films, of which *Funny Games* (Haneke, 1997), *Romance* (Breillat, 1999), *Irreversible/Irréversible* (Noé, 2002), *A Hole in my Heart/Ett hål i mitt hjärta* (Moodysson, 2004) and *Antichrist* (von Trier, 2009) endure as key examples, are drawn together by a fluid reception, exhibition, and production culture. By recognising these similarities and the manner in which they cut across national divides we can position the films within a wider tradition of

filmmaking, and assert that the models and approaches often associated with a particular French sensibility occur simultaneously on a transnational scale.

This is also a transhistorical phenomenon and alongside a discussion of important French narratives such as *Romance, Baise Moi* (Despentes & Trinh Thi, 2000), *Irreversible* (Noé, 2002), *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001), and *Twentynine Palms* (Dumont, 2003), I examine early examples of extreme art cinema, including *The Virgin Spring/Jungfrukällan* (Bergman 1960), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom/Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (Pasolini, 1975), and *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel, 1929) and *Belle de Jour* (Buñuel, 1967). Through the assessment of these films, it will be made clear that cinematic extremity has historically existed as a fluid aesthetic circulated between European nations. Importantly, this sets a foundation in which an re-evaluation of modern Franco-centralism can be undertaken, as it provides early evidence of the exchanges happening before the recent re-emergence of transgressive art cinema.

Following this, the investigation of recent examples such as *Funny Games, The Idiots, A Hole in My Heart*, and *Dogtooth* (Lanthimos, 2009) will further illustrate the transnational nature of the aesthetics, reception cultures and exhibition practices that define the extreme art film canon. Indeed, it is clear that the principal models, which define extreme art cinema spread beyond European borders, with comparable trends characterising some Asian and US productions. Asian films such as *Audition/Ôdishon* (Miike, 1999) and *The Isle/Seom* (Ki-duk, 2000), among others, display similar approaches to violence, genre inversion and taste slippage, while sharing certain exhibition platforms with their European counterparts. Moreover, recent American Independent cinema has seen a rise in extreme themes. Narratives such as *The Killer Inside Me* (Winterbottom, 2010), *Shame* (McQueen, 2011), and *Only God Forgives* (Winding Refn, 2013) fuse 'high' and 'low' cinematic registers, while often being products of transnational exchanges between personnel and settings. While I will not be considering these non-European cultures in detail here, as it is not the intention of this article to provide a complete canon due

to the difficulties of offering such a large overview, their importance will be suggested throughout in order to allude to the scope of the extreme art film sphere. Consequently, this article seeks to present a snapshot of transnational extreme art tradition, and offer a blueprint in which a more geographically flexible canon can be suggested, and expanded.

Academic discussions on transnational cinema have become increasingly prevalent since the early 2000s, a timeframe which mirrors the swell in extreme art cinema. Notably, as Andrew Higson's *The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema* (2004) has suggested, a transnational conceptualisation of filmic production has allowed Film Studies to more thoroughly reflect modern cinematic practices. As Higson stated, the national label 'erects boundaries between films produced in different nation-states although they may still have much in common. It may therefore obscure the degree of cultural diversity, exchange and interpenetration that marks so much cinematic activity' (2000, 64). Higson's stance is extended by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, who claim it is impossible to assign a fixed identity to a national product due to the constant migration of peoples and materials across geographic borders within the present age (2006, 1).

However, the term has undergone a series of scholarly interventions. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim's article *Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies* (2010) provides a key example of this type of cross-examination, as they work to deconstruct the term and the various meanings it has become identified with. They suggest that the word has become a shorthand which brings with it 'boundaries, hegemonies, ideologies, limitations and marginalisations of its own kind, or replicate those of the national model' (Higbee & Lim 2010, 10). Therefore, while it is central to understanding the migration of filmmakers, money, aesthetic patterns and cinematic practices across national boundaries, as well as the vastly globalised market that films trade upon, the term 'transnationalism' harbours its own pitfalls and hazards due to its overuse and inclusive range.

So as to avoid the overgeneralisations warned against by scholars such as Higbee and Lim (2010), Chris Berry (2010) and Deborah Shaw (2013), I adopt the work of Tom O'Regan (1999) and Deborah Shaw (2013). The notion of cultural exchange becomes paramount here, as it asserts that filmmaking is based on a circulation of cultural 'material', including concepts, texts, personnel, filmmaking practices and reception cultures (Shaw 2013, 57). Using this notion of transnational cultural exchange, I will assert that artistic extremity is a result of the consistent flow of ideas, themes and reading protocols which readily breach, collapse and penetrate geographic borders. However, while looking to illustrate the transnational nature of extreme art cinema, the article does not intend to discount the differences that occur between national productions, define extreme art cinema as a traditional filmic movement with a singular shared goal, or dismiss the importance of recognising films as national products. Instead, I wish to illustrate the manner in which extreme transgression and screen brutality has become (or rather has re-emerged as) a motif across a series of global productions.

Early Extreme Art Cinema: The Circulation of Extremity before the Resurgence

The following snapshot of extreme art cinema will adhere to a rough chronological structure in order to highlight how materials move, to use Dudley Andrews's term (2006), like waves through national production sites. It is imperative when considering historical examples of extreme imagery to position the transgressions as products of their era. If we fail to do this, unrealistic divisions between past periods and today's cinematic culture are produced. Consequently, within this article, the extremities seen within the cinemas of Luis Buñuel, Ingmar Bergman, and Pier Paolo Pasolini are determined by the levels of tolerability at the time of their production, rather than the standards of the current climate.

While the isolation of key directors asserts a certain authorial structure, which at times smothers the ability to discuss directors within a transnational context due to the preconceptions that they operate as an independent thinker, the three filmmakers considered here clearly draw from a pooled aesthetic while sharing exhibition channels within a transnational market space. Luis Buñuel's influence on cinematic extremity has been largely underestimated due to his overpowering auteur status, and as a result he is absent from most scholarly discussions. Described by Shaw as a transnational director due to his movements across Spain, Mexico and France (2013, 61), his films such as *Un Chien Andalou* and *Belle de Jour* are central to mapping the movements of cinematic extremity. *Un Chien Andalou* was made in France by Buñuel and Salvador Dali, who were both Spanish. One of the film's key sequences has vastly influenced the aesthetic make-up of extreme art film images. The razor blade sequence, in which it is made to appear as if a woman's eye is sliced open by a man, has set the tone for extreme art cinema's treatment of corporality. The sequence plays out in an unedited, static shot, whereby Buñuel's camera graphically portrays an unabridged version of the incident. The act itself is unflinching, shocking and biologically realistic, as the blade slices the eye in close up, showing both the cutting motion and gory aftermath (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The eye after the after the razor has sliced through the flesh.

The sequence has been highly influential breaching both cultural borders and historical eras, and therefore can be approached as one of the 'materials' of exchange discussed by the likes of O'Regan and Shaw. Its influence can be seen in *Benny's Video* (Haneke 1992), as Benny's (played by Arno Frisch) act of murder is drawn out to an agonising length in a single take. Indeed, it can be further appreciated in France within Noé's *Irreversible*, wherein Alex's (played by Monica Bellucci) rape is depicted in a 7 minute long take. Here like the slicing of the eye, we witness the duration of the event in full from a static camera. Moreover, the

audience is forced to endure the aftermath of the rape, and are unable to avoid the voyeuristic gaze of the camera. Elsewhere the Greek *Dogtooth* has a shot whereby the female lead (played by Aggeliki Papoulia) smashes out her canine teeth with a gym weight. Again, like Buñuel's sequence, the complete act is shown unedited, and the audience is not afforded the chance to hide from the onscreen extremities. Moreover, the strangulation of She (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg) in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* is prolonged to the point of discomfort, and like the razor slicing the eye, is grounded within a realist register. These sequences owe a debt to the unflinching, uninterrupted, realist violence of *Un Chien Andalou*, whereby the audience is made to suffer and endure the entirety of the act from a motionless camera. This instance of cultural exchange illustrates how the traits of extreme art cinema were never exclusively localised to France, and instead travel between national contexts wherein their influence is reframed and recast irrespective of national specificities.

Additionally, prior to the slicing of the eye, an image of a cloud floating across the moon anticipates the movement of the knife. The juxtaposition here between soft and hard, dream and nightmare, leads Allen Thiher to claim that the contrast reflects the destruction of the viewer, as it disrupts the passivity that has been learnt throughout their mainstream cinematic experiences (1977, 39). This challenging of the passive audience recalls the prevailing discourses surrounding extreme art cinema, with both Palmer (2006) and Horeck and Kendall (2011) observing the role provocation plays in stirring a reaction within an otherwise jaded audience. This potential to shock the spectator regardless of their individual social and cultural heritage defines large parts of extreme art filmmaking, and is prevalent within *Funny Games* (the use of Brecht's *Verfremdung* technique [See Figure 2]), *Romance* (the adoption of pornographic cinema traits), and *A Hole in my Heart* (the intersection between the fictional story and real footage of labia reconstructive surgery). Here, the deliberate provocation of the

audience is a feature that supersedes national limits, as each film becomes consciously or unconsciously informed by its predecessors along a communal platform .

Figure 2. Arno Frisch's Paul directly addressing the audiences concerning his victims chances of survival.

Unlike the destruction of the bodily form, *Belle de Jour* presents a crucial example of sexual transgression within early extreme art film. The narrative focuses upon Séverine Serizy/Belle de Jour (played by Catherine Deneuve), who, bored with the 'perfection' of her bourgeois existence, fantasises about sexual dominance and rape before using prostitution as a means to realise her desires. The most famous sequence of sexual extremity sees Séverine fantasising about being whipped with a riding crop before being abused by her husband and two coachmen. Symbolic templates of 'high' and 'low' culture converge as the aesthetic representation of wealth - the horse drawn carriage and idyllic country road - becomes the setting of explicit sexual manipulation. This slippage between taste cultures is central to understanding extreme art cinema, as the entire aesthetic is constructed around the fusion of art cinema tendencies and the shock tactics of exploitation cinema.

This relationship between 'high' and 'low' has defined the cinema of Breillat, whereby her employment of pornographic traits actively reworks the male gaze (Downing 2004, 269). Most recently, this slippage between 'high' and 'low' has come to define von Trier's *Nymphomaniac Vol. I & II* (2013), which, through the conflict between 'lowbrow', pornographic clichés such as bondage, interracial threesomes and hard-core sex, and 'highbrow' psychological theorising in the shape of Skarsgård's character Seligman, borrows from the same shared aesthetic template that informed *Belle de Jour*. Consequently, von Trier and Breillat, as well as others who create a discord between taste cultures within a single text, are informed by cinematic

decisions arising in other national and historical contexts. Importantly *Nymphomaniac* itself is a result of transnational migration between personnel, as it is a combination of a Danish director (von Trier), Danish production company (Zentropa Entertainment) and a Danish (Stellan Skarsgård, Connie Nielsen), English (Stacey Martin, Jamie Bell, Mia Goth), Scottish (Sophie Kennedy Clark) American (Shia LaBeouf, Uma Thurman, Christian Slater, Willem Dafoe), Anglo-French (Charlotte Gainsbourg) cast. Here, the actors become the ‘material’ of exchange, as they travel from several national contexts to converge within a single film which itself fuses several transnational registers.

Ingmar Bergman, a director again overlooked by many within the field of extreme art cinema as he is read through an auteurist lens, further advances the claim that cinematic transgression exists as a transnational aesthetic template. His inclusion here establishes a new way of reading the director’s work, which highlights his similarities to other transgressive art filmmakers. Crucially Bergman’s cinema challenged the boundaries of artistic representation through his attitudes on sex, a notion that has been hinted at within the article *Breaking the Swedish Sex Barrier: Painful Lustfulness in Ingmar Bergman's the Silence* (Hedling 2006). Herein Erik Hedling claims *The Silence* (Bergman, 1963) showed casual sex and masturbation for the first time in Sweden (2006, 17). As a result the film changed the censorial attitude of the Swedish Certification Board:

The deputy head of the Board [. . .] said that the Board had received a new paragraph in their legal instruction three days before the arrival of *The Silence*. This paragraph underlined that the Board could not make cuts if the film was known to be of significant artistic value or could be expected to gain such a reputation (Hedling 2006, 22).

Challenging censorship policy has continued to define extreme art cinema’s consumption and exhibition practices. Most notably, the reframing of hard-core sex from pornography into art cinema, a trait present throughout the cinema of Breillat and von Trier, has modified the way audiences, critics and censorship boards engage and understand depictions of sexual extremity.

As Daniel Hickin notes in his work on the censorship of extreme French cinema, the preconceived artistic value of the films allowed the BBFC to be more lenient, as the target audience was assumed to be appropriately equipped to deal with the on-screen transgressions (2011, 125). In Hickin's work, a transnational reception culture is uncovered, whereby censorship boards make decisions based on the pre-established stereotypes regarding art cinema, rather than those of individual national conditions. Here, the art banner supersedes and homogenises a series of non-American national productions, and points towards the need to recognise an extreme art film aesthetic as a transnational model.

Furthermore, Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* is a landmark narrative within a transnationally organised extreme art film history. The film is an early example of the rape revenge narrative, and centres on the rape of Karin (played by Birgitta Pettersson) and her father's (played by Max von Sydow) subsequent revenge. Crucially *The Virgin Spring*, while being enclosed within the often isolating framework of Bergman's auteurism, provides a worthy case study through which to survey the processes of cultural exchange. While the rape itself is prolonged in the fashion of *Un Chien Andalou's* razor blade sequence, and therefore further extends the impression that these European narratives draw from a shared aesthetic template, it is the movement of the narrative's key themes that is of interest here. Famously, the film was remade by American filmmaker Wes Craven into *The Last House on the Left* (Craven 1972). A fundamental narrative within American exploitation horror cinema, Craven's remake replaced the conflict between Paganism and Christianity with a condemnatory vision of contemporary American culture. Craven's remake went on to inspire other rape-revenge films, the most significant being *I Spit on your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978), which saw the abused woman exact the vengeance herself.

In a circular fashion, this trait re-enters Europe, and comes to define large sections of extreme art film production. The rape-revenge narrative structure characterises some of the seminal

French extremity films of the early 21st century. *Baise Moi* follows two rape victims as they go on a crime spree, killing various men along the way. Noé's *Irreversible* reverses the rape-revenge narrative structure, so the audience sees the act of retaliation out of context before working backwards through the night's events. Indeed, the structure of Noé's narrative demands a competency with the sub-genre, and is consequently reliant on the audience consuming narratives within a transnationally formed exhibition culture. Finally, Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*, which focuses upon the fallout of male-on-male rape, whereby the victim slaughters his female partner, again borrows from the template established in Bergman's narrative. Here, the rape-revenge trope crosses several historical periods and geographic locales, and breaches topographical borders.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, akin to Buñuel and Bergman, continues to draw from an established template of aesthetic choices while forming themes and motifs which go on to impact extreme art cinema across a transnational platform. Pasolini, like many of the modern extreme art filmmakers, has been both condemned for his transgressive filmic catalogue by critical and cultural discourses (Greene 1990, 134), and celebrated as an auteur (Gordon 1996, 191). This duality shows not only a shared critical rhetoric between a series of diverse (both geographically and historically) filmmakers, but has also come to typify Pasolini's final feature *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (hereafter, *Salò*). The film is summarised neatly by Naomi Greene, who claims it is not only Pasolini's most scandalous and chilling film, but one of the most disturbing and radical films in the history of cinema (1990, 196). The story takes place in the fascist controlled Salò, a geographical and temporal setting which actively invokes Benito Mussolini's Nazi sister state. The film depicts four male characters, known as The Duke, The Bishop, The Magistrate, and The President, sexually torturing 18 teenage prisoners, and thus centres on the double axis of sexuality and politics (Greene 1994, 234).

This dichotomy reflects the composition of many extreme art narratives, as the traits of genre cinema become inverted to assert allegorical meanings. Pasolini summarises *Salò's* message as follows: 'the body becomes merchandise. My film is planned as a sexual metaphor, which symbolizes [. . .] the relationship between exploiter and exploited. In sadism and in power politics human beings become objects' (Bachmann 1975-1976, 40). Here, the transgressive sequences, which include multiple rapes, castrations and feasts in which the participants are forced to consume faeces, formulate an apparatus in which a political critique can be staged. Indeed, Pasolini used a lexicon of absolute horror borrowed from several 'lowbrow' filmic genres (Gordon 1996, 259) to advance his allegory. Importantly, to be able to find metaphorical relevance within these extremities Pasolini had to rid sadomasochism of the sexual titillation that had been placed upon it by romance and pornography genres (Greene 1994, 234). Therefore, although *Salò* uses the trappings of the exploitation industry, such as particular poses, equipment and sequences of taboo, the removal of pleasure ultimately enabled them to be read on an allegorical level.

A similar process is also apparent Jean Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1960), which features rape, real animal slaughter and cannibalism within a critique of both capitalist and anti-capitalist stances. Here, these 'lowbrow' devices are employed in the service of a political, social and cultural critique, and are stripped of the pleasures they retain within a genre context. More recently, the cinema of Michael Haneke illustrates moments of inversion, as he uses both graphic violence and sex to question modern voyeurism. Prevalent in *Funny Games* through the Brechtian devices addressed earlier, the film uses the 'home invasion' horror template to interrogate the audience's lust for violence. Moreover, in *The Piano Teacher* (Haneke 2001), Haneke uses pornography's generic memory (Chareyron & Gural-Migdal 2011, 58) and stereotypical notions of sexual fetish to show Erica Kohut's (played by Isabelle Huppert) slow descent into depression. In France, Denis's *Trouble Every Day* plays with vampire and cannibal

iconographies, while Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* fuses the American road movie generic structure with slow cinema. Breillat further partakes in this tradition, as her cinema uses not only the visual motifs of the pornographic industry but also actors. Her film *Anatomy of Hell* (Breillat, 2004) features Rocco Siffredi, a pornographic performer with over 400 pornographic acting credits. Indeed, von Trier's *Antichrist* continually subverts the conventions of the horror movie, deliberately drawing attention to the cabin in the woods setting and witch imagery within its own discussion of depression and loss. It is within these dialogues between Italy, Austria, Denmark and France that the transnationalism of the aesthetics can be found. The inversion of generic tropes becomes a shared way to approach poignant social issues across film cultures, with each country taking influences from past narratives regardless of national specificities.

As claimed, the work of these three auteurs exposes a historical arch in which the key tropes and critical schemas are traded across a European platform. Whilst this survey could be extended beyond the filmmakers considered here, it is more useful to investigate contemporary examples of the canon to illustrate how these transnational exchanges still inform extreme art film cinema's aesthetic construction, reception culture, and production context.

Contemporary Extreme Art Cinema: Transnational Exchanges in the 21st Century

Lars von Trier's *The Idiots*, which was made in line with the restrictions of the Dogme 95, is a central starting point. Crucially, Dogme 95 has been commonly read through a national lens, casting it as a response to the pressures of globalisation. Within this framework, the movement has become isolated from the broader scholarly dialogues surrounding art film extremity. The assessment here, akin to those above, seeks to re-evaluate this liminal view, and while not dismissing it, will permit it to be read as part of the canon put forth in this work. In the first stages of achieving this aim, it is essential to recognise the ambitions of the movement. Mette

Hjort clarifies that it was a deliberately confrontational gesture instigated in order to elicit a reaction from audiences and critics (2005, 49). Herein, the movement defined by the primary models of provocation that rest at the centre of extreme art narratives, allowing Dogme 95 to be read as more than just a national phenomenon.

While the movement as a whole encompasses the extreme art logic of provocation, von Trier's *The Idiots* stands as a prime example of both Dogme and extreme cinema traditions. The narrative follows a group of bourgeois adults, who when in public, act like disabled people in order to circumvent normative societal practices. Decisively, the already distasteful depiction of actors mimicking the disabled was amplified by von Trier's use of nudity and a full penetration shot within the garden orgy sequence (Hjort 2005, 57). The adoption of pornographic motifs pre-dates its popularisation both within the cinema of Breillat and *Baise Moi*, and as I have claimed throughout, the deployment of pornographic staples has come to define extreme art cinema. Within this transfer, hard-core sex becomes the 'material' of cultural exchange, a stylistic trait which is adopted by an array of European filmmakers to serve individual purposes on a transnational axis. Here, a series of narratives can be drawn together through their communal use of 'lowbrow' cinematic devices and desire to shock the audience through the inversion of established practices.

Discussed sporadically throughout this article, Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* further confirms the nomadic nature of extremity, and is therefore deserving of a more focused exploration. *Funny Games* is Haneke's most traditionally extreme narrative, and was itself part of a transnational remake in 2007. The film details the torture of a wealthy bourgeois family via two intelligent strangers. As discussed, the film employs Brecht's *Verfremdung* technique (Grossvogel 2007, 37) so as to shock the audience into questioning their role in the consumption of meditated violence by interrogating the formalistic tropes of the home invasion

horror template. As mentioned earlier within this article, this process of subversion has defined the extreme art discourse, and is a cinematic approach which supersedes geographic borders.

Rather than discuss this further, I wish here to examine the manner in which this process of subversion has been critically interpreted. Up until this point, the ‘materials’ discussed as items of cultural exchange have been either personnel or visual motifs. However, in O’Regan’s original definition of the term he notes that reception cultures and critical approaches also travel and circulate on transnational channels (1999, 265). In this sense, the critical reception of *Funny Games* becomes a useful case study to advance my conceptualisation of extreme art cinema.

Although the film’s use of extremity was supported within the critical sphere, with Christopher Sharrett claiming *Funny Games* is a commentary on the social ramifications of violent cinema (2003, 28), whilst elsewhere Roy Grundmann notes it illustrated how the medium of extreme cinema could be used as a platform for intelligent communication (2007, 7), it also received negative criticism. It is this negativity, couched within a judgemental and personal rhetoric, which has come to characterise certain sectors of extreme art analysis regardless of geographic barriers.

David Grossvogel’s work on *Funny Games* characterises this critical disapproval, as he states that ‘the sight of two psychopaths terrorizing, maiming, humiliating a household, destroying it gratuitously, became for them just that—a sadistic exercise’ (2007, 37). Robin Wood’s article *Michael Haneke: Beyond Compromise* (2007) advances this line of criticism, as the author claims ‘*Funny Games* is clearly a minor work, the least of the films Haneke has both written and directed, a deliberately limited ‘chamber’ piece with little [. . .] social/political resonance’ (2007, 53). Coding the film as an idiosyncratic horror film (Wood 2007, 54), Wood’s comments mirror those that prevail throughout the critical interactions with extreme art cinema.

For example, Mark Olson claims *9 Songs* (Winterbottom 2004), a British extreme film which combines hard-core sex and documentary footage of live music events, is plainly a stopgap between proper features (2004, 57). Mirroring Wood's 'chamber piece' comment, Olson's assertion, appropriates extremity in a similar way, and uses it as a means to condemn the artistic merits of the narrative. Elsewhere, Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009), a film which, like so many of these extreme narratives, conflates national boundaries (set in Tokyo, the film is directed by the French-Argentinian Noé while using a mostly American cast) was described by Amy Taubin as being 'careless and dopey' (2009, 52). *Antichrist* received a familiar response, as it was accused by the same author of being merely a 'grim castration fantasy' (Taubin 2009, 51), while Mark Pearson maintains it was a 'pathetic attempt to use extreme cinema to keep viewers and critics interested' (2009, 38). Finally, *Only God Forgives*, another transnational extreme art narrative (Danish director [Nicolas Winding Refn] Canadian protagonist [Ryan Gosling] and Asian setting [Thailand]), is also read within this same critical schema. Presented clearly within the review *Unforgivable: Only God Forgives Is One of the Worst Movies Ever Made* (Reed, 2013), Rex Reed states that the film is 'ultra-violent, demented, plotless, creepy, meat-headed and boring, this is nothing more than a depraved travesty of abstract expression that wastes the film it's printed on' (Reed, 2013).

Here, part of the reception culture which defines extreme art cinema as a simplistic, attention seeking aesthetic based around hyperbole and shock becomes a flexible conceptual field capable of ignoring national specifics, as films from Austria, England, France, and Denmark are classified within a similar critical rhetoric. The vocabularies, styles and moral standing of the authors is therefore substitutable, a 'material' that travels beyond and between national borders. The interchangeability of these reading protocols creates a transnational reception culture across various channels of production.

Lukas Moodysson's *A Hole in My Heart*, which has been discussed thus far in relation to other narratives, is a key example of a transnationally composed extreme art canon. Detailing three people's attempt to make a pornographic movie, the film is shot on handheld camera, and intercut with scenes of labia reconstructive surgery. The combination of formal and bodily extremity has resulted in the film being described as having an assaultive approach (Pierce 2005, 31), while Mariah Larrison notes the way it destroys visual pleasure (2011, 148). These descriptions are comparable to those which define the extreme art canon, and are vital in evaluating the manner in which the film seeks to complicate the consumption of pornography in line with the likes of Pasolini, Haneke, Breillat and von Trier.

However, while the aesthetic and critical associations between Moodysson's narrative and those commonly positioned within the extreme art canon are clear, the film has been excluded from extreme art dialogues. This is partly due to the Franco-centric calibration of the scholarly field; however it also comes as a consequence of Moodysson's cultural and domestic heritage. Being from Sweden, and working within the Swedish industry has had a large impact on the way Moodysson's films are approached. Most notably, the director sees his work continually compared to that of Bergman. Discussed earlier as part of the extreme art canon, Bergman has also come to define Swedish cinema due to his prevalence within traditional art film culture, and as such exists as a standard bearer for all national productions. This status shapes the critical reception of Moodysson and his cinema: 'though "*Lilya 4-Ever*," [. . .] is only Lukas Moodysson's third feature film, he has become Sweden's most praised filmmaker since Ingmar Bergman' (Kehr 2003). Although within this quotation the comparison works to elevate the cultural standing of the Moodysson, a similar process of association had the opposite effect during the reception of *A Hole in my Heart*.

Using a similar method to that which motivated the exploration of Haneke, it becomes clear that the shadow of Bergman influences the reading of Moodysson's transgressive cinema. The

most extreme moment in the film sees a food fight cumulate in Geko (played by Goran Marjanovic) vomiting in Tess's (played by Sanna Bråding) mouth in a critique of both the porn industry and the growing reliance on fast food (see Figure 3). In the accompanying review in *Sight and Sound*, Ryan Gilbey notes that even through this scene is the climax of Moodysson's metaphoric message, it 'plays like a run-of-the-mill *Jackass* outtake' (2005, 52). What Gilbey's assessment neatly exposes is the manner in which Moodysson's pre-circulating capital, which is built in relation to his position as the saviour of Swedish cinema (Larrson 2011, 143) and successor to Bergman, collapses under the strain of extreme imagery. However, by looking beyond a national framework, whereby *A Hole in my Heart* can be read independently from the burden of Bergman's international reputation, it can be seen that the narrative belongs within a history of extreme art cinema. Here, the various extremities can be read within the frameworks of displeasure, subversion, hybridity, and challenge that have defined this articles assessment of the aesthetic rather than a failing of national heritage.

Figure 3. The climax of Moodysson's *A Hole in My Heart*.

Thus far, the focus of this article has centralised nations or directors with considerable status within European film markets. In order to truly realise the extent of this transnational spread, it is vital to consider a production which occurs outside of this hierarchical framework. The narrative in *Dogtooth* focuses upon three adolescents who are kept as prisoners within their family home. Within this setting, the siblings, unnamed throughout (referred to here as the Youngest Daughter, Eldest Daughter and Son), are subject to the cruel games they devise, a unique language sanctioned by their parents and ultimately incest (first between the Youngest and Eldest daughter, and then the Eldest Daughter and the Son).

Within a nationalised context the film has been championed as signalling the beginning of New Greek cinema, as Kieron Corless claims there has been an increase in the amount of young Greek directors who are able to find financing (2010). This centralisation of the national is extended within the critical dialogues that surrounded the film, with the cultural image of Greece finding its way into the writing of the critics: ‘as with the very best Greek tragedy, Lanthimos’ story of domestic extremes can accommodate broader sociopolitical readings’ (Bitel, 2010). Here, the text becomes framed within its national borders, which although central to understanding its impact on domestic production, isolates it from the processes of exchange that define its aesthetic composition.

By evaluating the film within the framework of transnational extreme art cinema, one can see that *Dogtooth* neatly continues the traditions of many seminal extreme art texts. The film’s climax, whereby the Eldest Daughter hits her mouth three times with a gym weight while the static camera simply observes the event in real time, is shot using a long take, a common approach used by extreme texts, as discussed. Moreover, the sex scenes further point to the film’s comfortable adoption within the extreme art paradigm as they are framed as an un-erotic spectacle (Georgakas 2010, 49), and marked by the extremity of incest. These sequences of clumsy and awkward sex deny the audience the voyeuristic pleasure of watching intercourse, and impede the audiences’ consumption of the sexual spectacle in a similar fashion to the cinema of Breillat, Pasolini, von Trier, Moodysson and Haneke. Indeed, *Dogtooth*’s employment of extreme art cinema traits illustrate its part in the common circulation of cinematic ‘materials’ throughout European film culture.

The film’s relationship to the extreme art canon proposed within this article has been confirmed outside of academic structures via its inclusion within the UK’s Film4 Extreme Season. Hosted by Mark Kermode, the season was used to contextualise the television premier of von Trier’s *Antichrist*. Within this schedule *Dogtooth* held a position of prestige and authority as it served

as the penultimate film, a decision which endorses its extreme credentials and sense of belonging within the canon. The Film4 season, which was screened between March 22nd and 29th 2012, composed of eight titles from Europe, Japan and the US. Alongside the screening of *Antichrist* and *Dogtooth*, the season showed Haneke's Austrian narrative, *Benny's Video*; *Love Exposure* (Sono 2008), a four hour long Japanese production about religion, love, and voyeurism; *Bug* (Friedkin 2006), an American production directed by William Friedkin; *Naked* (Leigh 1993), a British story of a rapist drifter; *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999), a high budget American adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's novel of the same name; and *Import/Export* (Seidl 2007), another Austrian production which details two people's movement across Eastern Europe. This season is vital to identifying the processes of canonisation happening outside of academia, and usefully collapses national segregation in favour of a transnational conceptualisation of cinematic extremity.

Conclusions: Beyond Europe

Significantly, the season illuminates the transnationality of extreme art cinema beyond Europe. Discussed at the start of the article, these non-European instances of extreme art cinema, while not covered in detail here, are central in further advancing the claims made throughout this article. Asian extreme cinema, such as *Audition* and *The Isle*, while sharing stylistic traits with the European narratives that have acted as the focal point of this investigation, further illuminate the transnationality of extreme cinema due to their distribution model. Brought to Britain by DVD distributor Tartan Video, these narratives found a global audience through transnational exhibition channels. Bannered under the heading 'Tartan Asia Extreme', a label which itself ignores national boundaries in favour of a broad regional category, the films distributed by Tartan came to influence and circulate alongside European extreme art cinema

in the early 21st century. Moreover, Tartan Video was responsible for the UK distribution of key European extreme narratives, including *Anatomy of Hell*, *Irreversible*, *Twentynine Palms*, *The Piano Teacher* and *Funny Games*. As a consequence, national divides are further blurred, as Tartan Video becomes a transnational platform which actively cherry-picks narratives from various contexts. Under the branding of Tartan's DVD artwork, these narratives exist in a category independent of national coding.

Furthermore, the American Independent films such as *The Killer Inside Me*, *Shame*, and *Only God Forgives* partake in this transnational circulation of ideas, personnel and critical receptions. As discussed, *Only God Forgives* was received in the same manner as the majority of European extreme art features, while each film is composed of a transnational cast. *Shame* is directed by Englishman Steve McQueen, and stars German/Irish actor Michael Fassbinder and English actress Carey Mulligan, and is set in New York. Indeed *A Killer Inside Me* is defined by a similar transgression of national borders. Based on an American book and set in Texas, the film is composed of an American cast (most notably Casey Affleck, Jessica Alba and Kate Hudson), yet is directed by Englishman Michael Winterbottom. The film displays forms of violence typical within European extreme cinema, as Affleck's Lou Ford beats his lovers in a manner comparable to the realist, graphic extremity that underpinned the violence considered throughout this work. It is when these examples are placed alongside the European narratives that the transnational spread of the extreme art canon can be comprehended. Thus, it becomes clear that the definable features that characterised 'New French Extremity' have in fact been exchanged between countries and art film cultures for decades, creating a shared aesthetic, thematic and critical reception culture across a multi-national platform.

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