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The New *Extremisms* Rethinking Extreme Cinema

Since we first began writing on the subject of a “new extremism” in French—and then more broadly European—cinema, the paradigm of extreme filmmaking has expanded and taken hold in a number of different contexts, which call precisely for the kind of renewed scholarly evaluation that is being facilitated by this issue of *Cinephile*. In our book, *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, we were interested in exploring the notion of extreme cinema in relation to the work of a range of European art house filmmakers such as Gaspar Noé, Lars von Trier, Catherine Breillat, Lukas Moodysson, Michael Haneke, and others. Sensing affinities between the works of these provocative directors, we set out to theorize the dynamics of extreme watching that their films brought into play. The relationship set up between the spectator and the screen was central to our exploration of these films. As we noted in our introduction, “it is first and foremost the uncompromising and highly self-reflexive appeal to the spectator that marks out the specificity of these films for us,” as well as the “complex and often contradictory ways in which these films situate sex and violence as a means of interrogating the relationship between films and their spectators in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (1-2).

Extreme cinema has since evolved in a number of exciting directions, extending its cultural reach. As an indication of its cultural relevancy, for instance, the latest edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Film* includes an entry on “extreme cinema (ordeal cinema),” which it defines as “a group of films that challenge codes of censorship and social mores, especially through explicit depiction of sex and violence, including rape and torture” (Kuhn and Westwell 152). The inclusion of the alternate term, “ordeal cinema,” is important for the emphasis it places on the role of the spectator, “who commits to watching a film that will take them through a horrendous experience in what seems like real time” (ibid).

As this dictionary entry suggests, such an extreme cinema tradition evokes a spectatorial dynamic that is central to a growing number of cinematic and national contexts. Taking a step back to encompass a more global view of cinema, it is clear that the new extremism tendency was never limited to European cinema, but has been a growing cinematic force across a number of national contexts, including films from South Korea, Japan, the United States, Mexico, and the Philippines, to name a few.¹ It is no exaggeration to say that the notion of an extreme art cinema can feasibly be thought of not just as a transnational trend, but also as a highly lucrative global commodity, marketed to consumers in a range of different national contexts.

What happens to the specificity of the films of the new European extremism and their self-conscious address to the spectator when the category of extremism is opened up, and takes on global dimensions? To what extent is it useful or important to retain this label of a “new extremism” in cinema across these disparate contexts? And how do we account for the many-faceted contexts in which this idea of extreme cinema manifests itself? There is a need to tread carefully here, and it is now even more vital to acknowledge the different cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts of extreme cinema; as Joan Hawkins warns, it is important not to “homogenize the traditions—as though all ‘visually arresting ways to turn violence into entertainment’ ultimately mean the same thing, or even have the same visceral effect” (n. pag.). This is something that we

1. See, for instance, Park Chan-Wook’s *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003), and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005); Takeshi Miike’s *Audition* (1999) and *Ichi the Killer* (2001); Kim Ki-Duk’s *Address Unknown* (2001); Carlos Reygadas’s *Battle in Heaven* (2005) and *Post-Tenebras Lux* (2012); Harmony Korine’s *Gummo* (1997) and *Trash Humpers* (2009); and Brillante Mendoza’s *Serbis* (2008) and *Kinatay* (2009).



were mindful of in our book, noting the need to distinguish between the in-your-face bravado of a filmmaker like Gaspar Noé, and the more restrained, austere filmmaking style of Michael Haneke. Nevertheless, as the idea of extremism in cinema gains ever-greater currency in a global, transnational context, the critical work of parsing such distinctions is more relevant—and more necessary—than ever. Indeed, in addition to a focus on the different aesthetic valences of extreme filmmaking from diverse national contexts, we also need to take into consideration a number of factors, including the following: the ways in which “extreme” cinemas are marketed, distributed, and written about in both the national and international presses, as well as in online fan forums; how the notions of extremism relate to technological innovation; how films mobilize a different range of affects and solicit distinct forms of emotional and cognitive work; how they admit of ambiguity and closure to varying degrees, and evoke different sets of cultural anxieties, pressures, and desires; and finally, how they work through these pressures in often conflicting ways to arrive at different methods of resolving, alleviating, or amplifying them. In short, we need

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to think in detail about the various national and cultural contexts that make extreme cinema relevant, meaningful, and watchable for spectators. From this point of view, what becomes increasingly important to stress is the notion of *extremisms*: different instantiations and mobilizations of the extreme across a range of national perspectives.

Beyond this, it is also important to think about how the rhetoric of extremism has increasingly been taken up within mainstream film contexts. Not only is there a growing “commercial mainstreaming of exploitation and euroshocker titles,” as Hawkins has noted, with bookshops and DVD outlets now making extreme films much more readily available (n. pag.), but the explicit sex and violence of art cinema is being repackaged for mainstream Hollywood audiences through major studio releases. Recently, for example, David Fincher’s Hollywood version of Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) was marketed as a “feel bad film,” explicitly foregrounding the visceral and provocative appeal of extreme, ordeal cinema for a mainstream audience. Another relevant recent example is British director Michael Winterbottom’s Hollywood release *The Killer Inside Me* (2010), which included set-piece scenes of brutality against its A-list female stars, Jessica Alba and Kate Hudson; what was most interesting in the wake of the controversy over the film was how the film’s director and producers justified its extremity through reference to art house traditions, arguing that viewers need to see the worst in order to make violence “real.”

This mainstreaming of graphic sex and violence marks an important point of departure from the paradigm we theorized originally. One of the hallmarks of the new European extremism for us was the specific way that these films imported codes and conventions of exploitation films—including pornography and horror—within the confines of a philosophically inflected art house cinema. The new European extremism’s sensational rise to prominence had to do precisely with the manner in which these films sought to break down the firewalls between pornography, art, exploitation, philosophy, and horror. Conversely, many of the recent variations on extremism in cinema represent

significant departures from, or variations on, these films’ provocative mixing of genre codes. In recent “torture porn”² franchises, or in the new French horror trend,³ for instance, the kind of explicit and confrontational staging of sex and violence that we wrote about initially is arguably repackaged, as Adam Lowenstein notes, “for purposes of audience admiration, provocation, and sensory adventure as much as



shock or terror” (42). Whereas in a film such as *Irreversible*, “graphic violence is designed to assault the target audience’s aesthetic tastes and political belief systems,” in the mode that Lowenstein calls “spectacle horror,” “confrontation or consolidation of audience beliefs through violence . . . is less central than perceptual play” (43). A key task for scholarly work on extreme cinema is to think through fine-grained distinctions between the range of spectatorial dynamics that underpin this shift from art house extremism to multiplex or horror film festival circuit extremisms. While these films might share a desire to push at 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” (n. pag.). A vital task here is to remain mindful of such distinctions, without lapsing into elitist arguments and perpetuating hierarchies between high and low, art house and mainstream cinema.

2. Coined by David Edelstein in 2006, the term “torture porn” has gained widespread currency to refer to a range of extreme horror films, including the *Hostel* (Eli Roth 2005) and *Saw* (James Wan 2004) franchises as well as films such as *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean 2005), *The Devil’s Rejects* (Rob Zombie 2005), and *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojević 2010).

3. The new wave of French horror includes films such as *Switchblade Romance* (Alexandre Aja 2003), *Inside* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury 2007), *Frontier(s)* (Xavier Gens 2007), *The Ordeal* (Fabrice Du Welz 2004), and *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier 2008).

In light of these concerns, what is to be gained by casting the net a bit wider, to examine a collective body of films that share a desire to viscerally confront spectators? What can an expanded address to contemporary extremisms reveal about the terms of spectatorship today? Firstly, we believe that while it is important not to homogenize all traditions of extreme cinema, much can be gained through adopting a more comparative approach to thinking about global extremisms. Thinking about the distinctive treatments of the extreme within and across national boundaries can tell us much about the cultural contours that produce and lend value to spectatorial experiences, that make them meaningful and watchable. Secondly, we would argue along with Lowenstein that adopting a longer historical view in thinking about extreme cinema can bring to light insights about the imbrication of technology, embodiment, affect, and cultural expression as these evolve and reconfigure over time. Finally, thinking about both art house and mainstream extremisms together can help to avoid forming elitist judgments and hierarchies between “high” and “low” culture, highlighting the way the address to the extreme traverses cultures, periods, and styles. What makes this *Cinephile* issue on contemporary extremism so important, in the final analysis, is its careful interrogation of the parameters and the significance of extremism as a global, protean phenomenon, and the space that it makes available for us to reassess such extremisms in a critical, culturally specific, historically informed, and non-hierarchical way.

Work Cited

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