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## Sacrificing the Real Early 20th Century Theatrics and the New Extremism in Cinema

While violent images permeate contemporary society, the practice of presenting real violence as entertainment is taboo and rests at the margins of culture. Forms of real violence such as public executions and ritual sacrifices are no longer commonly practiced in most regions of the world, but the cultural desire for violent spectacle does not abate with the decline of violent public performances. In his reworking of Aristotelian catharsis in relation to ancient ritual sacrifice and the modern stage/screen, Mark Pizzato argues that “the performance of violence, from ancient ritual to screen sacrifices today, gives context and sense to the losses of life, gradual or sudden, in each spectator’s particular death drive” (2). He notes that theatre has a long history of simulating traumatic events for the purpose of entertainment and instruction because viewing simulated violence can curb the desire to repeat real sacrifices offstage. While this may seem a simplistic explanation for our society’s thirst for realistic depictions of extreme sex and violence, there is something to be said for its transparency. The rapid development of technology and the proliferation of images that arise from the human desire to experience extreme imagery push filmmakers into making bold and innovative choices. In order for something new to materialize, however, it must emerge from past traditions, and by acknowledging past influences, new spectacles of violence can be viewed as part of the evolution of artistic transgression.

### Old and New

The cultural desire to see images of extreme brutality has evolved alongside the development of technology in filmmaking. Through the manipulation of special effects, films can simulate reality like never before. Some filmmakers have chosen to capitalize off of society’s ravenous desire for

violent spectacle, and so they present the human psyche and body in all states of perversion and depravity. Such is the methodology of new extremism: whether the intentions of the filmmakers are ultimately critical or exploitative, they address and interrogate the spectator’s desire to consume extreme depictions of violence. As suggested by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, “by pushing at the limits of the watchable and the tolerable, these films involve and implicate spectators in particularly intensified ways with what is shown on screen, demanding critical interrogation and ethical and affective response” (8). While the new extremism of the twenty-first century is aggressive, confrontational, and ethically challenging for its viewers, the pushing of boundaries in violent performance for the purpose of affective involvement is by no means a new phenomenon in entertainment.

New extremism’s French origins can be traced back through a long history of violent theatrical performance. The French theatre of terror, the Grand Guignol, reigned in popularity during its lifespan from 1897-1962 in Pigalle, Paris. Its popularity was rooted in tales of the perverse and the depraved. Horeck and Kendall note that new extremism “reflects [a] bridging position between newness and indebtedness to the past, to a history of transgression and provocation that is renewed and given visceral immediacy for the present” (5-6). The Grand Guignol was known for its theatrically explicit portrayals of gore, death, and sex, and was an exclusive form of entertainment that remained untouched by the cinematic medium for many years. For various reasons (including censorship and technological limitations), film was unable to express the levels of depravity that were achievable in the theatre. It was not until the rise of Hammer Films in the postwar period, in combination with the appearance of human monsters onscreen (*Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock 1960], *Peeping Tom* [Michael Powell





1960]) and off (specifically, Nazi Germany and its documented horrors), that the Grand Guignol eventually saw its decline.

Despite this decline, traces of the Grand Guignol still loom in contemporary culture. While the Grand Guignol is largely ignored by the academic world, its role in influencing popular entertainment, most notably the horror film, should not go unnoticed. Renowned horror writer, filmmaker, and artist Clive Barker has acknowledged his own debt to the Grand Guignol, which not only inspired many imitators in its own time, but also “has arguably influenced everything from the Expressionist movement of the silent German cinema to the gore films of Herschell Gordon Lewis and others” (114). According to Barker, there have been multiple attempts to resurrect the Grand Guignol in North America over the years, and while these attempts have proven to be unsuccessful, “its legacy is still with us” (114). While a direct link between the Grand Guignol and new extremism may be tenuous, an evolution of transgressive entertainment can be traced from the Grand Guignol through to the splatter films of Lewis, the slasher films of the 1980s, right up to the torture porn and new extremist

films of the twenty-first century. All of these films focus their energies on appealing to the basest of emotions in order to affect the audience on a visceral level. Of the Grand Guignol, Mel Gordon, one of the few scholars that writes on the topic, comments:

here was a theatre genre that was predicated on the stimulation of the rawest and most adolescent of human interactions and desires: incest and patricide; bloodlust; sexual anxiety and conflict; morbid fascination with bodily mutilation and death; loathing of authority; fear of insanity; an overall disgust for the human condition and its imperfect institutions. (2)

The same argument can be made for the horror genre, and more recently, new extremism, which has simulated all of the “most adolescent of human interactions” listed above, and more. The taboo is desirable entertainment precisely because it is taboo.

While new extremist films reflect the culture and the era in which they have been produced, they also rely heavily on the foundations from which they have been built. An in-depth examination of the techniques and tropes of extreme performance can illuminate how new extremism’s roots in the Theatre of the Grand Guignol can be contextualized within the larger realm of simulated violence for the sake of catharsis and entertainment. With the onset of modern technologies, depictions of gratuitous sex and explicit violence simulate reality with detailed accuracy, blending practical and computer-generated effects. These new technologies satiate the desire for Horeck and Kendall’s “newness” while allowing for the aforementioned “purgation of fear and pity” that Gordon identifies as the main purpose of the Grand Guignol.

### Simulated Violence, Real Affect

Images of real violence, such as in news stories and documentaries, can be accessed from a multitude of platforms, including print, television, film, smart phones, and personal computing devices. We consult these same platforms to view fictional images of sex and violence intended for entertainment purposes. While certain filmmakers portray fictional violence in an exaggerated fashion and therefore do not concern themselves with the depiction of realism, others rely upon it heavily in hopes of allowing audiences to fully immerse themselves in the situations presented in the film. In Amos Vogel’s examination of film as subversive art, he suggests that the “viewer enters the theatre willingly, if not eagerly, ready for surrender . . . [and] the film experience is total, isolating, hallucinatory” (9). In other words, audience members suspend their disbelief know-

ingly. While representations of violence are not real, they are still accepted as such because of the audience’s desire to be impacted on a visceral level. Vogel notes that

man begins with what he sees, progressing to visual representations of reality. Their transmutation into art does not seem to diminish the images’ impact. As holy today as in man’s pre-history, the image is accepted as if it were life, reality, truth. It is accepted on a feeling—rather than mind—level. (11)

Even though the audiences of violent performance are intellectually aware that the images they perceive are not real, this does not negate their affective response to those images.

Curiously, when experiencing an actual traumatic event first-hand, we tend to use fictional metaphors rooted in cinematic images to describe it. In Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she comments that the survivors of 9/11 described the event as “surreal” and “like a movie” (22). We can assume that most of the individuals involved had never experienced such terror and extreme violence apart from witnessing it on a movie screen. This explains why, when attempting to describe the experience, individuals relied heavily upon metaphor: the pain and suffering of a horrific experience can be contextualized through past images of fictional violence because language in itself is inadequate as a descriptor. Elaine Scarry’s examination of *The Body in Pain* addresses this inadequacy: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). Pain is older than language, which means that language is unnecessary to experience pain. It can also be argued that, “in man’s evolution, images antedate words and thought, thus reaching deeper, older, more basic layers of the self” (Vogel 11). Pain and suffering are primordial and cannot be adequately described through words, suggesting that images, which are our earliest forms of storytelling and communication, may provide a language that is better suited to representing pain.

If one is unable to rely upon words to describe the experience of real pain and suffering, then simulated images can act as the replacement to what is otherwise unrepresentable through language. This leads Pizzato to suggest that “the current rites of our mass theatrical media [are] masking Real sacrifices as mere play” (178). It is safe to assume that most spectators do not wish to experience real pain and suffering, nor do they necessarily want to revel in the real pain of others. The only way to experience pain and suffering safely is through the consumption of fictionalized violence. That being said, the presentation of “Real sacrifices as mere play” may lead to difficulties discerning real violence from

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simulated imagery. Without a basis of comparison, the spectator confronted with real violence instantly catalogues that image within a growing vault of images of realistically simulated violence. As a result of this blurring between fiction and reality, real images of violence are questioned regularly for their authenticity. Luka Magnotta, who this past summer in Montreal mutilated and dismembered Concordia student Lin Jun, uploaded the murder and dismemberment onto an online gore website only to be critiqued by the site’s followers, who suspected the video to be fake. If audiences have no real-life comparisons to draw upon, fictional images act as stand-ins for real ones. Because simulated images have become our primary frame of reference regarding real pain and suffering, our consumption of these images serves the purpose of allowing us to explore our own attitudes and fears concerning pain and violence.

### New Extremism and the Grand Guignol

While Pizzato examines ritual sacrifice in relation to theatrical performance, he does not stray far from the theatre of the ancients, leaving out some of the most perverse simulations of sex and violence to be found at the turn of the twentieth century. Gordon notes that the theatre has always existed: “The impulse to shock, to display the extremes of human behavior, and then to demonstrate the divine punishments that follow for those individuals who violate society’s taboos may have been the original social function of all performance” (4). Just as Pizzato speaks of the violent theatrical performance of ancient Greek, Aztec, and Roman cultures as a replacement for real sacrifice, Gordon aligns the Grand Guignol with those same theatrics of “purgation and fear,” through which spectators can safely experience heinous acts. Gordon also comments on the lack of crime on the streets of Paris during the heyday of the Grand Guignol in juxtaposition to Nazi Germany, where censorship eradicated theatre and film, leaving nothing to curb the violent appetites of the masses (49). This would suggest that the mere exposure to simulated violence has the power to

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curb potentially violent intent and eruptive behaviour. Violence will always exist, but by allowing audiences to watch realistic simulations of violent spectacles, the consequences of violence are readily exposed.

New extremist filmmakers assault the senses of their audiences: "reports of fainting, vomiting and mass walkouts have consistently characterized the reception of this group of art-house films whose brutal and visceral images appear designed deliberately to shock or provoke the spectator" (Horeck and Kendall 1). Many extreme filmmakers boast of audience walkouts and angry responses to their films. Potential viewers are repelled and/or intrigued when hearing of such controversies, and oftentimes approach these films for the simple reason that others cannot. Viewing becomes both an active choice and a challenge to all previous images that the spectator has encountered.

In the same way that new extremism is known for its unpredictable reception trajectory, the early theatre owners of the Grand Guignol emphasized stories of sensitive spectators as a form of advertising. Doctors were said to be on site to revive anyone if needed. The back alley of the theatre was regularly filled with vomiting individuals and hyper-ventilating couples. In one case, a new record was set after fifteen people fainted during a scene simulating a realistic blood transfusion (Gordon 28). Vomit and fake blood were not the only fluids flowing; the Grand Guignol was steeped in eroticism. Evidence of sexual arousal and its subsequent release could be found on the seats and in the private viewing boxes located at the back of the theatre. As much as audiences accepted the unreality of theatrical performance, it was imperative for successful viewing that they suspended their disbelief, "and, therefore, by their shocked reactions [they] unconsciously assisted in the life-like presentations of grisly murders, torture, corporeal mutilation, and bleeding wounds" (Gordon 44). The storylines and the execution of violent effects were key to realism in Grand Guignol performance.

Both the Grand Guignol and the new extremist films stray far away from supernatural explanations when it comes to the causation of violence. Many of the Grand Guignol

plays were originally based on *fait divers*, which were articles of real crimes accompanied by graphic illustrations that focused on primitive, animal passions (Gordon 10). Being that the stage was restrictive in size, the claustrophobic nature of the settings (prison cells, lighthouse towers, doctor's offices, bedrooms) combined with the lifelike storylines provoked an immersive experience and a heightened affective response. The intimate setting brought attention to the staging and special effects, which were crucial aspects of the realistic mode of performance.

In their comprehensive study on the Grand Guignol, Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson note, "the creative core of the Grand-Guignol is such that the effective execution of horror, through a heady blend of anticipation and suggestion, allows the audience to see, or at least believe it has seen, what it clearly has not" (76). Due to technological limitations, the Grand Guignol often had to imply violence



while maintaining the same visceral impact for spectators. The proscenium stage allowed for many of the gory acts to be committed offstage, heard rather than seen by the audience. In instances when violence did happen onstage, careful blocking and sleight of hand were used to avoid revealing the illusion. Sheep's testicles and blood-filled condoms were used for onstage castrations; real animal eyeballs were used for eye-gouging (because of their ability to bounce on the floor so well); and retractable knives and fake blood (four different recipes were patented) were everywhere. This was all part of a regular night at the Grand Guignol. The blocking of actors was rehearsed repeatedly in order to ensure that the onstage trickery was pulled off without any problems because, as Paula Maxa, the most murdered and raped woman of the Grand Guignol (murdered over

10,000 times and raped over 3,000), has said, "a line or gesture said too fast, or too slow, could easily ruin the tension built up over ten to fifteen minutes and destroy the evening" (Gordon 26). While the theatre situated itself within the naturalist tradition, using realistic props, special effects, and storylines at moments when the four-walled naturalism was broken (usually by the villain looking directly at the audience just prior to the moment of violence), the spectator's role as both witness and willing participant intensified the horror, and heightened affective response.

New extremism does not have to break the fourth wall in order to move its audience, but it does employ up-to-date film technologies to garner the same participatory response in the spectator. Violence and its effects are seen up close and in graphic detail. The close-up shot (*Antichrist* [Lars von Trier 2009]), the extreme long take (*Irreversible* [Gaspar Noé 2002]), and the employment of subjective point-of-view shots (*Dans ma Peau* [Marina de Van 2002]) are all used as a means of intensifying horror while inviting the spectator to become an active participant. No longer must the viscera be implied or hinted at. With the aid of modern technology, explicitness—aided by the use of colour, creative camerawork, and stylistic vibrancy—has become the new standard when it comes to extremist content. Particular moments of extreme violence may still remain hidden, but no longer is this out of technical necessity: technology grants new extremism the ability to show it all, which intensifies the affective experience, similar to how the Grand Guignol incited participatory feelings through convincing onstage violence.

We now have the chance to see overt simulations of decapitations and dismemberment (*Haute Tension* [Alexandre Aja 2003]); torture and flaying (*Martyrs* [Pascal Laugier 2008]); excruciating, uncut rape scenes (*Irreversible*); unsettling, yet somewhat erotic, self-mutilation (*Dans ma Peau*); at-home cesarean sections (*A l'interieur* [Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury 2007]); abortions (*Enter the Void* [Gaspar Noé 2009]); and genital mutilation (*Antichrist*). The body is depicted *in extremis* in the films of new extremism, just as it was in the Grand Guignol; the difference is that now one can see every minute detail of the torture and suffering. It would have been difficult to remain a passive spectator at the Grand Guignol because the horrors depicted onstage demanded active engagement. A similar effect is achieved when viewing new extremist films because everything is visible, and these images, if they are to be regarded as addressing the basest of human emotions, succeed in transcending language due to their graphic nature.

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## Final Thoughts

New extremism may be new in that the representations of violence have become more realistic, but that does not mean that the desire to explore extreme and violent content through performance is a fad that will abate over time. Extremism in art, particularly of the realistic kind discussed herein, evolves along with everything else. Transgressive simulations of violence have developed alongside the modernization of technologies, which has resulted in new standards when it comes to filmic realism. While public executions may be a thing of the past, images of simulated horrors find their place in the repository of fictional images of violence within us all. New extremism allows spectators to remain safely distanced from the content embedded within the films while testing out their tolerance for extreme subject matter, and it calls upon the past in order to assert itself in the modern age. Times change and the execution of art evolves, but our basic human instincts remain unaltered; we will always be drawn to the depraved, the transgressive, and the taboo.

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