

# Chelsea Birks & Dana Keller

## Extreme Vancouver

In the preface to this issue of *Cinephile*, Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall note the importance of approaching extreme cinema in a way that recognizes aesthetic, cultural, and historical differences. This approach need not eliminate the possibility for a comparative approach to extreme cinema, however, as making links between films across cultures and periods can help to illuminate the particular ways that each film addresses the spectator through a distinctive treatment of challenging subject matter. With this comparative approach in mind, we sought to gauge the situation of extreme cinema within the particular context of Vancouver's cinema culture by attending the Vancouver International Film Festival.

The Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF) takes place in late September and early October every year, and prides itself on being one of the five largest film festivals in North America. VIFF carves out a unique place for itself through a particular focus on East Asian and Canadian cinemas, as well as its extensive nonfiction program. While VIFF offers a fantastic variety of films, its selection of horror and extremist cinema leaves something to be desired. It is clear from the festival's mandate and program that the programmers seek affective films, whether they impact the spectator on a physical or emotional level. Despite this desire for strong affective films, and in contrast with the programs of many other film festivals (for example, TIFF and Sundance), there are not a lot of horror or extremist films at VIFF.

We interviewed Curtis Woloschuk, VIFF programming assistant, to inquire about the lack of programming featuring horror and other film genres that commonly overlap with extremist cinema. His responses suggest four key reasons: budget, submission quality, programmer tastes, and audience interest. Much-anticipated horror films such as *V/H/S* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin et al.) and *The Lords of Salem* (Rob Zombie), for instance, have distributors attached, and this can sometimes include prohibitively high screen-

ing fees. As VIFF is a not-for-profit organization, it has a limited budget and must be careful about its expenditures. Regarding quality, Woloschuk explained that due to the lack of genre programming at VIFF, many films that might be considered extremist end up being submitted, by filmmakers informed of VIFF's tastes, to festivals that are more likely to accept them. As for the films that do make it to VIFF's programming panel, according to Woloschuk, few of them are innovative or boundary-pushing enough to be considered. The festival's reputation plays a part in the submissions it receives, but the programmers also factor into the equation: "There really isn't much appetite—or personal interest—amongst most of the veteran programmers at the festival for horror [and other genre] films." Because they often avoid genre films while scouting at other festivals, programmers risk overlooking new extremist cinema as well. Regarding audience interest, Woloschuk explains, "from what I am told by more experienced parties, horror films have tended not to draw well at the VIFF." He did note that items such as *Let the Right One In*, which "reside between the arthouse and grindhouse," are exceptions to the rule and generally draw audiences. He also noted that this year *Grabbers*, *Room 237*, *Berberian Sound Studio*, and *Antiviral* all did quite well. While horror and other forms of extreme cinema remain a minor part of the festival, Woloschuk is optimistic that that "a larger horror presence is a possibility," adding "it's certainly something that [he is] going to be pushing for."

The fact that films featuring extreme content did relatively well at the festival this year indicates that extremism has a place in Vancouver's cinema culture. Among these films were a nature documentary about fishermen, a Malaysian family drama, a feminist critique of Russian society, an homage to Italian giallo films exploring extremity through sound, and a Canadian debut feature by the son of body-horror master David Cronenberg.

### *Leviathan*

Arguably, the most viscerally affective film at VIFF this year was a nature documentary. VIFF has a reputation for its ecologically focused documentaries, but *Leviathan* is more like a horror film than a BBC nature special. Filmmakers Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor operate from the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard, and their work is a combination of anthropology, documentary, and visual art; their latest film is a nightmarish exposition of life on a fishing trawler off the Massachusetts coast that takes the "sensory" part of the lab's moniker seriously. The dizzying effect of cameras being attached the sides of the ship's hull, the helmets of the fishermen, in amongst the dead and dying catch, and on poles thrust high up in the air is emphasized by the film's hellish soundscape: rushing, crackling water, slippery sounds of fish sliding in their own gore past the camera, thunderous wind, and crashing waves have a gut-churning impact on the spectator. The resulting experience is nauseating and exhilarating, contemplative

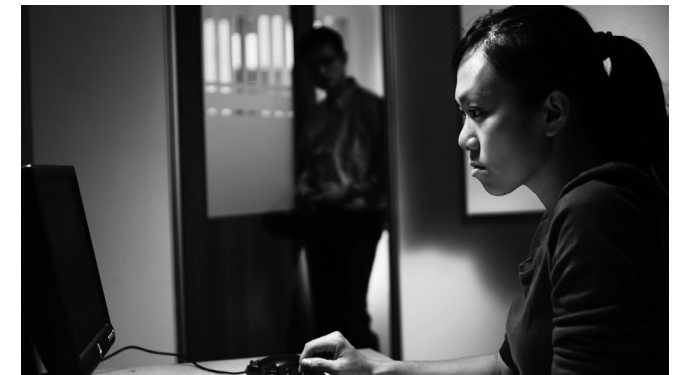


and contemptible, contradictions that evoke comparisons with the art house/grindhouse aesthetic of new extremist cinema (the nod to Claire Denis in the credits gives further credence to this comparison).

The experience of *Leviathan* was polarizing: while some spectators we spoke to claimed it was one of the more daring and original films they had seen, it was also the most walked-out-of film we saw at the festival—indeed, one of us could not even make it through the first hour for fear of vomiting. Controversy is a hallmark of extreme cinema, a result of its often-ambiguous position between conventions, taste regimes, and social norms; *Leviathan* positions itself between horror film and nature film, heavy metal and high art, and transports extremity to new ontological territory by infusing the documentary mode with confrontational aesthetics and affect.

### *If It's Not Now, Then When?*

Prolific Malaysian filmmaker James Lee is known both for his art house sensibility and for his graphic genre pictures, a tension that underlies his latest film, *If It's Not Now, Then When?* A family drama that explores estrangement and desperation with emotional restraint and a low-budget digital aesthetic, *If It's Not Now, Then When?* examines the broken relationships between a mother (Pearlly Chua), daughter (Tan Bee Hung), and son (Kenny Gan) after the passing of the father. The mother leaves money in places where she knows her son will steal it, the daughter attempts to find fulfillment in a hollow affair with her callous boss, and the



son disinterestedly engages in petty theft and emotionally abuses his girlfriend in order to pass the time. They never seem to occupy the same space, passing through the house like sullen ghosts and interacting only at a distance through misinterpreted messages and disconnected conversations. The film concludes with a burst of unprovoked violence and an act of incest, transgressions that suggest the costs and implications of social isolation.

The sexual act between brother and sister that concludes the film is both shocking and strangely gratifying: their lovemaking is the first truly intimate act in the film and it is shot in an extended take that treats their desire with tenderness. The film's final act throws the preceding events into new light, implying new reasons for the family's alienation and misery. The film's force as a work of so-called extreme cinema comes not from the two transgressive acts that conclude it, but from the long-simmering anguish that they represent. *If It's Not Now, Then When?* offers incest and violence as ineludible consequences of modern family life; the only other choice available is to continue asking the film's titular question.

## Twilight Portrait

At first glance Marina (Olga Dykhovichnaya) seems to have it all: a loving husband, a fulfilling job, and the respect of her friends. After being viciously raped by three police officers, Marina realizes that she has none of the aforementioned things: her husband is unfaithful, her job is meaningless, and her friends are parasitic and selfish. Angelina Nikanova's debut feature film is a bleak and impassive look at life in modern Moscow, and it has incited controversy among festival audiences due to its challenging subject matter and inscrutable protagonist. According to the VIFF program, the assault transforms Marina into "a nocturnal creature drawn to depravity": she engages in a perverse and



perplexing sexual relationship with one of her abusers, who responds to her professions of love with aversion and violence. Marina might be a martyr or a masochist, depending on how you interpret her actions.

Labelled as "shocking" and "uncompromising," *Twilight Portrait* is one of few films in the VIFF program described in a way that suggests extreme content, ostensibly advertising to audiences that appreciate challenging art house cinema. The film's dispassion and ambiguity serve to alienate rather than eliciting affect, however, and in this the film has more in common with the clinical detachment of Michael Haneke or even the cool depravity of Cronenberg's *Crash* than with the visceral trauma of films like *Irreversible* or *Romance*. But *Twilight Portrait* lacks the unsettling subtlety of Haneke or the latent desperation of *Crash*, and its refusal to provide or acknowledge any meaning for itself is often frustrating. The film's impenetrability might be read as symptomatic of a particularly nihilistic view of contemporary Russia, a world where brutality and corruption are met with disinterested resignation. The most disturbing part of *Twilight Portrait*, though, is that it risks evoking the same apathetic response in the spectator.

## Berberian Sound Studio

*Berberian Sound Studio* (Peter Strickland) introduces us to Gilderoy (Toby Jones), who departs from his job as a sound designer at a British children's show to work on an Italian horror film. As his work progresses, Gilderoy realizes that he's not cut out for horror. His attempts to quit fail, and the job begins to drive him mad. The critical reception of *Berberian* has been divided: some love its homage to Italian giallo films and sound design; others regard it as pretentious, dull, and purposely abstruse. Most agree that it caters to a highbrow, art house audience that excludes the common horror fan.

In new extremist films, the human body serves as a canvas upon which great violence is exacted: in *Dans ma peau*, a woman takes cutting to a new level; in *Trouble Every Day*, a man's sexuality is inextricable from his primal urge to tear people apart; in *Antichrist*, a woman pummels her husband's penis before bringing him to a bloody orgasm, and then removes her own clitoris with a pair of shears. In many of the films discussed in our issue, including *Irreversible*, *Rammbock*, and *Young Girls in Black*, the extremist content is present in the narrative as well as in the visual style of the films themselves. *Berberian's* extreme content is present in both of these things, but it is most notable in



the film's transference of violence from the human form to the food that sustains it: Gilderoy transforms hot grease on a pan into a hot poker entering a woman's vagina; cabbages and melons become similarly mistreated body parts. The film's sound design transposes the viscera from the human body to our everyday surroundings. Throbbing with a life of their own, *Berberian's* sets take control of the narrative; the characters, stuck in the belly of the film with no way out, become increasingly hopeless until eventually they go mad.

## Antiviral

The simultaneous contempt and coveting of celebrities in contemporary society forms the basis for Brandon Cronenberg's *Antiviral*, which is set in a world in which celebrity flaws—namely, their viruses—are sold to anyone willing and able to pay the price. Our hero, Syd (Caleb Landry-Jones), sells celebrity viruses to customers of the Lucas Clinic by day and moonlights as a bootlegger of those same viruses, which he brings home by injecting himself with



them at work. The clinic is not the only organization profiting from celebrity skin: butcher shops sell meat made from celebrity cells—meat that people eagerly consume.

Despite the sterile white sets in which the events of *Antiviral* unfold, the film effectively communicates a sense of infection; in fact, one might even argue that these enhance the horror rather than diminishing it. To paraphrase Cronenberg (Jr.), who spoke after the screening on September 29, 2012, the crisp, clean whiteness of nearly every location in *Antiviral* contrasts sharply with the "meaty-ness" of the people depicted in the film. In one scene, for example, globs of goopy blood explode from Syd's cracked lips onto a bleach-white floor. The contrast between the gore and the simple, clean set is meant to enhance the display's visceral appeal. The director's affective aims extended to *Antiviral's* soundscape, which was designed to infuse the film with a "bodily quality." The combination of the clinical mise en scène and the pulsating sound design creates a sickening skin around *Antiviral* that threatens to envelope anyone who views it. Indeed, our informal verbal survey of audience responses to the film, as well as critical reviews, suggest that we aren't the only ones who left the theatre feeling squeamish.

## Conclusion

The films discussed herein hail from a variety of cultural contexts and exhibit a number of approaches and techniques, but their shared focus on provocation and affect attests to the heterogeneous nature of contemporary extremist cinema across the globe. Whether through form, content, or a combination of the two, each of these films elicits a response from the spectator that is characterized by a sense of viscerality and transgression. While such extreme films are scarce in VIFF's programming, their relative success this year suggests that contemporary extreme cinema has a place and a future at the festival. Our hope is that Woloschuk's prediction comes true, and that the future of VIFF programming will include more challenging, graphic films. From our experiences at VIFF this year, we would argue that Vancouver audiences are more deviant than they appear!

**About VIFF:** We would like to extend thanks to the people at VIFF for their support, and particularly Curtis Woloschuk for generously giving us an interview. The following information is quoted from VIFF's website, [VIFF.org](http://VIFF.org).

Both in terms of admissions and number of films screened (152,000 and 386 respectively in 2011) VIFF is among the five largest film festivals in North America. We screen films from 80 countries on 10 screens. The international line-up includes the pick of the world's top film fests and many undiscovered gems. VIFF 2011 included 20 World premieres, 30 International premieres, 49 North American premieres and 40 Canadian premieres.

Three main programming platforms make our festival unique: we screen the largest selection of East Asian films outside of that region, we are one of the biggest showcases of Canadian film in the world and we have a large and important nonfiction program.

Attracting a large, attentive and enthusiastic audience of film lovers, the festival remains accessible, friendly and culturally diverse.