

book review

Frey, Mattias. **Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture.** Rutgers University Press, 2016.

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The programming of shocking, salacious, and sexually charged art films is now expected, even routine, on the international festival circuit. These feature presentations with aberrant sex, graphic violence, or sometimes a combination of both seize public attention and widespread press coverage. As Mattias Frey analyzes in his book *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (2016), these “taboo-breakers” may aim for revulsion or titillation, but the predictable deluge of journalistic attention these titles receive diminishes their bold attempts to challenge, horrify, or shock moviegoers. As he claims, these artful, agonizing features have “thrived, spread, and intensified into a steady stream and predictable pattern” (8).

Frey persuasively argues that the prominence of these scandal-baiting films, now habitual at European and North American festivals, undermines the value of their provocation. Films like *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002), *Twenty-nine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2003), and the two-part *Nymphomaniac* (Lars Von Trier, 2014) are less known for their plots than the moral panic and divisive reactions they drew at prestigious film festivals. But that outrage is marred when mainstream publications capitalize on the controversy: *The Guardian* even invited Noé to pen a column that both defended and promoted the graphic violence in *I Stand Alone* (1998) before that film's release in the U.K.

In partial reaction to recent books about lascivious national cinemas, such as *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Horeck and Kendall 2011), Frey expands the conversation beyond the controversial content in the films. He elaborates on discourses including studio business incentives, festival programming platforms, critical reception, filmmaker statements in the press, and DVD marketing. Referring to this book as “the first macrostudy of contemporary controversial art filmmaking” (12), Frey divides this analysis into two halves: the first outlines the ways these films are broadly shaped in the cultural sphere, from production to exhibition, while the second focuses on case studies that accentuate the processes from the first half.

Among the macro discourses Frey investigates include interviews and statements by renowned filmmakers. In Chapter 1, “Transgression and Distinction: Filmmaker Discourses,” Frey asks whether an art-house director undertaking an auteur profile can help a taboo-breaker reach a more highbrow status. As a filmmaker's reputation and renown can hold a thrall over film audiences, Frey looks at studio-sanctioned strategies that hold works by these celebrated, if controversial, auteurs at a remove from more base representations of grotesque violence and pornographic sex. Frey relies on Pierre Bourdieu's categories to determine how certain extreme films reach a level of artistic integ-

rity, while others fail to find traction at festivals and art-house cinemas. Meanwhile, he uses statements from beloved shock auteurs (like Michael Haneke and Catherine Breillat) that position their works as evocative of a more serious artistic legitimacy: the repulsive content in their films, these directors say, is for art rather than exploitation.

Frey examines the broader critical receptions of these films in Chapter 2, although he focuses most on two reductive evaluative reactions: the “aesthetic embrace” and the “cynicism criticism.” The former reinforces the films as artfully distinctive, as these critics regard the radical subject matter as indicative of a sociopolitical subtext or allegory. As Frey regards, the “aesthetic embrace,” in its reading of amoral subject matter as layered metaphor, reacts to the “cynicism criticism,” wherein critics shrink the gap between art and emptiness, blaming smart filmmakers for transgressing good taste. The former critics would appreciate the director’s statements examined in the previous chapter, while the latter would roll their eyes at the presumed artistic integrity the auteur proclaims.

Meanwhile, festival patrons receive a lot of attention in *Extreme Cinema* because, like the mainstream press, they serve as markers of the artistic legitimacy of these films. These cultural gatherings are one of the more significant ways that esoteric titles find and expand an audience. In the third chapter, “The Rhetoric and Role of Film Festivals,” Frey explores how these centers of cinephilia serve as launching pads for challenging material. Partially due to the tastes of programmers (or, the programmers interviewed by Frey), larger festivals work to cater to a wide spectrum of moviegoers. Their function is, as Frey attests, “to expose audiences to themes, types of representation, and tastes that they would not otherwise consume in other venues” (57). The author’s interviews with film festival programmers like Beth Barrett (Seattle), Michelle Carey (Melbourne), and Noah Cowan (San Francisco) add weight to his insights – even if the chapter ultimately places too much of an emphasis on prestigious festivals as crucial institutions for this type of artistic exchange. For one, these celebrations of cinema are often beyond the means, in regard to price and location, for many cinephiles to attend. Moreover, some festivals, including those situated in countries with a more tolerant bent toward taboo-breaking content or that specialize in courting cult movie fans, benefit more from scandal films than others.

The fifth chapter, “The Interpretations of Regulations,” focuses on film ratings boards, such as the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which have the potential to stigmatize acclaimed films by labeling them with a restrictive rating. The former ratings board, once an intensely conservative board that doubled-down on films with graphic sexual content, reformed to a more permissive body in the late 1990s with the help of a public consultation. At that time, citizens of the U.K. kept inquiring why they could be legally allowed to have sex at 16 but refused entry into an 18-rated film that contained graphic sexuality. The consultation led to the BBFC loosening their grip on harshly rating films with sequences of full-frontal nudity and gore, although sexual violence remained a spot of bother. On the other hand, the MPAA is still strict about nudity and sexuality, and keep its files about ratings decisions classified.

Frey’s comprehensive research into BBFC examiner reports, internal memos, and public statements provides insight into how a country adopts fairer censorship rules. The most interesting analysis in this chapter alleges that the BBFC often compares the content in foreign productions with British ones – and Frey argues that this is an unfair evaluation. An English-language taboo-breaker made with U.K. financing, Frey states, would have a harder time getting a lenient rating than a film with similar salacious content from France or Japan. To back up these claims, Frey relies on the assessments of board members. One member writes, in reference to Jean-Jacques Beineix’s *Betty Blue* (1986) residing amidst the “French” traditions of onscreen romance and desire, that the director has “the knack of making sex on screen seem natural and direct, not smutty or titillating (as in *9½ Weeks*)” (110).

In the last four chapters, Frey concentrates on micro-studies that help to situate more obscure extreme fare in mainstream contexts. For instance, in Chapter 6, “The Added Value of International Distribution,” he prioritizes the ways that the DVD cover art on Tartan Films’ Asia Extreme label orientalizes and stereotypes genre films emanating from East Asia, enticing curious film watchers “with Western stereotypes of perverse, immoral, violent, sexually open, or deviant Asians” (134). But the cultural scholar also argues, intelli-

gently, that orientalism is itself a “marketing strategy” (135). In the nuanced chapter that follows, “Sex, Violence, and Self-Exoticization,” Frey deconstructs some of the cruder marketing strategies from the previous chapter, explaining that ideas of exotic and/or extreme non-Western cultures has been a viable marketing strategy in art-house circles for decades – and that countries position their cultural narratives in that essentialized mode to vie for international success and acclaim. Using the wealth of bleak, despairing titles heralding from Austria as a model, he examines how modest economic and cultural incentives from that country’s film industry make it appealing for creators there to replicate the tone and aesthetic of a homegrown, globally-recognized auteur like Haneke, whose films are easily identifiable from their unsettling violence and macabre depictions of sex.

While the chapter that investigates Tartan’s Asia Extreme collection is useful, due to the company’s folding in 2008,¹ not to mention the widespread decrease in DVD sales over the past decade, Frey’s analysis is incomplete. One wishes Frey could have expanded on more contemporary exhibitors of violent fare, and whether they have continued capitalizing on these orientalist marketing schemes. Meanwhile, how does the iconography remain consistent during a time when it is more demanding to market niche films due to an increasingly saturated media landscape? To an extent, Frey deals with the difficulties that indie distributors must grapple, noting in the fourth chapter that these companies “are not typically known for their longevity” (70). And his evaluations of these smaller subsidiaries like Invincible Pictures, which released *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010) in both unrated and R-rated packages, and Artsploitation Films (another specialist in transgressive fare) show notable efforts to appeal to a niche demographic. But the end of the chapter, which references how video-on-demand platforms have shifted release patterns but services like Netflix choose not to license more challenging fare, feels like a prelude to a chapter on contemporary viewing practices of controversial films that never arrives.

Meanwhile, in his analysis of New York’s Film Forum cinema and its principles of programming, Frey too briefly scrutinizes how the widening of indie distributors, alongside a diversifying number of leisure activities, have “complicated arthouse programming” (85). This anxiety rings true for an

age where streaming and subscription video-on-demand services have partially replaced the art-house cinema as the exhibitor of noteworthy indie films. But the author’s focus on a popular urban space that gathers revenue for more esoteric titles – now, more than ever, an outlier along the spectrum of how people discover this extreme cinema – further emphasizes the limited scope of Frey’s exploration. A more capable investigation into new platforms for cinemagoing, which moves beyond the paradigm of repertory theatergoing and into more fluid, digital film spaces, is needed.

A paradox that arises throughout these discourse analyses is the relationship between the artistic legitimacy the filmmakers crave and the reductive nature of marketing campaigns that use blood and skin as a selling point. Despite the aims of auteurs, the publicity of their sex-filled dramas often thrives on reducing the darker themes into brief spurts of titillation. Frey compares the directors’ statements, which champion their artistic virtuosity, with the iconography frequently present in these films’ advertisements: a bare female body, the desirous use of the colour red, a critic pull-quote that foregrounds a claim that the film is provocative. As Frey examines, this mingling of highbrow and lowbrow content merely continues an art cinema trend from the last half-century. Ever since risqué titles like *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (Vilgot Sjöman, 1967) penetrated American art houses, the line between artistic pretension and pornography has remained fiercely debated. This subversion of advertising also means that celebrated auteurs have had to defend their art. This “concomitant need to compete for cultural legitimacy” (21) enables directors to make claims about their features to hold them in an artful distinction, distanced from pornography of the erotic and torture varieties. But, where these directors see art, marketers see an opportunity to build on these films’ reputations as taboo-breakers, creating a schism.

In *Extreme Cinema*’s final chapters, Frey hones in further on these varied aims among filmmakers and advertisers. Focusing on the extensive sexual content in titles such as *9 Songs* (Michael Winterbottom, 2004), *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013), and *The Brown Bunny* (Vincent Gallo, 2003), he compares the way these artists create distinctions between their work and pornography. Some prioritize stylistic triumphs – a lack of non-diegetic music and more hyper-

active editing and camerawork, for instance – and a representation of sex that bemoans pleasure or eroticism of any kind. Filmmakers like Winterbottom and Breillat have commented on the absence of arousal within their films, aiming for a bleaker realism that “the wall-to-wall ecstasy of hard-core pornography” cannot compare (Williams 2008, 23). This growing consolidation between art cinema and hardcore cinema indicates that the lines can be blurred. When Frey examines the preponderance of these art film excerpts on mainstream porn sites, the categories of high and low art become increasingly unstable.

There has been a need for an analysis of these progressively daring and explicit films, especially with the more widespread proliferation of graphic imagery on the Internet, such as the wealth of available pornography to the circulated photographs of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib. What may have been considered startling or harrowing in the 1990s, when the newly-established NC-17 rating in the United States circumscribed the potential financial success of films like *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996) and *Henry & June* (Philip Kaufman, 1990), seems far tamer in the early twenty-first century. At the same time, a few sections within *Extreme Cinema* already seem dated. Frey’s fourth chapter briefly touches on the post-video era where on-demand business models have become a key part of the distribution of various extreme titles. However, when he mentions how independent companies have had difficulty with “the notoriously conservative Netflix” (91), this note is not just brief but also misleading. I’ve found multiple taboo-breakers from this book on Netflix (at least, the Canadian iteration), including *Blue is the Warmest Colour* and both volumes of *Nymphomaniac*. There are certainly gaps in analysis that could prompt Frey to update this book shortly, when more empirical data about the revenue coming from streaming and subscription video-on-demand services like Netflix may be publicly available.²

Nevertheless, there is something admirable in Frey’s efforts to critically examine the institutional patterns of films that, ultimately, make a mere dent at the box office and only occasionally adopt a cult following. After many pages devoted to the extensive marketing tactics for these challenging sells, he provides a table with the American and British box office grosses for “explicit sex art films” between 1998 and 2014 (190). Only two of

the 29 titles surpassed the \$5 million mark (in U.S. dollars) – even when combining the revenue from both countries. This miniscule financial success confronts a dark reality for this cinephilic niche; even if these titles pique curiosity, they only convince a small audience to see them. What good is creating and perpetuating controversy if only a few daring or intrigued filmgoers seek out the provocation? The reminder of these films’ lack of success is significant but also anticlimactic, minimizing the significance of the “macro-phenomena” that Frey studies.

References

- Frey, Mattias. 2016. *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today’s Art Film Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Horeck, Tanya C., and Tina Kendall, eds. 2011. *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Williams, Linda. 2008. *Screening Sex*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Endnotes

- 1 Additionally, many of their home video releases are currently out-of-print.
- 2 One expects that Frey has recognized these gaps. In 2018, he presented a paper at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference that examined forms of curation on platforms like Netflix and MUBI; Frey will likely elaborate on this subject in a future publication.