

Hardcore Horror: Challenging the Discourses of 'Extremity'

Steve Jones

There has been a notable increase in the production and discussion of extreme film (particularly extreme horror) in the cultural sphere over the last fifteen years. Extreme horror production and distribution has flourished thanks to the accessibility of digital filmmaking, crowdfunding and the global online marketplace. The box-office successes of films such as *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) attracted the attention of press critics, who dubbed such films 'extreme'.¹ Controversial releases such as *A Serbian Film* (Srđan Spasojević, 2010) attracted the attention of censors in numerous countries, including the UK.² Within this context, some filmmakers have carved a niche, producing gory, micro-budget horror that embraces content that censors find problematic. In previous work, I referred to these micro-budget productions as 'hardcore horror'.³ Hardcore horror's 'extremity' is confirmed by its unavailability in major retail outlets such as chain stores and multiplex theatres.

This chapter explores the relationship between 'hardcore horror' films and the discursive context in which mainstream horror releases are being dubbed 'extreme'. This chapter compares 'mainstream' and 'hardcore horror' with the aim of investigating what 'extremity' means. I will begin by outlining what hardcore horror is and how it differs from mainstream horror (both in terms of content and distribution). I will then dissect what 'extremity' means in this context, delineating problems with established critical discourses about 'extreme horror'. Print press reviewers focus on theatrically released horror films, ignoring micro-budget direct-to-video horror. As such, their adjudications about 'extremity' in horror begin from a limited base that misrepresents the genre. Moreover, 'extremity' is not a universally shared value, yet it is predominantly presented as if referring to an objective, universally agreed-upon standard. Such judgements change over time. Moreover, in contrast to marketers' uses of 'extreme', press critics predominantly use the term as a pejorative. Although academics have sought to defend and contextualise particular maligned films and directors, scholars have focused on only a handful of infamous examples, and academic

¹ See, for example, S. Tobias, 'Of thee I scream: How horror films reflect politics', *The Washington Post* (2 July 2016); K. Cochrane, 'For your entertainment', *The Guardian* (1 May 2007); C. Tookey, 'Antichrist: The man who made this horrible, misogynistic film needs to see a shrink', *Daily Mail* (24 July 2009).

² See S. Jones, 'The Lexicon of Offence: The Meanings of Torture, Porn, and "Torture Porn"', in F. Attwood, V. Campbell, I. Q. Hunter and S. Lockyer (eds), *Controversial Images: Media Representations on the Edge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 186–200; J. Aston, "'A Malignant, Seething Hatework": An Introduction to US 21st Century Hardcore Horror', *Senses of Cinema*, 80/1 (2016).

³ Steve Jones, *Torture Porn: Popular Horror after Saw* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). The term has since been adopted by others, including James Aston, *Hardcore Horror Cinema in the 21st Century: Production, Marketing and Consumption* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018).

publishers implicitly support that narrow focus. As such, the cumulative body of scholarly work on 'extreme horror' inadvertently replicates print press critics' mischaracterisation of the genre. These discursive factors limit our collective understandings of 'horror', its ostensible 'extremity' and of 'extremity' qua concept. Given that the discourse of 'extremity' is so commonly employed when censoring representations that challenge established genre conventions, it is imperative that horror studies academics attend to peripheral hardcore horror texts, and seek to develop more robust conceptual understandings of extremity.

Contextualising Hardcore Horror

Associations between contemporary visceral horror and extremity have been confirmed in the marketing materials of recent horror titles and re-releases of contentious twentieth-century films.⁴ Whether for DVD covers or digital platforms, promotional images routinely boast that a given horror title is being made available in an 'uncensored', 'uncut', 'unrated' or 'extreme' version. When films were censored for the theatrical release or previously banned, such claims signal which version of the film is being made available to prospective consumers. For example, *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) has been released in multiple versions in the UK, including a 'Special Edition...Fuller Version' (Screen Entertainment, 2003) and an 'ultimate...most complete version ever released in the UK' (101 Films, 2010). Both versions are expurgated, in contrast to the 2004 Australian Force Entertainment DVD, which proclaims to be 'completely uncut'. However, in many cases the proclamation that a film is 'uncut' is a misnomer inasmuch as no cuts were required prior to release. For example, the 2007 Entertainment in Video UK DVD release of *Flight of the Living Dead* (Scott Thomas, 2007) boasts of being 'uncut', despite not being subject to censorship in the UK.⁵ The US New Line Home Video release of the film is similarly emblazoned with an 'unrated' stamp even though it did not receive an R-rated theatrical release to warrant a distinction.⁶

Posturing towards 'extremity' in this manner is now a commonplace marketing strategy. To offer another example in the UK context, several films released by Technicolor Home Entertainment – including *Pig Hunt* (James Isaac, 2008) – were classified with a '15' certificate, but were rated '18' on DVD. Technically, this is due to the disc containing 'additional material' that was 'classified at a higher certificate than the main feature': in this case, the material was a trailer for *Pig Hunt* itself, which was classified at '18' even though the film was classified '15'.⁷ Including the trailer appears to have been a tactic to secure the higher age rating. Given that the certification excludes a section of the population (thereby potentially reducing the sales-base), Technicolor Home Entertainment seem to have intentionally used the '18'

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the following trends, see Mark Bernard, *Selling the Splat Pack: The DVD Revolution and the American Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

⁵ 'Flight of the Living Dead: Outbreak on a Plane', BBFC (2007), www.bbfc.co.uk/releases/flight-living-dead-outbreak-plane-2007-1 (accessed 29 August 2019).

⁶ Moreover, the 'unrated' version of *Saw VI* (Kevin Greutert, 2009) is different to the theatrical version in multiple ways, but barely any of the changes re-establish controversial elements. Rather, the alternate footage consists of alternative takes, different dialogue and pacing changes (for a detailed breakdown, see <https://www.movie-censorship.com/report.php?ID=5170383> (accessed 29 August 2019)).

⁷ 'Pig Hunt', BBFC (2008), <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/releases/pighunt-2008> (accessed 29 August 2019).

certification marker to present *Pig Hunt* as if it contains more extreme content than it actually offers.

These marketing strategies illustrate the ways in which notional unacceptability is routinely embedded into the discourses that surround visceral horror films. Two implications follow. First, such constructed unacceptability signals that these films are products of a liberal moment, at least in terms of horror film censorship. Uncut versions of banned horror films (such as *I Spit on Your Grave*) are commonly sought after for their notoriety, and because they were at one time unavailable.⁸ Rhetorically aligning newer, uncensored films with these illicit, sought-after products is a way of artificially generating cultural capital. The implicit claim made by labelling a horror film 'extreme' is that it contains material that could (perhaps 'should') trouble censors, even when it has not been censored. Secondly, the context in which these films are offered also belies their ostensibly controversial status. DVDs that are labelled as 'extreme' versions – such as the DVD release of *Saw III* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2006) – are widely available in chain retail stores. Although the marketing implies unacceptability, the context reveals quite the opposite; that the content is permissible, and that is why it is abundantly accessible. Where films have traversed those boundaries – providing unacceptable content – they have been censored or outright banned. For instance, *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* (Tom Six, 2011) was initially banned in various countries, including Australia, New Zealand and the UK. The censored 2011 UK DVD version by Bounty Films may lean on that controversy in its packaging (dubbing it 'the film they didn't want you to see'), but its wide release and legal permissibility undercuts, or at least dampens, any implied claim that the DVD release is 'extreme'.

Against (and perhaps in response to) this context, a subset of micro-budget filmmakers have produced films that contain the kinds of imagery promised by the above marketing strategies (i.e. fictional content that would be rejected by censors). I have previously dubbed such films hardcore horror. This term implies comparisons to hardcore pornography, thereby highlighting three broad characteristics that distinguish hardcore horror. The first is industrial. Just as porn exists as a film-making 'industry' apart from 'legitimate' feature film-making, hardcore horror is the ghettoised, stigmatised and fragmented Other to studio-based horror film-making. The second characteristic is aesthetic. As with pornography, hardcore horror filmmakers routinely deploy genitally explicit sex to mask the film's performative aspects. However, in hardcore horror, sex is usually combined or juxtaposed with violence. Thus, genitally explicit sex connotes that the dramatised violence is also real(istic), authentic and unplanned, rather than carefully crafted and staged.⁹

Before moving on to the third characteristic, it is worth noting that the combination of sex and violence is a step too far for major censorship bodies such as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC).¹⁰ For

⁸ See David Kerekes and David Slater, *See No Evil: Banned Films and Video Controversy* (Manchester: Critical Vision, 2001), p. 289: the list of titles banned by the Director of Public Prosecutions in the early 1980s 'remains something of a "shopping list" for collectors'.

⁹ This distinction is crucial: although these filmmakers push taste boundaries, and such pushing has led to some films being outlawed (as obscene), hardcore horror does not contain footage of genuine crimes.

¹⁰ See M. Barker, "'Knowledge-U-Like": The British Board of Film Classification and its Research', *Journal of British*

example, films such as *Murder-Set-Pieces* (Nick Palumbo, 2004), *Grotesque* (Kōji Shiraishi, 2009) and *The Bunny Game* (Adam Rehmeier, 2011) were banned by the BBFC because they contain prolonged depictions of sexual violence, or juxtapositions of sex and violence. To illustrate, *Hate Crime* (James Cullen Bressack, 2012) was refused classification because it 'focuses on physical and sexual abuse' in an 'unremitting manner'.¹¹ Since none of the films listed have yet been resubmitted for classification in censored forms, they cannot be sold legally in the UK. Many other films containing similar content have avoided official bans in the UK simply because they have not been submitted for classification (and thus still cannot be sold in the UK). Given the precedent set by banning films such as *Hate Crime*, it would be fruitless to submit films such as *Prison of Hell: K3* (Andreas Bethmann, 2009) or *Faces of Snuff* (Shane Ryan et al., 2016) to the BBFC, since both contain significantly more frequent, sustained and explicit depictions of sex, violence and sexual violence than films that have been banned.¹² Little narrative context is provided for the depictions of violence in films such as *Women's Flesh: My Red Guts* (Tamakichi Anaru, 1999) and *Murder Collection V.1* (Fred Vogel, 2009), which follow a structure that is more commonly located in gonzo porn than in horror. Here, extremity is marked by eschewing the causal narrative resolution and character development that typifies normative Hollywood storytelling.¹³ It is clear that censorship bodies such as the BBFC typically look to narrative context to provide a rationale for explicit violence.¹⁴ Minimising that context increases the chances that a hardcore horror film would be banned if submitted for classification.

Hardcore horror's third distinguishing characteristic is commercial. In contrast to moderately budgeted independent horror that seeks to emulate larger studio productions' aesthetic standards and trappings, hardcore horror is differentiated from 'mainstream' horror by its graphic (genitally explicit) depictions of sex and lo-fi visuals. Hardcore horror is typically shot on micro budgets. For example, *Flowers* (Phil Stevens, 2015) was reputedly made 'for a mere \$20,000', and was largely shot in the director's own home.¹⁵ This location itself suggests a degree of intimate control over the project, which Stevens confirms in his DVD commentary where he refers to *Flowers* as 'the movie I've been always trying to make...that I...love personally and with all my heart'.¹⁶ Stevens's comment – suggesting that movie-making is a compulsion rather than being motivated by profit

– is typical of how hardcore horror filmmakers routinely align budgetary limitations with

Cinema and Television, 13/1 (2016), 127; E. Pett, 'A New Media Landscape? The BBFC, Extreme Cinema as Cult, and Technological Change', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 13/1 (2015), 84.

¹¹ 'Hate Crime', BBFC (2015), <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/releases/hate-crime-vod> (accessed 29 August 2019).

¹² For a (non-exhaustive) list of films that are 'self-censored', which have 'not been formally rejected by the BBFC but are still effectively banned as it is pointless and expensive to submit films that won't pass', see 'Banned: Self-Censored', *Melon Farmers*, <http://melonfarmers.co.uk/banned.htm> (accessed 29 August 2019).

¹³ See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Minding Movies: Observations on the Art, Craft, and Business of Filmmaking* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 127–8.

¹⁴ See, for example, the BBFC's rationale for banning *Grotesque*: 'The work has minimal narrative or character development and presents the viewer with little more than an unrelenting and escalating scenario of humiliation, brutality and sadism', 'Grotesque', BBFC (2009), <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/releases/grotesque-video> (accessed 29 August 2019).

¹⁵ A. Ettinger, Liner notes for *Flowers*, DVD release (Unearthed Films, 2015).

¹⁶ 'Audio Commentary', *Flowers*, DVD release (Unearthed Films, 2015).

integrity, distancing themselves and their films from the profit-driven commercialism connoted by studio filmmaking.

Flowers is distributed by specialists Unearthed Films, but many other hardcore horror films are distributed independently by the filmmakers themselves. In this respect, contemporary hardcore horror filmmakers take their lead from late twentieth-century filmmakers such as Andreas Schnaas, Heiko Fipper and Shinji Imaoka who used VHS technology to release micro-budget sex-and-gore films to an international marketplace. Twenty-first-century hardcore horror filmmakers follow a similar path, although digital technology has arguably amplified filmmakers' ability to shoot and edit higher quality products on lower budgets, while digital platforms have facilitated new routes to international markets. For instance, Italian horror company Necrostorm not only produce and distribute their own products, but also run crowdfunding campaigns through their own website, maximising the yield from those campaigns. Recognising that filmic content precludes them from the funding mechanisms and distribution chains even minor studios and DVD distribution labels have at their disposal, companies such as Necrostorm thrive because of their self-publication model.¹⁷

This model leaves filmmakers in a vulnerable position. For example, Ryan Nicholson (Plotdigger Films) opened a successful Indiegogo campaign for *Gutterballs 2* in 2014, and in February 2016 Nicholson was hospitalised to remove a brain tumour. The film was not completed and pre-orders for various Plotdigger projects remain unfulfilled (much to the chagrin of backers who accuse Nicholson of stealing their money).¹⁸ Given that the staff of Plotdigger primarily consisted of Nicholson and his spouse, his illness virtually halted the company's business. Furthermore, such companies depend on maintaining a dedicated fan base's interest and loyalty, not least because the content necessarily limits its commercial potential. Nicholson's illness and the resultant delays clearly damaged the fan/film-maker relationship and Plotdigger's viability prior to Nicholson's untimely death in 2019.

Moreover, with limited budgets and without the support of established distributors, these filmmakers are reliant on social media to market their work. However, these avenues can be precarious. Film-maker Shane Ryan articulates this on his public Facebook page, protesting 'FACEBOOK moderator assholes...I joined ONLY to promote my films. But you goddamn fucking jackasses don't even allow me to...Don't I at least deserve to be able to let people know my films even exist . . .?'¹⁹

Promoting and distributing films via digital streaming platforms is just as frustrating for Ryan: 'It seems like almost nothing of mine is allowed on any major VOD/streaming/etc site. Which is actually making me consider how I should make/edit my films. But...That's not art. These aren't studio films...we shouldn't have to censor ourselves.'²⁰ Ryan's comments indicate that working outside the studio system ought to translate into increased artistic freedom, but if the resultant movies contain extreme content, even these alternative routes to market are

¹⁷ For the sake of full disclosure, I currently act as a script editor and translator for Necrostorm.

¹⁸ See R. Nicholson, 'Gutterballs 2: The Reel Deal', *Indiegogo* (2015), <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/gutterballs-2-the-reel-deal#/comments> (accessed 29 August 2019).

¹⁹ S. Ryan, <https://www.facebook.com/shane.ryan.77> (15 February 2018); emphasis in the original.

²⁰ S. Ryan, <https://www.facebook.com/shane.ryan.77> (17 February 2018).

severely restricted.

A distinction needs to be drawn here between these limitations and other forms of banning. Prohibition can augment an extreme horror film's reputation insofar as censorship indicates that a given film contains material 'not found in the average Hollywood film'.²¹ Censors aim to reflect majority values,²² and so censorship serves as a promise to hardcore horror consumers that a film features the extreme content that they seek (which is not available in mainstream products). Such movies have limited commercial prospects, and banning can alert potential consumers to a project that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. By having to seek out a copy of a banned film, fans signal their investment in hardcore horror. However, in order to harness that potential, the film has to be available for purchase in some form.

Hardcore horror filmmakers make a trade-off between profitability and artistic control, then. The word-of-mouth infamy filmmakers can generate potentially yields greater (if necessarily more modest) fortunes than broader distribution can. By carving a niche apart from the mainstream commercial sector, hardcore horror filmmakers avoid the market saturation that stifles many who seek fame in the world of studio-based horror. However, compared with an indie studio horror movie like *Hostel* – which had a budget of \$4.8 million and has yielded over \$82.2 million (worldwide, unadjusted)²³ thanks to its theatrical exhibition and subsequent home-media distribution – hardcore horror's budgets and returns seem insignificant. In this context, hardcore horror filmmakers react against mainstream movies' profitability by suggesting that commercial success equates to curbing content to fit within the sector's commercial and censorial remits. Such curbing has an impact on hardcore horror's very essence: its horrific elements.

Extremity and its Contingencies

By tracing its various characteristics, one can observe how hardcore horror is distinguished by its conscious negation of major studio film-making's industrial, commercial and aesthetic conventions, and therein lies its appeal as an alternative to mainstream horror. In this regard, hardcore horror filmmakers might appear reactionary, railing against normative standards simply to shock or upset. Film criticism's dominant voices are preoccupied with theatrical releases and so routinely ignore peripheral horror. Nevertheless, hardcore horror is implicated in the broader discourses that surround gory studio horror.

To illustrate, critics have referred to certified, theatrically released visceral films such as *mother!* (Darren Aronofsky, 2017) as 'extreme horror'.²⁴ Here, 'extremity' indicates that the

²¹ Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!" A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 124.

²² See D. Harries, 'Watching the Internet', in D. Harries (ed.), *The New Media Book* (London: BFI Publishing, 2002), pp. 171–82; Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

²³ See 'Box office history for Hostel Movies', *The Numbers*, <https://www.thenumbers.com/movies/franchise/Hostel#tab=summary> (accessed 29 August 2019).

²⁴ See, for example, P. Howell, 'Stranger Danger', *The Toronto Star* (15 September 2017).

film in question contains too much gore or violence for the reviewer's tastes and seeks to shock simply for shock's sake.²⁵ Some critics suggest that visceral horror filmmakers endeavour to outdo one another by creating ever-gorier or more explicit images.²⁶ Moreover, if a film-maker's aim is simply to outdo their peers, this game of 'one-upping' has no endpoint. Therefore, critics such as Lenore Skenazy suggest that '[i]f we start accepting this kind of movie as just "extreme" horror, the baseline will change'.²⁷ In this view, unless curbed, critics believe 'extreme' horror will have detrimental impacts on culture. Although they refer to theatrical releases as 'extreme', hardcore horror is implicated because the latter is distinguished by including content that is too affronting (or 'extreme') for the multiplex context.

Several problems follow from these premises. First, hardcore horror's very existence undercuts critics' complaints about mainstream horror's supposed extremity. A film such as *mother!* may be 'extreme' by the standards of certified films exhibited in cinemas but not by the standards of the genre as a whole. An individual who considers *mother!* extreme because it features infanticide²⁸ may change their assessment of its relative excessiveness after seeing *A Serbian Film*'s 'newborn porn' sequence (in which an infant is raped). However, that does not mean *A Serbian Film* is extreme and *mother!* is not. After all, the sequence in which a newborn is raped, beaten, dismembered, eaten and regurgitated in *Slow Torture Puke Chamber* (Lucifer Valentine, 2010) eclipses *A Serbian Film* in terms of prolonged violence and graphic detail, ensuring that it could not be released in the multiplex context in anything other than a heavily truncated form. Print press critics' broad proclamations about 'horror' misrepresent the genre by focusing almost exclusively on the mainstream studio system. Without explicit recognition of that limitation or a fuller synchronic understanding, Skenazy's illustrative complaint about the state of 'extreme' horror is only half-formed.

The second problem is that there is no universally shared value or absolute measure against which extremity is judged. For example, Todd Brown qualifies his description of *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008) by adjudicating that it is 'incredibly extreme';²⁹ Che Gilson deems that the violence in *Misogynist* (Michael Matteo Rossi, 2013) 'is often highly extreme';³⁰ Ronny

²⁵ This is a common trait among critics who deal with such material; see also S. Schiesel, 'No Mercy and Ample Ways to Die', *The New York Times* (12 October 2009); L. Terrell, 'The Brutal and the Banal Become Us', *The Star-Ledger* (8 March 2009).

²⁶ For examples of this discourse in action, see S. Holden, "'Bliss": Cultures and Sexes Clash in the Aftermath of a Rape in Turkey', *The New York Times* (7 August 2009); M. Orange, 'Taking Back the Knife', *The New York Times* (6 September 2009); D. Thomson, 'If these Walls Could Talk, They'd Scream', *The Washington Post* (4 January 2008); W. Ide, 'The Life Before Her Eyes', *The Times* (26 March 2009).

²⁷ L. Skenazy, 'It's Torture! It's Porn! What's Not to Like? Plenty, Actually', *AdAge* (28 May 2007), <https://adage.com/article/lenore-skenazy/torture-pornplenty/116897> (accessed 29 August 2019); see also Wendy Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007), p. 101.

²⁸ See P. Cooley, "'Mother!' is so controversial Paramount had to defend its decision to release the movie", *Cleveland* (18 September 2017), http://www.cleveland.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2017/09/why_is_mother_so_controversial.html (accessed 29 August 2019).

²⁹ T. Brown, 'TIFF Review: Martyrs', *Screen Anarchy* (7 September 2008), <https://screenanarchy.com/2008/09/martyrs-review.html> (accessed 29 August 2019); emphasis added.

³⁰ C. Gilson, 'Misogynist Review', *UK Horror Scene*, <http://www.ukhorrorscene.com/tag/horror-review/page/20/> (accessed 29 August 2019); emphasis added.

Carlsson considers the finale of *Maskhead* (Fred Vogel, 2009) to be 'really extreme';³¹ reviewer 'Blacktooth' describes *Flowers* as 'a very extreme horror flick';³² and Peter Bradshaw declares that *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) is an 'ultra-extreme movie'.³³ If the adjective 'extreme' referred to an absolute standard, qualifiers such as 'ultra' would be unnecessary (since both 'ultra' and 'extreme' indicate excessiveness). Most overtly, David Edelstein's proclamation that filmmaker 'Eli Roth is extremely extreme' demonstrates both the redundancy of such qualifying adjectives and how ineffective 'extreme' has become in contemporary discourse.³⁴ These phrasings reveal that 'extreme' is a relational judgement; it is a comparative measure that is contingent on the receiver's shared agreement about that to which it is being compared. Moreover, what a majority consider to be extreme (which is to some extent reflected in censorial standards) also changes over time. 'Extremity' indicates that which is unacceptable according to the cultural, political and social values of the moment, and those underlying values are not static. Thus, some previously banned films such as *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) have subsequently been released uncut.³⁵

What remains static, however, is the conceptual meaning of 'extremity'. The term is applied to that which is taboo or which breaches contemporaneous acceptability standards. The specific attributes, traits or themes that amount to extreme content change with time, but when critics point out differences between past and present, they routinely package such shifts with valuations, as if what is considered 'extreme' now is 'worse' than previous 'extreme' content. The latter is patently false insofar as if content was considered 'extreme' in the past, it violated acceptability standards in that moment. Present 'extreme' content is guilty of the same infringement, just as future 'extreme' content will be. Thus, discourse surrounding horror's 'extremity' reveals little about the elements that are being compared, since the term is commonly used to reassert (transient) normative value-judgements. The contingencies that would illuminate critics' judgements about extremity – such as the comparison between hardcore and multiplex horror – typically remain unexamined.

Without a more detailed understanding of the work 'extremity' does in relation to horror or a wider understanding of the genre, print press critics' proclamations about 'extreme horror' amount to little more than proposals about what horror films ought to be, packaged as if those assertions are objective descriptions.³⁶ This is entirely different from other uses of the

³¹ R. Carlsson, 'Maskhead review', *Film Bizarro*, http://www.filmbizarro.com/view_review.php?review=maskhead.php (accessed 24 March 2020); emphasis added.

³² Blacktooth, 'Flowers (review)', *Horror Society* (15 January 2015), <https://www.horrorsociety.com/2015/01/14/flowers-review/> (accessed 29 August 2019); emphasis added.

³³ P. Bradshaw, 'Enter the Void', *The Guardian* (23 September 2010), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/sep/23/enter-the-void-review> (accessed 29 August 2019); emphasis added.

³⁴ D. Edelstein, 'In *Green Inferno*, Eli Roth Honors the Cannibal-Gore Tradition With Bravura', *Vulture* (25 September 2015), <https://www.vulture.com/2015/09/movie-review-green-inferno-goes-for-the-kills.html> (accessed 29 August 2019); emphasis added.

³⁵ On *Salò's* censorship history in the UK, see 'Salò', *BBFC* (2008), <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/case-studies/salo120-days-sodom> (accessed 29 August 2019). On marketing the uncut version, see S. Hobbs, 'Salò, Or the 120 Days of Sodom: The Contemporary Distribution of Sexual Extremity', *Cine-Excess*, 2 (2016).

³⁶ The same is true in scholarship. See, for instance, Elena Del Rio, *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). Del Rio uses phrases such as 'extreme pain' or 'extreme violence' in a discussion of 'extreme film' without defining what extremity is (or what normative standard is being

term: in censorial contexts, 'extreme' usually indicates that content has infringed legal standards; in horror marketing, 'extreme' routinely promises that a film's content will suit some consumers' tastes (regardless of the veracity of such claims); hardcore horror filmmakers and distributors additionally use the term to signal difference from studio horror.

Academic Responses to Extreme Horror

Press critics almost universally use the term 'extreme horror' as a pejorative, tending to quickly dismiss films such as *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* as disgusting, superficial 'shock films'.³⁷ A minority of academics have sought to counter these assertions by engaging with allegedly 'extreme' low budget, theatrically released horror films. By subjecting such films to serious intellectual scrutiny, these scholars have challenged the notion that 'extreme' horror films are one-dimensional. Much of that work has assimilated discussion of these films into horror studies' established paradigms, such as allegorical, reflectionist approaches to textual analysis (paralleling films such as *Hostel* with a post-9/11 American mind-set, and so forth).³⁸ Where extreme horror has been approached by scholars, discussion routinely orients around several established thinkers – Antonin Artaud, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Vivian Sobchack, Susan Sontag, Linda Williams – whose ideas are returned to again and again. It is somewhat perverse that these theoretical approaches are recycled given that extreme film is 'by definition, dependent on the idea of newness' because shock arises out of unexpectedness.³⁹

Although academic work typically counters one shortcoming of print press criticism – the tendency to dismiss 'extreme' horror films – it frequently replicates another: the tendency to focus on a handful of theatrically released 'extreme' films.⁴⁰ Academics have been preoccupied with perceived trends such as 'Asia Extreme'⁴¹ and 'New European Extremity'⁴²

compared to).

³⁷ D. Itzkoff, 'Surgery Helps Lift British Ban on *Human Centipede 2* Film', *The New York Times* (7 October 2011); see also E. Shortall, "'Torture Porn' Horror Film Sequel Seeks Irish Release', *The Sunday Times* (16 October 2011).

³⁸ See B. Kattelman, 'Carnographic Culture', in M. Canini (ed.), *The Domination of Fear* (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 3–16; D. Lockwood, 'All Stripped Down: The Spectacle of "Torture Porn"', *Popular Communication*, 7/1 (2008), 40–8; Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema* (London: Continuum, 2012).

³⁹ T. Horeck and T. Kendall, 'Introduction', in T. Horeck and T. Kendall (eds), *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 5; see Alison Taylor, *Troubled Everyday: The Aesthetics of Violence and the Everyday in European Art Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

⁴⁰ See Aaron Kerner and Jonathan L. Knapp, *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Pramod K. Nayar, *The Extreme in Contemporary Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

⁴¹ See C. Y. Shin, 'The Art of Branding: Tartan "Asia Extreme" Films', in J. Choi and M. Wada-Marciano (eds), *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), pp. 85–100; Daniel Martin, *Extreme Asia: The Rise of Cult Cinema from the Far East* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); O. Dew, "'Asia Extreme": Japanese Cinema and British Hype', *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 5/1 (2007), 53–73.

⁴² G. Hainge, 'A full face bright red money shot: Incision, wounding and film spectatorship in Marina de Van's *Dans ma peau*', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 26/4 (2012), 567; Alexandra West, *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016); W. Brown, 'Violence in Extreme Cinema and the Ethics of Spectatorship', *Projections*, 7/1 (2013), 27.

and a small number of movies such as the *Human Centipede* series,⁴³ *Irreversible*⁴⁴ and *A Serbian Film*.⁴⁵ This scholarly work is valuable in its own right. However, little attention has been paid to hardcore horror within these discussions.⁴⁶ Cumulatively, scholars risk replicating the same mistake that undercuts print press criticism. Without a broad enough account of the horror genre, claims made about 'horror' or its 'extremity' are limited.

The academic publishing system supports the bias towards examining theatrically released, prominent 'extreme' films. Understandably, peer reviewers are encouraged to consider appeal to a journal's broader readership when commenting on articles, for example. As such, films and directors with recognisable names are an easier 'sell' to the prospective readership and editorial team than lesser-known micro-budget films and filmmakers. Although press critics rebuke 'extreme' filmmakers and censors actively suppress extreme materials, admonishment in the press and censorial controversy raise awareness about particular films. Those films become the very objects that academics then step in to examine or defend. The significance of such discursive analysis is apparent for peer reviewers, publishers and readers who have an awareness of the broader controversy arising out of press complaints and/or censorship.

Although some academics have sought to challenge the press's inadequacies then, the discursive system in which academics operate encourages canonisation of particular 'extreme' movies and the exclusion of others. In contrast to the small number of directors

⁴³ See E. Brinkema, 'Violence and the Diagram; Or, *The Human Centipede*', *Qui Parle*, 24/2 (2016); M. Smith, 'Revulsion and Derision: *Antichrist*, *The Human Centipede II* and the British Press', *Film International*, 13 (2015); K. Weir and S. Dunne, 'The Connoisseurship of the Condemned: *A Serbian Film*, *The Human Centipede 2* and the Appreciation of the Abhorrent', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 11 (2014).

⁴⁴ C. Birks, 'Body Problems: New Extremism, Descartes and Jean-Luc Nancy', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 13/2 (2015), 131–46; A. Butler, 'Sacrificing the Real: Early 20th Century Theatrics and the New Extremism in Cinema', *Cinephile*, 8/9 (2012), 27–31; M. Brottman and D. Sterritt, 'Irreversible', *Film Quarterly*, 57 (2004), 37–42.

⁴⁵ See M. Featherstone, 'Coito Ergo Sum: Serbian Sadism and Global Capitalism in *A Serbian Film*', *Horror Studies*, 4/1 (2013), 127–41; M. Featherstone and B. Johnson, "'Ovo Je Srbija": The Horror of the National Thing in *A Serbian Film*', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 16/1 (2012), 63–79; S. Kimber, 'Transgressive Edge Play and *Srpski Film/A Serbian Film*', *Horror Studies*, 5/1 (2014), 107–25. The limitation is also found in fan circles. See M. Betz, 'High and Low and in Between', *Screen*, 54/4 (2013), 495–513; as Betz finds, fan lists of 'extreme films' return to a small number of titles. This might seem counter-intuitive given that familiarity with extreme texts carries subcultural capital among self-identified fans (see Pett, 'A New Media Landscape?'). It might appear reasonable that lesser-known titles would carry greater potential for attaining subcultural capital, and so unfamiliar titles ought to be a regular feature of such lists. However, some shared agreement is necessary among members of a subculture so that knowledge can be translated into capital; unfamiliar titles do not necessarily lend themselves to such valuation.

⁴⁶ There are some exceptions, including David H. Fleming, *Unbecoming Cinema: Unsettling Encounters with Ethical Event Films* (Bristol: Intellect, 2017), which discusses Lucifer Valentine's films. Much of the work I have published in the area has been difficult to pitch to editors, for reasons outlined below.

such as Michael Haneke,⁴⁷ Catherine Breillat,⁴⁸ and Lars von Trier,⁴⁹ who have been scrutinised in multiple studies of 'extreme' film, hardcore horror auteurs such as Marcel Walz, Olaf Ittenbach, Kasper Juhl, Daisuke Yamanouchi, Andrey Iskanov and Andreas Schnaas remain virtually ignored within the scholarly literature. The existing work on 'extreme' horror (including Neil Jackson's chapter in this collection) is valuable and necessary. However, a handful of well-documented films such as *Irreversible*, *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009) or *A Serbian Film* have garnered most of the scholarly attention in this area, while equally interesting hardcore horror films such as *Atroz* (Lex Ortega, 2015), *...And Then I Helped* (Michael Todd Schneider, 2010) or *Collar* (Ryan Nicholson, 2014) remain neglected. As such, scholarly work to date somewhat misrepresents the volume and diversity of 'extreme' horror that is available.

Little attention has been paid to hardcore horror movies precisely because these films are marginal by definition. Indeed, hardcore horror filmmakers flourish only because of the relative inattention paid to their work. If too much attention were drawn to the content produced by hardcore horror filmmakers, they may fall foul of the law. The obscenity charges brought against FX artist Remy Couture for creating works depicting extreme forms of violence (chronicled in the documentary *Art/Crime* (Frédéric Maheux, 2011)) demonstrate the consequences that can result from spotlighting extreme horror fiction. Scholars publishing on these films risk admitting that they have engaged with potentially illegal or obscene materials.⁵⁰ These external pressures discourage scholars from engaging with materials that skirt the boundaries of acceptability.

Nevertheless, academic work cumulatively (presumably unintentionally) tends to marginalise most hardcore horror filmmakers, who are already limited to the cultural peripheries because of the content that they produce. Those scholars who seek to defend hardcore horror's maligned texts should take care not to inadvertently reproduce pejorative attitudes towards these films. For example, affect-based analysis of 'extreme' horror might aim to suggest that visceral responses are valuable, but such interpretations imply that extreme film is principally characterised by providing transient bodily reactions. This commonplace approach essentially replicates the pejorative associations between extremity and superficial shock that critics employ to vilify these films.

Without greater focus on the concept of extremity or the variety of peripheral texts that

⁴⁷ Catherine Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image* (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2009); B. Price, 'Pain and the Limits of Representation', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 47/2 (2006), 22–9; L. Coulthard, 'The Violence of Silence: Vocal Provocation in the Cinema of Michael Haneke', *Studies in European Cinema*, 9/2–3 (2012), 87–97.

⁴⁸ See Taylor, *Troubled Everyday*; Troy Bordun, *Genre Trouble and Extreme Cinema: Film Theory at the Fringes of Contemporary Art Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); D. Keeseey, 'Split Identification: Representations of Rape in Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* and Catherine Breillat's *A ma soeur!/Fat Girl*', *Studies in European Cinema*, 7/2 (2010), 95–107.

⁴⁹ L. J. Marso, 'Must We Burn Lars von Trier? Simone de Beauvoir's Body Politics in *Antichrist*', *Theory & Event*, 18/2 (2015); J. Choi, 'Sentimentality and the Cinema of the Extreme', *Jump Cut*, 50/1 (2008).

⁵⁰ For instance, I removed more than 20,000 words of my PhD thesis while the UK government was drafting Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 (the 'Dangerous Pictures Bill'), since it was not clear at that time whether the pornographic and horror-based content I was discussing would fall within the law's remit.

constitute 'extreme horror', scholarly discourse risks homogenising all manner of representations that disrupt established genre conventions. Consequently, the term 'extreme' is often rendered banal, amounting to little more than an author's declaration that they personally found the representation distasteful. Virtually any depiction of sex or violence could be considered extreme compared with established genre conventions, the individual's prior viewing experiences and/or the industrial, commercial and sociopolitical context in which the film is situated, precisely because extremity is a contingent value rather than an absolute standard. In conclusion, extreme horror's depictions are particularly notable because these contentious images enliven our understanding of values that underpin our social and political beliefs.⁵¹ That contentiousness is, after all, what makes these images seem 'extreme'.

⁵¹ For a more detailed discussion, see S. Jones, 'Sex and Horror', in F. Attwood and C. Smith with B. McNair (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 290–9.