CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall

WHAT IS THE NEW EXTREMISM?

This book explores a diverse body of films that have attracted attention for their graphic and confrontational images of sex and violence, and which can be described as part of a trend towards a 'new extremism' in contemporary European filmmaking. As with the films it is used to describe, the term the new extremism is a highly suggestive and contentious one, which comes loaded with a range of connotations in this post-9/11 age of religious terrorism. Hence, it is important for us to clarify from the start what it means in a specifically cinematic context. In this collection, we are adopting the term 'the new extremism' in the context of contemporary film culture, both as it has been used to describe and often decry the work of a range of French directors – including, for example, Catherine Breillat, Gaspar Noé, Bruno Dumont and Philippe Grandrieux – and to interrogate affinities with the work of European filmmakers such as Michael Haneke, Lukas Moodysson, Lars von Trier and Ulrich Seidl.

Reports of fainting, vomiting and mass walkouts have consistently characterised the reception of this group of art-house films, whose brutal and visceral images appear designed deliberately to shock or provoke the spectator. Although such films have frequently been dismissed as aggressive and reactionary, this book argues that the films of the new extremism and the controversies they engender are indispensable to the critical task of rethinking the terms of contemporary spectatorship. Beyond the collective emphasis in these films on explicit and brutal sex, and on graphic or sadistic violence – features shared by a range of other global film trends such as 'torture porn' (Lockwood 2009), 'the new brutality film' (Gormley 2005) or 'Asia Extreme' cinema (Chi-Yun Shin 2008) – it is first and foremost the uncompromising and highly self-reflexive appeal to the spectator that marks out the specificity of these films

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

for us. We locate the new extremism in cinema, then, not simply with respect to what is shown, but in light of the complex and often contradictory ways in which these films situate sex and violence as a means of interrogating the relationship between films and their spectators in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In their concerted practice of provocation as a mode of address, the films of the new extremism bring the notion of response to the fore, interrogating, challenging and often destroying the notion of a passive or disinterested spectator in ways that are productive for film theorising today.

FROM (FRENCH) EXTREMITY TO (EUROPEAN) EXTREMISM

Writing in 2004, film programmer and critic James Quandt first coined the term 'the new French extremity' to describe what he saw as a 'growing vogue for shock tactics' in French cinema since the 1990s. Quandt's widely read polemic has been hugely influential in ways not always expected (and at times lamented) by the author. As he wryly observes in this volume in an important new afterword on the subject, his essay 'took on a life never intended'. It prompted a range of responses from popular and scholarly contexts, and the new extremism has since gained widespread notoriety as one of the most important recent trends in French cinema. In his original 2004 essay, reprinted in this book for the first time, Quandt defined this disparate body of filmmaking in the following disparaging terms:

> The critic truffle-snuffing for trends might call it the New French Extremity, this recent tendency to the willfully transgressive by directors like François Ozon, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat, Philippe Grandrieux – and now, alas, Dumont. Bava as much as Bataille, Salo no less than Sade seem the determinants of a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation and defilement. (Quandt 2004)

For Quandt, such determined transgression smacked of desperate measures. As he further explained:

> Images and subjects once the provenance of splatter films, exploitation flicks, and porn – gang rapes, bashings and slashings and blindings, hard-ons and vulvas, cannibalism, sadomasochism and incest, fucking and fisting, sluices of cum and gore – proliferate in the high-art environs of a national cinema whose provocations have historically been formal,

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

> political or philosophical . . . Does a kind of irredentist spirit of incitement and confrontation, reviving the hallowed Gallic traditions of the *film maudit*, of *épater les bourgeois* and *amour fou*, account for the shock tactics employed in recent French cinema? Or do they bespeak a cultural crisis, forcing French filmmakers to respond to the death of the ineluctable (French identity, language, ideology, aesthetic forms) with desperate measures? (Quandt 2004)

With this set of challenging questions, Quandt laid down the gauntlet for the discussions that followed, including a response from British film critic Jonathan Romney, who placed such filmmaking in the context of wider aesthetic and philosophical traditions of extremism and transgression in France. Defending many of the same films derided by Quandt, Romney noted that:

> it shouldn't be forgotten that many of the films . . . [of the new extremism] are also stylistically extreme and innovative, whether it's in the shades of austere detachment (Breillat, De Van, Honoré), in Noé's lapel-grabbing kineticism, or in the inscrutable experimentalism of Philippe Grandrieux's *La Vie nouvelle*, which resorts to such disorienting tactics as heat photography and long silences. (2004)

While it was Quandt's notion of a new 'extremity' that initiated the debates that were to follow, it is the idea of a 'new extremism' in contemporary filmmaking that has gained more widespread usage, appearing in a number of contexts, including Ginette Vincendeau's 2007 entry on the New French Extremism in *The Cinema Book*. Other scholarly work on this body of films has preferred cognate terms, such as a 'cinema of sensation' (Beugnet 2007a), a '*cinéma du corps*' (Palmer 2006b), '*cinéma brut*' (Russell 2010) or 'extreme realism' (James Williams 2009). Despite the range of terms used to describe the films in question, these scholars seem to agree that the turn towards 'explicit and graphic physicality' constitutes a significant tendency in French cinema since the 1990s (Williams 2009: 188). The hallmarks of this tendency include a 'disregard for genre boundaries', and an inclination to combine an art cinema aesthetic with 'shock tactics traditionally associated with gore, porn, and horror' (Beugnet 2007a: 36). According to Vincendeau, such films also frequently include 'shocking acts', such as rape, necrophilia and self-mutilation (2007: 205). However, many of them tend to represent such subjects through techniques that heighten the sensory and affective involvement of audiences, foregrounding the question of spectatorial response in a way that 'unites the intellectual and the visceral' (James Williams 2009: 188). Scholars such as Scott MacKenzie have explored how the films of the new French extremism

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

'profoundly question the complicity of the spectator in the acts of voyeurism and desire surrounding the representation of sexuality, violence and, *a fortiori*, rape-on-screen' (2010: 159).

The films associated with the new extremism trend have had an undeniable impact not only on French cinematic production in the twentieth century, but also on the exportability and marketability of French cinema in foreign markets. As Vincendeau writes: 'The label [the new French extremism] helps the export of French cinema, reinforcing cultural stereotypes of Frenchness, while fitting with the global rising tide of sex and violence and appealing to younger audiences' (Vincendeau 2007: 205). If the films of the new extremism in France have been received abroad as a particularly 'French' take on this 'rising tide of sex and violence', a range of European films since the 1990s have employed many of the same confrontational aesthetic strategies, and have also garnered attention for their distinctive takes on cinematic provocation and transgression. Noting affinities between the early work of Gaspar Noé, François Ozon, Thomas Vinterberg and Lars von Trier, for instance, critic Richard Falcon noted in 1999 that 'the new European cinema wants to outrage us' (Falcon 1999: 11). Falcon details what he calls 'an aggressive desire to confront [. . .] audiences, to render the spectator's experience problematic' (ibid.). More recently, European filmmakers such as Michael Haneke, Lukas Moodysson, Thomas Clay, Ulrich Seidl, Yorgos Lanthimos, György Pálfi, Mladen Djordjevic and others have aligned themselves in noteworthy ways with traditions of cinematic provocation, and there is no doubt that the ever more global nature of extreme cinema has inflected the ways that these films have been marketed and received. The recent example of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (Denmark, 2009) is a case in point: the film's promotional campaign traded on that film's reputation as 'the most shocking film in the history of the Cannes film festival' (Singh 2009), and the ensuing polemic also demonstrated just how effective such marketing strategies can be, with the film receiving exceptionally high levels of mainstream media coverage.[1] However, the debates around such controversial, gruelling films in this broader context of European cinema have also led to substantial critical reflection and analysis, and recent scholarly work on European filmmakers engages with many of the same questions that have preoccupied scholars of the new extremism in French cinema – questions about spectatorial agency and 'ethical reflexivity' (Wheatley 2009: 2), about the critical 'appeal of moments of unpleasure in cinema' (Bainbridge 2004: 400), or about the ways in which the 'abject heroes or heroines in European cinema' might offer 'a counter-image of what it means to be human' (Elsaesser 2005: 125).

In light of this, one of the central aims of this collection is to open up the concept of a 'new extremism' from French to European cinema. This is the first book-length study of the new extremism, and the volume brings

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

into critical dialogue for the first time a range of European filmmakers who are recognised for their sensational, provocative work, and for pushing at the boundaries of the watchable. In emphasising this move from France to Europe and calling for a consideration of the work of filmmakers from a range of national contexts, we do not mean to push aside questions of specificity – national, aesthetic, socio-economic or political – in favour of an a-historical or decontextualised approach to sex and violence. Rather, we believe that such a move lends critical insight into the different ideological contexts in which such extreme cinematic strategies have been adopted and adapted. Similarly, we want to make clear that we do not see the 'new extremism' as the collective label for a new 'genre' or 'movement'. The work of film directors associated with the new extremism does not amount to a collective 'style', and the films considered in this volume evoke and often deconstruct a range of generic tropes rather than constituting one collectively. Nor do we wish to downplay the differences in style, approach and intent that separate the filmmakers included in this volume. For example, there is a clear need to differentiate the films of Michael Haneke, which, despite their reputation for brutality, are characterised more by visual restraint than by excessive violence or horror, and the 'self-consciously trashy', in-your-face sex and violence of a film like *Baise-moi* (France, 2000), directed by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, which has been described as 'among the New French Extremity's most graphic and confrontational texts' (Romney 2004). Hence, in this collection, the new extremism is treated as a trend or tendency that brings together a range of aesthetic approaches, themes and concerns, but that does not preclude other ways of categorising or approaching these films.

Finally, we want to specify our particular take on the terms 'new' and 'extremism' that we are adopting. In using this term, we do not wish to suggest that the extremism of these films is unprecedented; nor do we intend to enumerate a comprehensive catalogue of new, or newly extreme, practices or representations. Graphic representation and the tradition of artistic transgression have complex histories, and the definition of what one takes to constitute extreme is notoriously subjective, slippery and bound by historical and social pressures. As many of the contributors to this volume suggest, the extremity evinced by these films is often as much a matter of asserting particular filiations with artistic, cinematic, literary and philosophical forebears as it is of breaking new taboos. However, as Frances Ferguson argues in her study of obscene representation, the idea of newness is something that may also be intrinsic to our understanding of extremity and obscenity, of shock and outrage. By definition, the extreme is dependent on the idea of newness and on the compromising closeness that it is thought to establish between the real and its representation (Ferguson 2004: 152–4). The term the new extremism, then, reflects this bridging position between newness and indebtedness to the

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

past, to a history of transgression and provocation that is renewed and given a visceral immediacy for the present.

AESTHETICS AND POLITICS: THE VALUE OF EXTREMISM

Given the contentious subject matter, and the emphasis on shock effects and unpleasurable sensations, it is not surprising that the response to these films has sometimes had a tendency to polarise debate. A range of pronouncements by the filmmakers in question have also fanned the flames of controversy, as in Bruno Dumont's self-professed goal of mounting a 'terrorist attack' on spectators (Matheou 2005: 17), Michael Haneke's intention to 'rape the spectator into independence' (Frey 2003), or Gaspar Noé's assertion that he is 'happy some people walk out during [his] film' because 'it makes the ones who stay feel strong' (Noé 1999). Such rhetorical pronouncements have often solidified, rather than challenged, the entrenched positions of those who, on the one side, see aesthetic or political merit in this group of challenging films, and those on the other, who consider the films of the new extremism as nothing but ultra-aggressive displays of pomp and circumstance, or the result of cynical marketing ploys designed to 'attract exposure through transgression' (Falcon 1999: 11). For critics such as Falcon and Quandt, these films display nostalgia for the 'authentic' provocations of Buñuel, Fassbinder or Pasolini, but are not able to reconnect with past traditions of cinematic subversion in a meaningful way. Romney, on the other hand, observes that these films:

> can hardly be accused of lacking a political drive – whether it's in the fiercely engaged sexual politics of Breillat's films, the cultural analysis of corporate-image trafficking in Assayas's *Demonlover* or Noé's venomously precise diagnosis of the alienated extreme right in *Seul contre tous*. (Romney 2004)

Though Romney is undoubtedly correct in ascribing a political dimension to many of the films discounted by critics such as Falcon and Quandt, what is curious is the extent to which his description of those films in this quotation seems to drain them of much of their visceral intensity, and to strip them of their essential ambiguity around questions of politics and history. While the films of the new extremism would seem to invite comparisons with earlier filmmakers for whom aesthetic provocation was an explicit form of political activism, they also seem invariably to short-circuit such analogies, such that the line between critique and complicity is increasingly difficult to discern.

As Martine Beugnet points out in her essay for this collection, these films

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

frustrate 'attempts at meaningful contextualisation' in ways that are perhaps problematic and productive in equal measure. In a recent essay entitled 'Traces of the Modern: An Alternative History of French Cinema', Beugnet and Elizabeth Ezra note the extent to which the 'emphasis on the corporeal and the visceral' in the films of the new extremism, and their 'elliptical narratives and absence of psychological motivation' resist 'explicit interpretations and overt political messages' (Beugnet and Ezra 2010: 35). However, this 'resistance to interpretation' does not necessarily imply that these films lack a political context. On the contrary, it is precisely extreme cinema's ability to eschew 'productive recuperation' (Beugnet and Ezra 2010: 35) and to '[engage] us emotionally as well as aesthetically with the irrational and unacceptable' that gives it its critical edge (Beugnet 2007a: 40). For Beugnet, the obscure historical and political dimension of the films of the new extremism needs to be read in a radically new way – as a form of embodied dialogue that takes place between film, spectator and context, and which has to be sensed before it can be understood. In making this argument, Beugnet draws from the work of Adam Lowenstein (2005), whose approach to the modern horror film insists on the powers of visceral shock and sensationalism as means of building up sympathetic identifications with history. By creating oblique and yet powerful correspondences between the body of the film and the body of the spectator, the films of the new extremism might be said to embody both past and contemporary realities in a novel way. In doing so, they call for a sustained consideration of the complex relations between aesthetics and politics as they are constructed through the intimate dialogue between the film and the spectator, and as they are reproduced and reconfigured through the kind of vociferous public debates that these films so often trail in their wake.

AFFECT, ETHICS AND AUDIENCES

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the emphasis on the nature of embodied spectatorial response, the critical concept of affect is central to this collection.[2] As noted in a special issue on 'Affect' in the journal *Body and Society* (2010), recent critical thinking in the social sciences and humanities has been characterised by an 'affective turn'.[3] What such a turn to affect might mean for contemporary film studies is something that is explored in this book: many of the contributors are concerned, in one way or another, with exploring our affective responses to film culture, as well as looking at how such culture works to shape our perceptions. It has not always been thus. As Lisa Cartwright notes in her recent book, *Moral Spectatorship*, 'feeling' has long been 'a suspect area of research for film and media scholars who, since the time of Brechtian distanciation and Althusserian apparatus theory, have worked to institute models

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

that allow us to resist the seductive pull of the medium as it moves us to feel for the other' (2008: 1). Increasingly, however, film scholars coming from a range of approaches, including audience response studies, cognitive science, psychoanalytic film theory, Deleuzian studies and phenomenological philosophy, have become preoccupied with exploring the nature of that seductive pull. As cognitive film theorist Carl Plantinga notes, 'any satisfactory account of film reception and its implications for ideology, rhetoric, ethics, or aesthetics had better be able to take film-elicited affect and emotion into account' (2009: 5). The question of how cinema works on the level of sensation and body attempts to complicate a purely representational understanding of it as a semiotic meaning-making machine. As evidenced by the contributions collected herein, the films of the new extremism help us to rethink cinema as that which is played out on our bodies, and which constructs an appeal to affect, emotion and, indeed, the intellect.

In turn, this appeal to the affective and visceral components of spectatorship has important implications for thinking about the ethical purchase of such extreme films, and the relation that they construct between self and other, spectator and screen. If, as Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton have recently suggested in *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, 'film studies has had surprisingly little to say about ethics' (2010: 11), this collection echoes their suggestion that 'ethics may be integral to film practice, the phenomenology of cinema, and to much film theory' (ibid.). In the films of the new extremism, questions of ethics are brought to the fore: 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. Although they have often been dismissed as immoral, nasty and irredeemable, much of what is so interesting and disturbing about this group of films is precisely the challenges they pose to commonly held belief systems. In this respect, the films of the new extremism highlight an important distinction, which all too frequently goes unnoticed in public debates about controversial films, between moral and ethical spectatorship. As Michele Aaron notes, moral response is largely involuntary and uncritical, whereas ethics 'is all about thinking through one's relationship to morality rather than just adhering to it' (Aaron 2007: 109). In this respect, the emphasis on violent excess, negativity and heightened moments of unpleasure in the new extremism may in fact be construed as an indispensable facet of its ethical appeal: as Downing and Saxton put it, 'often the most apparently pernicious representations are the ones that can enlist the viewer in particularly nuanced ethical reflection' (2010: 21). Many of the chapters in this book examine these films from this perspective, exploring the complex ways in which the films of the new extremism wreak havoc on moral certainties and established value systems, but without supplying the kind of

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

comforting messages that are to be found in more redemptive or life-affirming films. Instead, such films highlight the 'ethical and creative potential' (Del Rio 2008: 16) of the spectator to think through her own embodied responses to images and to others. The work of ethical reflection, then, is articulated as much through the heated debates surrounding these films as it is through the films themselves. As Downing and Saxton suggest, 'ethical meaning does not reside purely in the flow of images but emerges more urgently in the course of the reception and circulation of these images – in the multifarious encounters between audiences and films' (ibid.: 20).

Following our interest in the notion of affective and ethical response, we believe there is a need to interrogate many of the taken-for-granted claims that have been made about controversial films and their spectators. The task of theoretical investigation into the new extremism needs to be informed and counterbalanced by a rigorous approach to audiences and what they do with or make of the films in question. Martin Barker's work has been at the forefront of this attempt to understand systematically how audiences respond to extreme images, and how those demands for ethical reflection are negotiated in actual contexts and in specific instances of watching. As he argues elsewhere:

> [Audience research] means devoting attention to the accompanying materials to which audiences are exposed even before they reach the theatre. It means addressing the precise ways in which films are brought to audiences. It means focusing on the social and individual conditions under which films are accessed, watched, appreciated, and digested, and how cultural values and worldviews are used as active points of reference in these processes. (Barker and Mathijs 2008: 2)

We view this approach as essential for thinking about the films of the new extremism. Such films, and the controversies they engender, call for a nuanced consideration of the actual contexts of viewing, and of the extra-textual strategies that help either to contain or to amplify their capacity to shock and offend. We maintain that the films associated with the new extremism provide a productive meeting ground for two apparently rival accounts of film audiences: textual-based theories of spectatorship and audience research. In his essay for this volume, Barker, for instance, takes issue with what he describes as a film studies approach to the spectator, which, for him, often makes generalised predictions about viewers and their habits of viewing films. But one of the intriguing things about watching, teaching and writing about this group of films is the way in which they seem to call for a combined approach to the vexed question of spectatorship and audience response. The films of the new extremism enable – and in many cases demand – an approach that attends to concrete

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

facts about audiences, but that also opens these up to theoretical speculation about the wider stakes and implications of those responses.

The essays in this volume reflect this call for a composite approach to thinking about sex and violence in the cinema, approaching the films of the new extremism from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Our collection begins with the reprint of James Quandt's 2004 essay, 'Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema'. It is notable that almost all of the essays in this volume refer to Quandt's impassioned essay, even if it is only to set themselves in opposition to its claims, a move that testifies to its enduring significance as a tour de force in polemical writing. Though Quandt's essay refers to the idea of a new 'extremity' in derogatory terms, something that many of the contributors to this volume seek to complicate and nuance further, it is his work that scholars have found so immensely useful to push against when trying to elucidate the central features of an extremist turn in contemporary European filmmaking. Well aware of the 'straw man' status his work has assumed in discussions of the new extremism, Quandt has written an Afterword for this book that addresses the unexpected impact of his essay and considers what kind of cultural meanings the idea of the new extremism has taken on seven years later. As the title of the Afterword, 'More Moralism from that "Wordy Fuck"', may suggest, a recalcitrant Quandt responds to his detractors, and provides us with yet another bold and thought-provoking piece.

The first section of the book, 'French Cinema and the New Extremism', explores the historical, socio-political and cinematic contexts that frame the eruption of a visceral and extreme wave of French filmmaking. In keeping with this book's focus on the move from France to Europe, chapters in this section also consider how the intellectual and cultural influence of France has had an undeniable impact on ways of thinking about and framing European cinematic identities, practices and processes. The opening chapter of this section, 'The Wounded Screen', is by Martine Beugnet, whose critical interventions have played a central role in shaping intellectual thought about French extreme cinema. In this chapter, Beugnet focuses on post-war cinema, considering how an emerging extreme cinema deals with political conflicts and concerns about France's involvement in traumatic historical events in ways very different to the tradition of political, social realist filmmaking. As she writes: 'By contrast, the new extreme's foregrounding of a corporeal, embodied dimension offers a less immediately legible, more visceral connection to the historical context of production.' Beugnet builds on key insights from her book, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (2007), regarding the 'sensory overload' of the 'cinema of sensation', by comparing Agnès Varda's classic art film, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (France, 1962) and Claire Denis's 'blood-soaked gore opus', *Trouble Every Day* (France, 2001). She explores how both films,

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

though separated by forty years, work with categories 'emblematic of the post-war cultural shift' identified by Kristin Ross in her important study of post-war French society, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1999). Through references to disease, both films evoke 'the legacy of French colonial history', and in doing so, each connects 'the individual and the filmic body with the national body and history's festering wounds'.

Tina Kendall's chapter addresses one of the cultural figures who has been central to understandings of sexuality and transgression in France – Georges Bataille. Kendall examines Christophe Honoré's *Ma mère* (France, 2004), an adaptation of Bataille's posthumous novel of the same title, in order to consider the impact of Bataille on the corpus of the new extremism. Looking at the ways in which *Ma mère* displaces, reworks and reframes its Bataillean intertext, Kendall reflects upon the problematic place of Bataille in the explicit sex formula of recent 'hard core' international art cinema. Of particular interest in this regard is Honoré's decision to re-imagine the backdrop against which Bataille's story of incest unfolds – transposing it from 1920s Paris to the seedy nightclubs and sexual tourism sites of the Canary Islands in the present day. In so doing, Kendall argues, Honoré seeks to interrogate and reposition Bataille, to render his message intelligible in the context of global consumer capitalism. Drawing on Martin Crowley's claim that the appeal of Bataille today arises from his 'tackiness', Kendall argues that what is most subversive about Honoré's film is the 'tacky spectatorship' it solicits – what she describes as the 'oh, please!' factor that comes from the film's more embarrassing and risible moments.

Rounding off this section on the new French extremism is Neil Archer's examination of Bruno Dumont's reworking of the American road movie, *Twentynine Palms* (France, 2003). Here, Archer identifies and critically explores one of the key aspects of a new European cinema of extremity – the manipulation of popular genre and generic motifs in a high art, philosophical context. In reconsidering the extent to which Dumont can be seen to subvert the values and conventions of the road movie, Archer sounds an important cautionary note about the latent Eurocentrism at work in *Twentynine Palms*, which 'veers at times toward an implicit endorsement of (European) high-cultural values'. At its most complex and engaging, however, Archer suggests that the 'cinematic particularity' of the images in Dumont's film call such cultural binaries into question, inviting us to contemplate issues of 'space and the violence of human presence' and, finally, perhaps, the very idea of ' "centrist" cultural models in general, and the human-centric assumptions of knowledge and truth in particular'.

This reference to a critique of a human-centric understanding of the world provides a useful transition to the next section of this volume, 'Becoming Animal: Posthumanism and the New Extremism'. In this section, the

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

contributors explore the complex ways in which the films of the new extremism foreground, and seek to challenge, the cultural and political construction of divisions between the human and its multifarious 'others'. The contributors argue that by intensifying those divisions between human and non-human, filmmakers such as Philippe Grandrieux and Ulrich Seidl offer a means of thinking through current socio-economic and political realities and East/West polarities. Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben, Jenny Chamarette considers the way that Grandrieux's films, through their scantly composed narrative frameworks, evoke archetypal figures which, she argues, point past 'narrative and representational configuration[s] of the human' to disclose 'the non-human construction of the ethics of humanity' at the heart of his films and others associated with the new extremism. In her analysis of *Sombre* (France, 1998), Chamarette argues that it is precisely through the film's address to sensation and the corporeal over narration and figuration, and an approach to filmmaking that insists on the film body itself, that such an ethical appeal is premised. She argues that the presentation of human bodies in *Sombre* 'offers a starting point for thinking subjectivity outside the sphere of the human'. By attending to the 'bare life', or 'what is excluded when humanity [. . .] is no longer accorded', films such as *Sombre* construct an ethical address to the spectator.

Michael Goddard continues the discussion of Grandrieux through a fascinating comparison of his film, *La Vie nouvelle* (France, 2002), with Seidl's *Import/Export* (Austria, 2007). While both directors have been accused of recycling clichéd ideas about Eastern Europe, Goddard argues that in fact they radically destabilise ideas about Eastern European monstrosity 'by pushing them to a higher level of intensity'. It is through their evocation of extreme visceral sensation (something that leaves them open to charges of sensationalism) that Grandrieux and Seidl are able to evoke the 'political unconscious' of post-Cold War Europe, and to explore critically how the West is implicated in the emergent modes of life and biopolitical experiences of the 'new Europe'.

Catherine Wheatley offers a slightly different take on Seidl in her contribution, by zeroing in on the tension between documentary and fiction in his work and reflecting more broadly on the 'status of the "real"' in the cinema of the new extremism. Considering how reality is deployed in the films of the new extreme, Wheatley focuses on what she describes as one of the tropes of the new extremism: the real-life slaughter of animals on screen. Debates about the viewer's ambivalent, emotional response to the death of animals relates in intriguing ways to Seidl's treatment of human subjects in films such as *Import/Export*. While acknowledging the uneasiness generated by his films and the uncertainty regarding the issue of the consent of his performers, Wheatley ultimately draws a conclusion not dissimilar to Goddard's: namely, that Seidl's pushing at the limits of the real, as frightening as it may be, is also

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

extraordinarily effective at bringing 'us into contact with realities of human suffering in a manner unprecedented in the other films of the new extreme'.

The third section of the book, 'Watching the Extreme: Cultural Reception', foregrounds the central issue of how audiences respond to the films of the new extremism. It begins with Martin Barker's provocatively titled chapter, 'Watching Rape, Enjoying Watching Rape . . .: How Does a Study of Audience Cha(lle)nge Mainstream Film Studies Approaches?' This chapter emerges out of an important 2005 study Barker and his associates were invited to conduct by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), exploring how actual audiences 'make sense of and respond to watching images of sexual violence on screen' in extreme cinema. For Barker, such an endeavour is imperative because it challenges the widespread tendency to make general predictions regarding the 'ways in which films might affect audiences'. Looking at the different responses that Critics (those who reject the film) and Embracers (those who engage with it) had to the violent ending of Catherine Breillat's *À ma sœur!* (France, 2001), Barker concludes by arguing for the importance of heeding the 'rich and complex' ways that Embracers engage with films, noting that 'we need as film scholars to *learn how to learn from them*' rather than falling back onto generalised predictions about the figure of the 'spectator'.

Working in the same tradition of audience analysis as Barker, Daniel Hickin's chapter tracks the changing attitudes of the BBFC towards film censorship during the 1990s into the noughties, by examining how it dealt with the cinema of the new extremism, in particular that of *enfant terrible* Gaspar Noé. Through exploring the BBFC's response to Noé's *Seul contre tous* (France, 1998) and *Irréversible* (France, 2002), Hickin argues that the BBFC eventually 'distanced itself from the concept of "censorship" towards a policy based on "classification" and the principle that adults should be free to choose their own viewing (provided it does not contravene British law)'. Through a close analysis of BBFC decisions and journalists' reviews of the films, Hickin's chapter looks at what happened between the BBFC's cutting of images of explicit sex in *Seul contre tous*, a film that can be considered part of the 'first wave of the new extremism', and its decision to release *Irréversible* uncut just four years later. As Hickin concludes, 'The release of *Seul contre tous* and *Irréversible* heralded the emergence of a new form of provocative European cinema that coincided with the beginning of an increasingly open, accountable and liberalised form of British film censorship.'

The next chapter, by Leila Wimmer, is an important attempt to contextualise *Baise-moi* (France, 2000), one of the most notorious of the films of the new extremism. Released in 2000, *Baise-moi*, along with *Irréversible* is part of the 'second wave' of the new extremism identified by Hickin in the previous chapter. Drawing attention to the structuring absences of *Baise-moi* and analysing the media furore surrounding the film's release, Wimmer suggests that

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

what ultimately unsettles is the film's 'exposure of difference', a strategy which calls into question the 'rhetoric of universalism' that is a staple part of French national identity, and reveals 'unresolved anxieties and concerns about ethnicity, citizenship, gender and sexuality' that are at the heart of contemporary French society. As Wimmer notes, the censorship of the film was ultimately a means of displacing these anxieties on to the more manageable category of 'pornography'.

Finally, Mariah Larsson's chapter relocates us from France to Sweden with her consideration of a filmmaker who may not have received as much analytical attention as other directors of the new extremism but whose work is none the less key to an understanding of a wider European turn towards the extreme – Lukas Moodysson. Larsson examines the reception of Moodysson's work in Sweden, where he has developed a reputation as a politically subversive filmmaker. In particular, she analyses his fifth feature film *A Hole in My Heart* (Sweden, 2004), which is notable for its controversial and sensationalist images, including close-up plastic surgery on labia. Larsson notes that *A Hole in my Heart* did not fare as well with audiences as some of Moodysson's earlier films, though critics were more favourable towards it and tended to read it as a scathing critique of the pornography industry. Considering the links between Moodysson's filmmaking and the Swedish feminist anti-porn movement, Larsson's central argument is that, despite his reputation as a radical, there is a much more conservative strain running through his work than is generally acknowledged.

One of the major themes of this book is the question of ethics and spectatorship, and it is to this topic that we turn our attention in the final section. Each of the contributors in this section explores the complex ways in which the films of the new extremism position spectators affectively and ethically. Nikolaj Lübecker's chapter on Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (Denmark, 2003) argues that the film is really all about the spectator; more precisely, it is a film that seeks to manipulate the spectator and 'the aim of these manipulations is to bring out "the beast" in us.' Arguing that the film puts a 'deadlock on catharsis' through use of a colliding Brechtian and surrealist aesthetic logic, Lübecker suggests that the 'feel-bad' experience of *Dogville* and other films of the new extremism are what, however perversely, lead us to ethical reflection. Indeed, he goes so far as to conclude that 'aggression and manipulation not only save the films from facile moralising, but also allow the spectator to engage with the "inner bastard" in a way more intimate than otherwise possible.'

The next chapter, by Tanya Horeck, is an attempt to consider what the idea of a new European extremism might mean in the context of contemporary British filmmaking through an address to the work of Andrea Arnold. While Arnold's work is seen to sit somewhere between British social realism and European art cinema, Horeck looks at how her emphasis on the sensory

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

and the affective aligns her with the films of the new extremism. Focusing on the explicit sex scenes in her two feature films, *Red Road* (UK, 2006) and *Fish Tank* (UK, 2009), Horeck argues that these affective encounters make 'the viewer engage in an intimate' and '*ethical* way, with the bodies on display'. In looking at how Arnold's films invite spectators to watch the sexual encounters through an ethical optics, revising understandings about the relationship between viewer and viewed, Horeck observes that, 'despite the fact that the films of the new extremism are frequently viewed as amoral for their sensational content, there is more of an ethical dimension to many of these films than is generally credited.'

In the penultimate essay to this section, Lisa Coulthard continues the discussion of ethics and spectatorship through an important reconsideration of the role that violence plays in the films of Michael Haneke, specifically *The Piano Teacher* (Austria, 2001) and *The White Ribbon* (Austria, 2009). Arguing that Haneke's films 'do not address violence directly so much as they create an environment where one expects violence to erupt any second', Coulthard suggests that this idea of a violence 'lying in wait' is key to understanding how violence 'works as cinematic and ethical critique' in his work. What makes Haneke's films so unsettling for spectators is the way they 'trouble our certainty as to what we consider violence and what we exclude'. For Coulthard, 'Haneke's films explore and extend the parameters of violence itself' in ways that go beyond ideas of excess or the sensational more commonly associated with the films of the new extremism to reveal the 'obscenity of the everyday'.

In the final chapter of this section, Asbjørn Grønstad explores the notion of the 'unwatchable' in relation to a 'roughly decade-long cycle of art films that compel us to rethink the notions of spectatorship, desire and ethics'. The films of the new extremism are films that compel us to look away – that constitute a 'fork in the eye' – an intensive visual assault on the film audience. But the infliction of such brutality on the spectator is not necessarily just about sensationalism for sensationalism's sake, and Grønstad argues that the idea of the unwatchable is in fact a key theoretical and philosophical concept, which is crucial for thinking through the ethical terms of the relationship between spectator and screen. In elaborating the concept of the unwatchable, Grønstad focuses on two films notable for their prolonged and 'excessive' scenes of sexualised violence, and for their deliberate attempt to inflict pain on the spectator, Noé's *Irréversible* and von Trier's *Antichrist*. How do we account for the (unpleasurable) spectatorship of such films? Or, as Grønstad asks, in a question that we believe is fundamental to this book as a whole: 'How, with reference to the spectator, is one to make sense of this ostensibly masochistic penchant for unwatchable images, and how, with reference to the artist and the film, is one to make sense of a poetics which accentuates such an excess?' Exploring possible ways of answering this question, through close reference to

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

the films themselves, as well as to the notion of a 'fantasy of self-destructive viewing', Grønstad concludes with the suggestion that we need to consider how the films themselves generate theories of spectatorship, and to acknowledge that 'sometimes a film opens up spaces of reflection that are more vital than the film itself.' Ultimately, argues Grønstad, the films of the new extremism do nothing less than require us to reconsider existing ways we have in film studies for thinking about the ethics and the phenomenology of watching images.

The contributions to this volume engage with some of the most important theoretical issues facing film and media studies today: including the 'affective' turn in cultural theory; the role of the senses in cinema; the kinds of ethical engagements that media forms can be understood to enable; insights about what audiences do with violent and sexually graphic images; posthumanism; the relation of aesthetics and politics; and the distinctive ways that fantasy and reality are entwined in contemporary cultural production. That these theoretical issues are often already embedded in the films themselves is part of what makes the study of the new extremism in contemporary European cinema such a captivating, if troubling, pursuit.

Finally, the question of whether the new extremism is still alive or whether it is a thing of the past (not so new any more, in other words), or to what extent it is useful to employ such a term, remains a matter for debate. For Quandt, who refers to the new extremism in his Afterword as a 'waning phenomenon', the pertinent question to ask now is, 'what *was* the new extremism'? We are not quite so confident about sounding the death knell for the films of the new extremism just yet, for it would appear that the desire to provoke and disturb the spectator cannot be easily quelled and is, indeed, what constitutes the very foundation of the philosophical reflection on the ethics of looking that we find so prevalent in contemporary European art cinema. Instead, we want to hold on to the ambiguities surrounding the idea of a new extremism in contemporary European filmmaking, which, despite debates regarding its meaning and provenance and the direction in which it is heading, retains its cultural currency as a rubric by which a specific body of contemporary films – and *auteurs* – are viewed and understood.

NOTES

1. For an example of the debate over *Antichrist* see Xan Brooks (2009).
2. Although there are a number of ways of approaching the terms 'affect' and 'affective', by far the most influential has been Brian Massumi's account. In *Parables for the Virtual: Affect, Movement, Sensation*, Massumi argues for the need to differentiate between affect and emotion. For Massumi, affect and emotion 'follow different logics and pertain to different orders' (2002: 27). Steven Shaviro provides a useful gloss on Massumi's understanding of

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.

this distinction when he writes that '[f]or Massumi, affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified and meaningful'. Emotion, Shaviro elaborates, 'is affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject. Subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they *have* or *possess* their own emotions' (2010: 3, italics in original).

3. See Blackman and Venn (2010).

Copyright © 2011. Edinburgh University Press. All rights reserved.

The New Extremism in Cinema : From France to Europe, edited by Tanya C Horeck, and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kentuk/detail.action?docID=744021.
Created from kentuk on 2018-08-17 05:32:52.