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Monstrous Sex: The Verge of a Pornographic Turn? Bending, Breaking, Penetrating the Rules

Filmic horror narratives traditionally evoke a restless pursuit to locate the other, not only in the mutilating predator, but also in its sexually active and thus doomed victim. In the recent history of horror film, however, this 'sex-equals-death' condition has been progressively subverted. Drawing on the notion of 'body genres' and Monster Theory, the article traces various, increasingly explicit forms of this death spell reversal, from popular teen horror The Cabin in the Woods to the orgiastic art house symphony of Lars von Trier's Antichrist, to the television-realm of the vampiric True Blood, where combined excesses of sex, blood, and narration spark a sex-positive mode of monstrousness.

I. Cinema's Disdained Viscera: Shock and Seduction

Behold, my love, behold all that I simultaneously do: scandal, seduction, bad example, incest, adultery, sodomy!
– Marquis de Sade, Philosophy in the Bedroom

In her 1991 essay *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess*, Linda Williams observes: “There is no accounting for taste, especially in the realm of the ‘gross’. As a culture we most often invoke the term to designate excesses we wish to exclude”.¹ When referring to filmic works, this diagnosis of cultural sensitivities still seems to be applied to the genre categories of horror and porn. Both are characterized by and criticized for their focus to systematically highlight the sensational through displays of violence and sex. Drawing on this shared aim of horror and porn to physically affect the bodies of their spectators through the portrayal of corporeal excess, Carol Clover posits the fruitful notion of ‘body genres’². In these genres

¹ Linda Williams: “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess”. *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (1991), p. 2.

² Carol J. Clover: “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film”. *Representations* 20 (1987): *Misogyny, Misandry and Misanthropy*, pp. 187-228.

the viewers' reactions often seem to mirror the displayed excesses, be they sexual arousal or shiver and shock.

Interestingly, pornography is "more often deemed excessive for its violence than for its sex, while horror films are excessive in their displacement of sex onto violence".³ For a long time, theoretical analyses had stopped at that point of discovery, and it still appears to be the seemingly gratuitous excess that makes porn and 'gross-out' horror two of the lowest genres in cultural esteem. Simply lumping them together without further investigation, however, dangerously misperceives and leaves unexplored the body genres' potential to reflect and challenge the culture they address. Despite, or rather precisely because of this dismissal, I am going to claim that the link between horror and pornography is not only inextricable in terms of genre. In the form of their common agents – shock and seduction – this link is also inscribed in the materiality of the medium film itself, the technical stratum of which might thus, as Arno Meteling has shown, well be called monstrous.⁴

Emanating from the scandal created by the Marquis de Sade's writings, the end of the eighteenth century saw the outbreak of a discourse concerning the definition of pornography as opposed to morally adequate forms of art and a sense of the normative erotic – a discourse that has not yet ended, as Paula-Irene Villa argues. She detects the recurring momentum in a "lament of cultural pessimism", one "gladly coded as a generational problem that circulates around the moralist warning of pornography's pernicious and society-, community-, even civilization-threatening consequences".⁵ According to Villa's reading, rationality seemed and still seems to be bound to condemn and exclude porn. However, despite this abjection, pornography enacts a delicate paradox of rationalized excess, and in doing so becomes even more unsettling:

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cf. Arno Meteling: *Monster. Zur Körperlichkeit und Medialität im Horrorfilm*. Bielefeld 2006, p. 25.

⁵ Paula Irene Villa: "Pornofeminismus? Soziologische Überlegungen". *Pornografisierung von Gesellschaft*. Ed. Martina Schuegraf/Angela Tillmann. Konstanz/München 2012, pp. 51-66, here p. 51 (translation mine).

Pornography, perceived as arousal of sexual excitement for its own sake, is highly efficient, particularly in its medial choreographies from de Sade to contemporary feminist porn, and it pursues an economy that maximizes profit: systematic and methodical titillation. It is exactly this ambivalence that irritates, making pornography simultaneously fitting and uncustomizable.⁶

Just as Williams' assumed cultural 'we' abjects those displays of sensualism which exceed the comfortable as gross, and just as pornography becomes unclassifiable in its frenzied rationality, so too do filmic horror narratives traditionally evoke a restless pursuit to locate the other.

And they find it – not only in the mutilating and destructive predator, but also in its sexually active victim. In line with Clover's potent observation that it is the sexually saturated female body which serves as the main catalyst in body genres⁷, female sexual pleasure is here itself conceived as deviant, even monstrous. For the following investigation it is indeed the monster, its construction, and its sexuality that constitute subject matter and theoretical grounding. When Villa positions contemporary discourse about pornography in direct consequence of the Enlightenment, and by doing so stresses the staying power of rationality, some ontological scepticism seems advisable. What does this troubling status report mean for displays of sexual pleasure in contemporary horror narratives? And even more poignantly, one might ask: What about the attainments of postmodern thinking?

At the end of the twentieth century, two significant publications, Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows* and Jeffrey J. Cohen's *Monster Theory*, introduce "monstrousness as a mode of cultural discourse". Opposing what he calls "the sacred dicta of recent cultural studies" to historical specificity, Cohen suggests a "new *modus legendi*: a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender".⁸ Em-

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Carol J. Clover: "Her Body, Himself" (see fn. 2), p. 200.

⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen: *Monster Theory*. Minneapolis 1996, p. 3.

bracing the idea that there are “no smooth epistemological wholes, but a multitude of fragments”, the hypothesis for this essay is as follows: The monster as the other which (etymologically) warns and reveals is lurking in the margins, always ready to challenge the hierarchy of the system that created it – bending, breaking, and penetrating the rules of normative discourse. Linda Williams rearticulates the apparent rules of the genre and gets to the gory heart of the matter when she states that in horror, “power is granted so long as it is rigorously separated from phallic or any other sort of pleasure. For these pleasures spell sure death in this genre”.¹⁰

As we will see, in the recent history of popular on-screen horror however, this ‘sex-equals-death’ condition has been repeatedly and increasingly subverted. I intend to trace the various forms of this *death spell reversal* to where they become explicit in displays of excess and monstrous empowerment fuelled by sexuality and strategies of pornography.

While it would be highly interesting to move beyond the screen and spill into the fields of, for instance, theatre and literature, I am in this case bound to the monster-medium of film, which, regardless of content, simultaneously incorporates shock and seduction. With reference to Michel Foucault’s ‘great surface network’ of sexuality as well as Jean Baudrillard’s notion of seduction, Patrick Fuery observes that cinema “presents seduction, and seduces, as a site of resistance, as negotiations of power and knowledge, as systems of desire; in doing so seduction becomes part of the very materiality of cinema itself”.¹¹ Accordingly, shock and violence are always already innate to the medium film, always cutting, chopping, dissecting its objects.

Having already touched on a multiplicity of monstrous formations and constructions, we will now proceed to slip under the skin of specific screen-fragmented embodiments of monstrous sex. Side effects of such encounters include what we might call a parasitic, even vampiric relationship: between us, as observers, feeding

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Williams: “Film Bodies” (see fn. 1), p. 8.

¹¹ Patrick Fuery: *New Developments in Film Theory*. New York 2000, p. 174.

on sensational *skin shows*, and our subject/object or abject matter with its equally insatiable hunger for our fears and desires.

II. The Death Spell Reversal

The Director: It's different in every culture. It has changed over the years, but it has always required youth. There must be at least five. The whore – she's corrupted, she dies first. The athlete. The scholar. The fool. They all suffer and die at the hands of whatever horror they have raised, leaving the last to live or die, as fate decides – the virgin.

Final Girl: Me? Virgin?

The Director: We work with what we have.

– The Cabin in the Woods

In anticipation of the point: Whore or designated virgin, scholar, fool, or athlete – by the end of Drew Goddard's teen horror *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), they are all dead, and with them every human soul on the planet. Rewind 90 minutes: The five young and attractive protagonists, ready to spend a fun weekend in the woods, arrive at the cabin and – despite the alienating frame of the opening sequence in a sci-fi like research facility – not that much seems to have changed since Sam Raimi sent in the demons in 1982's *Evil Dead*.

But *The Cabin*, a densely stratified construct of carefully assembled genre clichés, sets out to counter the claim that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Fragment by fragment, the movie and its eponymous edifice reveal and deconstruct their own monstrous bodies. In fact, the cabin's very foundation is part of a national research institution where laid-back scientists sit in front of control screens and steer the protagonists' actions like puppeteers in order to perform an existential ritual. Here the (old?) rules of genre coincide with the paradigms of the ritualistic sacrifice to the Old Gods. As Susan Sontag ascertains in her 2003 essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "The iconography of suffering has a long pedigree. The sufferings most often deemed worthy of representation are those understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human".¹² In this case, the 'Old Gods' may well be associated with the

¹² Susan Sontag: *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York 2003, p. 40.

movie-going masses, who, hungry for minimally varying displays of bloodshed and suffering, call for and affirm the ritual.

The Cabin's moribund guests, however, don't fit their designated stereotypes. Stripping off these figurative skin suits, the two remaining friends decide to fight – not so much for survival but against genre conventions and their role as sacrificial lambs. They join an impressive army of zombies, ghosts, ghouls, dragons, vampires and other sorts of monstrous beings in a raid that rips their puppeteers and the theatre-like institution into pieces, culminating in an Armageddon of almost Lovecraftian extent.

In its strategy to make the rules of genre transparent to its audience, *The Cabin in the Woods* is descendant to Wes Craven's *Scream* (1998), which introduced humoristic, postmodern self-referentiality to the teen slasher movie, a subgenre that had by then been more or less exsanguinated. While both function simultaneously, and to commercial effect, parodies and suspense-packed horror flicks, *The Cabin* goes one step further and reformulates the death spell. In a hegemony where the young are manipulated into binary stereotypes in order to be sacrificed, innocence does not exist, for we all engage in the ritual to satisfy our lascivious curiosity.

The unsettling appeal exuding from displays of corporeal suffering, which concerns Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, is also employed by Marcus Stiglegger in his remarks on *Terror-Kino*. It is by this term that he summarizes a subgenre of filmic terror, the exemplary works of which have in most cases also been referred to as 'torture porn'.

And indeed, internationally profitable horror franchises, such as the *Hostel* or *Saw* films, feature an onslaught of explicitly tortured bodies, packed in set pieces with deathly climaxes calling to mind the porn industries' money shot. Although Stiglegger's description of these films draws on Sontag's claim that "[a]ll images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, *pornographic*"¹³, he nevertheless dismisses the 'torture porn' classification as a tactic of the conservative press contrived to bolster censorship. He stresses the fact that the 'Terror-Filme' of the last decade reflect

¹³ Ibid, p. 95.

a social reality, and negotiate ethical questions, that have become increasingly relevant.¹⁴

Of course, in terms of gender politics, they still don't do much. For instance, even though Eli Roth's cleverly devised *Hostel* (2005) primarily stages the violent saturation of attractive male bodies, and the avenging male survivor is not at all of the abstentious kind, all the narrative patterns of heteronormativity, especially the threats of unchecked female sexuality, remain intact. While bending the rules of the genre and reversing the death spell, at least to the point that virginity no longer serves as a convincing survival strategy, it appears that horror films designed for the multiplex are still bound by their own rituals of production. They create monsters and reflect monstrous otherness, but always leave the insignia of the old gods visible.

In the realm of international author's films and art house movies, different rules apply. Monstrous sex reaches a new level of explicitness in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), where grieving parents retreat into the woods (of Eden) following the death of their infant son. Von Trier lets renowned actors (Charlotte Gainsbourg, Willem Defoe) perform alongside porn star body doubles to create graphic scenes of sexual intercourse that are always driven by voracious female desire. With every act, sexuality becomes more and more violent as the pair slips into the depths of the isolated forest, climaxing in a scene of genital mutilation where brutal naturalism merges into a super-natural, even satanic metamorphosis of the female lead. While at the end she dies at the hands of her husband, it is she who utters the death spell, summoning a veritable hellstorm that leaves the immaterial forces of feminine evil untouched, even invigorated.

Via unsurpassed exaggeration and uniquely pornographic strategies, *Antichrist* reveals and thereby destabilizes the rigid gender dichotomies embedded in narrative structures across histories and genres. The film enacts itself as an orgy of signifiers blown out of proportion, a monstrosity where witches, speaking animals and satanic nature reign in supernatural chaos. "Without the familiar bi-

¹⁴ Marcus Stiglegger: *Terror Kino. Angst/Lust und Körperhorror*. Berlin 2010 (= *Kultur & Kritik* 1. Ed. Dieter Bertz/Marcus Stiglegger.), p. 17.

nary codes [...], meaning itself becomes monstrous”¹⁵, posits Judith Halberstam, and in demonstration conjures up a particularly oscillating and enticing embodiment of monstrosity:

Risen from the topographical depths of the Gothic, it “crawls face down along the wall dividing self from other, and drains metaphoricality from one place only to infuse it into another.”¹⁶ Representing “the productions of sexuality itself”¹⁷, it wanders the grounds of cultural paranoia, infesting titillating nightmares and tabooed fantasies.

III. The True Blood Transfusion: Excesses of Blood, Sex and Narration

*You, who like a dagger ploughed
Into my heart with deadly thrill:
You who, stronger than a crowd
Of demons, mad, and dressed to kill,
Of my dejected soul have made
Your bed, your lodging, and domain:
To whom I'm linked (Unseemly jade!)
As is a convict to his chain-*
– Charles Baudelaire, *The Vampire*¹⁸

*Fuck all y'all devil zombies! Turning this town into an orgy
from hell!*
– Deputy Andy Bellefleur, *True Blood* series

¹⁵ Judith Halberstam: *Skin Shows. Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. London 1995, p. 179.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 100.

¹⁸ Roy Campbell (trans.): *Poem of Baudelaire. A Translation of Les Fleurs du Mal*. New York 1953.

“God hates fangs” glows on a fluorescent church billboard, and although the pun is intended, it becomes exceedingly clear that the people of Bon Temps, Louisiana, are not exactly known for their sophistication and open-mindedness. Despite the unwelcoming campaigns, even in this provincial setting for Allan Ball’s TV-series *True Blood*, the time seemed right for the ‘Great Revelation’. With bottles of commodified synthetic TRU Blood, available in every supermarket, vampires are ‘out of the coffin’, claiming their civil rights and discovering what every *night* life as US citizens feels like.

When the American cable network HBO broadcasted *True Blood*’s first season in 2008, it quickly became one of the most successful television drama series in the network’s history, attracting a solid fan base through unusually explicit displays of hyperglossed sexuality and seductive violence.

Based on Charlaine Harris’ *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* novels, *True Blood* revolves around the telepathic and empathic waitress Sookie Stackhouse, who, after falling in love with the first vampire she meets, finds herself entangled in a complex network of race, class, gender, and species politics. The first season seems to pick up on the traditional ‘sex-equals-death’ condition, featuring several murders of young, sexually active women who either had sex with vampires (so-called ‘fang bangers’), or who got high on vampire blood, an intensely aphrodisiac hallucinogen referred to as ‘V’.

When one of the most likable secondary characters, a part of Bon Temps’ (human) community, and friends with Sookie’s heartthrob brother Jason, turns out to be the murderer, we learn that it is exactly that community and their depicted ignorance which pose the biggest threat to any kind of peaceful coexistence between humans, vampires, and the other species who will, season by season, join the fictitious world of *True Blood*. In the process, the murder storyline leaves room for excesses of sex-talk, semi-naked bodies performing rough sex and, as a substitute for hardcore shots, close-up facial features in ecstasy, pain, or both. It thus helps to establish a style of narration loaded with sex, violence, and a particular focus on the supernatural, hitherto unknown to mainstream television shows. Moreover, in contrast to most of the discussed on-screen representations of horror narratives and their disposition to employ porno-

graphic strategies, *True Blood* presents a world in which sex is not generally punished with death.

As Martina Schuegraf points out, “*True Blood* manages to introduce and execute a variety of sexual possibilities and experiences, ranging from the bizarre to the (supposedly) normalized, to the (violently) extreme”.¹⁹ Embedded in a narrative that conveys forms of unreserved sexuality, seemingly indifferent to gender, race and orientation, as enriching rather than ‘gross’, monstrous sex becomes an alternative design opposing a degenerate, failing social system. After all, with vampires in the picture even death evokes a promising potential – to be reborn as a veritable paragon of sexual potency, charisma and skill.

When Sookie and her boyfriend, gentleman/vampire Bill Compton, engage in sex for the first time, and for her it really is the *very* first time, the somewhat worn-out imagery of romantic defloration is simultaneously alienated and climaxed by a display of vampiric double penetration: During intercourse, Bill sinks his fangs into Sookie’s neck, sipping and thereby visibly spilling her blood. While sex is presented in a glossy and aestheticized manner, *True Blood* also acknowledges that sexuality is messy. And it does so by utilizing the vampire’s archetypal force to tell stories about oppression and outcasts, religious fanaticism and redneck bigotry; all of which are excessively immersed in blood, which becomes all at once: index, symbol, and signifier.

Since in horror narratives fluids are known to be fetishized, with blood circulating “throughout vampiric sexuality as a substitute of and metaphor for other bodily fluids (milk, semen)”²⁰, I suggest that *True Blood’s* potential to break the rules of genre and challenge normative discourse surrounding sexuality can be conceived as a *transfusion* of different agents of excess into one another. For unlike even the more well-endowed movie productions, the format of television drama allows for the unlimited prolongation of narration. In

¹⁹ Martina Schuegraf: “Monströses Begehren: die Vampirfigur in ‘True Blood’“. *Pornografisierung von Gesellschaft*. Ed. Martina Schuegraf/Angela Tillmann. Konstanz/München 2012, pp. 103-114, here p. 111 (translation mine).

²⁰ Halberstam: *Skin Shows* (see fn. 15), p. 101.

the case of *True Blood*, this state of potentially endless narrative debauchery is enriched with elements of body genre that transform narration into a corporeal excess, with monstrosity inscribed into the textual and material body of the show itself. Furthermore, this transfusion promotes and pursues the penetration of its audiences' viewing habits by its excessive repetition of imagery, particularly refined in the opening title sequence of every episode of *True Blood*.

The recent development and success of such innovative drama series on television (and online) might indeed work in favour of monsters who, more so than those on the big screen, seduce an increasingly sophisticated audience that in turn increasingly demands explicitness. As allies, they could spark a sex-positive turn of filmic horror, one which exceedingly subverts the hierarchy of a system that only creates monsters in order to abject and eradicate them. It would be about time, too, according to Judith Halberstam's diagnosis from more than a decade ago: "[t]he monsters outnumber the humans and posthumanity is upon us".²¹

IV. What's at Stake

"Not so! Alas! Not so. It is only the beginning!"
– Van Helsing in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Etymologically, pornography combines the ancient Greek *pórnē*, 'harlot, prostitute', with *gráphein*, 'to write'. Concerned with inscriptions of monster sexuality and construction, I have explored the 'relation between the dyad monster and the human', and by touching on exemplary filmic embodiments of monstrous sex, I have shown that this relation is always vampiric and "parasitical with the one ever buried within the other."²² For, as Cohen puts it, "[t]he monstrous body is pure culture"²³, and just as the body genres of horror and porn are linked in terms of shock and seduction, both being innate to the medium of film, the potential to bend the

²¹ Ibid, p. 179.

²² Ibid. P. 181.

²³ Cohen: *Monster Theory* (see fn. 7), p. 4.

norms, break the rules and penetrate the rituals of filmic horror always depends on how corporeal excesses are conveyed.

Notably, while positing the spectator's propensity to physically mimic the displayed sensual reactions, the concept of body genres does by no means imply the habitualization of violence. Films labelled 'torture porn' could prospectively subvert the intended condescendence of that designation. As elaborate examinations of the "voyeuristic quest to show what lies below the skin"²⁴ that is inherent to splatter movies, and by dealing with important ethical and systemic aspects of social reality, they may expand their attention to include hitherto neglected questions of gender identity formations. Considering the way in which the 'torture porn' denotation entered the discussion on cinematic explicitness, however, Stiglegger's dismissal of it stands to reason.

But since unexamined abjection rarely fosters insight, I suggest reclaiming pornography for further observations of horror narratives. More specifically, I propose to reclaim pornography as a mode of sex-positive monstrosity. With monsters superior in numbers after all, and in light of its proximity to the body genre horror, pornography can be identified as the inscription of the monstrous on every one of us.

²⁴ Halberstam: *Skin Shows* (see fn. 15), p. 139.