

Is *Mark of the Devil* an Example of Transgressive Cinema? Georges Bataille's Philosophy of Transgression and the Cinema of the 1970s

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Abstract

Witchploitation films of the late 1960s – like *Mark of the Devil* (1970) – were often criticised for exploiting inquisitorial violence such as torture and rape for the sake of pure sensation. While the exploitative manner of dealing with historically based violence is clearly an issue, at the same time the question of what effect these depictions of extreme violence might have on the audience should be raised. Every culture has its own defined and accepted limits, which are made by collective agreement. Reaching and transgressing these limits amounts to the transgression of an interdiction, of a taboo. This article discusses the representations in the media of the act of transgression – commonly associated with the work of the French philosopher and novelist Georges Bataille – as a

collective moment of fear, and raises the question of whether or not this could generate a ‘transgressive cinema’. And in particular it asks: are witchploitation films transgressive?

Keywords: witchploitation, censorship, sensation, transgression, taboo, philosophy, Georges Bataille, exploitation film, violence, torture.

The witchploitation films which followed the success of Michael Reeves's *Witchfinder General* (1968) were often criticised for exploiting inquisitorial violence such as torture and rape for the sake of pure sensation. In Germany *Mark of the Devil* (*Hexen bis aufs Blut gequält*, Michael Armstrong, 1970) was banned till 2016, and in England this film was a well-known example of the 'video nasties'.¹ While the exploitative dealing with historically based violence is clearly an issue, at the same time the question of what effect these depictions of extreme violence might have on the audience should be raised. Why does an audience willingly seek out graphic depictions of torture and execution? Finding conclusive answers to this question is not easy, as the motivation might vary in each individual spectator. Considering the fact that *Mark of the Devil* came out at a certain period in film history when the limits of media violence were being intentionally stretched and many other movies tested the frontiers of sexuality and violence – for example *Last Tango in Paris* (*Ultimo tango a Parigi*, 1972) by Bernardo Bertolucci – it might be

useful to delineate a theoretical key to understanding this phenomenon. After explaining the notion of transgression according to Georges Bataille, I will contextualise the witchploitation films by analysing several movies relating to this concept and finally comment on the transgressive nature of *Witchfinder General* and *Mark of the Devil*.

Georges Bataille's Philosophy of Transgression

Every culture has its own defined and accepted limits, which are made by collective agreement. Reaching and transgressing these limits amounts to the transgression of an interdiction, of a taboo. Transgression is coupled with fear, because it entails punishment by one's own community, on the one hand, and on the other, paradoxically, the community fears the taboo breaker, because they have empowered themselves by this act of transgression and at that moment have become sovereign: by breaking the rules they have proven their independence from the rules of the community and have corrupted its foundations.

This article will discuss the reflections in the media of the act of transgression as a collective moment of fear and the question of whether or not this could generate a transgressive cinema. The term 'transgression' (from the Latin for 'trespassing' or 'crossing a line or border') is commonly associated with the work of the French philosopher and novelist Georges Bataille. In his book *Eroticism*, originally published in 1957, Bataille develops the most comprehensive correlation of sexuality, death and social sanctions.² He uses this term to describe a person's wilful act of breaking a taboo. The desire for transgression, according to Bataille, is caused by the existence of a taboo or prohibition itself, often connected with sexuality. Transgression is genuinely 'human', because only human societies recognise taboos that regulate their communal life. Transgression is associated with moments of fear and disgust. For Bataille, transgression does not only subvert the taboo, but it also stands in a complex interdependence with it.

In his essay "A Preface to Transgression" (1963) Michel Foucault links Bataille's notion of transgression to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and the Marquis de Sade, by placing the Nietzschean idea of the 'death of God' within the context of sexual sovereignty and transgression: the death of God – he argues – permits a world that unfolds in transgression, a world based on excess and self-expenditure. Foucault too emphasizes that, in the end, the transgression affirms and legitimises the taboo:

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origins; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simply obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them.³

Bataille's idea of crossing boundaries in order to gain (sexual) sovereignty is a firmly established

but very ambivalent concept within modern philosophy. The above-mentioned commentary by Foucault, which by the 1960s had already elevated the excessive act of transgression to a utopian gesture, defines this boundary as a transient phenomenon, which reveals itself right at the moment of the transgression. Thus it is not possible to pinpoint transgression – in Bataille’s sense, the inner experience of transgression based on eroticism is an incident of a spiritual nature, mainly to be found in acts of orgiastic erotic excess or sacrifice.⁴

Transgression becomes the life principle of Bataille’s philosophy. Similarly to Nietzsche, Foucault and Bataille oppose a definition *ex negativo*. Instead they understand transgression as an act of cultural release. Bataille’s use of the term transgression defines a state beyond moral and ethical limits, ultimately *beyond good and evil*. Based on this assumption, Bataille has proposed the opposition of the death drive (*Todestrieb*) to the will to live (*Lebenstrieb*) – inspired by the respective concepts of Sigmund Freud. While becoming autonomous, sexuality is

also conceptualised as a celebration of an emotional and finally of a physical death. Bataille’s model of a ‘general economy of expenditure’ is already noticeable in Sigmund Freud’s work: the assumption is that excess energy, which is no longer viable for growth, inevitably has to be wasted, “willingly or not, in glorious or catastrophic form”: “the living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g. an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit”.⁵

The author developed his notion of transgression not only in theoretical pieces, but also in literary fiction. In his episodic novella *Story of the Eye*, published in 1928 in the context of the surrealist movement, Bataille goes through the various acts of transgression in turn. The ‘eye’ of the title is not only the eye of the voyeur; rather it is

Bataille's visionary sight. It is a metaphorical 'eye' that opens up at the moment of the rite of passage and ultimately of transgression.⁶

Along with the death drive, hate and aggression, according to Bataille the manifold rites of sexuality are the only means of transgression. Especially in the sadomasochistic mingling of lust and pain he saw the creative potential to awaken and live the transgressive experience. In S/M role play the sex and death drives can be combined in a transgressive manner which is, again, connected with the phenomenon of taboo and prohibition. "The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it," as Bataille states, adding that "the taboo is there in order to be violated".⁷ Exactly that assumption might be of interest when considering the possibility of a transgressive film. The cinema of the 1970s was one of the key artistic forms of expression which repeatedly imagined and staged the violation of taboos in manifold ways. As noted above, the philosopher himself has written several 'transgressive' erotic short stories and even

novels that utilise the breaking of taboos as a central theme.⁸ The idea of a transgressive work of art may therefore be thinkable, even in the controversial framework of Bataille's philosophy.

Playing with the fulfillment and rejection of desire yields many possibilities for literary and cinematic expression. It is not surprising that many artworks achieve their success by addressing or (even) enacting transgressions in Bataille's sense. Usually the moment of taboo breaking is a pivotal moment in the story, forcing the spectator to deal with socially and culturally established norms. However, one must bear in mind the cultural relativity of taboos: e.g. adultery as a pivotal act will be perceived differently in Asia than in Europe or America. Transferring the anthropological term 'taboo' to the 'neuroses' of Western society goes back to Sigmund Freud, who states in *Totem and Taboo* (1912–1913) four points of similarity: "(1) the fact that the prohibitions lack any assignable motive; (2) the fact that they are maintained by an internal necessity; (3) the fact that they are

easily displaceable and that there is a risk of infection from the prohibited object; and (4) the fact that they give rise to injunctions for the performance of ceremonial acts.”⁹ If we look at the taboos of Western industrial society, they are often underpinned by a specific rational explanation, which serves as an explanation for the inner compulsion to respect the taboo. For example the prohibition of incest is explained by the risk of genetic defects – yet the scientific proof is not that clear.¹⁰ But breaking the taboo is the appeal: desiring the transgression of a taboo in order to get the ‘forbidden Other’ – and to be able to transcend the banality of everyday life. Referring to the above-mentioned taboo of incest, role play involving incestuous sex acts is widely known on popular porn sites like Pornhub. Yet breaking a taboo is only one possible form of transgression and should not be taken as being synonymous with transgression itself. As Bataille says: the transgressive act transcends the taboo. In the case of a violent act it has to be a conscious effort, not an instinctual reaction: “The transgression of the taboo is not

animal violence. It is violence still, used by a creature capable of reason”.¹¹

Despite Bataille’s discussion of numerous artworks of the past as ‘transgressive’ examples, it is hard to define a transgressive cinema simply on the basis of his spiritual model of transcendence by taboo breaking, especially as Bataille himself never mentions cinema, just photography.¹² Not each taboo-breaking work of art aims at transcendence or the inner experience of eroticism, as the author puts it.¹³ Not even the self-proclaimed ‘Cinema of Transgression’ from the New York underground of the late 1980s can be simply labelled ‘transgressive cinema’. It seems more appropriate to consider cinema as one possible medium for reflecting transgressive philosophy on levels of plot, character relations, dialogue and certain kinds of role playing that relate to the transgressive form of sadomasochism Bataille himself describes.

Is there a transgressive cinema?

Filmmakers like Bernardo Bertolucci, Nagisa Ōshima or Pier Paolo Pasolini have often

described their own works as concerned with transgression.¹⁴ Other arts can be related to the concept: especially performance theatre, various music subcultures (Industrial, Black Metal), extreme genre cinema (horror, thriller and porn) and the popular literature of Vladimir Sorokin and Jack Ketchum work with a decisive aesthetic of transgression, which does not amount only to simple taboo breaking. These films, books and compositions are not mainly about aesthetic revolt, but rather about a deeply modern worldview, which already understands its own ambivalence as a form of existence.

The idea of transgressing or fusing the duality of Eros and Thanatos is mirrored in many films of the 1970s, especially in Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*, which is inspired, according to the director,¹⁵ by Bataille's work in the wake of *Blue of Noon* (1935).¹⁶ In this novel that is set in France of the 1930s, the protagonist swings from one mistress to the other. It is not the plot but the motif of morality-transcending sexuality that resembles Bertolucci's film quite remarkably, especially the fantasy of having sex

with a completely unknown, nameless person. Anonymous sex represents a decisive contrast with the bourgeois understanding of a relationship, which relies upon knowledge of and love for the other, as well as stability and fidelity. However, this can also be seen as the dialectical supplement of such a bourgeois morality. The film depicts an *amour fou*, which lasts for only a couple of days, with a man in his fifties, Paul (Marlon Brando), whose wife has just committed suicide, and a young woman who is about twenty years old, Jeanne (Maria Schneider). The couple meet in a vacant apartment, where they indulge in intense sadomasochistic and playful sexual acts. In the course of the movie the man slowly abandons his dominant position, which, however, leads to the breakup of the unconventional relationship. After one last dance, Paul follows Jeanne to her apartment, where she shoots him, seemingly in self-defence. In the way the sex acts are framed, the film develops its own kind of communication, a body language which is characterised by transgression, fear and corruption. Despite its elaborate visual style, the

movie establishes its transgressive moments mostly on the verbal level, especially through the consistent repetition of references to anal sex. The first exclamation of the protagonist Paul in the film is “Fucking God!” – which he shouts as he covers his ears while standing close to the loud noise of a passing metro train – and, according to the maxim of the Marquis de Sade, the highest protest against God lies in anal sexuality.¹⁷ Building on this idea, all the key scenes utilise exactly this same motif. The film evokes many transgressive moments and challenges the Western audience’s value system: for example the family as a ‘sacred institution’, the means whereby reproductive sexuality is organised, the human being as a domesticated beast, the repression of urges. In short, Paul attacks the values of bourgeois society. Ironically, the film’s depiction of transgression proved extremely seductive for bourgeois audiences who, witnessing the desecration of beauty and the contamination of the sacred, revelled in the negation of their own morals.¹⁸ In the final act Paul follows Jeanne to her mother’s house, asserts that he loves her and finally wants

to know her name. Following the fatal logic of the film, Jeanne will not only kill her lover – he has infringed his own concept of transgression – but she will also deny him and tell the police that he is a stranger who tried to rape her.

Although Bertolucci was seemingly inspired by Bataille and integrated transgressive motifs into the production, his film cannot be considered as transgressive artwork, because, according to Bataille, he would have had to aspire to evoke a transgressive, ecstatic state in the spectator and through this connecting them with the sphere of the sacred. The famous film adaptations of Bataille, and also Bertolucci’s film, at best only visualise the motifs of Bataille’s prose and philosophy. Whether they are transgressive themselves is hard to assess. As noted before, these art works mainly reflect on transgression by showing transgressive acts. In a Bataillean sense only Paul and Jeanne might experience transgression in their acts of ‘eroticism’ – but simply watching them does not mean to witness transgression in a way that would justify a term like ‘transgressive cinema’.

Triggered by the easing of cinema censorship in the 1970s, many adaptations of Bataille's writings followed, with films focusing on the erotic aspects of the literary sources in most of the cases: *Simona* (Patrick Longchamps, 1974), *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no korīda*, Nagisa Ōshima, 1976), *Playing with Love* (*Maladolescenza*, Pier Giuseppe Murgia, 1977), *Blue Movie* (Alberto Cavallone, 1978), *Matador* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1986) or, as a more recent example, *My Mother* (*Ma mère*, Christophe Honoré, 2004) all wallow in the thematic universe disclosed by the French philosopher.

In this context, the experimental short film *The Story of I* (Jo Ann Kaplan, 1997) can be understood as a kind of a meta-film, in which a woman lies in a bathtub and reads and imagines Bataille's transgressive prose. The bizarre events described in the text provoke a series of fantasies in which the bathroom setting becomes the stage and the woman the main player. As her dreams unfold, she becomes the 'eye' of the story and her own body the object of its gaze. With a feminine slant, *The Story of I* plucks

Bataille's central metaphor from its original context and re-invents its erotic vision from the inside out. The eye in the vagina, seen through blood, urine and tears, looks at itself in the mirror.

Only the French terror film *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008) can be acknowledged to have developed its own idea of martyrdom, based on Bataille's work *The Tears of Eros*, as in the film's finale, a living girl is skinned to enable her to access the afterworld. However, *Martyrs* has an open end and does not affirm the awaited result of the forced transgression by martyrdom. Bataille's writing comments on the pictures of the *lingchi*, the Chinese 'death by a thousand cuts', to which the film refers by displaying a photo from the book *The Tears of Eros*. But even Laugier's film has to be seen as meta-transgression because it refuses to deal with a clear result of forced martyrdom. Other attempts to direct an authentic transgressive cinema – like the films of the German independent director Marian Dora who made *Voyage to Agatis* (*Reise nach Agatis*, 2010) – touch the domain of snuff

movies (films in which, allegedly, one or more of the actors is deliberately killed on camera as part of the pro-filmic event, although no such film has ever been found), by deliberately blurring the lines between consensual sexuality, animal abuse (zoophilia) and necrophilia. At least the sexual acts shown resemble some of those described in Bataille's own prose. But still this is more a cinema inspired by transgression – depicting transgressive acts, illustrating the idea. As Bataille explores in his final theoretical enquiry *The Tears of Eros* in 1961, art can lead to a transgressive experience. But most of his examples are taken from religious contexts, so the spiritual transcendence is already part of the game. While Laugier obviously shies away from the possibility of transcendence within martyrdom, Dora aims for transcendence, yet lingers on pure destructiveness and pseudo-philosophy. The latter stance closely resembles the one displayed in Jess Franco's Spanish exploitation films of the 1960s.

A popularised idea of transgression based on Bataille's philosophy has been exceedingly

interesting for the narrative media such as literature and film since the 1970s: in these contexts the seductive potential of breaking a taboo and the ambivalent aspects of collective social fears were used as the narrative basis for psychological melodrama. The previous examples should show how the different kinds of transgression – taboo breaking, expenditure of the body and its energy, senseless tyrannical acts and also sovereign self-empowerment by suppressing others – can become an immoral fascination of a narrative work of art. It challenges the spectators and forces them to review their own moral boundaries constantly. Nevertheless one cannot call representations of transgressive acts a transgressive cinema per se, because a cinema of that kind would have to leave the conventions of the narrative cinema far behind and aim at inducing an ecstatic state in the audience, a state akin to the intense sensations experienced through erotic or religious activities, and the contemplation of spectacles of violence and death. Bataille's idea of transgression is, as noted above, connected with the 'sacred' and aims at a state of

transcendence. The ‘inner experience’ of transgression is key here – the out-of-body state beyond daily existence. In merely illustrating acts of transgression this ‘inner experience’ is not necessarily achieved.

Anyway the exploitation films of the late 1960s and 1970s were profoundly interested in depicting transgressive acts on several levels: they created tales of desire and taboo-breaking lust, they evoked scenarios of relentless suppression, torture and humiliation – and finally they focused on historical periods of tyranny and abuse of sovereign power. Such a narrative interest is most evident in exploitation films concerned with the persecution of witches. This leads us to the key question: are historically based witchploitation films transgressive?

Witchploitation and the Philosophy of Transgression

If we look at a witch-hunting film like *Mark of the Devil* by Michael Armstrong, we cannot avoid but link it to the historical drama *Witchfinder General* by Michael Reeves. In

America the film was named after the poem “The Conqueror Worm” (1843) by Edgar Allen Poe in order to connect it with the popular Poe cycle by Roger Corman starring Vincent Price. Not only because of its title the film can be considered to be the actual origin of witchploitation cinema. *Witchfinder General* tells the story of a couple coming into conflict with the authorities in the crisis-stricken England during the Commonwealth era (1649–1659). The professional ‘Witchfinder General’ Matthew Hopkins (Vincent Price) roams the country in search of torture victims, who can earn him a great deal of money. In the small village of Brandeston he tortures a priest (Rupert Davies), who has been accused of witchcraft, until his daughter Sara (Hilary Dwyer) tries to ransom him by offering herself to Hopkins. The witchfinder general initially agrees, but incarcerates the old man nevertheless. When Hopkins’s assistant Stearne (Robert Russell) rapes Sarah, Hopkins loses interest in her and hangs her father. Sarah’s fiancé Richard (Ian Ogilvy), a soldier of Cromwell’s, hears about the tragic fate of his lover and tries to free her.

Hopkins gets ahead of him and sets them up. Their fate comes to an end in the torture chamber, where Hopkins and Stearne torture Sara before Richard's eyes in an effort to get them both to confess to being witches, and so dispense with Richard, who they realise is determined to kill them both. Richard, maddened by what he is witnessing, manages to break free and kills Hopkins with an axe, while Sara frantically screams.

Witchfinder General stems from the world of classical British horror films and is yet quite different in tone and mise en scène: Michael Reeves, who died unexpectedly a little while later,¹⁹ had already directed two horror film productions. Distributor American International Pictures (AIP) forced him to hire Vincent Price, one of the most popular idols of the horror genre.²⁰ The young director tried everything to modify the acting style which Price had imported from his roles in AIP's Edgar Allan Poe adaptations. Reeves concentrated on an underexplored area of the genre: historically based human bestiality and tyranny. Matthew

Hopkins is presented as an obsessive, sexually repressed tyrant, a vicious personification of de Sade's sovereignty – a sovereignty that undermines everything for its own desires. To rise above all other beings, Hopkins sacrifices them, because he desires them sexually. In acts of savagery he proves his power. He is the 'dark sovereign' straight out of a Marquis de Sade novel. Contrary to characters in similar films such as *Mark of the Devil* and its sequel, the witch hunter is not impotent, but rather power-hungry and cruel. He supervises the tortures unaffectedly, with a nearly scientific stoicism, as if overseeing an experimental set-up. The abused body in this film is often an old, wrinkly one, in contrast to many successor films focussing on the beautiful female body. Hopkins does not really enjoy the agony of his victims, rather it is the moment of power, when his victims surrender themselves 'freely', as Sara initially did. The audience is defencelessly subjected to the realistic horror of torture; the spectators cannot distance themselves, as they could if those accused of witchcraft were really involved in the supernatural. In torture scenes like these

Reeves conveys his depressing and pessimistic message. This destructive downward spiral of violence can end only in insanity. What is striking about the film is the positive image of the liberal Church, embodied through Sara's father. The threat rather comes from the freelance inquisitors following their own mercenary and sexual interests. Reeves, therefore, cannot be seen in the light of Bataille's philosophy of transgression, but rather relates to de Sade's idea of a dark and destructive sovereignty in his film.

The year 1969 had heralded the start of more imitations of this concept, which modified the events of *Witchfinder General* in different ways. The first steps into this direction were made by Adrian Hoven with the German production *Mark of the Devil*, directed by Michael Armstrong, which tells a story about a symbolic father-son conflict. The disfigured, sadistic witch hunter Albino (Reggie Nalder) terrifies the inhabitants of an Austrian village in the eighteenth century. When he is rejected by Vanessa (Olivera Vučo), a waitress whom he

desires, he indulges in sadistic practices which are not acceptable to the public anymore, even considering the fact that he is a witch hunter. He is replaced by Lord Cumberland (Herbert Lom), who displays the same kind of arbitrary authority after strangling Albino. When his assistant Christian (Udo Kier) falls in love with Vanessa, Cumberland accuses her of witchcraft. Shocked by the injustice of his mentor, whom he witnessed killing Albino, Christian releases Vanessa from the dungeon. She immediately instigates a public riot, and Christian becomes the victim of the unrest, while Cumberland escapes.

Armstrong created the first really exploitative witchploitationfilm, less character-driven than *Witchfinder General*. Reeves's story is based on historical events from the seventeenth century: Matthew Hopkins actually existed, even if he did not meet his end in an act of bloody revenge. The director used his scenario to explore the human condition under extreme pressure, while Armstrong relies more on episodic storytelling in *Mark of the Devil* and does not provide as

much space for character exploration. The latter basically uses the tropes of the historical melodrama firmly rooted in pulp fiction. Armstrong reserves plenty of space for extensive torture scenes for which the film was infamous for decades, provoking censors into action in several countries.²¹ Under Armstrong's direction simple explanatory models suffice for the torture motivations: Albino acts out of his sexual frustration, because his disfigured face does not get him far with women, while Cumberland is a ruthless power broker, closer to the character of Matthew Hopkins. Cumberland is a reckless person, whose violent actions all seem rationally justified and serve his own benefit, which again makes him a de Sadean sovereign figure as described above.

On the formal level, the film draws upon a then upcoming style of European exploitation films, with its fast zooms and close-ups of terrified faces and explicit gore effects, such as mutilations and burning. As opposed to Reeves's film, Armstrong focusses on the uninhibited sexualized representation of

violence, by torturing mainly beautiful young women (and one equally attractive young man). The most notorious sequence is the torture of a young blonde, whose tongue is torn out with a huge pair of pliers. Armstrong's direction may also tie in with de Sade's motif of the immoral tormentor, a non-ethical character, acting 'beyond good and evil', accumulating power based on suppression and sacrifice of others – he is the dark sovereign. While Bataille's writing and thinking was obviously inspired by de Sade's literature, his idea of transgression moves away from the earthly pleasures of excessive sexuality and the seduction of torture and tyranny as de Sade describes it. Whereas the witchploitation films vaguely relate to de Sade's writings, they never even touch on an idea of transcendence and 'inner experience' via transgressive acts. Bataille himself refers to historical torture scenes in art and photography when reflecting on the question of whether art can create a transgressive 'inner experience', but the imagery he quotes is extremely violent and his modern examples even show real death and agony. A film such as *Mark of the Devil* – and

Bataille never even refers to cinema as a transgressive medium – stays for its most part within the boundaries of contemporary cinematic conventions, despite the sexualisation of violence. Yet the graphic torture scenes seem to touch on taboo-ridden subjects, which led to its long history of censorship. But they are not transgressive in Bataille's sense of the word.

Three years later the sequel *Mark of the Devil Part II* by Adrian Hoven came out. Hoven cast himself in a supporting role as a nobleman, while Anton Diffring played the official witch hunter Balthasar von Ross, who abuses his position by making women sexually compliant to his own will and expropriates the citizens. Resistance is broken by torture, incarceration and execution. When von Ross kills the highly admired aristocrat Alexander von Salmenau (Adrian Hoven), he puts himself at odds with the people of the region. Von Ross pronounces von Salmenau a heretic, posthumously, and seeks the widow's (Erika Blanc) and son's (Percy Hoven) life. In the last moment, a sympathetic guard

grants them life and helps them to escape, and von Ross is lynched during a national uprising.

The torture scenes of *Mark of the Devil Part II* stay in one's mind, especially because they are focused on the graphic detail of physical destruction. At the same time Hoven shows the process of violent self-empowerment by the torturers: they celebrate the torture of the victim for its own sake to heighten their own sense of themselves – to torture means to be in command and control. In a key scene the torturers drop a female torture chamber victim with spread legs onto a long pale after losing interest in her. But even in such extreme moments, which are doubtlessly imaginable as historical fact, the direction distances itself by its framing and perspective. Hoven shows all the mayhem at full length but rarely in lingering close-ups.

As radical and confrontational visually as are the scenes of violence in exploitation films like *Mark of the Devil* and its sequel, they serve, at best, to portray the arbitrary exercise of power and sadistic motivation. Most of the time the

aesthetics of violence are neither concerned with the presentation of the act of transgression nor are they capable of creating a transgressive or ecstatic ‘inner experience’ in the viewer, as Bataille expects from the transgressive art he discusses in *The Tears of Eros* and *Eroticism*. The witchploitation films are simply more or less exploitative period films, which spice up their stories with different degrees of sometimes sexualised violence, even if they actually

managed to tangle with the visual taboos of certain societies, from which they were forbidden for a long time. The graphic nature of the violence on display may still be shocking for some spectators, but becoming a real challenge for the audience and acquiring a shattering ‘inner experience’, in particular by the explicit presentation of transgressive acts, are things which, however, the conventional narrative film carefully avoids even to this day.

¹ See Julian Petley’s article in this issue of *Cine-Excess*.

² Bataille, G. ([1957] 1962) *Eroticism*. London: Calder.

³ Foucault, M. ([1963] 1998) “A Preface to Transgression”, In: Botting, F. and Wilson, S. (eds) *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 24–40: 27.

⁴ Bataille, G. ([1957] 1962) *Eroticism*, 29–30.

⁵ Bataille, G. ([1959] 1988) *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy. Vol. I: Consumption*. New York: Zone, 21.

⁶ See Bataille, G. ([1928] 2013) *Story of the Eye*. New ed. London: Penguin.

⁷ Bataille, G. ([1957] 1962) *Eroticism*, 63, 64.

⁸ See Bataille, G. (1989) *My Mother. Madame Edwarda. The Dead Man*. London: Marion Boyars.

⁹ Freud, S. ([1912–1913] 1972) *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 28–29.

¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss, C. ([1949] 1969) *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Rev. ed. Boston, MA: Beacon, 13–14.

¹¹ Bataille, G. ([1957] 1962) *Eroticism*, 64.

¹² See Bataille, G. ([1961] 1989) *The Tears of Eros*. San Francisco: City Lights.

¹³ Bataille, G. ([1957] 1962) *Eroticism*, 29–30.

¹⁴ Russell, C. (1995) *Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure, and New Wave Cinemas*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 111; Barber, S.

(2010) “The Last Film, the Last Book: Pasolini and Sade”, In: Cline, J. and Weiner, R. G. (eds) *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema’s First Century*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 95–106: 96; Felleman, S. (2012)

“Two-Way Mirror: Francis Bacon and the Deformation of Film”, In: Dalle Vacche, A. (ed.)

Film, Art, New Media: Museum Without Walls? Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 221–238: 229.

¹⁵ Ciment, M. and Legrand, G. (1973) “Entretien avec Bernardo Bertolucci”, *Positif*, 148 (3), 29–38: 32.

¹⁶ See Thompson, D. (1998) *Last Tango in Paris*. London: BFI, 91.

¹⁷ De Sade, M. ([1795] 1990) “Philosophy in the Bedroom”, In: The Marquis de Sade *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*. New York: Grove, 177–367: 231–233, 272–273.

¹⁸ The film grossed 6,957,332,000 lire at the Italian box office. Any performance exceeding one billion lire represented a significant commercial success. See AGIS (1978) *Catalogo generale dei film italiani dal 1965 al 1978*. 5th ed. Roma: AGIS 1978, 206.

¹⁹ Halligan, B. (2003) *Michael Reeves*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 219–222.

²⁰ Halligan, B. (2003) *Michael Reeves*, 116–118.

²¹ See Julian Petley’s contribution to this issue.