

European Erotic Cinema: Identity, Desire and Disgust

Introduction by Alex Marlow-Mann and Xavier Mendik

From mainstream cinema's first nude scene in *Ekstase* (1933) to the extreme arthouse imagery of *Romance* (1999) via the exploitation films of Joe D'Amato and Jess Franco, Europe has always been at the cutting edge of cinematic depictions of the erotic, pushing the boundaries of what it is legitimate to represent on screen.

Employing varied genres and filmmaking modes – from the pseudo-educational sex films of Scandinavia and Germany to the surrealist exploits of Walerian Borowczyk or the arty bourgeois respectability of *Emmanuelle* (1974) – European cinema has shifted the paradigms through which the (eroticised) body can be represented and consumed, blurring and problematizing the boundaries between 'art' and 'exploitation'. Often these celluloid sexual experimentations elicit

contrasting reactions, ranging from desire to disgust, with unsettling and controversial results. In so doing, these films prompt a profound re-mapping of the body, as well as the concepts of art, commerce and even the very notion of the 'European'.

This edition of the *Cine-Excess* journal addresses the long and often controversial relationship between Europe and the erotic image, considering the extent to which these traditions reveal not only authorial intent and generic tendency, but also more fascinating issues relating to nationhood and regional distinction. Not only do the contributors to this issue offer new interpretations of iconic and controversial European erotic auteurs, but they also aim to provide insight into previously

untheorized 'explicit' cycles and the local traditions of the Continental extreme.

Given her status as one of the most celebrated and contested creators of explicit European cinema, it is more than appropriate that the leading European director Catherine Breillat features as the subject of the two opening entries of this edition of the *Cine-Excess* journal. As an auteur whose work has always operated at the intersections of arthouse and pornography, it is Breillat's cinema as a literal and figurative mirror of wider sexual tensions that dominates Alice Haylett Bryan's article "I Only Like To See Myself in Small Bits": Catherine Breillat's Reflections of the Female Body.' Here, the author turns to Irigaray's concept of the mirror as a patriarchal mechanism that conveys distorted reflections of female subjectivity to understand the complex maturational journeys undertaken by Breillat's heroines in three key cinematic case-studies. Beginning with the early

production of *Une vraie jeune fille/ A Really Young Girl* (1976), Haylett Bryan notes how Breillat's directorial debut eschewed the sex-as-liberation tendency that dominated many 1970s European porno-chic productions in order to expose more fully the social and psychic constrictions that surround society's construction of female eroticism during such periods of emancipation. In the film, the mirror motif is used prominently in a number of striking scenes that convey the young female protagonist's altering perceptions of self and sexuality. Although these pointed mirror image segments initially evoke feeling of nausea and self-loathing in the heroine, they soon develop into a more attuned exploration of how female desire comes to be coded as shameful and excessive by the male dominated order. With its emphasis on taboo body fluids, interiorised monologues and introspection, *A Really Young Girl* initiates many of the formal devices that Breillat would later use in more widely

distributed and celebrated titles such as *Romance* (1999), which forms the basis of Haylett Bryan's second case-study. In this film, the author notes that mirror reflections are once again prominently displayed as a mechanism to explore how a heroine's emergent sexual development subverts wider systems of male control in a narrative that combines tragi-comic emotional encounters with scenarios of sexual excess and ultimately death. As with Breillat's debut feature, *Romance* remains significant for its annexing of mirror image structures to more self-reflexive strategies implicating the audience in the often complex and coercive strategy of surveying female physiology. These formal modes of address are further considered in the later Breillat production of *À ma soeur/ Fat Girl* (2001), which comprises Haylett Bryan's final case-study. Once again, the author notes that female tendencies of self-loathing, introspection and ultimate liberation are mediated through mirror

reflections, in the controversial tale of a marginalised heroine whose fantasies of erotic acceptance are ultimately ratified through a finale of sexual violation and mass familial slaughter. In its controversial closing segment, the film juxtaposes violent imagery of sexual relations with more interiorised scenes of self-discovery that ultimately show how Breillat's cinema is itself a mirror to wider complex and contradictory codes of behaviour that govern European femininity.

While mirror imagery remains the key focus of Haylett Bryan's analysis, it is the role of generic derivations in the director's work that occupies Troy Bordrun's article 'Sex is Metaphysical: Catherine Breillat's Pornographic Films'. While acknowledging that Breillat would not typically be considered a genre filmmaker, he argues that the fixed and restrictive way in which genres are defined by theorists such as Rick Altman fails to reflect either the more fluid conception evidenced by

many approaches to filmmaking, or the way spectators approach non-genre specific films. Extreme cinema, with which Breillat has often been equated, would be one example of a form of filmmaking that appropriates the codes of body genres like pornography and horror, but uses them for different ends. Thus Breillat draws on tropes recognisable from pornography, encouraging viewers to read her films in relation (or opposition) to a particular interpretative paradigm in order to articulate a complex and provocative message about the status of female desire and sexuality. In order to make such a case, Bordrun begins by making an important distinction between ‘erotica’, ‘classical pornography’ and what he terms ‘non-pornographic pornography’: sexually explicit films that do not aim (solely) to provoke arousal but rather to ‘operate as a challenge to existing sexual relations and the power dynamics therein’. Breillat achieves this by focussing her attention on the ‘non-pornographic body’ (Brinkema),

or what Breillat herself terms ‘pornocracy’: a female body depicted both within its position of patriarchal subjugation and with a fully developed exploration of female interiority and subjectivity. This results in films that combine the affective power of pornography with a high degree of emotional realism. Inevitably this produces multiple, and often contradictory effects on the spectator and Breillat’s films therefore afford a significant challenge to traditional theories of spectatorship. Drawing on Gunning’s counter-argument to Metz and Mulvey’s theories of the gaze that cinema does not operate as a medium of “illusionistic absorption”, Bordrun argues that Breillat’s films’ non-pornographic approach continually reminds the viewer that (s)he is “watching by *a succession of sensual assaults*”, opening up the possibility of a multiplicity of viewing positions and conflicted spectatorial responses. Rather than representing the truth of the sexual situation through

maximum visibility, as Williams argues of classical pornography, Breillat's films reveal the power dynamics, desires and feelings of shame inherent in the sexual act, perfectly embodying the tension between desire and disgust that is this issue's theme.

Breillat's challenge to genre has led her to occupy a peculiar position within European cinema, exposing and calling into question traditional distinctions between genre and auteur filmmaking and between art and highbrow culture. A similar process can be seen to operate during the final years of Pier Paolo Pasolini filmmaking career, and this serves as the subject for Simon Hobbs' submission '*Salò, Or the 120 Days of Sodom: The Contemporary Distribution of Sexual Extremity.*' Here, the author explores both the imagery, promotion and reception of Pier Paolo Pasolini's infamous last film, noting that its explicit and unsettling scenes have continually

situated it across both the 'legitimate' and 'exploitation' spheres of European cinema, often with contradictory results. Hobbs further explores this tension via a detailed consideration of the British Film Institute's 2011 Blu-ray release of the film, which comprises the core of his analysis.

Drawing on a range of theoretical sources, the author argues that paratextual studies provides an appropriate method for considering how *Salò's* fluctuating status is centrally affected by the ancillary information that surrounds its wider release, promotion and distribution. Noting the importance of the contextual relationship between these differing materials in circulation, Hobbs argues that Pasolini's film operates via a "double axis of sexual taboo and politics", which mutually aligns and conflicts its commentaries on Fascism/ European power principles with visceral acts of torture and defilement. As a result, the text is rendered vulnerable to a range of differing and seemingly incompatible

receptions focussing more fully on these taboo busting scenes. Hobbs explores these differing critical interpretations through a comparison of the 2001/2011 BFI releases of *Salò*, which function to situate and limit notions of on-screen excess within wider interpretations of the film as difficult, challenging and ultimately poetic. The construction of this set of meanings (which was underscored by BFI led campaigns to reappraise the film's status) are for Hobbs strained by the unsettling imagery accompanying this second release, which retains a status more associated with European exploitation cinema. Although some of the additional materials that accompany this release trade on Pasolini's pre-established authorial persona, critical review essays and documentary extras allied to the 2011 cut continue to trade on the film's more sensational aspects, and thus "further enhance the film's reputation as an exploitative piece of transgression." In so doing, the 2011 BFI release indicates the

extent to which strategies of European erotic excess are increasingly normalised in line with established perceptions of artistic integrity in order to appeal to multiple user groups interested in the extreme image.

In her follow-up submission 'Salò: A Response to Simon Hobbs', the BFI's Head of Content Jane Giles approaches the promotion and distribution of Pasolini's film from both the historical position that the organisation has adopted in relation to European cinema, as well as the need to appeal to new niche consumers beyond the traditional arthouse envelope. Importantly, Giles' account indicates the extent to which the 2011 BFI Blu-ray campaign sought to distinguish itself from existing 'art cinema' releases of the film by more consciously drawing on promotional tactics associated with 'cult' or popular European film tactics. If these strategies do function to confirm the tensions around reception outlined in Hobbs' analysis, then

they also highlight what Giles defines as an increasing overlap between the presentation of popular film and art cinema extras within the home entertainment distribution circuit.

While several scholars have previously discussed the concept of European erotic excess via the case-study of the French *Emmanuelle* films, as well as their Italian derivations which also proliferated during the 1970s, it is the influence of such templates on Cypriot sex cinema which is the focus of Costas Constandinides' article 'Erotic Adventures on Aphrodite's Island: The Unofficial Cypriot Black Emmanuelle Trilogy and the Film that "Increased the Birth Rate in Cyprus"'. Here, the author considers how a quartet of 1970s sexploitation titles created and produced on the island not only drew out tensions between Cypriot cinema and wider European nations, but also highlighted the important role of cinema owners and local producers in the creation of sexploitation

cinema on the island. By considering a range of Cypriot sex cinema titles that featured the Black Emmanuelle actress Laura Gemser, the author notes how local producers/entrepreneurs such as Diogenis Herodotou adapted traits associated with the Italian series to aid the creation of a more specifically Cypriot notion of sex cinema during the 1970s and 1980s. While Herodotou releases such as *Emmanuelle: Queen of Sados* (1980) were often subsumed into wider perceptions of Greek cinema as being dominated by the motifs of "summer, sex and souvlaki", these films also reveal a range of interesting overlaps and tensions between the wider country and the politics of Cyprus, which the author then explores via a range of transnational perspectives. For instance, by conducting a detailed analysis of *Emmanuelle: Queen of Sados*, the article considers how the prominent use of Cypriot locations in the film were complimented by contemporary narrative devices that drew repeated connection to

established localised myths. By analysing the film's controversial tropes of rape, revenge and sensuality, Constandinides notes how Laura Gemser is repeatedly equated with the local myth of Aphrodite as both an erotic and avenging figure. Evocations of this traditional Cypriot figure also features in other narratives that the author considers, such as *Love Cult* (1981), which cast Gemser as the mysterious leader of a new age sex cult whose power base is supported by a primitive male guards. In this and other Cypriot titles such as *Emanuelle Queen of the Desert* (1980), Gemser's repeated association with Aphrodite gives her a near supernatural quality which appears as in marked contrast to the more contemporary suitors against which she is ranged. As such, Constandinides provides a convincing closing consideration of how these modern renditions of such classic Cypriot figures were also used in sex cinema releases to highlight recent military and political tensions on the island via a

series of mechanisms normally only ascribed to the more 'legitimate' forms of Greek national cinema.

While the Cypriot cinema of the 1970s sought to produce its own nationally-specific version of broader European trends of erotica, Denmark during the same period was leading the way, challenging the limits of acceptability and establishing models that would later be emulated elsewhere. Indeed Scandinavia in general, and Denmark in particular, soon became synonymous with sex, transgression and pornography. In his submission 'Incorporation of the Transgressive: Sex and Pornography in Danish Feature Films of the 1970s', Isak Thorsen considers how and why Denmark became the first country in the world to legalise picture pornography, in 1969, examining both the gradual relaxation of attitudes prior to legalisation, and the subsequent assimilation and popularisation of pornography within the mainstream. One of the reasons for legalisation was that

it was hoped that this would actually reduce the consumption of explicit material, which had proliferated on Danish screens over the past decade; but while this had been true of literary pornography, the same did not occur with cinema. Thorson notes how American filmmakers such as Alex de Renzy were among the first to cash in on the new situation, producing pseudo-educational or documentary films on the Danish approach to sex in an attempt to smuggle more explicit material onto American screens and in so doing increasing the aforementioned equation between Denmark and sexual licentiousness. Danish filmmakers also made such sociological films. However, they also produced hard-core pornographic films, including some that blended the genre with horror to produce authentic exploitation cinema that mined the desire-disgust dichotomy, as well as explicit sex comedies. Thorson explores the principal examples of all three of these trends – *Kærlighedens ABZ/ The ABC of Love*

(1961), the hugely successful six-part Zodiac series (1973-1978), *Dværgen/ The Sinful Dwarf* (Raski, 1973) and *Jeg så Jesus dø/ I Saw Jesus Die* (1975) – paying particular attention to the local production and reception contexts. In tracing this evolution, he shows how pornography in Denmark follows the “cycle of liberalisation”, through which sub-cultural transgressions become gradually integrated in mainstream, first proposed by Brian McNair.

The articles thus far have examined the auteurs and genres of European erotic cinema; Alex Marlow-Mann and Xavier Mendik’s ‘Death, Desire and Dania: Satire, Sexuality and Erotic Mobility in 1970s and 1980s Italy’, on the other hand, deals with a particular production company: Dania Film, founded by producer Luciano Martino, which (together with its sister companies) has been responsible for over 170 films and 22 TV movies and series since 1964. These

films occupied a wide range of genres, and the submission explores the way in which the company's success owed much to Martino's skill at anticipating or exploiting current trends within Italian cinema's *filone* (formula) system. However its biggest contribution was arguably to the sex comedies of the 1970s, which subsequently morphed into a darker vein of morbid erotic dramas in the decade that followed. The article seeks to locate the causes of the success of these genres, and their evolution, not only within the economics of the Italian film industry, but also within a series of wider social tensions affecting the country. The sex comedies – typically starring the iconic Edwige Fenech – negotiated the tensions created by changing gender roles in the wake of feminism and shifts in the labour market, playing for comic effect on the disruption caused by the arrival of a sexually provocative woman within a traditional male professional arena (the police, the military, the taxi service).

Nevertheless, viewed chronologically, these films articulate a gradual progression towards acceptance and normalisation of the woman's presence within the workplace, anticipating as much as reflecting broader social trends. Equally, the titillation offered by the supposedly voyeuristic gaze of such films is rendered explicit, turning the (male) spectator's act into a point of ridicule and thus raising interesting questions about feelings of male inadequacy in this society of rapidly changing gender roles. The 1970s in Italy were conflicted not only in terms of sexual relations, but also politics, with far left and right-wing terrorism threatening to destabilise the country. These events, the authors argue, contributed to the darkening of mood as the sex comedy morphed into the morbid erotic drama, and “the socially attuned and (apparently) sexually voracious Italian woman was recast as from a comic character into a potentially vengeful and threatening figure, whose potency sharply contrasted with images of

male disability, incarceration or criminal internment.”

A number of the key creative figures associated with Dania Film provide their own views on the themes raised in ‘Red Light Memories: The Dania Creatives Speak’. These responses are drawn from material filmed for the forthcoming *Cine-Excess* documentary *That’s La Morte: Italian Cult Cinema and the Years of Lead*, which, like the article, forms part of a broader research project looking into Dania Film and its productions funded by the University of Brighton’s Rising Star award. Director Sergio Martino – the brother of Dania founder Luciano – reflects on the attitudes towards sex in Italy at the time he was pioneering the Italian sex comedy, as well as on his brother’s approach to formula filmmaking. Michele Massimo Tarantini – Luciano’s cousin and another regular director of the Dania stable – addresses both the impact on changing gender roles on his

‘professional women’ comedies, and the parodying of male voyeurism. This later theme is also picked up by Alvaro Vitali, the comic actor most associated with such scenes and with the ridiculing of incompetent or infantilised masculinity. Vitali also considers the question of desire and why, despite (or perhaps because of) their relative chastity, such films fulfilled such an important erotic function for a generation of Italians. Finally, in a rare interview, Edwige Fenech, the iconic actress most readily associated with the genre, provides a wide-ranging account of her experience of performing in the films and becoming an erotic icon, her position in relation to Italian feminism and finally her transition behind the camera to the role of successful producer. These accounts provide a series of first-hand testimonies that provide colour and nuance to the account of social and sexual change in cinema and society provided by the accompanying article.

The final submission to this edition of the journal completes the circle by returning to the contemporary period and dealing with a body of films more commonly associated with art cinema than the exploitation field. The Romanian New Wave cinema produced since 2000 is probably the most surprising of the subjects treated in the current issue. However, numerous Romanian films in this period have dealt centrally with the theme of sexual violence, as Doru Pop explains in ‘Rape and Sexual Violence in Contemporary Romanian Cinema’. Given that the central concern of this issue is the complex and conflicting ways in which sex has been treated in European cinema (art/exploitation; commodification/questioning; desire/disgust), these provocative films raise issues central to understanding European cinema’s engagement with sex. Pop begins by quoting a series of frankly shocking statistics revealing the prevalence, and even normalisation, of

rape and sexual violence within contemporary Romanian society. He then addresses the way in which sexual violence has been turned into a discursive practice, arguing that analysing such narratives can provide a means of “dismantling the process of signification [and] deconstructing meaning formation in various social contexts”. Before addressing the contemporary period, he demonstrates this process in the Romanian cinema of the Communist era, showing how sexual violence served to foreground “the exploitative practices of the Capitalists (represented as violent men) on the working classes (represented as female victims)”. After the fall of Communism, the same trope was repeated but with the meaning inverted: now it was the Soviet order imposed on the nation of Romania that was presented as a form of historical rape. Similarly, the ‘Miserabilist’ cinema of Mircea Daneliuc in the 1990s utilised images of sexual violence as a metaphor for the violence and decay of post-

Communist Romanian society. In New Romanian films such as *Ryna* (2005) and the celebrated *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile/ 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), on the other hand, sexual violence is implied or alluded to, rather than explicitly depicted. This is undertaken in order to reveal the fracturing of prescribed social roles, with women forced to support one another and act from a position of strength in order to protect themselves from the violence unleashed by a degraded and weakened masculinity. If, as Pop asserts, such films suggest that traditional social relations no longer function, then films dealing with sex trafficking, such as *Loverboy* (2011), provide the most extreme consequence of this breakdown. New Wave directors thus abandoned the traditional metaphorical depiction of rape in favour of an exploration of deeper issues relating to social control and sexuality within Romanian society. Thus Pop can conclude his treatment of a painful topic on a positive note, arguing

that rape in these films is not “a means of de-humanizing femininity” but “an expression of the inherent power of the victims and a manifest declaration of an awakened social conscience.”

It should be clear, then, that this issue of the *Cine-Excess* e-journal is made up of a wide-ranging collection of case-studies, straddling art, exploitation and pornography, and a number of different national traditions. The issue does not aspire to provide a totalised picture or definition of what ‘European erotic cinema’ might be; rather it is intended to offer a patchwork of some of the myriad ways in which European cinema has approached the representation of sex and sexuality and thus contribute to a fuller, more multifaceted vision of the European erotic. The very term ‘European erotic cinema’ is itself contestable, as suggested by the varied terms used throughout the individual essays (pornography, erotica, exploitation – even ‘non-pornographic

pornography'). It is in the issue's subtitle, then, that its true scope and identity can be found: it addresses films that provoke a range of contradictory responses in relation to sexuality, from inciting to desire to eliciting disgust, repulsion or outrage. And it is this multiplicity that distinguishes the European erotic. It is here that their *excess* can be found.