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Authors	Gunn, Jenny
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The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas. Elena del Río. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016 (288 pages). *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren* Aronofsky. Tarja Laine. Berghahn Books, 2015 (194 pages).

Jenny Gunn

While graphic extremism in the cinema is certainly not new and can be traced back to the oeuvres of twentieth-century auteurs—such as Luis Buñuel, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Rainer Warner Fassbinder—a more recent urgency to characterise and define the parameters of extreme cinema has been inspired by James Quandt's coining of the intentionally pejorative term "New French Extremity". In a polemical review, published in *Art Forum* in 2004, Quandt critiqued a seemingly gratuitous emphasis in a number of recent films by contemporary French filmmakers—such as Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat and Claire Denis—on the body, sensational physicality, graphic sexuality and violence. Since Quandt's controversial writing, however, many film scholars have been keen to embrace the new extremism and to recognise it as a properly global cinematic trend. Two recently published books, Elena del Río's *Grace of Destruction* and Tarja Laine's *Bodies in Pain*, contribute to this recent body of literature while also marking what is perhaps a new phase of theoretical discussions on extreme cinema, which brings particular attention to issues of spectatorial affects and the ethics of film viewership.

As defined, for example, in the introduction to Horeck and Kendall's 2011 edited collection, *The New Extremism in Cinema*, the overriding characteristic uniting the recent extreme cinema is an "uncompromising and highly self-reflexive appeal to the spectator" (1). Similar argument is also found in the more recently published *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media*, in which coauthors Kerner and Knapp state that "if nothing else the near hysterical response to extreme cinema reveals that it appeals to the visceral experience of the viewer" (1). In this regard, like Horeck and Kendall, and Kerner and Knapp, Elena del Río's *Grace of Destruction* expands the filmic notion of extremity beyond the representation of graphic physical violence or sex, giving attention to the encounter between the spectator's body and the film-body. More specifically, and with a methodology derived from Deleuzian affect theory, for del Río an extreme cinema exhibits a sustained intensity and attention to affect as an immanent virtual force undergirding actual experience.

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Like the canonical films of the New French Extremity, such as Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* (2002) or Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003), the films considered in *The Grace of Destruction* do attend to negative affects of pain and suffering, but the production of these is understood as the result of bad affective encounters rather than physical violence per se. Interestingly, from del Río's perspective and informed by an avowed Nietzschean-Spinozan ethology, the bad affective encounter is paradigmatically that which occurs between the affective body and the repressive moral system that stifles it. In other words, *The Grace of Destruction* examines how strict morality, as the root cause of the negative affects, produces sick bodies (2). Likewise, del Río attempts to continue the project of expanding the notion of extreme cinema beyond its status as a national trend, or even as a European one, to a global phenomenon, examining a diverse range of filmmakers, including some already comfortably associated with the new extremism. In an introduction and five chapters, del Río explores the cinemas of Michael Haneke (Chapter One, "The Disease of Morality") along with Carlos Reygadas (Chapter Two, "Bare Life"), Rainer Werner Fassbinder and David Lynch (Chapter Three, "Physics of Violence, Folds of Pain"), Takeshi Kitano (Chapter Four, "Ethology of Death") and Lars von Trier (Chapter Five, "Extinction").

Interestingly, the negative affects of pain and suffering examined in *The Grace of Destruction* and the notion of the bad affective encounter vary in their thematic context, socio-political relevance, and affective tenor, ranging from the subtly negative—gender politics and sexual experience in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1980) and *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006)—to the catastrophic—total planetary apocalypse in *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011). A Spinozan-inspired ethics, such as that advocated by Deleuze and mobilised by del Río, encourages one to increase one's power, to go to the limit of what one might do: an ethos that necessitates threshold encounters. Thus, paradoxically from a Spinozan perspective, a violent encounter can be affirmative if it allows for an increase in power and the emergence of the new. As del Río argues, films such as Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003) and Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* (*Das Weiße Band—Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*, 2009) examine repressive moral systems, such as the bourgeois Oedipal family and the system of Capitalist exchange, not to reinforce them but in order to transform them, producing "counter-effects", which become activated in their spectators in the film viewing experience (3).

As del Río smartly highlights, it is the violence of an open structure and lack of narrative closure, or moralistic solutions in the nonmainstream films she considers, such as *Dogville* and *The White Ribbon*, that allow for such counter-effects to be produced: "The cinemas that adopt an ethics of immanence allow the interval to reach its creative/affective potential through a delayed response or even lack of response. In these cinemas, destructive or negative images directly issue from the cinematic potential for the destruction of old values and the creation of new values" (16). The extreme cinemas that del Río considers in *The Grace of Destruction* could thus not be more different than the closed-structure of mainstream Hollywood cinema, in which violence and transgression must be met with an equally violent and sadistic enforcement of the law. As del Río argues in her analysis of Hollywood stylistic techniques, such as the cause and effect narrative structure, if there has been a quantitative increase in violence in mainstream cinema, this has been necessarily met with a considerable rise in moralism. In del Río's view, mainstream cinema consistently fails to examine the root cause of violence and its immanent

potentiality, which is the repression of vital forces demanded by moralising systems and its concomitant "moral/humanist illusion of a subject" (2). As the author observes through the example of shot-reverse shot in Spielberg's films, rarely does mainstream cinema de-suture the spectator enough to provoke a threshold encounter or allow for the production of a counter-effect. Instead, the viewer remains locked forever in identification with the Hollywood film's moralising point of view as coded in the reaction shot.

Perhaps, then, the best counter-example to this tendency in mainstream cinema, and not coincidentally, the most extreme encounter examined in the *Grace of Destruction* is provided by von Trier's *Melancholia*, in which in confronting and experiencing the radically open event of earthly apocalypse, all opportunities for identification are erased, and likewise, all moral institutions deemed illegitimate, or even irrelevant. In the case of *Melancholia*, del Río argues that the counter-effects that extreme cinema is capable of engendering are born in a viewer's fresh scepticism for the necessity of the morality of heterosexual monogamy and marriage, particularly in the face of the global annihilation that extreme climate change, for example, represents.

While it is not explicitly stated, it is thus implied that, for del Río, the cinematic experience itself provide a threshold or limit experience in which an encounter with negative affects proves affirmative. This is perhaps where *The Grace of Destruction* most closely aligns with the thesis of Tarja Laine's *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*. While in the *Grace of Destruction* del Río seeks to open up the definition of extreme cinema to a global context, Laine arguably hones the concept in, producing a sustained study of the oeuvre of Daren Aronofsky. Linking Aronofsky's preoccupations to that of extreme cinema as a cinema of the body and again to directors such as Breillat, Denis and Noé but also Lynch, von Trier and Haneke, Laine defines body cinema as "a corporeal aesthetic [and] a cinematic style that aims at bodily immersion and affective sharing" (1). Unlike del Río's, however, Laine's attention to affect is not derived from Deleuze and Spinoza, but rather from film-phenomenology. As a result, she is ultimately less invested than del Río in a clear distinction between emotion and affect. Inspired by the work of Jennifer Barker in *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, Laine views Aronofsky's cinema as an "affective-aesthetic system," a reciprocal body that we encounter in the film viewing experience (2). Given the wide acceptance of extreme cinema's visceral and highly sensorial nature, it may be that film-phenomenology's privileging of the viewer's sensory perception and its attention to "seeing feelingly" may be the most successful methodology for conveying the film viewing experience of extreme cinemas such as Aronofsky's (5).

Expanding on Barker's concept of the film-body, Laine considers the specific ramifications of encountering a film-body in pain and elaborates on the phenomenological experience of pain in Aronofsky's cinema for viewers. For Laine, it is the particular affectiveness of Aronofsky's film style and his heightened use of unusual techniques, such as hip-hop montage, the snorricam, extreme shot angles, and the extreme performances of the actors that create a film-body in pain and produce a painful encounter for film viewers. But the value of encountering Aronofsky's painful film-bodies goes beyond mere solipsism or titillation. Rather, drawing on the discipline of film-philosophy, and thus, coming closer to del Río in methodology,

Laine argues that Aronofsky's painful film-bodies "speak through affect and not through language" (15).

Divided into an introduction, five body chapters and a conclusion, and proceeding in chronological order through Aronofsky's oeuvre, Laine focuses on the experience of pain through a range of sensory experiences (noise and rhythm) and affective states (grief, masochism, and the uncanny sublime). The author argues that Aronofsky's cinema produces a return to the senses and an ethical awareness of bodily materiality, undoing the illusion of the rational Cartesian subject for film viewers (Laine 14–15). Likewise and aligned with del Río's insistence on the immanence of affect, the pain produced in the encounter with Aronofsky's cinema undoes the illusions of the monadic subject. As Laine shows, for example, in her analysis of filmic rhythm in *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) (Chapter Two, "Rhythm"), the direct felt experience of the synthetic temporality induced in the experience of drug addiction overcomes the ethical morass of the position of a more readerly empathy, in which one preserves one's distance from the represented event. Instead, by viewing *Requiem for a Dream* through the filmic rhythm's violent oscillation between the natural circadian rhythms of the human and the synthetic nonhuman rhythms of the drug use, one comes dangerously close to an embodied experience of drug addiction. For example, Laine describes how the rapidity of the editing style in *Requiem for a Dream* allows viewers to "see feelingly" the embodied experience of Sarah's (Ellen Burstyn) growing addiction to amphetamines or, to take another example, how a series of successive and tactile close-ups of bodily injury in *The Wrestler* (2008) and *Black Swan* (2010) lead viewers to viscerally experience the physical sacrifice of the disciplined body of the performer-entertainer. Thus Laine argues that, as with the examination of moral systems in the extreme cinema of del Río's *Grace of Destruction*, the experience of encountering Aronofsky's painful film bodies produces ethical counter-effects that stay with the spectator long after the film is over.

It seems striking in light of *Bodies in Pain*, in fact, that Aronofsky's cinema, and perhaps particularly the 2000 film, *Requiem for a Dream,* have yet to be considered in the context of the new extreme cinema more generally speaking. While American cinema, in general outside of the torture porn sub-genre of horror, tends not to be included in survey discussions of the new extremism, as Laine observes, the violently affective climax of Aronofsky's *Requiem* seems easily recognisable as "perhaps the ultimate instance of cinema of the body" (1). While the question of authorship may be implicit in del Río's attention to filmmakers with well-developed oeuvres and cult-like statuses in *The Grace of Destruction*, given *Bodies in Pain*'s exclusive devotion to Daren Aronofsky's films, Laine is forced to address the issue explicitly. Inspired by a Foucauldian understanding of the author as a discursive function, as well as Mikel Dufrenne's theory of the sensuous in cinema, as the "internal organisation" of the film as an aesthetic object, Laine argues persuasively that authorship must be taken into account since the gesture of the author is imbedded in the film as an aesthetic object (4). In her view there is a parallel encounter of "expressive resonance" occurring between the viewer and the author as triangulated through the film itself. As Laine argues, and drawing from Dufrenne, "the sensuous enables the spectator to respond to the work's 'desire-to-be' in a way that corresponds to the author's engagement with it . . . the process of making is embedded in the work as the author's 'gesture' in which the spectator takes part by means of carnal familiarity" (Laine 4–5, Dufrenne 148–9). In other words, the author is the first to encounter and experience the film object as a sensuous body, as its viewers will later likewise do as well. In her defence of an auteurist approach, Laine accordingly

argues that the mark of the director's original creative gesture, or the sensuous, more forcefully resonates in viewing the films of directors like Aronofsky, who have consistently recognisable aesthetic and thematic preoccupations across an oeuvre.

Laine's theory of authorship could, in fact, be potentially promising for an expansion of del Río's project, given her own attention to directors with such secure authorship status. While *The Grace of Destruction* does not develop this line of thought, it is one take away of the book that the exploration of the repressiveness of moral systems and negative affects is a much larger concern for all of the film directors del Río chooses to include. While del Río states that the common thread uniting the filmic examples she includes is a "sustained practice of intensity [and] a *higher* investment in engaging with virtual forces as opposed to explicit violence or sexuality" (4–5; emphasis added), in fact, there has always been a dividing line in considerations of the new extreme cinema separating the restrained treatment of extremism by respectable auteurs, such as Haneke and von Trier and the more "trashy" aesthetic extremism of Ulrich Seidl, or even Eli Roth. Perhaps Laine's explicit foregrounding of an auteurist approach and a new inclusion of Aronofsky in the canon of new extremism may force a conversation concerning this problematically elitist hierarchy.

Taken together, del Río's *Grace of Destruction* and Laine's *Bodies in Pain*, while deriving from the different methodological approaches of Deleuzian affect theory and film phenomenology respectively, both continue to invigorate the conversation surrounding the new extreme cinema while also expanding the applicability of its terms in productive and challenging ways that particularly encourage us to consider the ethical and philosophical ramifications that only the extreme encounter can engender. Most importantly, moving beyond an overemphasis on graphic representational violence and sexuality, which has in many ways tautologically restrained theories of the new extremism, del Río and Laine successfully attempt to identify a series of specific aesthetic and ethical traits, by which a taxonomy of the extreme film may be more reliably and satisfactorily defined.

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Jenny Gunn is a PhD student in Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University. Jenny's research interests focus on gender and sexuality in contemporary cinema and art, digital media, and popular culture. She is editorial staff of *liquid blackness*, a research project on blackness and aesthetics.