

“A malignant, seething hatework”: An introduction to U.S. 21st century hardcore horror

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Hardcore horror meets at the intersection between pornography and horror. Films such as Fred Vogel’s *August Underground* trilogy, Shane Ryan’s *Amateur Porn Star Killer* series, Lucifer Valentine’s ‘vomit gore’ films and the standalone examples of *Scrapbook* (Stanze, 2000), *The Bunny Game* (Rehmeier, 2011) and *Hate Crime* (Bressack, 2012) have merged “the narrative facets and aesthetic practices of both genres”[1. Steve Jones, *Torture Porn: Popular Horror After Saw* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 6.] to produce a low budget, realist horror that forwards an extremely violent content. For example, in *August Underground* (Vogel, 2001) the material is presented as being of deliberately poor quality and amateurish in nature, so that the extended sequences of torture and murder come across as part of a ‘home video’ collection of the killers. In *Amateur Porn Star Killer* (Ryan, 2006), the narrative follows, in an almost single take format, the point-of-view of a young man as he picks up a 13 year old girl and proceeds to manipulate her into sexual congress before raping and strangling her. Lucifer Valentine’s ‘vomit gore’ films focus on a young woman who makes a pact with Satan to escape the trauma, abuse and suffering she has experienced throughout her life. Her journey features an array of disturbing and confrontational material such as self-induced vomiting, real sex, intense sadomasochistic activity, and protracted scenes of extreme violence. In all these examples, the films often quote and allude to the codes, conventions, and even language of pornography in their realisation of authentic and gruesome horror. Furthermore, in their use of digital technology, low-budget productions and alternative distribution and exhibition practices they also reference technological and commercial trends found in the pornography genre. It is these similarities which justify the

use of the prefix hardcore as the term bridges the production, narrative, and aesthetic strategies of hardcore horror with the unmediated, explicit and low-fi, digital filmmaking of hardcore pornography.

In terms of horror, Vogel et al. are related to but ultimately distinct from existing formations of the 'extreme' in contemporary cinema. The millennial proliferation of extreme films has engendered an increase in critical and academic response which has centred on European art extremity, East Asian extreme cinema and the popularity of 'torture porn'. [2. Tanya Horeck, Tina Kendall, eds, *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Daniel Martin, *Extreme Asia: The Rise of Cult Cinema From the Far East* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); James Aston, John Walliss, eds, *To See the Saw Movies: Essays on Torture Porn and Post-9/11 Horror* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013).] However, the examples contained within this scholarship, from Gasper Noé's *Seul contre tous/I Stand Alone* (1998) to Chan-wook Park's *Oldboy* (2003) and James Wan's *Saw* (2004), are all predicated on the tenets of mainstream or art cinema acceptability: certification via classificatory bodies, the attachment of mid-to-high level production companies, and limited to full theatrical release. Therefore, connected to this sanctioned 'approval' is the inevitable restriction it places on graphic representations of sex and violence. While more mainstream and commercial films do provide challenging and confrontational examinations of explicit material they are unable, due to financial and social contracts, to fully utilise the confection of sex and violence in truly extreme ways. The restrictions of extremity placed on these films have done little to dampen their status as purveyors of extreme cinema and, indeed, focus has remained largely within these groupings, particularly 'torture porn'. Hardcore horror is relegated to the margins of this discourse so that, as Carol Clover once said of the slasher, it resides "[d]own in the cinematic underbush." [3. Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws:*

Gender in the Modern Horror Film (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 187.] Yet, the integration of the liminal, and legitimately extreme, form of hardcore horror is essential if a wider examination of the cultural field of U.S. horror is to be provided. Not only can hardcore horror provide a corrective to “torture porn’s ostensible ‘extremity’, and the meanings of ‘torture porn’ as a categorising term,”[4. Jones, *Torture Porn*, p. 6.] it can also provide a redefinition of the boundaries of the genre within the context of contemporary U.S. horror.

Hardcore horror goes *beyond* extreme cinema yet is overlooked in much of the popular writing and academic scholarship on the subject. Here, Antonio Lázaro-Reboll’s work on the ‘archaeology of horror’ put forward in his 2012 book, *The Spanish Horror Film*, offers an appropriate methodological approach that can “reintegrate marginal filmic and cultural practices”[5. Antonio Lazaro-Reboll, *Spanish Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p.7.] of which hardcore horror currently resides in terms of its place within the horror genre. In Lázaro-Reboll’s book he maps out the essential terrains of definition, aesthetic and thematic approaches, production and exhibition, and horror reception in order to argue for a “more inclusive cultural geography of horror which takes into account the institutions and technologies, genre users and consumers that shape and participate in the process of genre classification and (re)configuration.”[6. Lazaro-Reboll, *Spanish Horror Film*, p. 5.] In turn, this leads to his formation of an ‘archaeology of horror’ that accounts for the discursive practices and structures in which the horror film is “produced, circulated and consumed.”[7. Lazaro-Reboll, *Spanish Horror Film*, p. 7.] With regards to hardcore horror such an approach is vital. If, by judging horror according to the prevailing standards and attitudes of cinematic theory along with a tendency to focus more on commercial horror, critics and scholars are in danger of potentially neglecting hardcore horror and its fertile areas

of enquiry. Themes such as cinematic realism, fandom, and performativity provide hardcore horror with insightful contributions and new ways with which to think about horror.

To reiterate, hardcore horror has received little academic attention despite the fact that it has undergone a contemporary, post-millennial boom and can add cultural value to the study of 21st century horror cinema. The marginality of the films has bestowed upon them the status of being ‘illegitimate’ and to be treated as ‘worthless’ or with indifference by critics and scholars. Certainly, the ‘unlikeable’ nature of these films and the unfettered levels of violence can be viewed as a debased spectacle for the prurient spectator. Yet, recent scholarship has begun to address what Jeffrey Sconce might see as the ‘paracinema’ of hardcore horror and has, either directly or indirectly, provided ways in which to define the films as related to but discreet from other extreme horror such as the pseudo-snuff film and ‘torture porn’.[8. Jones, *Torture Porn*; Neil Jackson, Shaun Kimber, Johnny Walker, Thomas Joseph Watson, eds, *Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); David Kerekes, David Slater, *Killing for Culture. From Edison to Isis: A New History of Death on Film* (London: Headpress, 2016).] Jones’s book *Torture Porn: Popular Horror After Saw* provides the most relevant treatise with regards to hardcore horror as it begins to point toward a definition essential to Lázaro-Reboll’s methodology of reintegrating marginalised horror into critical developments of the genre. Jones’ study is primarily a critique of ‘torture porn’ as a misrepresentative label which often acts as a pejorative for the films and their fans. The outcome is that ‘torture porn’ acts as a synecdoche for all extreme horror that ultimately exposes “inattentiveness to horror that exists outside the mainstream.”[9. Jones, *Torture Porn*, p. 171.] As a corrective, Jones positions hardcore horror as more illustrative of an authentic extreme cinema and puts forward a working definition to underline how and why this is the case. The attempt to supply a list of the key characteristics of hardcore horror represents the first scholarly engagement with the films in terms of categorising them as a discreet sub-genre of horror. For Jones, the films adhere to three over-

riding characteristics connected to hardcore horror's amalgam of the pornography and horror genres: an explicit focus on sexual violence, a prioritisation of violence over narrative development and a realist aesthetic. Jones' definition largely focuses on the films themselves, though it is necessary to expand on this composition so that the entire filmic and cultural practices of hardcore horror can be integrated into dominant accounts. Doing so will reclaim the films and position them fully within Lázaro-Reboll's thesis of a more inclusive map of the horror genre. It is important then to include elements such as marketing, distribution and how they are received by audiences so that the involvement of hardcore horror can be wholly established and its contribution to emergent trends within 21st century U.S. horror accounted for. Therefore, an expanded definition to include the full archaeology of hardcore horror would encompass:

1. An explicit focus on depictions of sexual violence;
2. A privilege of violence/spectacle over narrative;
3. A realist aesthetic;
 - a. Explicit nature of violence/sexual violence and realistic depiction;
 - b. Authenticity of performance;
4. Produce an affective charge of fear, dread, and horror;
5. Not shown theatrically;
6. Lack of certification.

North American hardcore horror certainly did not start in the 21st century and what the contemporary films highlight is that notions of extreme cinema are necessarily contingent on social, cultural, historical, and technological considerations. Herschell Gordon Lewis' *Blood Feast* (1963) and Alan Shackleton's *Snuff* (1976) are two films which today are easily dismissed as either gaudy camp or cheap and inauthentic exploitation, but during their release they caused considerable controversy and outrage with their representations of extreme and intensive horror. Hardcore horror is merely the most recent 'moment' of extreme cinema, though whether they will receive the same dismissive sentiments as *Blood Feast* and *Snuff* in the future is uncertain! The point is that hardcore horror must be situated as part of the

continuing historical development of transgressive horror so that the variety of contextual factors during the time the films were produced can be clearly presented. With this in mind, the originator of this new moment is Eric Stanze's *Scrapbook*, which represents a clear progenitor of 21st century hardcore horror with its stark, explicit and realist content, alternative exhibition and promotional devices, and in the affective charge of its reception within the horror community. The film fulfils the criteria of hardcore horror and achieves the status of one of the most controversial horror films released in the new millennium. The transgressive nature of the film and its commitment to an uncompromising and brutal horror has turned many away from the film and relegated it to the outlying reaches of the horror genre. If we are to apply Lázaro-Reboll's methodology of a horror 'archaeology' to *Scrapbook* then we can work through its notoriety and marginal position to provide conceptual frameworks with which to critically engage with the film and its contribution to contemporary North American cinema. For example, the film can provide an entry into the historical development of cinematic realism in the way it addresses the nexus of technology – socio-historical context – aesthetics embedded within 21st century discourses. *Scrapbook* destabilises any clear boundary between the real and mimesis and uses portable recording technology to anticipate how our relationship with the real was changing in the protean globalised, digital age. With its unflinching and intimate camera capturing a variety of humiliating, degrading and graphically violent scenes between the killer and his female captive, *Scrapbook* 'defamiliarizes' the real that was elided or sanitised in much of the previous horror during the 1990s.[10. I am taking the concept of 'defamiliarization' from Viktor Shklovsky, and how, in turn, it was picked up and applied to cinematic aesthetics by scholars David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson.] In doing so, the film provided a pertinent examination of the "historical, technological, aesthetic and sociological factors"[11. Christopher Williams, *Realism and the Cinema: A Reader* (London: Routledge,

1980), p.3.] of cinematic realism and how, in an age moving toward amateur testimony and accessible visual technology, our understanding of and relationship to the real was shifting.

The realist horror on display in *Scrapbook* was picked up and responded to in numerous horror forums anticipating new relationships between realist horror and the viewer, but the film was still circulated via the conventional distribution route of the video cassette. Regardless of how effective the film was in removing barriers toward the horror via its commitment to realism, *Scrapbook* would nonetheless be received as an artifice by viewers due to the formal and social arrangements, such as credit sequences and watching the film on a tape which had either been bought or rented. One example of hardcore horror that attempted to bypass the regulated distribution and exhibition processes was Fred Vogel's *August Underground*. Vogel attempted to not only produce a pseudo-snuff film that would genuinely "fool people,"[12. Fred Vogel, "DVD commentary," *August Underground* (Fred Vogel, 2001).] but to also release the film in such a way as to remove any 'official' status. *August Underground* is filmed in the found footage style and features purposefully degraded film quality and 'unprofessional' production practices to forward an authentic and realist horror. The film focuses on one killer (played by Vogel) who is filmed by an unseen cameraman/accomplice (co-writer Allen Peters). The film starts and ends without credits to give the impression that it is merely a random collection of home video footage.[13. The first bootlegs were distributed without credits and in unmarked cassette cases. When the film was finally released on DVD in 2006, an opening title page warning viewers of the violence and end credits were added.] Extremely graphic material of unconnected and spontaneous torture and murder is presented throughout in an extended and unmediated form. In terms of providing a realist document that was unrestricted by the limitations of filmic practices, Vogel built upon the verisimilitude of *August Underground* by attempting to circumvent the traditional release patterns of theatrical exhibition or of release via VHS and DVD. It was Vogel's intention to leave unmarked copies of *August Underground*

in public places such as airports and libraries in order to move the film out of any officially sanctioned realm and into the category of an illicit 'found object' to be picked up and consumed by curious passers-by. Perhaps unfortunate in terms of Vogel's desire to genuinely "fool people" into thinking they were watching footage of 'real' death, he ultimately decided against such an audacious method due to the immediacy of 9/11 and the very real possibility of a lengthy period of incarceration. However, the film was still distributed anonymously and as an unmarked VHS, only this time to the underground scene and horror fans receptive to violent and extreme material.

August Underground is relentless in its graphic exploration of an almost documentary-like aesthetic of violence and death. Canadian horror magazine *Rue Morgue* declared the second instalment, *Mordum* (Vogel, 2003) a "malignant, seething hatework,"[14. This quote appears on the cover of the *Mordum* DVD, *August Underground: Mordum* (Fred Vogel, 2003).] and the nature of the trilogy as being obscene, confrontational, and repellent is inextricable from its representational strategies. Vogel's obsessive commitment to producing a realist horror is unprecedented in its levels of violent content and has provided important ways with which to engage with notions of the real within the contemporary horror genre. It has also impacted on other cultural practices such as fandom and the dominant structuring element in horror fandom studies between connoisseurship – distinction – subcultural capital.[15. See, Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London: Continuum, 2005); Mark Jancovich, 'A Real Shocker: Authenticity, Genre and the Struggle for Distinction', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* (14: 1, 2000), pp. 23-35., and although dealing with club culture, Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) can be effectively mapped onto horror fandom.] Here, the reception of the *August Underground* films uncovers distinct trends within audiences of how horror is experienced in ways which destabilise the strict hierarchal nature of fandom and the nature of affect and the

inauthentic viewer. For example, Matt Hills has spoken at length about how “the act of being scared is predominantly located on the side of non-fandom”[16. Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror*, p. 74.] and is thus downplayed or disavowed in fan discourse lest it be connected to inauthenticity. Hills goes on to highlight how knowledge is instead prioritised as essential and desirable so that connoisseurship and expertise can be vaunted to create a distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ fans. Although the term ‘scared’ is never mentioned, fans typical responses to the *August Underground* films were along the lines of “I felt sick on several occasions”, “I found [*Mordum*] disgusting”, “it’s very hard to watch”, “I lasted 5mins... that stuff is just too fucked up for my liking”, and “I had to turn off after 35 minutes because my stomach was nauseous and I wanted to scrub my eyes with bleach.”[17. These viewer responses were taken from the *Bloody Disgusting* and *The Mortuary* forums: <http://bloody-disgusting.com/forums/>, <http://the-mortuary.com/>.] The responses highlight a very strong, almost primal, response to the films and while not articulating directly that they were fearful or scared, reactions such as feeling sick, being disgusted, and having to turn the film off should reduce the status of the ‘authentic’ viewer and thus invalidate any distinct and hierarchical positioning of fan identity. However, what the forum threads on the *August Underground* films highlight is that these reactions are instead valued and seen as the desired response. Fans who admit to these feelings and responses to the film are bestowed with a status of increased authority and legitimacy. Primarily, this is connected to Vogel’s commitment to make an authentic and realist document, with the intention to genuinely confuse viewers over the exact provenance of the material and whether or not it contained scenes of actual real death. Fans who aligned themselves with Vogel’s approach understood that responses of fear, dread and horror were exactly the desired affective qualities of the film. *August Underground* is *not* meant to be viewed in the same way as a mainstream horror, where being scared is denied so as to not expose yourself as an inauthentic fan. *August Underground* is a corrective to both the sanitized

content of mainstream horror *and* to its safe affective spectatorship. Thus, viewers declaring that they were unaffected by what they saw were in fact conflating the films with more mainstream and commercial horror. In failing to acknowledge the distinction between the two spheres, viewers inadvertently marked themselves out as lacking connoisseurship and knowledge with regards to the representational strategies of the films. Fans that clearly expressed the affective qualities caused by the *August Underground* trilogy often continued by relating it to the authenticity of the diegetic violence and how it connected to their experiences of ‘real-life’ scenes of violence. Rather than crudely positioning themselves in opposition to the mainstream, the fans situate themselves as more active on the affect of horror and as Hills has pointed out, the fan instead “acts upon horror”[18. Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror*, p. 89.] rather than the horror simply acting upon them.

Shane Ryan’s *Amateur Porn Star Killer* films also pick up and develop the changing landscape of cinematic realism circulating in American society in the 21st century. The trilogy of films “epitomizes the faux-snuff methodology, being mainly constituted by real-time, camcorder-shot footage”[19. Steve Jones, ‘A View to a Kill: Perspectives on Faux-Snuff and Self’, in *Snuff*, Jackson, et al, eds, p. 278.] and authentic and realist representations of violence and death. *Amateur Porn Star Killer* (2006) focuses on a young, white, male killer called Brandon (played by Ryan) who picks up 13 year old Stacey (Michiko Jimenez) and takes her to a motel where he eventually rapes and murders her. The film produces authentic performances and a growing sense of unease and dread alongside stylistic inserts such as quotes about the cultural fascination with snuff and sensational details of Brandon’s criminal activities. The further two instalments, *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* (Shane Ryan, 2008) and *Amateur Porn Star Killer 3: The Final Chapter* (Shane Ryan, 2009) repeat the basic set-up and continue the formal and narrative developments of the first film. Ryan’s realist horror moves away from Vogel’s stance of convincing people that they are watching the ‘real thing’ to

present its material as if it had been found and released by a distribution/production company. Ryan's purposeful manipulation of the footage is to suggest that this is what would, or will happen, if snuff *were* to emerge within our visual media. From the stylised elements of Luca Magnotta's filmed mutilation of Chinese student Lin Jun to the highly contrived narratives and techniques of the "ideologically motivated snuff videos"[20. Mark Astley, "Snuff 2.0: Real Death Goes HD Ready," in *Snuff*, Jackson, et al, eds, p. 159.] of Islamic extremists and terrorist networks, we have seen an increased mediation in how unsimulated depictions of violence and death have been (re-)presented. In turn, these documents of real death are positioned as more in line with their cinematic and televisual counterparts. With its continued manipulation of the realist frame, the *Amateur Porn Star Killer* series provides a prophetic examination of how the realist aesthetic of snuff has developed toward a more 'entertaining' spectacle of violence as images of real death become preponderant in the media during the 21st century.

As previously stated, Ryan moves away from Vogel's mimetic horror toward 'real' violence re-packaged as entertainment. Over the course of the three films, Ryan manipulates the aesthetics of snuff so that rather than just documenting death with a "sense of real world authenticity though a primitive gaze,"[21. Kerekes, Slater, *Killing for Culture*, p. 75.] he points instead toward a more complex engagement with how the mythology of snuff is experienced and disseminated by screen media during the 21st century. Central to this mythology is, of course, the reality-based mechanics of snuff and how its use and manipulation via amateur recordings of atrocity to propagandistic extremism and news reportage has had "far-reaching consequences for the ways in which we might understand images of violence and murder." [22. Neil Jackson, 'Introduction. Shot, Cut, and Slaughtered: The Cultural Mythology of Snuff', in *Snuff*, Jackson, et al, eds, p. 16.] In this complex web between the real and the artificial, reality further recedes from our grasp. Therefore, throughout the *Amateur Porn Star Killer* films, Ryan seems to suggest that now even the real would be questioned and eyed with suspicion if not

mediated through various stylistic or ideological filters. Similar to *August Underground* and fortified by the amateur footage and News channels repackaging of 9/11 as a spectacular Hollywood narrative, the phenomenal rise of social media sites during the 2000s, and the increasing occurrence of on-line death videos, the *Amateur Porn Star Killer* films provide a pertinent example of how our relationship with the real has changed in the 21st century and to the ever growing complexity of what is seen and understood as reality.

The final major strand of hardcore horror in the 21st century has been the ‘vomit gore’ films of Lucifer Valentine (*Slaughtered Vomit Dolls*, 2006; *ReGOREgitated Sacrifice*, 2008; *Slow Torture Puke Chamber*, 2010; *Black Mass of the Nazi Sex Wizard*, 2015). Valentine’s films modify the realist horror of Vogel and Ryan by forwarding a highly stylised and ontogenetic portrayal of its main character, Angela Aberdeen (Ameara La Vey), as she attempts to escape the physical and sexual abuse she has suffered since her early teenage years. The filmmaking process for Valentine is not predicated by commercial imperatives or exposure necessarily into the horror community and independent film circuit.[23. Lucifer Valentine has not attended any film conventions or festivals to promote his films, nor has he had any of the ‘vomit gore’ films screened. See, “History of vomit gore,” *Slaughtered Vomit Dolls* (Lucifer Valentine, 2006).] Instead, Valentine talks about his work as personal creative projects borne out of his dominant/submissive sadomasochistic relationship with Ameara La Vey.[24. Greigh Johanson, “Lucifer Valentine,” *Goregasmic Cinema*, September 2012, accessed 6 June 2016, <http://goregasmiccinema.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/lucifer-valentine.html>.] Valentine and La Vey’s close relationship developed over many months as the first ‘vomit gore’ film, *Slaughtered Vomit Dolls*, started to take shape. During this time, La Vey approached the process by drawing upon previous experiences as an erotic dancer and adult movie performer as well as her struggle with bulimia and alcoholism. La Vey’s performance throughout is intense and kinetic as she uses gesture and expression to push her body to extremes, often subjecting it to risk and harm.

The result is a performativity that punctuates and destabilises the narrative through affective acts such as vomiting and sadomasochistic violence. [25. A difficult term to categorise and define, performativity is, broadly speaking, an act ‘like a performance’ without actually being a performance in the traditional sense. See, Richard Schechner, Sara Brady, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Third edition (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 123 – 169.] The extreme modalities of performance link to what ‘vomit gore’ means to Valentine in terms of providing a creative opportunity to purge trauma so that transcendence from personal suffering and tragedy can take place. The term ‘vomit gore’ therefore necessitates the representation of a grotesque, violent and transgressive visual spectacle combined with a personal and spiritual redemption in its engagement with trauma and suffering. To this end, the films provide a controversial, highly symbolic, extremely graphic and realistic composition of hardcore horror.

The ‘vomit gore’ films point to alternative ways with which to approach the genealogy of horror and to its promotion and exhibition, but its most valuable contribution to the landscape of contemporary horror is how the films engage with performance and performativity. The excessive and deviant body which this performance often extends from is unlike anything offered up in more mainstream productions, even those broken and mangled bodies that populate the narratives of ‘torture porn’. Therefore, the films can provide a wider range of somatic experiences that challenge the contract between performer and performance and performance and the audience. The ‘vomit gore’ films widen out the realist special effects and authentic *mise-en-scène* of other hardcore horror examples to include real displays of distasteful and ‘abnormal’ acts contained within an affective performativity. These acts include numerous examples which “breach acceptability standards”[26. Jones, *Torture Porn*, p. 182.] through the delineation of the ‘clean and proper’ body in which urine, menstrual blood and vomiting are connected to more representational scenarios of rape, torture and murder. The use of ‘abnormal’ acts combined with authentic SFX work does not necessarily “function... to limn

grotesque acts just because ugly deeds are shown.”[27. Jones, *Torture Porn*, p. 180.] In fact, in the focus on the suffering of Angela Aberdeen, the films provide a highly symbolic treatment of her trauma and provide an intimate exploration of how child abuse, bulimia and sex work has contributed to the physical and psychological breakdown we witness during the first instalment of *Slaughtered Vomit Dolls*. Although such representations cannot fully communicate what the reality of sexual abuse or bulimia is like for a particular person, the series of films do provide an effective, albeit horrendous, visual record of the trauma and suffering. The viewer is forced to confront Angela’s anguish through a series of abstracted scenes of violent trauma that represent her sub-conscious manifestation of the horror that has categorised her life. In the focus the ‘vomit gore’ films place on Angela’s suffering, Jones has commented that they present Angela simply as a victim and helpless in her actions. The pact she makes with Satan would seem to further exemplify her subordinate position as she declares that she will kill and die for him. The films also break down the experiences of Angela into archetypes such as ‘stripper’, ‘beauty queen’, and ‘teen porn star’ and as such present Angela as a type of ‘everywoman’ which “risks implying all women are (potential) Angelas.”[28. Jones, *Torture Porn*, p. 181.] Jones’ contention is that the films are effective in showing the horror of abuse and psychological breakdown, but ultimately restate the passive nature and victim status of women. Yet, the affective performativity of Ameara La Vey as Angela warrants a closer examination of how the focus on the self and the body in her performance may instead provide a critique of power structures tied up in oppressive patriarchal discourses.

Ameara La Vey’s prioritisation of body performance situates her violated body as the “central object over and through which relations of power and resistance are played out”[29. Colin Counsell, Laurie Wolf, eds, *Performance Analysis: An Introductory Course Book* (London: Routledge, 2001, p. 141.) and in doing so addresses the power dynamics involved in the construction of female identity. For example, the archetypes presented in the ‘vomit gore’

films are particular labels imposed on Angela as part of a patriarchal society. Angela has been commodified and exploited through these terms and has been unable to either redraw their meanings or to escape their stultifying and coercive force. In *ReGOREgitated Sacrifice*, Angela is able, finally, to confront these archetypes as they are ritually destroyed and purged from her subconscious. These identities that have been imposed onto Angela are thus broken down and removed, enabling her to forge a new identity of self-representation. In these cases, La Vey uses her body as a performative space to resist female subjugation and to recoup a female centred perspective on identity. In doing so, Angela manages to expose the oppressive and limiting force of the archetypes and in their place offers a transgressive and ‘abnormal’ female performativity. Identity is recognised as not fixed, not given, and not settled and Angela/Ameara’s performance of transgressive gestures and actions proposes a transformative self that is in the process of becoming.

The films, and especially *Slaughtered Vomit Dolls* and *ReGOREgitated Sacrifice*, set up the prospect of a political engagement with gender performativity and how it is enforced within a patriarchal, phallogentric social order. Yet Jones has commented that the artist ultimately remains absent from the proceedings. That is, Angela is trapped within a never ending cycle of suffering and abuse and after the first film is only presented as already dead, living on in the Kingdom of Hell or returning back to the surface to ‘infect’ another ‘Angela’ character.[30. Jones, *Torture Porn*, p. 180.] However, this does not suggest that Angela/Ameara is simply a victim destined to repeat and act out her trauma. The ‘abnormal’ gestures in the film and particularly the gesture of vomiting and sadomasochism disrupt and disorganise the narrative to provide an expression of transformation and becoming. The labels of ‘stripper’ and ‘beauty queen’ can be seen as “part and parcel of the cultural attempt to codify and contain women with safe and predictable limits.”[31. Elena del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 31.] Yet, as the films

show, these labels do not have to be determining and can be used as a “point of departure in a process that may lead to a less safe configuration.”[32. del R o, *Powers of Affection*, p. 31.] Therefore, in the ‘vomit gore’ films, binary notions of “oppressive structures and expressive capacities”[33. del R o, *Powers of Affection*, p. 31.] coexist in that the subjugation of Angela/Ameara does not limit and constrain expression. Ultimately, her mind is the “target of control and domination by the linguistic sign[s]”[34. del R o, *Powers of Affection*, p. 36.] of ‘stripper’ or ‘teen porn star’ but her body and its affective-performativity act as a site of resistance. Angela’s endless cycle of abuse and helplessness does not become “indicative of a tendency to render injured parties unknowable outside of their torture in hardcore horror,”[35. Jones, *Torture porn*, p. 180.] but as a “sensational *force* that disrupts, redirects, and indeed affects narrative *form*.”[36. del R o, *Powers of Affection*, p. 15] The affective-performativity of the ‘vomit gore’ films inserts fissures or ruptures into the narrative that shocks audiences and disorganises any ‘safe’ way of receiving the films or that of female identity. The gesture of vomiting, sadomasochistic sex, and body violation may appropriate (and even reinforce) patriarchal formations of the female subject, but also fights that appropriation through affective performance that undermines or offers a flight from totalising or definitive representational categories.

As can be seen from the films discussed, hardcore horror enables new ways of thinking about horror outside of normative filmmaking practices and general constructions and conceptions of horror. The article has mainly positioned realist horror, expressive and affective performance, and fandom to highlight both hardcore horror’s marginal status and how it can provide cultural value to existing discourses on horror in the 21st century. Similar accounts can also be given for how the films are conceived and the utilisation of unconventional exhibition and marketing routes. Here, the films, their makers and their fans, as social groups overlooked previously, form an important site in providing a more comprehensive genre space to consider

horror in the contemporary period. Therefore, including the narrative and chronological history of hardcore horror will open up a wider cultural and critical platform to recoup this outcast strand of North American horror film. It will also shift the current dominant critical framework to accommodate marginal forms as necessary in providing an archaeology of horror in the 21st century. Ultimately, hardcore horror *is* a marginalised adjunct to mainstream and commercial horror, but that does not mean it should be seen as worthless or irrelevant in providing a critical treatment of how the horror genre's outer limits can provide as much rich detail as that of its centre. Hardcore horror is an important, if disturbing and dangerous, addition, if appreciation and understanding of the contemporary U.S. horror film is to be fully realised.

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