

Escape from representation? Excess, meaning and materiality in exploitation cinema

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Teaser

In this paper, Kristina Pia Hofer reflects on how the significance of material excess in exploitation cinema can complicate and enrich readings that focus on the politics of representation of trash film.

Kurzbio

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Exploitation cinema is a genre of excess. Films like Herschell Gordon Lewis' *She-Devils on Wheels* (1968) flaunt surplus and hyperbole: protagonists play stock roles that embody stereotypes of exaggerated difference (for instance, of gender, sexuality, race and class), sensational display is privileged over coherent narrative, and an often trashy materiality—noise, grain, wear and decay—keeps oozing through the seams of the works.

[Video 1: Caption: The trailer for *She-Devils on Wheels*,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l316hJEdraw>]

In everyday language, excess is what spills over limits: the superfluous, the unnecessary, the overly forceful, the embarrassingly intense, the too much of anything. Lacking clearly discernible rational or functional motivation, excess appears beyond (common) comprehension and defies (logical) explanation. As a consequence, the threshold of excess often marks the boundaries of that which is perceived as proper, as usual, or as 'normal'. In exploitation cinema, however, excess does not figure as incidental (or aberrant), but rather as a welcome feature: it emerges as one of its central generic modalities. 'Cult film' scholarship has long linked exploitation cinema's exhibitionist, sensationalistic qualities to an early cinema of attractions (1) and described the dynamics that keep pulling audiences (and critics) towards exploitation films as visceral and affective (2). Excess, it seems, takes center stage as one of the main markers of the genre.

This emphasis on excess in exploitation films invites an exploration that goes beyond an interpretation of their politics of representation. After all, analyses of representation in cultural studies usually approach films as language or code, and ask for the meaning(s) and significations transported by images, sounds and texts (3). However, excess—per definition—does not primarily communicate meaning. Kristin Thompson (1986) describes cinematic excess as diametrically opposed to narrative content, and as unable to clearly signify. She locates excess in "those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces"—that is, in every aspect of a movie that does not propel the story, and disturbs the impression of narrative coherence (4). Here, excess emerges from those elements that become "incomprehensible" (5) when measured against the conventions of classical narrative film: the convention that narrative must be smooth, and that filmic labor should be invisible (6). As an effect, excess "defamiliarizes" viewers (7), and tends to leaving audiences puzzled as what to do with and how to make sense of it. This may also owe to the fact that cinematic excess, in many instances, announces itself as a material presence of the technologies and the physical stuff that a film is made

of: Thompson here especially points out the quality of the colors visible on screen (8), the cuts and fabrics of wardrobe and costumes (9), acting styles and framing that draw attention to the actors' and actresses' bodies, especially their skin (10), and film sound and music that primarily communicate their texture instead of their syntax (11).

Given that, it is surprising that the bulk of academic engagement with exploitation cinema still focuses on teasing meaning exclusively from narrative and characterization, instead of engaging more thoroughly with the material aspects of the excess that is so typical for the genre (12). This absence becomes even more striking when looking at how later filmmakers appropriate exploitation modalities in their own work. Budget Rock musician/filmmaker Michael Lucas and trash director John Waters, for instance, who both claim to be directly influenced by Herschell Gordon Lewis (13), notably stage excess in trashy, heavy visual and sonic textures, in exaggerated histrionics or wooden acting styles, and through employing outdated technologies that announce themselves in media-specific wear and decay. In these appropriations of exploitation cinema, cinematic excess appears as something fundamentally material.

Material excess in appropriation: examples

One aspect of material excess in which Lucas' and Waters' works resemble *She-Devils* lies within the (textile) fabrics used for backdrops and wardrobe. The Man-Eaters of *She-Devils on Wheels* wear garish colors, freakish designs, and tacky cloth (see Fig. 1). Queen, the Man-Eaters' leader, wears a different outfit in almost every scene—most notably a tight pantsuit made from silver glitter fabric with an oversized matching hat, and a yellow catsuit and studded hood of black leather that tightly hugs her skull. In contrast, Whitey, a butch character, wears remarkably similar plain-leggings-and-T-shirt outfits throughout the movie (which nevertheless invite some textural marvel of their own, as the cloth they are made of appears strangely flat and rigid, at times almost looks as if it was cut from cardboard). However, a trashily textured marker of femininity-as-masquerade is literally pinned even on the butch: from underneath Whitey's black patent leather biker hat emerges a thick, long, stiff, yellow French braid with a suspiciously plasticky feel to it. In some scenes, Whitey wears an additional braid just as thick as the other one, which adds to the impression that we are looking at fake hair. Even the Man-Eaters' 'colors,' the cut-off jackets signifying gang membership, come in smooth, brightly colored cloth, the light shine of which screams synthetics (see Fig. 2. Queen is wearing a fake fur leopard print jacket to mark her position as gang leader, see Fig. 3). With their cheap, flimsy fabrics, the jackets look almost obscenely playful in comparison to the more conventional colors of scuffed leather or faded denim that make an appearance in other films of the biker exploitation

cycle (14). On their backs, the vests carry the Man-Eaters' logo, a pink cat's head with slanted yellow eyes, bared white vampire fangs, and a cutesy bow tie cut from black velvet.



(Fig. 1, Caption: Tacky fabrics on a Man-Eater)



(Fig. 2, Caption: The Man-Eaters' cut-offs)



(Fig. 3, Caption: Leopard print for the Queen)

Similarly, *Pink Flamingos* (1972), to pick but one of John Waters' films, goes out of its way to look and feel cheap, an endeavor that blazes from every fiber of its wardrobe, makeup, hair, and sets.

[Video 2: Caption: Textile excess in *Pink Flamingos*,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCGGetB0OX4g>]

Michael Lucas' *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* also sports excessive fabrics and textures, which at times even seem to run counter the protagonists' characterization. Unsurprisingly, the Leather Girls who give the feature its title wear black leather jackets adorned with studs, safety pins and band names painted in white marker (among them, for instance, the infamous late 1970s San Francisco punkers Crime). The cool, distanced punk appearance, however, is laced with more homely fabrics: the translucent plastic of throwaway, see-through rain coats, the black and white satin of cheap bras, and strangely haptic domestic interiors cluttered with grubby net curtains and oversize stuffed animals.

[Video 3: Caption: Clashing fabrics in *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vR7RedODPYc>]

A perhaps even more pervasive manifestation of excessive material excess that all the exploitation films discussed in this chapter share lies within their noisy sonic signatures. *She-Devils on Wheels*, *Pink Flamingos* and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*

all make use of 1950/60s (or 50s/60s-influenced) Garage Rock'n'Roll numbers for their musical soundtracks, which come with their own layer of excessively prevalent audio textures: ear-shattering treble levels, shrill vocals, tinny drums, and novelty sounds like growling, rumbling, bird calls, or motors roaring. However, the songs used in these films, especially *Get Off The Road* and *Hate Teen*, are not only noisy because of their (Proto-)Punk attitude and instrumental arrangement, but also because a consistently present "sound of technology" (15) lays bare their lo-fi recording practices. In contrast to the norms of standard professional sound production (16), these recordings do not strive towards maximal signal-source fidelity. Alongside the desired audio signal, that is, the actual music performed by the band, they also contain the humming, static hiss, drones, grain, and dropouts, distortions and limitations caused by the material stuff of recording technology itself, that is, by the oxides of magnetic tape, the motors in tape recorders, the current running through cables, and the diaphragms of microphones.

[Video 4, Caption: "Get Off The Road" by Sheldon Seymore and Robert Lewis in *She-Devils on Wheels*]

[Video 5, Caption: "The Girl Can't Help It" by Little Richard in *Pink Flamingos*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZBLt_rcehE]

[Video 6, Caption: "Hate Teen" by Dave Nudelman and the Wild Breed in *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*]

The excessive presence of the sound of technology extends into the non-musical soundtracks of the three films discussed. In *She-Devils on Wheels*, for instance, non-significatory audio events like ambient noise or optical crackle routinely threaten to drown out signals that propel the narrative and transport content, like dialog or diegetic sound effects. Especially in scenes shot on location, like Honeypot's initiation in video 7, dialog is often rendered completely unintelligible, which allows audiences to only guess what the characters are saying.

[Video 7, Caption: Honeypot's initiation, *She-Devils on Wheels*:]

Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls picks up on these sonic aesthetics even more consistently, and often features long, dialog-driven scenes, in which the meaning of what is talked about nevertheless remains barely audible due to excess room reverberation and overwhelming tape hiss.

[Video 8, Caption: At the No Girls Allowed Clubhouse, *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*]

In *Pink Flamingos*, the lo-fi sound recording equipment and practices employed causes dialog that carries the most narrative motivation to produce the most excessive acting: as if aware that what they said would have to compete with a lot of noise on tape, the cast deliver their most important lines yelling at the top of their voices, and enunciating each word carefully and slightly slower than they normally would.

[Video video 9, Caption: Divine gets a Birthday present, *Pink Flamingos*,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RKgmEw6xZE>]

Addressing material appropriations: resonance

Methodological frames for analyzing representation often focus on film as functioning like a semiotic system: as a code of arbitrary signs that transport meaning regardless of their specific material qualities. Material manifestations of cinematic excess like noise, which do not signify, but rather foreground their own weave and texture at the expense of a film's content, cannot be appropriately addressed with such frames. As their materiality exceeds their semiotic function as 'neutral' placeholders for an abstract signified, they appear as meaningless, unnecessary trash that does not warrant further critical examination (17). In contrast, Susanna Paasonen recommends sounding resonances, not just deciphering the codes of representation, as a method for studying genres of (material) excess (18). Taking its cue from affect studies and "new materialism", Paasonen's concept of resonance addresses excess as a visceral quality of sound and images, whose specific haptic and textured material quality can very well convey significance. This significance, however, is quite different from the meaning transported by semantic signs. This significance is meaningfulness that emerges from the affective intensities that an excessive audiovisual can move audiences to (19). Paasonen appropriates "resonance" in its

"... thesaurus definitions such as 'richness or significance, especially in evoking an association or strong emotion'; 'intensification and prolongation of sound, especially of a musical tone, produced by a sympathetic vibration'; 'sound produced by a body vibrating in sympathy with a neighboring source of sound', and 'oscillation induced in a physical system when it is affected by another system that is itself oscillating at the right frequency'" (20)

As this definition clearly shows, resonances depend on at least two bodies or agents interacting. Sounding resonances thus means addressing the dynamics of movement, fluctuation, touch and affective reverberation that unfold between a film and an audience as they encounter in a specific viewing/listening situation. As a consequence, resonances are not easy to predict or generalize: exploring them necessitates to always consider "who is encountering the images [and sounds,

KPH], how, where, and when" (21). Importantly, the form and shape a specific moment of resonance may take also depends on how the different systems of meaning and meaningfulness I have sketched above interact. (Representational) signification, (emotional) significance and (affective) intensity may amplify, contradict, feed back into each other, or cancel each other out (22). Research design aiming at an analysis of such dynamics of interaction must thus also ask how, for different viewers and listeners, the meaning that traditional sites of semiotic interest (like narrative content, characterization, genre history, ideological charge, intertextuality of images and sound) assign to a film may be affirmed, altered, or contested by the same film's material qualities, like the textures described above, and the material conditions of the specific viewing situation (23). This entails thinking agency in unusual ways: unlike representational frames, which usually presuppose agency as human only, sounding resonances explores whether, and what exact sort of, agential potential might also reside within matter (24).

Thinking excess with materiality: impulses

Not surprisingly, trying to put these methodological impulses to practice comes with its own set of difficulties. As Susanna Paasonen has repeatedly pointed out, academic criticism operates and depends on making sense within the realm of language and the semantic, while material resonances not always do. Processing one's findings about the material dimensions of excess for academic presentation, publication and discussion thus necessitates a translation of these dynamics into language, even if that means that the aspects most crucial to one's insights do not transcribe well, and are therefore lost (25). In my own engagement with the (sonic) excess of *She-Devils on Wheels*, *Pink Flamingos* and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*, I have at times found it easier to process and express the dynamics at play between Lewis' film and the later appropriations not in my role as the media theorist Kristina Pia Hofer, but as the Garage Rock'n'Roll musician, producer and performer Ana Threat. Thinking about a possible agentiality of recording equipment and the significance of dirty sonic textures has no doubt stimulated my writing, and has allowed me to formulate questions on subject/Other binaries in exploitation cinema (26), the historicity of trash film materiality (27), and the feminist_queer potential of the fantastic, excessive "exploitation feminism" conjured up in films like *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* (28) in language. At the same time, however, I felt that the more appropriate (and definitely the more affectively intense) field for working through the very same questions was the production of messy, materially excessive appropriations of exploitation cinema of my own—by wrestling with the acoustics of my rehearsal room to get the envelope and exact degree of distortion right for a cymbal recorded with a trashy

microphone (hear Knives Ready on *Dropout Dumpling*, link 1), by arranging songs in dialog with the distinct sonic signature of the 4-track magnetic tape recorder I use as an effect for my vocals (see video 10, musical performance starts at minute 9:45), and by staging my own Girl Gang exploitation short fully aware that one of the most important performers was not just the humans acting on screen, but also the specific sonic and visual texture brought on by the analog Video 8 camcorder that director Theresa Adamski used for the shoot (see video 11).

[Link 1: Caption: Ana Threat, Dropout Dumpling (2013),
<http://anathreatxxx.bandcamp.com/album/dropout-dumpling-2x7>]

[Video 10, Caption: Ana Threat and Kristina Pia Hofer lecturing at Kunstuniversität Linz, <http://dorftv.at/video/8733>]

[Video 11, Caption: Ana Threat, Bretzel High Stomp (2013),
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76VKJJaLip8>]

To conclude, what both my 'straight' academic address of exploitation cinema's materiality and my punky performances show is that they are no attempts to escape from the semantics of representation. Signification through signs—for instance, in the repeated citation of what has solidified into the aesthetic codes of Garage Rock'n'Roll and trash film fandom since the late 1970s (29)—is crucial in my thinking and writing, as well as in my recording and performing practices. Still, especially my audio/visual work bespeaks a desire for analytical frames and practices that also account for the other things the excessive materiality does to—and with—viewers and listeners in excess of standing for some other signified: moving, distracting, trashing reception experiences in their very visceral, immediate texture.

Final score

(1) See Eric Schaefer: *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. Durham 1999, p. 76ff. See also Danny Shipka: *Perverse Titillation: The Exploitation Cinema of Italy, Spain and France, 1960-1980*. Jefferson, NC 2011, p. 10.
(2) See Elena Gorfinkel: "'Dated Sexuality': Anna Biller's Viva and the Retrospective Life of Sexploitation Cinema". In: *Camera Obscura* 26 (3) 2011. See also Mark Jancovich: "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production of Cultural Distinctions". In: *Cultural Studies* 16 (2) March 2002. See also Jeffrey Sconce: "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of

Cinematic Style". In: *Screen* 36 (4) Winter 1995. See also Jeffrey Sconce (Ed.): *Sleaze Artists. Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style and Politics*. Durham 2007. See also Danny Shipka: *Perverse Titillation: The Exploitation Cinema of Italy, Spain and France, 1960-1980*. Jefferson, NC 2011.

(3) See Stuart Hall (Ed.): *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London 1997. See also Susanna Paasonen: *Carnal Resonance. Affect and Online Pornography*. Cambridge, MA 2011.

(4) Kristin Thompson: "The Concept of Cinematic Excess". In: *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology. A Film Theory Reader*. Ed. by Philip Rosen. New York 1986, p. 131.

(5) Thompson 1986, p. 133.

(6) See David Bordwell: "Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures". In: *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology. A Film Theory Reader*. Ed. by Philip Rosen. New York 1986.

(7) Thompson 1986, p. 134.

(8) See Thompson 1986, p. 141.

(9) See Thompson 1986, p. 137.

(10) See Thompson 1986, p. 134.

(11) See Thompson 1986, p. 139.

(12) See Kristina Pia Hofer: "Vom Begehren nach Materialität: Sonischer Dreck, Exploitationkino, feministische Theorie". In: *FKW Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur*. Nr. 57, October 2014.

(13) See John Waters: *Shock Value. A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste*. New York 1981, pp. 191ff. & Wallid H. Fielding, "The Creator of Blood Orgy Talks to Me", blog post, 26 November, 2010)

(14) See, for instance, *Wild Angels* (Roger Corman 1966) or *Hell's Angels on Wheels* (Richard Rush 1967).

(15) Birtwistle 2010, 126ff.

(16) See Mary Ann Doane: "Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing". In: *The Cinematic Apparatus*. Ed. by Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heat. London 1980. See also Rick Altman, "General Introduction: Cinema as Event". In *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*. Ed. by Rick Altman, London 1992. See also John Belton: "1950s Magnetic Sound: The Frozen Revolution". In: *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*. Ed. by Rick Altman. London 1992. See also Robert Spadoni: *Uncanny Bodies: The coming of sound film and the origins of the horror genre*. Berkeley & Los Angeles 2007; Andy Birtwistle: *Cinesonica. Sounding Film and Video*. Manchester 2010, pp. 85ff.

(17) See Birtwistle 2010. See also 2011. See also Hofer 2014.

(18) See Paasonen 2011, pp. 13ff.

(19) See Paasonen 2011, pp. 8ff.

(20) Paasonen 2011, p. 16.

(21) Paasonen 2011, p. 17.

(22) See Birtwistle 2010, pp. 126ff.

(23) For instance, the affordances of the technology that an individual copy of the film is played back from, see Paasonen 2011, p. 17. See also Altman 1992.

(24) See Paasonen 2011, pp. 256ff. See also Karen Barad: *Meeting the Universe Halfways: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham 2007. See also Michael David Kirchhoff: "Material Agency: A Theoretical Framework for Ascribing Agency to Material Culture". In: *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 13(3), Fall 2009, no page number.

(25) See Susanna Paasonen: "Disturbing, Fleshy Texts: Close Looking at Pornography". In: *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*. Ed. by Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen. London 2010. See also Paasonen 2011, p. 200. See also Laura U. Marks: *Touch. Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis 2002, pp. ix ff.

(26) See Hofer 2014.

(27) See Kristina Pia Hofer : "Exploitation Feminism: Trashiness, Lo-Fidelity and Utopia in *She-Devils on Wheels* and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*. Currently under review for *Transatlantica* Special Issue: Exploiting Exploitation.

(28) See Kristina Pia Hofer: "Dirty Sound: The Camp Materialism of *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*". In: *The Dark Side of Camp. Queer Economy of Dust, Dirt and Patina*. Ed. by Franziska Bergmann et al. London forthcoming.

(29) See, for instance, Rupert Weinzierl: *Fight the Power! Eine Geheimgeschichte der Popkultur & die Formierung neuer Substreams*. Wien 2000, pp. 162f.

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