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Sex and Horror

Steve Jones

The combination of sex and horror may be disquieting to many, but the two are natural (if perhaps gruesome) bedfellows. In fact, sex and horror coincide with such regularity in contemporary horror fiction that the two concepts appear to be at least partially intertwined. This is not to suggest that the sex–horror confluence is an exclusively contemporary phenomenon.¹ For instance, Hunter Gardner (2015) traces the lineage of contemporary psychosexual horror fiction back to antiquity. Brian Godaw (2002: 187–208) maps the relationship between sex and horrific violence in the Bible in order to anchor his exploration of modern horror cinema. Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs (1995: 29) posit that the focus on violence and sex they find in Italian cinema is little more than ‘a modern day version of the ancient Roman circus’; ‘blood, passion...violence and sex were an integral part of these spectacles’.

It is unsurprising, then, that the horror genre boasts a bounty of sexual themes and sexually driven plots. The sex–horror relationship is sometimes connotative rather than overt; examples of this relationship range from the seduction overtones of *Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922, dir. F.W. Murnau) and the juxtaposition of nudity and horror promised by European exploitation filmmakers (see Shipka, 2011: 5; Olney, 2013: 30), to *Hellraiser's* (1987, dir. Clive Barker) sadomasochistic iconography. More overt explorations of sex are offered in horror films that are based around the porn industry, including *Zivot i Smrt Porno Bande/The Life and Death of a Porno Gang* (2009, dir. Mladen Djordjevic), *Muzan-e/Celluloid Nightmares* (1999, dir. Daisuke Yamanouchi) and *Quad X: The Porn Movie Massacre* (2015, dir. James Christopher). Many mainstream pornographic films have also explored horrific themes and utilised horror tropes. For instance, in *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973, dir. Gerard Damiano), the eponymous protagonist is damned to a purgatory that is defined by her unfulfilled sexual desires; rape is a prevalent mode of sexual expression within violent Japanese pinku eiga (see Weisser and Weisser, 1998: 16; Wong and Yau, 2014: 33); and recent horror-porn crossover movies such as *The Walking Dead: A Hardcore Parody* (2013, dir. Joanna Angel) incorporate gore and archetypal horror characters (here, zombies) not just in the settings, but also within pornographic sex sequences (see Marks, 2014).

In other cases, sex and horror are balanced in a manner that thoroughly blurs the distinction between porn and horror. For example, *Niku Daruma/Tumbling Doll of Flesh* (1998, dir. Tamakichi Anaru) is constituted by two lengthy sex sequences, followed by what is arguably the most horrific rape/mutilation sequence to be published in the Japanese microbudget video market. The film's run-time is mainly composed of mundane pornography, yet its horrific crescendo is its most memorable segment. Although the film was marketed as gory horror – its finale dominates the video's packaging – its content is mainly focused on genitally explicit sex. Such subject-matter makes the film hard to classify in generic terms, but it also highlights that the two elements somehow fit together. In a more recent example, the ‘dark-web’ clip compilation film *MDPOPE: Most Disturbed Person on Planet Earth* (2013, dir. Thomas Extreme Cinemagore) juxtaposes real death footage with (mainly scatological) porn in a manner that blurs the boundaries between desire and disgust. *MDPOPE* thus

implies that pornography can be both attractive and repulsive, while death footage can be simultaneously horrifying and titillating.

This sweeping overview is meant only to underline that the relationship between sex and horror – which I will refer to as ‘sex-horror’ to encompass the various combinations outlined above – is well established. The sustained presence of sex-horror in film suggests that these two elements fit together and the combination is a source of pleasure (entertainment, fascination, intellectual stimulation and so forth) for many. Yet sex-horror is broadly perceived to be disturbing (see Hester, 2014: 119; Malone, 2011: 184). Where horror includes sex (or is presumed to include sex), moralistic critics have used labels such as ‘pornography’ and ‘torture porn’ to disparage those combinations (see Jones, 2013: 132). Despite the evident interest many individuals have in sex-horror, these negative reactions indicate that sex-horror is a source of trepidation, moral disdain or disgust for others. Thus, it appears that sex-horror inspires directly competing responses. One might conclude that sex-horror itself is paradoxical; that it holds two directly oppositional meanings simultaneously. However, as I will illustrate in this chapter, these dual responses are not as contradictory as they might first appear to be.

To begin, let us consider negative responses to sex-horror. In their bluntest form, these manifest as calls for censorship (see Hills, 2014; Petley, 2014). Sex-horror need not be explicit to incite censorship; even the juxtaposition (rather than merging) of sex and horror has been met with protest (see Caputi, 1992: 215; Ebert, 1981: 56; Russell, 1993: 155). Many such complaints have led to the outright banning of films that incorporate sex-horror. *A Serbian Film/Srpski Film* (2010, dir. Srdjan Spasojevic) is a notorious recent example; the film was banned in its uncut form in numerous countries (including Australia, Norway and Malaysia) because it contains: a) representations of consensual sex, rape, and gory murder; b) juxtapositions of sex and horror; and c) scenes in which rape and murder are combined.

Routinely, such content is classified as ‘obscene’, and censorship is justified as a way of protecting the public from sex-horror. For instance, the landmark ruling *Miller v. California* (1973) evoked public interest by positing that obscene materials contravene ‘contemporary community standards’. The same sentiment is echoed in the UK Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, which prohibits images that a ‘reasonable person’ – an average member of the populace – would find ‘grossly offensive’. The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) draws on that rhetoric in its guiding principles, one of which is to protect against ‘retarding social and moral development, distorting a viewer’s sense of right and wrong, and limiting their capacity for compassion’ (BBFC, 2014). This same strategy for suppressing obscene images is echoed internationally. For instance, in 1977, Spain introduced the ‘S’ certificate to demarcate ‘films that were likely to damage the sensibility of the viewer – in other words, sex and horror films’ (Tohill and Tombs, 1995: 67). In another example, Section 3(1) of New Zealand’s Films, Videos and Publications Classification Act 1993 defines an image as ‘objectionable if it describes, depicts, expresses, or otherwise deals with matters such as sex, horror, crime, cruelty, or violence in such a manner that...is likely to be injurious to the public good’ (emphasis added). More broadly, censorship groups typically posit that such materials will lead to ‘moral decay’.²

Such complaints about moral and social deterioration are abstract in nature: it is not clear how representations of sex-horror have a corrosive impact on 'society' or 'morality' per se. The case is further confused by blurring the core elements of sex-horror as well as the line between fictional representation and reality. As Feona Attwood (2014: 1190) observes, within many anti-pornography arguments, 'reality and fantasy, sexual practices and representations, sex and violence have become so intertwined that they cannot be disentangled'. William Brown's claim (2013: 26) that the presence of 'sexually explicit' imagery in horror films 'makes it difficult to tell false from real' is underpinned by the same kind of conflation Attwood identifies. In this way of thinking, the sex-horror amalgamation confuses generic boundaries, but that confusion is made to stand in for an abstract problem regarding the distinction between reality and fantasy.

Those who seek to suppress sex-horror imagery typically garner support for their position by negating these complexities. The reality/fantasy 'problem' is re-configured into a proposal that exposure to sex-horror will have demonstrable negative impacts on its audience and society more broadly: that is, viewers who are exposed to sex-horror will be incited into committing acts of sexual violence. Although the media-effects model has been widely refuted (see Cameron and Frazer, 2000; Segal, 1993), the paradigm has numerous advantages for those who wish to suppress sex-horror. First, the complainant's inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality – which is intrinsic to the argument that fictional representations cause real crimes – is projected onto sex-horror's audience. Thus, the complainant need not justify their position because, they allege, it is sex-horror's consumers who fail to apprehend that fiction and reality are separate. Second, the vagueness about how sex-horror could cause social and moral deterioration is transmuted into a practical concern. According to this (flawed) logic, there is little need to engage with representations of sex-horror, or to understand why the combination is so disquieting to some; the problem is 'obvious', as is the 'solution' (censure).

This line of reasoning rose to prominence before the advent of horror or porn studies, both of which were ignited by scholars seeking alternatives to effects-based condemnation. Effects-based reasoning evidently influenced foundational work in these areas. For example, Linda Williams (1991) dubbed horror and porn 'body genres' based on their propensity to 'move' audiences. Although much more nuanced than the media-effects argument, Williams' paradigm begins from the premise that these films are significant because they have demonstrable affective impacts on viewers: horror scares or disgusts, while porn arouses.³ Similar concerns are explored in Carol Clover's (1993) and Vera Dika's (1990) influential examinations of slasher movies. Both authors employ a psychoanalytic identification model to understand audience engagement,⁴ suggesting that horror's antagonists achieve sexual gratification from killing, and that audiences vicariously attain voyeuristic sexual pleasure from watching horror.⁵

These early works did little to sway censorious complainants from the dual beliefs that sex-horror could cause an increase in real-world sexual violence,⁶ and that sex-horror inculcates sadosexual pleasure.⁷ In this view, sex-horror's target audience is an abnormal niche of people who do not share the majority's disdain for the sex-horror confluence (see, for instance, Jones, 2013: 47–51; also Hanich, 2010: 26). These presumptions are limited in two crucial ways. First, the target audience's responses are characterised as being homogeneous. However, given that sex-horror is presented as

disturbing because the two elements supposedly do not belong together, one would expect to find evidence of multiple and/or conflicted responses within the target demographic, not just a divergence between the presumed audience's and the moral majority's views on sex-horror. Second, calls for censorship are frequently founded on (what are presumed to be) normative values, yet those values betray a set of 'moralistic assumptions about appropriate expressions of sexuality' (Carline, 2011: 326).

The ostensible sex-horror paradox stems from this unnecessarily limited vision of sexuality. Put bluntly, the moralistic position presents sex as being antithetical to horror, but this view fundamentally oversimplifies and misrepresents what sex is. Sex involves bodies (even if only imagined, or only one's own body). Bodies can be sources of disgust, and because sex commonly entails the exchange of various bodily fluids (such as saliva, sweat, vaginal juices, semen), sex can provoke fears about interpersonal pollution and pathogenic infection (see Chapman and Anderson, 2012: 63; Stevenson, Case and Oaten, 2011: 79; Tybur et al., 2011: 343). Genitals' proximity to excretory zones may also trigger related disgust responses (see McGinn, 2011: 193; Miller, 2009: 101–5). The moralistic characterisation of sex-horror severely underplays the importance of disgust to human sexuality. Acknowledging the affinities between sex and horror is imperative in developing sophisticated understandings of sex-horror.

The horrific side of sex has been considered in another of horror studies' foundational psychoanalytic works: Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993). Creed focuses on genitals, gestation and castration within the horror-film context, acknowledging the connections between sex and corporeal horror. However, Creed's work suffers from the same flaw that plagues psychoanalytic textual analysis more generally: she focuses on symbolic content rather than on what is literally present onscreen. In fact, in the time that has elapsed since *The Monstrous-Feminine* was first published, many horror filmmakers have moved towards overt and literal depictions of sexual horror that render psychoanalytic interpretative methods redundant. Films such as *Teeth* (2007, dir. Mitchell Lichtenstein), *Bad Biology* (2008, dir. Frank Henenlotter), *Kiseichuu: Kiraa Pusshii/Sexual Parasite: Killer Pussy* (2004, dir. Takao Nakano), *She Kills* (2015, dir. Ron Bonk) and *One-Eyed Monster* (2008, dir. Adam Fields) present genitalia as a source of disgust and monstrosity, while *It Follows* (2014, dir. David Robert Mitchell), *Contracted* (2009, dir. Eric England), *Night of Something Strange* (2015, dir. Jonathan Straiton) and *Kanno Byoto: Nureta Akai Kuchibiru/The Slit-Mouthed Woman* (2005, dir. Takaaki Hashiguchi) are concerned with sexually transmitted infections.⁸ These sex-horror films negotiate the complex terrain of pain, pleasure, disgust and attraction in an unambiguous fashion; psychoanalysis is not required to uncover repressed sexual horror in these cases.

Despite its shortcomings, Creed's work is notable for its serious engagement with psychosexual horror, and this area is worthy of greater scrutiny than it has received to date. Sex and horror overlap because they evoke some of the same phenomenal experiences and emotions (pleasure, disgust and so forth) to various degrees. Sex-horror is not an unholy union of opposites, in which horror is synonymous with harm and disgust while sex equates to pleasure and lust. Rather, their edges blur and merge. They are entangled, and so – at least sometimes – they belong together. Sex is not always a site of shared intimate pleasure; it is at least sometimes awkward, uncomfortable,

painful, even traumatic. Simultaneously, horror is at least partially interlaced with drives regarding preservation of one's own life or the wellbeing of one's social grouping; horror narratives typically focus on displeasures (suffering, fear, anti-social behaviours, bodily damage, psychological anguish, and so forth) related to those impulses. Yet representations of such conditions do not exclude pleasure or preclude pleasurable responses.

The moralistic quest to censure representations of sex-horror entails denying these complexities in favour of over-simplified models such as the media-effects paradigm. In these suppressive discourses, horror and sex are presented as 'just bodily' matters (corporeally rather than cerebrally stimulating). Moreover, this connection with the physical is leveraged to characterise sex and horror as 'self-evident' (tangible, obvious) and unworthy of intellectual scrutiny (see Paasonen, 2012: 57; Williams, 1991: 4–5). Although sex-horror is condemned, the argument betrays an inability to sufficiently explain what is wrong with sex, horror or the sex-horror combination.

This gambit is indicative of what Haidt and Hersh term 'moral dumbfounding...the stubborn and puzzled maintenance of a moral judgment without supporting reasons', which 'seems to occur primarily when people have strong emotion-backed intuitions, as is often the case in matters involving sexuality' (2001: 194). Dumbfounding manifests as an 'inability to explain [moral 'gut feelings'] verbally', leading towards the 'post hoc fabrication' of moral reasoning (Haidt, 2012: 25–26). It is precisely that form of dumbfounding that is evident in 'the inconsistencies, misunderstandings and deliberate legal manipulations of language and the interpretation of images' in obscenity cases involving sexual content (de Genevieve, 2007: 159).

Indeed, calls to censure sex-horror are typically marked by both conceptual confusion and a lack of detailed engagement with the films under scrutiny. For example, during the Minneapolis Public Hearings on Ordinances to Add Pornography as Discrimination Against Women in 1983, Ed Donnerstein referred to the infamous horror film *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974, dir. Tobe Hooper) as 'porn' in which 'women are killed in sexual ways' (Everywoman, 1988: 19–20). Yet the film contains no sex or nudity; the alleged 'sexual overtone' that makes *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* a 'classic' example of sex-horror for Donnerstein (Everywoman, 1988: 20) is entirely of his own imagining. The same euphemistic projection of sex onto an asexual horror scenario is evident elsewhere in criticism of horror movies, and slasher films in particular. Critics commonly presume that for slasher-killers, murder replaces sex (see Heba, 1995: 113);⁹ as Cynthia Freeland has it, with 'orgiastic thrusting motions, the knife or other weapon obviously functions as phallus. Everyone knows (like the teenagers in *Scream*) what such violence "means"' (Freeland, 2000: 181, my emphasis). These proclamations reveal less about the film or the target audience than they do about the critic who perceives horror as sex and projects this evaluation onto 'everyone'.

Without a more nuanced understanding of the sex–horror confluence, the delegitimisation of such representations is nothing more than hollow rhetoric used to support taste judgements. It is particularly concerning that such insubstantial, subjective verdicts can become enshrined in law (see Carline, 2011: 327). Those who rally against sex-horror do not just limit the range of representations available; such censure also stigmatises sex-horror, and consequently territorialises even private contemplation of those perfectly natural elements. Perversely, suppression of sex-horror stifles our

understanding not only of how complex representations of sex-horror are, but also of how complex human sexuality is.

To illustrate, I will briefly consider a case study: *A Serbian Film*, a horror movie that has been widely censored as a result of flouting sexual taboos including necrophilia, paedophilia and rape.¹⁰ The images that were (and were not) subject to censorship in this case reveal the dominant sexual norms of the moment. For instance, the most heavily censored sequence in the UK release involves a woman (Lejla) being suffocated by having a penis forced into her mouth, yet a scene in which a man (Tasa) is lobotomised by having a penis inserted into his eye-socket was left untouched. These parallel choices indicate that sexual violence perpetrated by men against women is less acceptable than male-on-male sexual violence. Indeed, by removing the former and not the latter, the BBFC perpetuates that norm.

A Serbian Film seeks to broaden the narrow vision of sex implied by such norms, demonstrating that sexual expression takes on a diverse array of non-normative forms. This enriched vision of sex adds depth to the characterisation, helping the audience to understand characters' motivations. For example, when Marko – brother of lead protagonist Milos – visits Milos's wife (Marija), Marko retires to the bathroom to masturbate both because he is aroused by being near her and in order to assuage (and thus gain control over) his desire for her. This sequence establishes Marko as a lonely, sexually frustrated character, and foreshadows the film's climactic sequence in which Marko rapes Marija as part of a pornographic production. Yet Marko's motivation is more fully explained in an intervening scene in which he receives oral sex from a prostitute while watching a video of Milos and Marija celebrating their son Petar's birthday. Footage of Petar being told to 'blow harder' to extinguish his birthday candles is intercut with Marko pushing the prostitute's head onto his penis in order to stimulate his failing erection (as she puts it, 'your animal is snoozing again'). The video then abruptly switches to a porn film starring Milos. Marko verbalises his jealousy over his brother's erection ('why isn't he fucking limp, like all the normal people?'). In the BBFC-certificated version of the film, the home-video footage of Petar's birthday (and the family's joy) is excised since it juxtaposes an image of a child with Marko's sexual activity. Yet that removal damages the audience's understanding of Marko's motivation. In the censored version, it appears that Marko is simply envious of his brother's sexual prowess. With the birthday footage in place, it is clear that Marko is jealous of Milos's familial happiness, and his envy is translated into a lament about Milos's prowess compared with his own impotence. That transference underscores how psychologically complex sexuality is. It also offers some explanation (but not justification) for why Marko rapes Marija in a scenario that pornographer Vukmir describes as a 'warm family home': Marko attempts to desecrate Milos's family because he feels excluded from their happiness. Consequently, the censored version portrays Marko as a one-dimensional monster; he is reduced only to the atrocity he commits because relevant information about his character is missing. Both cuts of the film condemn Marko's actions, but the uncut version offers a more psychologically nuanced account of Marko's sexual sadism, rather than abruptly revealing him to be an inhuman rapist as the censored version does.

Although many critics found the film's sex-horror irredeemably 'repulsive' even in its censored form (see Tookey, 2011), *A Serbian Film* does not eroticise sexual violence.¹¹ Indeed, the film could be interpreted as being highly critical of representations that eroticise degradation, particularly those

found in extreme pornography. Within *A Serbian Film*, various behaviours that are characteristically found in extreme pornography are rendered as horrific acts of murder; for instance, Leija's and Tasa's deaths (detailed above) evoke the practices of cock-gagging and skull-fucking, respectively. Indeed, given that Milos's involvement with extreme porn leads to his own rape, that of his wife and child, and their subsequent suicides, the plot appears to vilify extreme pornography.

Even so, the film does not shy away from depicting behaviours that contravene sexual norms. In fact, *A Serbian Film* is also overtly critical of eschewing sex-horror to protect one's sensibilities. For example, when Milos is told to have sex with a child (Jeca), he holds his penis hostage by pressing a knife to his shaft, then launches himself out of a window. The absurd slapstick of his response pokes fun at the reactionary desire to forcibly distance oneself from taboo rather than negotiating one's offence in a more sensible fashion. Thus, *A Serbian Film* confronts its viewer with graphic displays of sex-horror, challenging audiences to manage their reactions to sexual taboo. The filmmakers do not simply seek to offend; they dare viewers to reflect on why sex-horror is offensive and how one reacts to sex-horror. As Schubert observes, *A Serbian Film's* 'challenging themes...provid[e] adults with a space where these issues can safely be explored' (2012: 146).

Furthermore, the film thrust sex-horror into the limelight of public discourse. The film garnered attention for 'show[ing] unshowable things' (Spasojevic in Carey, 2011); that is, for portraying sex-horror in a public arena where that combination is typically eschewed. Consequently, journalists were challenged with finding ways of discussing that material and, as Scott (2011) notes in his review of the film, 'newspaper-friendly euphemisms do not really exist for the images Mr. Spasojevic conjures up'. Although the impetus to report on *A Serbian Film* demonstrates that sex-horror is of public interest, Scott's reflection indicates that the prevailing discourse is ill equipped to cope with sex-horror. That inadequacy reveals the need to openly address sex-horror, since eschewing and censoring it impoverishes the discourse. Confronting and being able to articulate the disgust, anger and disturbance that sex can generate is imperative to enriching our understanding of human sexuality. Sex-horror has the capacity to embody those aspects of sexuality, and to provoke precisely those forms of discussion.

Notes

¹ My focus on horror film does not indicate that the sex–horror confluence is unique to film or to horror; rather, horror film is used as a sustained case study in order to illustrate the conceptual implications that follow from the handling of sex–horror within scholarly and legislative contexts.

² See Strub, 2006: 258. For examples of how this plays out in public discourse regarding horror film, see Jones, 2013: 37.

³ The latter is echoed in the BBFC’s classification of ‘sex works’ based on the assumption that their ‘primary purpose is sexual arousal or stimulation’ (BBFC, 2014: 6). Williams compares horror and porn, making direct reference to sex–horror as generically excessive (1991: 2), yet she does not explain precisely what responses or pleasures sex–horror combinations might elicit.

⁴ Far more nuanced and sophisticated models regarding audience reaction to horror film have been advanced in recent years. See, for example, Hanich, 2010; Plantinga, 2009; Strohl, 2012.

⁵ On the dominance of this model, see Dyer, 2002: 116; Hutchings, 2004: 195–196; Jenkins, 1994: 102.

⁶ Indeed, Clover and Dika’s logic is echoed within censorial discourses; Martin Barker (2009: 58–60) has expressed concerns over the BBFC’s unreflective appeal to identification-based media-effects models, for example.

⁷ This connection may have been fuelled by criminological literature suggesting that serial killers often have a history of being sexually abused, and are reputedly heavy users of porn (see Douglas, Burgess and Ressler, 1992: 25–26).

⁸ A bounty of recent horror films have also focused on pregnancy; on this trend, see Jones, 2015.

⁹ One defence for this position is that sex scenes and murder sequences are sometimes juxtaposed in slasher films. However, detailed engagement with the films themselves reveals that these juxtapositions are not as commonplace as is often presumed. Barry Sapolsky and Fred Molitor (1996: 46) demonstrate that juxtapositions of sex and murder are relatively rare in slasher films. They propose that slasher movies’ reputation for combining sex and murder stems from misperception; when juxtapositions do occur, they are remembered more vividly than other incidents because they are more likely to offend audience members’ sensibilities. Thus, sex–horror will be most prominent in an offended audience member’s memory of the film in toto (see also Cowan and O’Brien, 1990: 187). For a discussion of the same dynamic in relation to more recent horror films, see Jones, 2013: 137.

¹⁰ For a detailed itinerary of countries that have rejected the film and cuts made to the UK release, see Kimber, 2014: 114–116.

¹¹ Some critics, such as Brady (2010), acknowledge this. Others condemned the film without seeing it (see Johnston in Pascoe, 2011).

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