

The State vs. Buttgereit and Ittenbach: Censorship and Subversion in German No-Budget Horror Film

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IN THE LATE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S, WEST GERMAN INDIE DIRECTORS released a comparatively high number of hyper-violent horror films, domestic no-budget productions often shot with camcorders. Screened at genre festivals and disseminated as grainy VHS or Betamax bootlegs, these films constitute anomalies in the history of German postwar cinema where horror films in general and splatter movies in particular have been rare, at least up until the 2000s.¹ This article focuses on two of the most prominent exponents of these cheap German genre flicks: Jörg Buttgereit's controversial and highly self-reflexive *NekRomantik 2* (1991) and Olaf Ittenbach's infamous gore-fest *The Burning Moon* (1992), both part of a huge but largely obscure underground culture of homebrew horror. I argue that both *NekRomantik 2* and *The Burning Moon*—amateurish and raw as they may appear—successfully reflect the state of non-normative filmmaking in a country where, according to Germany's Basic Law, "There shall be no censorship."² Yet, the nation's strict media laws—tied, in particular, to the *Jugendschutz* (protection of minors)—have clearly limited the horror genre in terms of production, distribution, and reception. In this light, *NekRomantik 2* and *The Burning Moon* become noteworthy case-studies that in various ways query Germany's complex relation to the practice of media control after 1945. Not only do both films have an interesting history with regard to the idiosyncratic form of censorship practiced in postwar (West) Germany, they also openly engage with the topic by reacting to the challenges of transgressive art in an adverse cultural climate.

A direct response to the West German government's cracking down on graphic horror films in the wake of the so-called British "video nasties panic" during the early eighties, *NekRomantik 2*—much like its 1987 predecessor *NekRomantik*—probes the limits of artistic expression through a no-holds-barred engagement with the extreme taboo of necrophilia. At the same time, however, the sequel plays with the expectations of the ever-watchful German

authorities, anticipating the cuts that would presumably be imposed by the regulatory bodies in order to allow for an official release. In *NekRomantik 2* the fault lines—so to speak—are located between long stretches of art-house *ennui* as eruptions of strong violence and deviant sexuality, creating a formal frame that separates the graphic moments from the rather mundane rest and crafting a highly symmetrical text. The result is a fierce attack on the stigmatization of violent art that results from a blanket condemnation of the horror genre as an inferior and emotionally scarring form of debased entertainment. In *The Burning Moon* Ittenbach more openly attacks Germany's double standards as he slashes into the façade of Bavaria's conservative suburbia, arguing in his wild splatter anthology that under the surface of the nation's middle-class culture a repressed lust for blood and guts still lingers. The outrageous *The Burning Moon*—which is still banned to this day in Germany—suggests that an oppressive media landscape which provides no artistic safety valve leads to the inability to address underlying tensions, a problematic development that the director visualizes in the steadily escalating narrative arc of his film's segments. It culminates in a horrific vision of hell in which narrative has no place. In order to discuss the two titles from the shared angle of subversion and anti-censorship rhetoric, it is first necessary to outline the cultural climate of (West) Germany in the 1980s, including the ways in which the state has regulated horror films after the Second World War.

Horror Cinema, the BPjM, and the Video Nasty Panic of the 1980s

When we discuss West German no-budget horror, we need to talk briefly about the situation of horror cinema in postwar Germany in general and changes in the culture-political landscape of the 1980s in particular. German horror film—as academic lore has it—barely survived the aesthetic reconfigurations of the Third Reich, and its rebirth onto the screens of the republic, it seems, has been a slow and painful process. The consensus is often that “[d]er deutsche Horrorfilm blieb nach den Erfolgen der Stummfilmzeit bis heute marginal” [“German postwar horror film remained marginal after its success during the silent film era”] (Vossen 24). Lutz Koepnick notes how:

Nazi cinema tried to massage minds and coordinate desire, but unlike Hollywood in the 1930s it had little tolerance for transporting its audiences to unknown places and times, for scaring viewers with wacky scientists and gruesome monsters (77).

To be sure, the genre clearly suffered during the twelve years' reign of fascism, and for the longest time it never really recuperated while dealing with “the lasting burdens of a violent past haunting the present in each and every

one of its moments” (Koeppnick 83). As Ursula Vossen argues, “Während des Zweiten Weltkriegs erlebte der Horrorfilm einen deutlichen Einbruch, galt er doch angesichts des realen Schreckens und Leides als unangemessen” [“During World War II the horror film experienced a severe slump as it was considered inappropriate in the face of real terror and suffering”] (20-21). Yet, the perceived absence of German postwar horror *film*—even though there have been, of course, German horror *films*—appears perplexing when taking into account the influence that German Expressionism had on global cinema—including Hollywood and its *film noir* gangsters and Universal monsters—most famously through works such as Robert Wiene’s 1920 expressionist poster-child *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and F.W. Murnau’s 1922 masterpiece *Nosferatu*. While countries such as the United States and Japan either simply continued or quickly revived their respective domestic versions of horror cinema—and at times even reimported it to Germany—the self-proclaimed nation of *poets and thinkers* largely rejected its own tradition.

The reasons for this are complex. Important for this essay is the fact that both the Bonn Republic and its successor, the Berlin Republic, found themselves in a particularly sensitive position concerning the pitfalls and promises of mass media, especially their ability to fulfill or fail the political *Bildungsauftrag*, (West) Germany’s constitutional mandate for media to be democratic and educational. After the Second World War, the fear of a resurgence of National Socialist ideology drove both the decentralization of channels of dissemination and the development of a media regulation system. Shortly after Germany’s official capitulation on May 9, 1945, two regulatory bodies came into effect. In 1949, the semi-governmental *Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft* (FSK; Voluntary Self-Regulation of the Motion Picture Industry) was founded to ensure that each movie to be screened in theaters received a rating before it could get released. In the mid-1970s, the federal agency *Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Schriften* later *Medien* (BPjS, since 2003 BPjM; Federal Department for Writings/Media Harmful to Minors)—established in 1954 and tasked with the protection of minors from violent, racist, and pornographic content in literature and comic books—reacted to an increase in instances of visual media that were considered problematic and potentially harmful to persons under the age of 18. While the British tabloids opened a veritable witch hunt—calling for the banning of offensive materials, including the demand to burn the tapes that ended up on the so-called video nasty list—the West German government also responded to the perceived threat. State attorneys and federal judges increasingly enforced the §131 StGB (penal code) dealing with the “glorification of violence,”³ which became law in 1973 and was expanded to include video releases in 1985.⁴

A second, concurrent development at the intersection of technology and cultural geography further impacted the genre’s position domestically.

With the advent of relatively affordable home video systems and the availability of Betamax and VHS tapes—rented at mushrooming video stores or illegally copied from one recorder to another—graphic horror films became an overnight phenomenon that led to drastic changes in both public perception and West German media politics. In the early 1980s, the newly and readily available copies of violent films from all around the world intensified the discussions over the impact of horror on younger audiences after “die Presse brandmarkte die neuen Videocassetten als ‘Schmuddelmedium’” [“the press had labeled the new medium of video tapes ‘filth’”] (Seim 2008, 58). When titles such as Sam Raimi’s groundbreaking *The Evil Dead* (1981) hit theaters as well as VCRs in West Germany, they triggered severe objections and concerns from various parties due to their unprecedented graphic violence and overt and often misogynistic sexuality.⁵ As a result, films such as *The Evil Dead* were quickly pulled from theaters and video stores; several of those ended up on the index or were banned altogether. This coincided with a political sea-change that occurred when Helmut Kohl became chancellor in 1982 and his government shifted towards a more conservative culture politics.⁶ Favoring established and proven directors and producers, the state almost exclusively funded film projects that played it safe, artistically as well as financially. Critical and/or all-too provocative art-house fare—and non-normative genre films even more so—hardly had any chance of receiving the crucial subsidies of the *Deutsche Filmförderung* (German Film Fund), which also required support from a national television network, a rule that affected gory horror films in particular as they could not be aired (uncut) on public television.

Subsequently, domestic horror films became risky endeavors, morally, financially, and, most importantly, legally. As Thomas Groh sums up the situation, “Wer den gewaltsam geöffneten Körper auf Zelluloid bannt, Abbilder auf Konserve davon im Handel anbietet oder sich gar zur Rezeption bekennt, begibt sich ganz schnell auf justiziables Terrain” [“Whoever puts the forcefully opened body on celluloid, tenders images of it, or admits to watching them, very quickly ends up dealing with legal repercussions”] (178). Unsurprisingly, the number of West German productions, low to begin with, not only stagnated but decreased, leaving the genre in the hands of independent filmmakers shooting in their basements with the help of friends, while the amateurishly produced tapes turned into elusive and sought-after artifacts. This cultural pressure-cooker atmosphere in West Germany—spilling over into the early days of reunified Germany—contributed to the emergence of the idiosyncratic German no-budget horror of the 1980s and 90s under consideration here. The absence of West German horror by default challenged the country’s self-understanding as a democracy that through its *Basic Law* guarantees freedom of expression: to keep a long, complex story short, if the protection of minors results in the unavailability of specific cultural materials even to persons of

legal age on the grounds of the glorification of (fictional) violence, is it still true that “There shall be no censorship” in Germany? *NekRomantik 2* and *The Burning Moon* tap into these debates not only because both films have experienced massive problems with the BPjM upon their release, but also because they display a subversive attitude toward and even open critique of various forms of media regulation.

Anticipating the Cut: The Strategic Symmetry of *NekRomantik 2*

Jörg Buttgereit is arguably the most visible German horror film director of the 1980s and early 1990s.⁷ Harzheim, for example, claims that Buttgereit “seit den zwanziger Jahren des vorigen Jahrhunderts der erste deutschsprachige Regisseur [ist], der dem Horrorfilm neue Impulse gab” [“is the first German director since the 1920s who gave the horror genre new impulses”] (309). To be sure, Buttgereit has been taken seriously by scholars as an avant-garde director whose aesthetic resembles that of renowned international filmmakers.⁸ As Mikel J. Koven argues, the two installments of *NekRomantik* gesture toward Buttgereit’s “obsession with the past [...which] echoes his own feelings of national identity within a post-Nazi Germany” (191). Buttgereit, however, has repeatedly stated that he does not feel completely comfortable with the interpretation of the corpse(s) in *NekRomantik 2* as signifiers of the concentration camps.⁹ The corpse then is more than a reminder of fascism’s atrocities, even though it is that too. It provided, as I argue in this essay, a critical commentary on the status quo of Germany’s postwar media politics. Less researched than its striking scenes of necrophilia (and thus arguably eclipsed by them), we find intertextual moments that range from diegetic references—for example, a visit to an art-house cinema or the in-movie watching of a VHS tape that depicts the autopsy of an animal cadaver—to explicit displays of filmic techniques breaking the immersive flow. As Harzheim observes, Buttgereit plays “wiederholt mit dem Mittel des Films im Film, nicht zuletzt auch, um filmhistorische Seitenhiebe zu verteilen: [...] bis hin zu dem von ihm gehassten *My Dinner with Andre* [...], den er vor allem mit *NekRomantik 2* karikiert” [“repeatedly with the technique of film in film, in part to make snarky side comments: [...] this includes *My Dinner with Andre*, which he loathes and ridicules in *NekRomantik 2*”] (312). The key to the text, then, can be found in the tensions between the neo-realist moments of violence and these cinematic gimmicks.

Buttgereit’s film explicitly focuses its attention on the socio-cultural and political climate in West Germany with a particular focus on media production and consumption. In an interview with Stefan Höltgen and Julia Köhne about his early days as an artist, Buttgereit states his intention: “Das Verständnis von Gegenkultur, das ich damals hatte, habe ich versucht, in diesen Film zu stecken” [“I tried to inscribe the understanding of counter culture that I

had in those days into this film”] (207).¹⁰ In *NekRomantik 2*, he crafts a text that could air as an avant-garde rom-com on national prime time television with only 5 total cuts made, an interpretation supported by the fact that the extended version of the movie—only screened twice in 1991 until its release in 2016 as a Blu Ray mediabook—was recut by Buttgereit in part to achieve the desired mix of a realist aesthetic booby-trapped with avant-garde stumbling blocks that frame clearly delineated moments of excessive gore. The film’s subtexts result from the director’s own experiences as an artist working in a genre that has repeatedly clashed with the (West) German censorship apparatus, reflecting Buttgereit’s overall political approach to filmmaking. As he explains in an interview with Shade Rupe for *Screem* magazine: “I will not [make any cuts] because of the political message that my film is unrated” (Rupe 20). Buttgereit’s film openly challenged the practices of the BPjM, accepting the legal risks this involved. Ironically, when *NekRomantik 2* was actually confiscated by the authorities after a screening in Munich, the director was shocked by the severity of the charges levelled against him.

Released as an unrated version in 1991, *NekRomantik 2* was intended from the get-go to raise a ruckus, but the intensity of the backlash arguably exceeded what the filmmakers had expected. After the movie had toured the festival circuit for almost a year, it screened in Munich at the *Werkstattkino*. The highly conservative Bavarian authorities had the screening stopped and confiscated the print in 1992. The projectionist of the *Werkstattkino*, Doris Kuhn, was fined, while Buttgereit and his producer Manfred Jelinski were charged in accordance with §131 of the penal code. As with part one, Buttgereit had never submitted his movie to the FSK¹¹ board—nor to the lawyer panel of the *Spitzenorganisation der Filmwirtschaft* (Umbrella Organization of the Film Industry; SPIO)—and thus risked not only financial disadvantages but also prosecution. In order to avoid the charge of “glorification of violence,” Buttgereit somewhat reluctantly campaigned for *NekRomantik 2* to be considered art (including commissioning an academic evaluation of the work), an eventually successful maneuver that exploited the freedom of art “loophole” in the Basic Law. In the meantime, however, the movie had been banned in Germany and thus pulled from circulation. Jelinski’s apartment was raided by the police searching for the negatives in 1992; had the negatives been found, they would have been destroyed. When the police couldn’t find the negatives, the authorities in fact finally struck an unprecedented bargain. After approximately two years, they offered to drop the charges against Buttgereit and Jelinski. Today, *NekRomantik 2* occupies an interesting grey zone in the German media landscape: it has been redeemed from a legal standpoint—and could even be sold and screened publicly to an audience over the age of 18 (it was actually released in 2016 as a rated retro-VHS version) but remains controversial and usually ‘out of sight’ because retailers and theater owners are

hesitant to sell or screen the title due to its nefarious reputation and presumed unclear legal status.

At this point it is helpful to take a step back at this point and briefly familiarize ourselves with the story of *NekRomantik 2* in order to set up the structural analysis that propels my reading. In its opening scenes, the film replays the grotesque finale of part one in black-and-white. Rob, a necrophiliac, disembowels himself while masturbating, reaching a violent climax with his belly already sliced open. Using full-frontal (plastic) nudity and extreme gore, Rob's ejaculation—and at this point the sequel switches to color film—turns from milky white into a gushing fountain of red. Drawing a clear line between the two texts, Monika, also a necrophiliac, then learns about Rob's suicide from the newspapers. She digs him up and begins a sexual relationship with the corpse, an appalling withered thing, blackened and covered in decomposition fluids. Trying to lead a more normal life Monika later begins dating Mark. Both their sexual activities and their everyday life as a couple, however, leave Monika's desires unfulfilled. At the film's halfway mark—at minute 52 out of its total of 104—she attempts to literally sever her ties with Rob and dismembers his decomposed body in a very graphic scene. In the infamous climax—after more sequences focusing on Monika and Mark's attempt at a 'normal' life—Monika cuts off Mark's head during intercourse and replaces it with Rob's head before finishing the sexual act, creating a hybrid creature that resides at a liminal place between life and death. In a final scene, the audience also learns that Monika is pregnant, a twist ending that paves the way for a final installment of a trilogy that has yet to be realized, at least on film.¹² Thus, Buttgereit frames the love triangle between Monika, Rob, and Mark with three meticulously placed scenes of a very graphic nature.

The text's symmetrical organization strongly suggests that Buttgereit had foreseen potential interventions and repercussions and preemptively inserted them into the fabric of the text. The director compartmentalizes *NekRomantik 2* into two long stretches of non-horror narrative sandwiched between the three extreme scenes that give the movie its nefarious reputation.¹³ The scenes between the film's bursts of violence are filled with moments such as Monika and Mark enjoying an East Berlin fairground on a sunny day. Buttgereit drags out these latter scenes with a devilish joy, adding to the monotony with—what he deems to be even more infuriating—instances of avant-garde playfulness and inter-textual references. While explicitly intended as an endurance test for hardcore splatter fans looking for violence as entertainment, the film is also a meditation on the effect of the cut—both in the form of editing and censorship—for genre and medium alike.¹⁴ Buttgereit's structural choices imply that cutting the three concentrated scenes of violence results in a narrative that is still fully functional and theoretically suitable for public broadcasting yet painfully pretentious. Approximately 15 minutes shorter, *NekRomantik 2* would

still clock in at the 90-minute mark, being transformed from underground low-budget horror to art-film-slash-love story. These violent scenes are strangely at odds with the more overt ‘disruptive’ moments of avant-garde playfulness in the film. While the latter feel rather displaced with regard to the realism that dominates the rest of the text, it is clear that, for example, the long black-and-white segment that mocks *My Dinner with Andre* will make the cut in the true sense of the word while the more genre-typical set-pieces would have been ordered to be removed by the BPjM due to their problematic content.

Along these lines, I argue that Buttgerit’s approach challenges the specific form of interference executed by the German state, which does not exercise any form of *Vorzensur* (censorship prior to the release) but rather makes it the responsibility of the filmmakers to ensure compliance with legal standards and only acts after the fact. When Buttgerit has Monika cut up and preserve parts of Rob’s body he channels the best-of reels of *NekRomantik*’s juiciest parts that currently circulate on platforms such as YouTube, at least, as long as they don’t get removed by the web sites’ admins. By drawing attention to a mindset in which horror films are perceived as moving from set-piece to set-piece while the act of watching them becomes highly fetishized, the director also gestures to the fact that these set-pieces have long been virtually invisible after the intervention of the BPjM.¹⁵ Thus, *NekRomantik 2* establishes Rob’s corpse as the aesthetic, cultural, and media-political afterlife of part one. In other words, his body reemerges as a metaphor for the fascination with the ostensibly “unrepresentable” in German culture—including but, importantly, not limited to the concentration camps—a decomposed and ugly thing that refuses to stay underground. Rob’s remains symbolize the probable rejection of the film, the inability to find a place for a text that digs deep. In this regard, *NekRomantik 2* can be considered a comment on how the past influences the present. For Buttgerit, the interferences of semi-private and government institutions are more than attempts to protect minors from violent images. They in fact foster an impotent art aimed at the mainstream, tolerable only as long as it does not overstep boundaries. Buttgerit thus offers a scathing critique of the limits imposed on transgressive art, which hamper not only the traditional horror genre but innovative and critical filmmaking writ large, as certain topics—by default—are ordered to be better left alone.

Slashing up the Middle Class: *The Burning Moon* and its Narrative of Escalation

Even though underground filmmaker Olaf Ittenbach belongs to a small group of relatively well established German horror film directors, he has received little scholarly attention and even less critical acclaim. The neglect can in part be attributed to Ittenbach himself: in an interview conducted for the “making-of” of *The Burning Moon*—included on the North American InterVi-

sion DVD—he answers a question about what drives him as a film-maker with a single word: “Gaudi,” ‘fun.’ This sets Ittenbach apart from the more artistic goals of Jörg Buttgerreit, who—arguably somewhat tongue-in-cheek—likes to play with his image as an auteur and intellectual. In comparison, the Munich-based Ittenbach comes across as a provincial hack appealing exclusively to the low-brow tastes of the hardened horror audience. As Harzheim explains, “anders als deutsche Horrorfilmer wie [...] Ittenbach [...] galt Buttgerreits Interesse stets dem Experiment, in formaler wie inhaltlicher Hinsicht” [“in contrast to German horror directors such as [...] Ittenbach, Buttgerreit has always had an interest in formal and narrative experiments”] (310). It is by no means my intention to reframe Ittenbach as an arbiter of high culture; yet, I suggest reading *The Burning Moon* too as a critical comment on German media culture, albeit one that goes in a somewhat different direction. The 1992 splatter anthology casts a piercing if naïve gaze into quaint middle-class life and the suppressed desires and double-standards that underwrite it, a deep-running fascination with the morbid that is not allowed to be openly expressed. Where Buttgerreit plays with audience expectations by “cutting up” viewing experiences, Ittenbach announces his final verdict on the domestic horror genre in the face of a stifling media regulation apparatus, namely that it is marginalized to a point where it becomes problematic. In reaction to this, he employs a strategy of escalation to suggest that the moral rejection of mainstream horror runs counter to the nation’s dark past and eventually leads to a generic development that can only function through empty excess.

Not all readers will be familiar with Ittenbach’s horror anthology. *The Burning Moon* is the last German horror film—to this date—to get and remain banned in its country of origin; in contrast to *NekRomantik 2* it is, as of 2017, still illegal in Germany. In 1993, Ittenbach was fined DM 3000 and the court ordered his private home searched; during the raid, the authorities destroyed the master tapes of *The Burning Moon*. Yet, copies of the film have survived, as the aforementioned US release by InterVision, for example, proves. The film’s legal situation in Germany—the potential and often unclear repercussions for selling or screening a copy—renders Ittenbach’s work even less visible than *NekRomantik 2*. Shot on video primarily on weekends by Ittenbach and his friends over the span of several years, *The Burning Moon* establishes a frame narrative in which Peter, an unstable, drug-addicted juvenile, is grounded by his parents for his disrespectful behavior; they also task him with babysitting his little sister while they go out to dinner. Peter decides to tell his sister two gruesome bedtime stories—the two large segments that comprise the lion’s share of the anthology’s 98-minute running time—before he ends up stabbing her to death during the climax of the film. Drugged up and under the influence of the eponymous burning moon, Peter then takes his own life by slicing his wrists on the balcony of his parents’ cozy *Einfamilienhaus*

(single-family house) located in a Munich suburb under constant construction.

The first bedtime story, “Julia’s Love,” revolves around the eponymous young woman, who, unaware of his true identity, goes on a date with the escaped serial killer Cliff Parker. After an awkward dinner at a restaurant, Cliff runs amok and murders Julia’s family in order to have her for himself. Julia, however, survives the various attacks and Cliff is finally shot by the police. The second bedtime story, “The Purity,” set in rural Lower Bavaria in 1957, focuses on Father Ralf, who is revealed to be a rapist, Satanist, and murderer. His transgressions result in the death of an innocent man, Justus, whom the villagers incorrectly assume to be the killer. When some of the men pay one of their own to kill the mentally slow Justus, the events spiral out of control. Justus indeed dies, but returns as a zombie who succeeds in sending his assassin to hell by marking his house with the number of the beast. The second bedtime story culminates in a scene—only loosely related to the rest of *The Burning Moon*—in which Ittenbach celebrates a cheaply executed yet nonetheless effective deconstruction of the human body as the killer descends into a hellish, other-worldly realm where he is slowly dismembered by monstrous creatures. It is the ensuing prolonged torture scene that has earned *The Burning Moon* its considerable reputation on the midnight circuit. This scene—of which Seim writes, “die Höllen-Szene des insbesondere beanstandeten Schlußes [geht] vorallem wegen der heftig realen Bohrmaschinen-gegen-Zahnreihen-Sequenz schon ziemlich an die Ekelgrenze” [“the hell-scene of the much-criticized ending goes beyond the limits of good taste, in particular with regard to the extremely real-looking power drill against teeth sequence”]—thus informs my reading (2012; 74).

To be sure, the movie makes some rather flatfooted claims about German socio-politics, but it is the narrative arc—culminating in the metaphysical torture scene described above—that underscores the subversive quality inscribed in the text. While all four segments include clashes with figures of authority, *The Burning Moon* is neither a reflection nor a serious analysis of the *Generation-enkonflikt*, the struggle between the WWII-era generation and the grandchildren over who was responsible for the Third Reich. Rather, the overall tenor of childish rage triggered by quaint Bavarian life invites a somewhat ironic reading that positions the text as a deliberately immature attack—almost silly at first, but becoming increasingly sickening as the story progresses—on conservative media politics and normative culture. To this end, Ittenbach deploys what I would like to call a strategy of escalation over the course of the film’s 96-minute running time. The violence in *The Burning Moon* quickly evolves through various stages, going from—as I show in greater detail below—unintentionally funny, if gory, to outright cynical and shocking, a fast-forward romp through the history of modern horror from the formulaic slasher tropes

of the late 70s to the sexually charged hellscape of the late 80s.¹⁶ Overall, *The Burning Moon* intimates that reunified Germany's tidy, bourgeois façade hides a double-standard that publicly denounces the horror genre while a very real aggression is cultivated behind closed doors. The gore on display not only intensifies as the movie progresses but also changes registers with regard to the visceral impact of the brutal scenes hurled at the audience.

The Germany we at first observe in *The Burning Moon* is a place devoid of excitement into which violence then suddenly erupts. Paired with a healthy dose of boredom, the film's social topography creates a specific representation of a garden-gnome-infested suburbia that both necessitates and suppresses, as far as Ittenbach is concerned, a transgressive life-style outside of the mainstream. The Bavaria depicted on screen, at least in the beginning, is one of conservatism permeated by rampant consumerism. Ittenbach's Munich suburbs are full of newly built houses; the life he conjures up is that of the middle-class that settles into its new abodes and remains rather uninterested in questioning the situation of the new German socio-political and geographical landscape after 1990. Peter, too, lives in such a nice house with his parents. When he disrespects his mother after he comes home from a botched job interview and a sluggishly filmed gang fight, his father immediately puts him in his place, using physical force. Until the end, Ittenbach stages Peter as an almost comic fair-weather rebel and middle-class wannabe thug whose unintentionally funny disregard of his own family then unexpectedly culminates in the unexpected killing of the younger sibling; a coda to the hell-scene mentioned above. The violence in the frame narrative is initially comical—in particular with regard to the gang brawl—up to the moment when the little sister ends up dead with a knife sticking out of her chest. Peter's suicide by cutting his wrist is equally disturbing, in particular because the scene's relative understatement starkly contrasts with the metaphysical torture sequence that immediately precedes it.

While the frame narrative is relatively low on gore, "Julia's Love" gradually increases the level of violence, clearly emulating the American slasher movies of the late 70s and early 80s, in particular John Carpenter's 1978 genre milestone *Halloween* but also its formulaic—and usually gorier—offspring along the lines of the *Friday the 13th* franchise. Yet Parker's killing spree is still framed in relatively restrained fashion for the first two acts before it resorts to a mode of amateurish exaggeration that is reminiscent of the contemporaneous Splatstick boom in genre cinema, best exemplified in comedy-horror films such as Sam Raimi's 1987 *Evil Dead 2 – Dead by Dawn* and Peter Jackson's 1992 *Braindead*. In other words, despite the graphic violence on display during the final scenes of the segment, "Julia's Love" clearly occupies a liminal position between the paradigms of splatter and comedy in which Julia becomes the final girl that Carol Clover discusses in her book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*.

The second segment, “The Purity,” is already much harder to digest. Reducing the fun splatter elements, the story—set in 1957 and thus regressing to an even more conservative time and place, a small rural town—adds a rape scene to the mix before it moves on to instances of ritualistic murder and vigilantism. The overall tone is much darker, referencing the more transgressive horror films that emerged after George A. Romero’s controversial game-changer *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and Tobe Hooper’s 1974 *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. More in line with Meir Zarchi’s 1978 rape-and-revenge film *I Spit on Your Grave* or Charles Kaufman’s notorious 1980 *Mother’s Day*—both of which have been banned by the German authorities—than *Halloween* or Sean S. Cunningham’s mainstream slasher *Friday the 13th* (1980), “The Purity” adopts an aesthetic of depravity. Still marred by the amateurish handiwork and lack of budget, it nonetheless exudes a very different, more cynical feel than “Julia’s Love.” “The Purity” is thus stage three in *The Burning Moon*’s evolution, establishing, as it were, a pattern of constant one-upping that reaches its apex shortly after.

The descent into hell that comprises the final 15 minutes of *The Burning Moon*—minus the short coda that reveals Peter’s murder of his sister and his suicide—takes the strategy of escalation to its logical conclusion. With virtually no connection to the narrative—with the exception of the torture victim being the killer of Justus—Ittenbach strips the sequence bare of any narrative element. In other words, *The Burning Moon* becomes almost pure form, a display of special effect showmanship that distills the cynical essence of splatter cinema down to its core. Visually sutured to both “bedtime” stories through the insertion of bluish laser-line effects that signal an arrival in hell, the sequence is a spitfire barrage of post-slasher horror tropes. The representation of the Inferno that precedes the torture—with its shambling and mutilated bodies and scenes of eternal suffering—is powerful, especially when one takes into account the financial limitations of the production. Compared to the silliness of “Julia’s Love” in particular, the torture sequence lacks any redeeming denouement or comic relief. While still vaguely informed by the seminal horror titles of the late 80s—Clive Barker’s 1987 *Hellraiser* and its 1988 sequel *Hellbound* (directed by Tony Randel) are cited directly with Asian torture shockers such as T. F. Mou’s 1988 *Men behind the Sun* lurking in the background—this is more than Ittenbach’s German, no-budget reimagining. Rather, the over-the-top violence and crudeness of the material—reinforced through a weird sound design that takes recourse to the synthesizer bombast of 80s action cinema at odds with the sluggish pace of the film and its amateurish look—makes it impossible to take Ittenbach’s critique at face value, yet the tongue-in-cheek attitude on display in *The Burning Moon* suddenly gives way to such bursts of unrestrained, nihilistic violence that it becomes difficult to overlook Ittenbach’s strategy of speeding through the history of horror as

a critique of the constraints on German horror directors that have prevented them from honing their skills gradually.

The Present and Future of German Horror Film

The Burning Moon is arguably the last hurrah of German underground horror, or, depending on the perspective, its death knell. As some experts have pointed out, it implicitly acknowledges that it belongs to a dying breed and delivers the final punches while going down before the horror genre finally returns to the big screen.¹⁷ In the years following *The Burning Moon*, German mainstream horror staged a comeback: Stefan Ruzowitzky's influential 2000 box-office hit *Anatomie* is usually seen as the key text of this paradigm shift. Since then, the German speaking countries have produced a wide variety of genre films, but hardly anything that comes close the shock value of *NekRomantik 2* and *The Burning Moon*. In 2002, shortly after the mass shooting in Erfurt executed at a local high school by a single shooter, the laws regulating the protection of minors were revised in an attempt to streamline and standardize the applicable laws and also to take into account the changed role of the Internet. Interestingly, the rulings of the FSK have since then become more lenient. Some older films have been taken off the *Index* and made available again to the general public, while others have been given a lower rating, usually allowing minors to watch these titles at the age of 16 and older whereas before one had to be at least 18. More and more new genre releases are available without cuts. While this can be attributed to a change in *zeitgeist* and the growing persistence of distributors, the development also signals a shift in the status of genre filmmaking. While *The Burning Moon* remains banned in Germany, *NekRomantik 1* and *2* have re-entered the Region B market only recently via expensive collector's editions. The genre writ large has been put back on the cultural map. However, a vast majority of the output belongs to the moderate Hollywood-like spectrum, running counter to Buttgereit's philosophy that horror should make people feel uncomfortable while to a certain extent supporting Ittenbach's argument that the extreme representation of violence is the necessary result of the absence of a healthy middle ground. It will be interesting to see when and if Germany national cinema will produce a postmodern horror film or tackle current problems such as the 2016 immigration crisis in graphic genre fare, as the French New Terror Wave did from 2003 to approximately 2008.

Notes

1. Steffen Hantke, for example, writes that German film scholars often express "the prevailing critical opinion that there is no such thing as German horror cinema after 1945," an assumption that, according to Hantke, needs an immediate corrective (vii).

2. Article 5 of the Basic Law postulates in *Paragraph 1*: “Every person shall have the right freely to express and disseminate his opinions in speech, writing and pictures, and to inform himself without hindrance from generally accessible sources. Freedom of the press and freedom of reporting by means of broadcasts and films shall be guaranteed. There shall be no censorship.” *Paragraph 2* then adds: “These rights shall find their limits in the provisions of general laws, in provisions for the protection of young persons, and in the right to personal honour” (ibid). Finally, the Basic Law declares in *Paragraph 3* “Arts and sciences, research and teaching shall be free. The freedom of teaching shall not release any person from allegiance to the constitution.” (ibid). Several fundamental principles clash here; freedom of speech and the status of the artwork vs. the protection of minors and the individual’s right to a dignified life as specified under the Basic Law. See: www.bundestag.de/blob/284870/ce0d03414872b427e57fc-cb703634dcd/basic_law-data.pdf

3. § 131 StGB states that distributing media “die Gewalttätigkeiten gegen Menschen in grausamer und unmenschlicher Weise schildern oder die zum Rassenhaß aufstacheln” [“which depict violence against human beings in gruesome and inhumane fashion or incite racial hatred”] are punishable by up to a year in prison or a fine. The ratified version changed the term “Menschen” [“human beings”] to “Menschenähnliche” [“human-like beings”] and in general rephrased the paragraph in stricter terms.

4. The public interest in the increased availability of graphic materials spiked in 1984 and eventually resulted in the aforementioned revision of the *Jugendschutz*; the so-called “lex video,” which led to the fact that “Juristen [...] sich [...] erhebliche Gedanken um den schmalen Pfad zwischen Meinungs- bzw. Kunstfreiheit auf der einen und Strafgesetzen auf der anderen vorallem beim Film gemacht [haben]” [“lawyers thought a lot about the thin line between freedom of expression and art on the one hand and the criminal code on the other, in particular with regard to movies”] (Seim, 43).

5. For a detailed account see Riepe’s essay “Maßnahmen gegen die Gewalt: Der Tanz der Teufel und die Würde des Menschen.”

6. As Julia Knight writes with a particular focus on the history of New German Cinema, political interference into the filmmaking process “reached an unprecedented peak in the mid to late 1970s. As terrorist activity had escalated during the 1970s, it resulted in increasing intolerance of dissident viewpoints” (480). She continues to explain that “film funding agencies became even more conservative, avoiding any projects that could be construed as politically radical, controversial or socially critical” (480).

7. Sabine Hake, for example, describes Buttgereit as combining “horror, gore, perversion, and bad taste in low-budget horror films” through which he “acquired a small but international underground following mainly through video releases” (208).

8. Mikel J. Koven defines Buttgereit’s cinema as “highly subjective” and links it to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s theory of a Cinema of Poetry in which Pasolini claimed that “if the objective of Hollywood continuity filmmaking was never to let the camera’s presence

be felt, then the cinema of poetry must demand the opposite” (188). Throughout his work, the director includes a variety of modernist techniques; as he often does, he uses “self-affirmative references to the medium” that demand our attention (Kerekes 69).

9. See, for example, the two-hour long discussion on censorship in West Germany with Christian Bartsch, Dr. Roland Seim, and Dr. Stefan Höltgen, which is part of the bonus material on Turbine’s 2012 release of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

Here Buttgereit states that he feels the urge to “face-palm himself” whenever *NekRomantik* gets reduced to the concentration camp trope.

10. This approach does not come as a surprise given the director’s artistic and personal background. Born in 1963 in West Berlin, Buttgereit started experimenting with video and film at an early age. Making a name for himself in the West Berlin sub-culture scenes—from Punk to experimental Super-8 art—Buttgereit shot often funny yet non-normative short films while also directing music documentaries.

11. While the FSK is indeed a part of the film industry, the moniker *freiwillig* (voluntarily) is misleading. The actual submission of a title is a voluntary decision on the part of the artists and/or distributors, but in not submitting the movie to the FSK board, the director, producer, and/or distributor may become subject to charges if legal troubles were to arise after the release of an unrated version.

12. A graphic novel sequel to *NekRomantik 2* was released in 2016 to supplement the films.

13. On the English audio-commentary provided by the director and some of the actors for the US DVD release by Barrel Entertainment, Buttgereit confirms that he is deliberately playing with audience expectations.

14. In an interview with Shade Rupe, Buttgereit admits: “If you watch *NekRomantik 2*, you will see that it’s again not giving the people what they want, right? (laughs) It’s torturing them with a lot of arthouse fun” (22).

15. Koven writes that Buttgereit’s films—like Pasolini’s, objects of controversy—pre-suppose “a distanced engagement with the social act of watching a film and the questions such an act raises about our pleasure” (189).

16. As Claus Bienfait states in his entertaining if heavily biased 1984 documentary *Mama Papa Zombie* in regard to the alleged rise in media related violence: “Das Problem ist nicht auf die sozialen Brennpunkte der Ballungszentren beschränkt. Es ist nicht minder akut in der Provinz, auf dem flachen Land und hinter idyllischen Kleinstadtfassaden” [“The problem is not limited to the social hot spots in urban areas. It is no less pressing in the boondocks, the countryside, and the idyllic small towns”] (Min. 13:20-13:45). Bienfait insinuates that the cinematic violence is endemic to the living room of the seemingly well-adjusted nuclear family. Slicing open the quasi-mythical *Heile Welt* (idyllic world), Ittenbach, too, exposes a ubiquitous interest in the extreme and morbid that can neither be admitted nor expressed publicly.

17. As the filmmaker and journalist Markus Hagen writes, “Heute folgt der deutsche (Horror-) Amateurfilm nur noch bekannten Mustern. Er versucht das zu liefern, was andere echte Filme mit besseren Mitteln folgerichtig viel besser liefern können und

macht sich dadurch obsolet” [“Today, the German no-budget (horror-)film only follows established patterns. It attempts to do what other real films with higher production values can clearly do much better and thus renders itself obsolete”] (15).

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Abstract

This essay re-reads two German low-budget horror movies, Jörg Buttgereit's *NekRomantik 2* (1991) and Olaf Ittenbach's *The Burning Moon* (1992). I argue that both titles—amateurish and obscure as they may initially appear—explicitly comment on the difficult state of non-normative film-making (in particular with regard to horror cinema) in a country where, according to Germany's Basic Law, "there shall be no censorship." Largely overlooked in studies on German national cinema, Buttgereit and Ittenbach's films reflect Germany's complex relation to the practice of media control after 1945, including—but not limited to—the depiction of fictionalized violence. Not only have *NekRomantik 2* and *The Burning Moon* been banned in their native country, they already anticipate the state's intervention and inscribe the discourse into the texts themselves.