Perverse Sexuality in the Cinema of Jörg Buttgereit

Keegan Purdy

This essay explores the representation of necrophilia in *Nekromantik* (1987) and *Nekromantik 2: Die Rückkehr der Liebenden Toten* (1991) both written and directed by German filmmaker Jörg Buttgereit. I argue for Buttgereit’s contribution to the cinematic representation of sex with reference to the ‘necro-porn’ of his films. I argue that the films demonstrate a critical account of pornographic representation using the exhibition of sex as a means to repulse as opposed to arouse. Far from being mere slices of exploitative horror positing an exhibition of gore and thoughtless gratuity, I argue that *Nekromantik* and *Nekromantik 2* are films distinguished by an attempt to address the conceptual and visual strategies of pornography and sexual perversion.

“What lives that does not live from the death of someone else?” V. L. Compton

“I want to master life and death” Ted Bundy

Jörg Buttgereit was born in 1963 in West Berlin. Rejected from the Berlin Film School in the 1980s, he went on to independently finance and release several experimental short films including the well received *Mein Papi* (1981), a short six-minute cinéma vérité account of the director's father Erich. His first feature film, *Nekromantik*, was released in 1987. Broadly speaking Buttgereit’s recurrent themes are abjection, perversion and love. His finest work *Der Todesking* (1990, *The Death King*) compares favorably to Peter Greenaway, in particular *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989). His short films are similarly accomplished in formal construction employing distinctively protracted shots and intimate assessment of his subjects. Despite being maligned for his uncompromising style, Buttgereit enjoys critical praise in some quarters for his daring brand of schock cinema.

Buttgereit’s interest is in a style of confrontational cinema fashioned from the underground punk scene of 1980s West Berlin – this artistic directive is evident in *Nekromantik*’s production. In his exploration of contemporary German horror films, Halle identifies the tradition that *Nekromantik* and other films of the period grew from:

As far as style, the films were in a line more with the tradition of slasher, trash, splatter, or euro gore films, a direction that had a fan base in Germany but little actual precedent in German film history before 1989… they disrupt conventional distinctions of high and popular culture and exhibit a potential for avant-gardist practice. (5)
The release of the films did not traverse “typical distribution routes but was facilitated by sub-cultural, underground venues” (Halle 43). *Nekromantik* was produced on a minimal budget and shot entirely on Super-8mm, the same format used for his previous experimental shorts while the sequel moved up to 16mm. Both featured a repertory cast and crew which would be assembled in much the same guise for subsequent films; collaborators such as Daktari Lorenz, Beatrice Manowksi, Monika M. and co-writer Franz Rodenkirchen. Though both *Nekromantik* and its sequel belong to the underground in form, distribution and aesthetic and have dated slightly, Buttgereit’s ferocious insistence on the mechanics of necrophilia is such that their status as pariahs of cinematic expression remains curiously intact.

*Nekromantik* and *Nekromantik 2* are morally ambiguous and strive to provoke revulsion. A closer look at the films however reveals Buttgereit's intention to confront the audience with an examination of necrophilia that isn't frequently attempted. There are a variety of mitigating factors present which “expose the complicity of the film medium in acts of ideological manipulation” with a “wit that is both suitably mordant and perversely life-affirming” (Blake 107). It is these aspects of the film that suggest a work more akin to the avant-garde than grindhouse.

Cinematic representations of sexually perverse acts are often restricted by the boundaries imposed by censorship as well as by the readiness of the audience to accept particular perverse practices as a component of entertainment. Consequently, mainstream cinema that represents explicitly perverse sexual acts has tended towards a ‘soft’ exposition. Patricia MacCormack, a great supporter of this breed of cinema writes, “necrophilia remains an issue which cinema tentatively walks around or suggests in abstract ways” (213). This is necessitated, in part, by the visceral and psychologically disruptive nature of necrophilia.

Films such as *Kissed* (1996) and *Hard Candy* (2005) demonstrate a broad consideration of sexual perversion whilst refusing to explicitly represent them visually. In stark contrast to this approach are a variety of underground European films which offer raw expressions of perversity mined for shock value. These films unapologetically aim to shock, offend and repulse. *Lucker the Necrophagous* (1986) made in Belgium and the Spanish short-film *Aftermath* (1994) exemplify a cinema that revels in graphic, abhorrent displays of necrophilia, which are “written off immediately, and unfairly, as trash.” (MacCormack 213).

Reviews of *Nekromantik* often seem to consign the film to the category of ‘obscene for obscenity’s sake’. One reviewer blandly describes *Nekromantik* as “a sickening excursion into the twisted life of a necrophiliac…the treatment of the subject is both severely exploitative and offensive, and there is absolutely no talent involved in any of it” (Putman 97). MacCormack argues in a manner I'm inclined to
agree with that Buttgereit’s films are difficult to situate within the two polarities of soft and hardcore exposition (213). *Nekromantik’s* themes deal “with the nature and denaturalization of human beings” (Keßler 9) paired with the visceral spectacle of films such as *Lucker the Necrophagus*. If this is to be agreed upon, it lends a certain weight to the argument that Buttgereit’s films are seminal entries in the Euro-horror genre.

Both films have been subjected to numerous cuts and even banned under obscenity laws (the final sequence in *Nekromantik 2* was censored heavily in many countries for a scene involving both sex and decapitation). MacCormack suggests that the two films are “no more aggressive or violent than relatively banal horror or action films” (200). Considering that there are numerous decapitation scenes in the horror genre, some of which are more graphic, it seems fair to conclude that the combination of sex and violence gave authorisation to censure. The soft-core pornographic aesthetic put to use in the finale of *Nekromantik 2* condemns the film as obscene, as Kieran writes, “by virtue of soliciting or naturally eliciting fascination in responses taken to be morally prohibited, and attraction toward indulging or even delighting in those very responses” (47).

**Necrophilia and Perverse Sexuality**

Buttgereit's saga of necrophilia aspires to an explicit and meticulous detailing of the practicalities associated with necrophilic acts. Furthermore, he places this uncomfortable analysis somewhat uniquely within an environment of domestic banality (MacCormack 200) recalling amateur pornography. Pornography, as I'll address later, figures prominently in Buttgereit's design. Both films engage the viewer in an anatomically specific display of sexual perversion, replacing the symbolism of more pallid cinema such as *Kissed* with a probing and frequently nauseating literalism.

Donald Levy, who views the system for categorizing perversion as inadequate and vague, offers this useful definition:

> [perversion as a] subclass of the unnatural. When a person denies himself or another one of the basic human goods (or the capacity for it) and no other basic human good is seen as resulting thereby, and when pleasure is the motive of the denial, the act is perverted. When the pleasure is sexual, the perversion is sexual. (200-201)

This view, borne by J. S. Mill’s utilitarianism summarises the fairly common understanding that perversion is a matter concerning deviance and infringement upon the rights of others. In *Nekromantik 2*’s most
conventional display of sex the central character of the film, Monika (Monika M.) forces Mark, a compliant partner played by Mark Reeder, to lie on his back as she envisions Rob’s corpse in a cutaway shot. She responds to her fantasy and denies Mark any pleasure in participation.

Primoratz suggests that the list of basic human goods is short, including “life, health, control of one's bodily and mental functions, knowledge and love” (252). In the sequence, neither person is wholly satisfied; Monika must invoke the spectre of necrophilia to account for Mark’s inability to please her while Mark’s natural urge to assert his dominant masculinity is prohibited. He is pinned to the floor and sexually incapacitated. By both Buttgereit and Levy’s account the scene anticipates the perversity of sexual congress. It should come as little surprise that the film is often favoured by feminist writers. The insistent positioning of the female body as a canvas for victim hood is very much a hallmark of exploitation and horror films and the examples of shock cinema that favour necrophilia more often than not deploy the convention with great zeal. Nekromantik and its followup upend this routine. MacCormack notes that “Buttgereit’s films are rare because they focus on male corpses, used both heterosexually by women and homo- and bisexually by men” (203). The sequence concludes with Monika framed imposingly – an image extolling feminine power, control and sexual mastery.

Many scholars have articulated the ancient theme of necrophilia and one of the most interesting studies can be found in the work of the German psychologist and social theorist Erich Fromm. In his wide-ranging work The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness Fromm defines necrophilia in two distinct ways. The first is sexually derived, the “desire to have sexual intercourse or any other kind of sexual contact with a corpse” (325). The second is nonsexual, the “desire to handle, to be near to, and to gaze at corpses, and particularly
the desire to dismember them” (325). Necrophilia in Buttgereit’s films serves to symbolically represent concepts of sexual and societal alienation as well as viscerally attacking its audience. Hentig offers something a little more abstract:

...it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction…it is the passion to tear apart living structures. (emphasis added, quoted in Fromm 332)

Buttgereit confronts the spectator with a visual literalism that challenges something in Hentig’s account – his characters reconfigure torn apart structures out of romantic affection and sexual desire. Typically, as in *Kissed*, a more innocuous visualisation is employed. The infamous Danish import *Animal Farm*, generically titled and featuring acts of bestiality was circulated widely in the United Kingdom during the 1980s. Memorably described as “one of the most un-erotic things you could ever see” (*The Dark Side of Porn*, 2006) Buttgereit uses sex in his films to achieve something consciously similar; as a means to sicken rather than arouse - a compelling opposition.

Fromm’s theorizing of necrophilia asserts a “psycho-pathological phenomenon” (366) where people are to be understood as a combination of death and life-affirming tendencies, necro- and biophilic (a love of life) states, vacillating more or less evenly in healthy subjects. Buttgereit inhabits his films with characters that embody these traits in a decidedly unbalanced way. The apartment where the first film takes place is overwhelmed with images of death. Anatomical posters are spread over walls amidst jars of organs; his bed is surrounded by chicken wire; the apartment exists in a tactile aura of filth. And yet this ugliest of backdrops plays host to a story of romance and catharsis. The attraction, or “worship of technique” (Fromm 342) in relation to metal/mechanical objects is also noted as a component of the necrophilious character. In addition to an apartment littered with metallic decomposition, Buttgereit includes a car crash in the opening of *Nekromantik*, and excursions to the cinema in *Nekromantik 2*, where an inter-textual ‘film within a film’ serves as a wry commentary on the dualities of violence/spectatorship (slasher movies in *Nekromantik*) and art/trash cinema (the high-art of the dream sequences in both films – more on that later). As in J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash*, the proximity of sex and twisted machinery adds further emphasis to the study of perversity observed in Buttgereit's films.

MacCormack considers the finale of *Nekromantik* to be the most “interesting moment of necrophilia” (206). Rob (Daktari Lorenz) now given wholly to self-loathing, sexual and existential alienation, stabs himself to death at the moment of sexual climax. It’s certainly the most dramatic and literal embodiment of Fromm’s theorizing of necrophilia as a resolute manifestation of human destructiveness. The sequence manages to
incorporate all of the symptoms of perverse behavior including murder, suicide and a pleasure/pain dichotomy. Psychoanalytic accounts tend toward the assertion that necrophilia is a perversion which externalizes hatred towards oneself (MacCormack 202). Such is Rob's heightened state of arousal that there is little need for him to precipitate the act through masturbation. In this disturbing reimagining, the knife functions as easily as the hand.

Commonly associated constituents of sexual perversion include ‘unnaturalness’ and ‘immorality’. The natural/unnatural distinction lies at the heart of the problem when considering sexual perversion (Nagel 5). Turning to Buttgereit, it would appear that he thinks of perverse sexual behavior as being imbued with a certain humanism and even tragedy. This tendency towards ‘humanizing’ the unnatural manifests itself affectively in the film as repulsive; it provides a level of discomfort for the viewer to see such behavior naturalized.

In Nekromantik 2, Monika retrieves Rob’s corpse after the events of the first film; the scene is conceived as an emotional reunion. The opening shot of the sequence shows her delicately touching his hand before caressing his lips; she traces the puncture wounds on his torso affectionately. A medium close-up on Rob’s face captures the movement caused by Monika, the head involuntarily moving from side to side, then a concluding shot of Monika removing her shirt and advancing towards the body before a fade to black. This sequence functions as a precursor to the act of sex using in Krzywinska’s words, “the normative terms of ideologies of ideal heterosexual love and courtship” (31). Far from being emblematic of the violence associated with perversion, Monika’s initial courtship of the body suggests a feminizing of perversity; the callous pragmatism associated with ‘male’ necrophilia is supplanted by the desires of Monika as a “particularly feminine example of necrophilia” (209).
Separating the scenes which constitute Monika’s initial experience with necrophilia is a short sequence where the male lead is seen in a recording booth voicing a pornographic film. The inclusion of this courts discourse pertaining to pornographic representation. Linda Williams, the influential scholar who has written extensively on pornographic representation writes “all sound…functions to bolster the diegetic illusion of an imaginary space-time and of the human body’s place within it” (61). She argues that non-synchronous sound in pornographic films ignores conventional cinema’s “anchoring (of) body to image” (62).

Buttgereit draws attention to this separation of body and image dramatically by repeating the takes Mark must ‘perform’ until the booth operator is satisfied with the result. He slaps his fingers against his palm, kisses his hand and supplies a continual stream of sounds simulating sexual satisfaction. The effect of the scene underscores the cinematic apparatus as a means of deception. Buttgereit reminds us, in a humorous way, that despite the graphic nature of his film, it is after all a simulation. This playful intent is largely amiss from Nekromantik and demonstrates a maturing of his film making ability.

**The Function of Dream Narratives**

According to Fromm “the attraction to what is dead and putrid can be observed most clearly in the dreams of necrophilious persons” (332). In both films, dream sequences are used to illustrate “surreal visions of death, desire and love” (Blake 99). There are two sequences in particular that merit further exploration.

Rob’s dream in Nekromantik takes place in a large open field. He tears through black plastic which covers his upper body, the very same that transported to the corpse to his apartment, revealing his face. His skin is partially torn away revealing his skull. A woman in a white dress advances slowly towards him carrying a
box. Inside is a severed head. Taking his hand, the woman helps him to his feet with the head in his hand. They toss the head playfully back and forth, smiling. As she throws the head back to him, it changes to a heap of viscera. He swings the intestines about his head, leaping amongst the grass. Finally he heaves the material into the air, arms extended skywards.

The dream is fairly straightforward to interpret. According to Freud, a deciphering method takes into account “not only the content of the dream, but also the personality and circumstances of the life of the author of the dream” (92). As such the dream can be viewed as an expression of desire. The bucolic field symbolizes mobility and stands in contrast to the cramped conditions of his apartment to which he is in a sense a prisoner to his distorted nature.

Key items in the dream emphasize Rob’s necrophilious personality as represented by the skull being exposed. The woman in the white dress suggests purity and unequivocal acceptance; she makes a ‘gift’ of emancipation in the form of the severed head, freeing Rob from his alienating desire. Desire is affirmed as independent of the boundaries ‘imposed’ by sexual morality. He is free to indulge his inner desires, absolved of guilt; this is evinced by the playful nature of the scene. The final image of Rob extending his arms outward embodies the redemptive symbolism of the dream. Rob’s sexual preference to which he has little control over, dominates his existence. The immoral ‘sick’ nature of this preference alienates Rob from society and society to him.

The dream sequence in Nekromantik 2 is comparatively shorter though no less interesting. Mark envisions himself as buried in the ground up to his neck. The scene once again takes place in a green field, though this time the clearing is surrounded by fruit trees which recall the opening orchard sequence in Nekromantik.

Monika, wearing a white dress and black boots walks stridently past Mark as he mouths for help. Ignoring his pleas she kneels before another face in the ground. The face is set in what resembles a white plaque, motionless with eyes closed and traces of blood about the neck and forehead. Monika kisses the face slowly as Mark looks on, shouts helplessly and becomes increasingly frantic. Finally she places a box over Mark’s head, again ignoring his wild facial contortions and swiftly plants the spiked heel of her boot through it.

The dream follows a conversation Mark has with a friend at a café in which he reveals his discomfort concerning Monika’s perverse nature, “She doesn’t want me to move while having sex…and takes strange pictures of me”. In the dream, his inability to move is clearly a reflection of this anxiety. The meadow in which he is buried is of a vibrant green and full of life. He mentions that “people in love are supposed to be happy”, the scenery hints towards the idealism of 'normal' romantic love, the kind of relation he is unable to participate in. Monika corrupts this idealism, ignoring his ‘pleas’ and desire for normalcy. The face which
she kisses is both Rob and all that he embodies - the satiation of her sexual longing. As with the dream in *Nekromantik* a white dress is seen though beneath this dress are black boots, a symbol of her underlying perversity and confidence (Monika doesn't suffer the self-loathing angst that beset Rob). In a final move perversion conquers as the boot crushes the box and with it, Mark's head. In this sense, the dream serves as a premonition foretelling his death by decapitation. Together these Felliniesque dreamscapes of the grotesque juxtapose the subconscious reflections of the possessed and the possessor, the idealist and the depraved.

**The Language of Pornography**

The first sex scene in *Nekromantik* occurs immediately after Rob unveils his acquisition to his girlfriend Betty (Beatrice Manowksi). A simple piano theme plays gently over the proceedings. Using a hacksaw to cut off a section of steel piping, Betty thrusts the surrogate penis into the corpse and unrolls a condom over it. She fucks the pipe as Rob sucks on an eyeball, rolling it about in his mouth before depositing it back into the socket. After much undulation, Betty holds the body upright and tongues the face.

What is interesting here is the combination of necrophilia and necrophagia – the desire to eat the dead. The tactility of death is explored in the scene with greater emphasis than on the act of sex itself. After removing the corpse from a body-bag the two run their hands over the length of the body. A close-up shows Rob massaging the eyeball in its socket with his finger. Unlike *Nekromantik* 2, the “fluid, sticky, sexual and sour” liquid which MacCormack names ‘corpse treacle’ (212) is fetishised. Monica by contrast rejects ‘corpse treacle’ – she is violently ill the first time she tastes it, and makes a point of washing the body free of its demarcating fluid.
The visible presence of this “borderland between bodies” (MacCormack 213) prompts a stylistic technique whereby the film blurs the motion of the actors; sexual movements are rendered indistinct, an amorphous composition of living bodies and the viscosity of death (the technique is re-used in Nekromantik 2). Krzywinska suggests that ‘art’ films “often flaunt experimental formal techniques that break with established practice in order to attract a particular, identifiable, niche audience” (6). While Buttgereit’s decision to film the necrophilia scenes in this way could be considered a courting of such an audience it seems more useful to view the effect as functional i.e. serving to disorientate and perhaps nauseate the viewer “by virtue of soliciting or naturally eliciting fascination in responses taken to be morally prohibited, and attraction toward indulging or even delighting in those very responses” (Kieran 47). The delirium incited by this blurring of motion further compounds the reactive disgust that such a scene generates.

The climactic scene in Nekromantik 2 is structurally the most overt reference to pornography and contests the self-destructive argument offered by the psychoanalytic reading. The scene begins with Mark arriving at Monika’s door where they kiss passionately. An oblique tilt of the variety used in German expressionism re-frames the two horizontally then cuts to them naked and lying on top of one another. The camera pans downward, lingering over the bodies on display and focuses attention on Monika’s knee pinning Mark assertively. A point-of-view shot shows Mark’s increasingly aroused state.

Mark’s eyes close in a moment of ecstasy as she pulls a large cleaver from beneath the mattress; she plunges the blade into his neck and ferociously separates head from body. Blood shoots from his neck. In order to maintain the erection Monika applies a tourniquet to Mark’s penis and replaces his head with Rob’s. She mounts the reconstructed body still twitching with involuntary motion, in Williams’ words, a “perverse substitute of death spasm for pleasure spasm” (192). The camera is positioned beneath her head and tilted upwards, detailing her now-increased sexual response in a display well-known to pornography,
“lips glistening and slightly parted, head thrown back” (Patton 105). Upon reaching orgasm, she collapses next to Mark’s blood-soaked body, satisfied at having attained the totality of the necrophiliac experience.

Prior to Mark’s decapitation the scene closely resembles a soft-core pornographic aesthetic without explicitly belonging to the genre. In Williams’ book *Hardcore* she references *Snuff* (1976), which she excludes from the pornography genre “unless the fantastic special effects of exploitation horror films are included in its definition” (190) Whereas *Snuff* perpetrated violence against women by men Buttgereit reverses this configuration, thus affirming pornographic violence as feminized through the portrayal of a masculine victim. I can't help but recall Clover’s often-cited study of slasher films in her book *Men, Women and Chain Saws* and the similarities between pornography and horror, the body open and ‘revealed’ (198-205).

The scene in question is preceded by Monika knocking over a miniature version of the ‘Glass Man’ – originally a life-size transparent model created by Franz Tschackert in 1930 in which the organs are rendered visible. The figure is thus displaced on the floor to which Monika sets about re-constituting the body. Similarly, she re-constitutes Mark’s body as her ideal sexual and romantic partner. Rob’s body existing in the transformative state of decomposition is returned to the grave dismembered. Mark is substituted for Rob through the ‘face’ (head), a primary means of identity.

The visual indication or ‘proof’ of Monika’s orgasm is confronted with the same issues identified in conventional pornographic representation - that “female sexual pleasure is not synonymous with orgasm” (Patton 105). This problem is rephrased in interesting ways. Williams insists that the spectacle of death in *Snuff* and the mechanics thereof functions as a “perverse substitute” for the “orgasm that is so hard to see in
the body of the woman” (194). For Monika, sexual gratification is synonymous with necrophilious sexual activity. Orgasm is thus represented in two ways. The first is symbolic, through a variation of the ‘cum shot’ the ‘ejaculation’ of blood on to the wall gives sight to the invisible female orgasm, evidenced by the timing of the shot in relation to Monica’s gyrations. Secondly, conventional means such as aural cues, exasperation and fatigued collapse next to the body post-coitus. Though the question of female pleasure remains problematic, as Monika’s orgasm is only verifiable when situated within symbolism and context, the “visual evidence of the mechanical ‘truth’ of bodily pleasure” (Williams 100-101) relies on the violent removal of the masculine agent thus re-centering power onto the feminine body.

Buttgereit boldly combines the explicit sex of pornography with the violence associated with horror films as well as a dose of romantic melodrama. The scenes staging necrophilia are accompanied by a romantic piano-laced score (which could be seen as a satirical comment on conventional pornography). The senseless sex/violence dichotomy of slasher films and incessant misogyny of heterosexual pornography mutate into something much more interesting in his films. Conventions of both are structurally prevalent in the Nekromantik films however they’re used with such uncomfortable proximity to one another that they suggest a criticism of both genres. A scene in particular provides an example: Mark, having watched a particularly nasty tape consisting of animal mutilation states knowingly that it is “totally perverse to watch this stuff for fun”. Monika replies angrily “I find it interesting, and in any case less perverse than films that always show dicks and cunts in close up”.

Conclusion

Pornographic discourse has yet to examine to any significant degree the representation of sex as an abhorrent exercise in transgression. Though much has been written with regard to gender in the horror film genre, many of its more extreme (and lesser known) examples have yet to be considered. This essay attempts to argue for a concerted effort to engage theoretically with the intricacies of normative pornographic tropes within this brand of uncompromising underground cinema. It's my contention that in doing so there may be opportunity for further contribution towards an understanding of how sex and violence share a correlation. The culture of movie-making today forces these two aspects of entertainment into ever increasing proximity and expanded fluency. Using Buttgereit’s uniquely disarming films this essay has attempted to elaborate on the darker avenues of extreme cinema, a subject which until recently has been relatively ignored, in aid of prompting further discussion on the notion of explicit representation and in preserving its unique capacity as a basis for confrontational art.


Putman, Dustin. "Nekromantik (1987)". 29/04/2010


