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# Exploitation Feminism: Trashiness, Lo-Fidelity and Utopia in *She-Devils on Wheels* and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*

Kristina Pia Hofer

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## Introduction: Trashing Male Supremacy? Man-Eaters and Leather Girls, 1968 and 1988

*Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (Russ Meyer, 1965), *Teenage Gang Debs* (Sande N. Johnson, 1966), *The Mini-Skirt Mob* (Maury Dexter, 1968), *The Hellcats* (Robert F. Slatzer, 1968), *Sisters in Leather* (Zoltan G. Spencer, 1969) or *The Female Bunch* (Al Adamson, 1971): from the mid-1960s onwards, American exploitation cinema has spawned a number of male-directed Girl Gang movies that present audiences with rather ambivalent politics. On the one hand, these films feature active, strong, outspoken female protagonists who claim privileges that mainstream cinema at the time often only granted male characters: these female protagonists routinely assert physical violence, organize in closely-knit, gender-segregated gangs or lead mixed gender groups, resist hegemonic and patriarchal family norms, carry weapons, ride fast cars and motorcycles, compete with male rivals (and among each other), express an unapologetic and autonomous sexuality, and generally take great delight in being “bad” (Zalcock, 1998; Hatch, 2004). On the other hand, however, the overt sensationalism and unflinching commercial motivation typical of exploitation cinema also often put these unusual female protagonists on display as a freakish, sexualized spectacle (Cook, 2005, 55f). As a consequence, the potential of various Girl Gang films to challenge androcentric and heteronormative modes of representation have been hotly disputed in both academic and fan contexts (see, for instance, Cook, 1967; Rich, 1995; Zalcock, 1998; Despineux and Mund, 2000).

This article seeks to contribute to, but also complicate, the existing debate by discussing the aesthetics of two rather idiosyncratic Girl Gang films from two very different production backgrounds: first, Herschell Gordon Lewis' female outlaw biker movie *She-Devils on Wheels* (1968), which made sufficiently satisfactory revenue at drive-ins and hardtops in the late 1960s (Vale and Juno, 1986, 35) and presently enjoys a second life being re-released in various digital formats by fan labels specialized in the fringes of "vintage" exploitation cinema,<sup>1</sup> and second, Michael Lucas' 16mm Budget Rock film *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* (1988), which never premiered in a theater, only saw a single small-run VHS release in the late 1980s, and remains relatively unknown to this day (Fielding, 2010a).

The two movies stand out from the bulk of Girl Gang fare because their narratives and camera work consistently represent the female protagonists as badass exploitation heroines in charge. Too often, Girl Gang films resort to the common formula of punishing unruly women in a final moral twist, or domesticating them through heterosexual romance (Zalcock, 1998). *She-Devils* and *Blood Orgy*, in contrast, not only steer clear of moralizing and romantic normalizations, but also allow for ambiguous endings: both Lewis' Man-Eaters<sup>2</sup> and Lucas' Leather Girls perpetrate serious crimes without justification, show no remorse, and still go free in the end. The films are equally unusual in their representation of violence and sex. While other Girl Gang movies often seem to stage fighting female bodies predominantly for the benefit of male viewers,<sup>3</sup> the camerawork in *She-Devils* and *Blood Orgy* often lingers on hurt, broken male bodies [*She-Devils*, 33:30-33:43, 47:43, 68:50, 73:12; *Blood Orgy*, 23:05, 48:06-49:20, 68:22-68:52]. When showing sex, the two films do not display female nudity so much as bare male chests [*She-Devils*, 24:16, 25:26, 61:40, 65:36; *Blood Orgy*, 38:30, 39:58]. In *She-Devils*, the Man-Eaters round their prospective sex partners up in a "stud line," from which the women pick and choose while commenting mockingly on the men's physical frame and supposed sexual prowess, thus turning back the objectifying, heteronormative gaze usually cast on women characters in biker films of the time [19:34-22:48; 55:13-58:13]. In *Blood Orgy*, the only sex scene (between a Leather Girl and one of her male captives) is rendered in a colorful, experimental whirl of dizzying, rapidly cut, extreme close-ups of unidentifiable body parts [41:06-41:15], which recall Second Wave feminist *avant-garde* filmmaking (like, for instance, Carolee Schneeman's *Fuses*, 1967) rather than typical exploitation techniques. True to this form, the scene climaxes in an almost poetic take on the Leather Girl's hand crushing an empty beer can [41:20].

Though the two films' representation and characterization of their female protagonists have been the main concern of other notable discussions (see, for instance, Zalcock, 1998; Fielding, 2010a; Choi, 2014), this article will adopt a slightly different focus. In the following, I explore a dimension that seems equally outstanding in the two movies, but has not yet garnered a similar amount of empathetic attention: namely, the two films' extreme (and extremely materially manifest) trashiness, in particular their overwhelming sonic excess. As is often noted in reviews, *She-Devils on Wheels* abounds with sloppy takes, cheap makeshift props, flimsy, handicraft costumes, and dirty, distorted lo-fi sound. Similarly, *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* is a scratchy, noisy no-budget production brimming with overdone getups, tacky fabrics, bad hair, abundant domestic detail in indoor backdrops, and an original musical score dominated by the ear-shattering feedbacks of screechy Budget Rock guitars, reedy combo organs, and the drone of basic analog synths. Interestingly, fan reviews that see absolutely no feminist

potential in either film often enforce their argument by pointing to these excesses: no serious feminist message, they insist, would ever come wrapped in such a shoddy package—see, for instance, the FilmBizarro (no date) review of *Blood Orgy*, or Celluloid Nightmares (no date) and Jabootu's *Bad Movie Dimensions* (2010) on *She-Devils*. My discussion will counter this projection by arguing that *She-Devils'* and *Blood Orgy's* pronounced trashiness is, in effect, key to understanding the particular critical impulses the two films can provide for a feminist reception of Girl Gang exploitation cinema today.

## Engaging Excess: From Second Wave Feminism to Exploitation Feminism

I am by no means the first to highlight exploitation cinema's trashiness as a useful resource for research. In 1995, Jeffrey Sconce suggested that the aesthetic excessiveness of exploitation audiovisuals be read as an "alternative archive" of subcultural articulations, fashion and musical styles, and sexual politics and identities past (Sconce, 1995). In 2011, Elena Gorfinkel elaborated on this idea. She argues that, since the trashiness of exploitation cinema often generates from an unusually high visibility of filmic labor, it warrants investigation beyond textual and diegetic frames. Trashiness, Gorfinkel argues, can also bespeak "documentary facts": glitches, mistakes, bad acting, and a general failure to establish cinematic verisimilitude would reveal a film's historical conditions of production and mark traces of actual historical bodies, objects, and practices. Many present-day viewers, she suggests, recognize (and enjoy) these traces as explicitly "dated," that is, as both belonging to and demarcating a specific period of pop culture history (2011, 105f). Thus charged with historical immediacy, exploitation productions seem to invite readings as outsider, alternative, or underground historical sources. Exploitation cinema's often blatant topicality makes such a reading even more attractive. Acutely aware of how promises of tackling timely concerns would lure audiences into the theaters, late 1960s exploitation films usually offered a sensationalist take on nascent social, cultural and political movements, ranging from psychedelic hippie cults to the so-called "sexual revolution" (Schaefer, 1999; Syder, 2002; Gorfinkel, 2011). For present-day viewers, this dated timeliness promises retrospective glances at how things looked, felt, "were" in the past—ideally, without the distortions or omissions imposed by mainstream cinematic conventions and production codes (Sconce, 1995). Retrospective fan pleasure in watching exploitation films, Gorfinkel suggests, often lies in "plumb[ing] their depths for their political and aesthetic transgressions" (2011, 96; also see Shiel, 2003).

When debating the feminist potential of Girl Gang films, it seems seductive to read *She-Devils on Wheels* as such an archive of transgressive acts and ideas of the past. As a movie about a female motorcycle gang engaged in a violent "battle of the sexes," it begs to be examined for possible traces of early radical feminism, or, more generally, of early feminisms of the so-called Second Wave, which blossomed in the late 1960s. The often-quoted anecdote that Lewis cast "real" female bikers—that is, women who were actually riding motorcycles and participated in motorcycle club subcultures in their offscreen lives (for instance, in Quarles, 1993, 37ff; Zalcov 1998, 63f)—created its own myth of the film as historical witness to female empowerment.<sup>4</sup> Other extra-filmic echoes seem to strengthen the case. The film's rhetoric of monstrosity (of "She-Devils"

and “Man-Eaters” who are “riding their men as viciously as they ride their motorcycles,” as one newspaper ad for the film would have it) corresponds with historical radical feminism’s flirt with exploitation aesthetics, which manifests in activist collectives with names like W.I.T.C.H. (short for “Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell”) and historiographies bearing titles like *Daring to Be Bad* (Echols, 1989). Moreover, the Man-Eaters’ hands-on approach to solving conflicts resembles how contemporary American media often portrayed radical feminists: as sensationally irrational, disturbingly deviant from expected gendered behavior, and excessively belligerent for no good reason (cf. Dow, 2003). In fact, Lewis himself has referred to his film as “the ultimate statement of gender equality.”<sup>5</sup>

Superimposing this “gender equality” on the historical Second Wave, however, would be a bit of a stretch, if not a deliberate misinterpretation. A closer analysis complicates the straightforward reading of *She-Devils on Wheels* as an underground archive of actual feminist activism. For one, the feature was released before the spectacular, “New York Radical Women”-initiated Atlantic City Miss America Pageant Protest that helped historical radical feminists to public notoriety. The film hit the theaters in May 1968, while the protest took place in early September of the same year.<sup>6</sup> Until then, the nascent feminist movement was still virtually absent from American mass media (Dow, 2003, 130). Alice Echols, one of the first historiographers of the Second Wave, even speaks of the movement’s “obscurity” before September 1968 (1989, 93). It remains doubtful that an exploitation film like *She-Devils on Wheels* would rely on an obscure social phenomenon to attract audiences. The film strongly alludes to the then widely popular outlaw biker movie cycle, picking up themes and tropes shared by films like *Wild Angels* (Roger Corman, 1966), *Thunder Alley* (Richard Rush, 1967) and *Hell’s Angels on Wheels* (Rush, 1967). These similarities suggest that Lewis hoped to cajole viewers with generic pleasures, providing them with settings and characters they were already familiar with. At this point in time, when Second Wave feminism was still mostly known to the very activists involved, the movement would more likely have turned up in a Mondo-style mock documentary<sup>7</sup> than in a biker feature. The Man-Eaters are thus probably best understood as a fantastic, exaggerated projection of what female emancipation *could* look like, rather than an actual reflection of the Women’s Rights activism that concurrently took place in the real world.

The fact that echoes of historical radical feminism *do* appear in a later Herschell Gordon Lewis feature—here, however, as a social phenomenon to poke fun at—strengthens the case against reading *She-Devils* as a reflection on the feminist movement. Indeed, *The Gore Gore Girls* (1972) shows a group of militant “women’s libbers” storming the stage of a strip club to violently attack one of the (female) dancers [30:57-34:17]. The scene playfully picks up on a popular anti-feminist sentiment that often met early radical feminist action of the Second Wave: namely, that feminism was all about women envying other prettier women (cf. Dow, 2003, 130). The activists carry signs sporting slogans like “Women right On!,” “Lewd is Crude,” “Take Off is a Rip Off,” and “Quit with Tit,” or simply showing the so-called woman-power symbol (a clenched fist encircled by the symbol for Venus) on plain white or yellow ground. While the slogans are ironically modified versions of Second Wave rhetorics,<sup>8</sup> the woman-power symbol is directly taken from the actual movement without modification, as if to make sure that audiences recognized the attackers as the real-world radical feminists they would have seen on the news.

The representation of *The Gore Gore Girls'* women's libbers, who have so much in common with historical radical feminists, contrasts starkly with that of the Man-Eaters in *She-Devils on Wheels*. While the fantastic, historically implausible Man-Eaters are tougher and more in charge than the rest of the characters, and thus easily accommodate fantasies of female empowerment as possibly cool, sexy and impressive even in the androcentric, stereotype-ridden cosmos of exploitation cinema, the Second-Wave-inspired women's libbers only serve as the butt of a joke. This difference is also expressed in the very different musical scores assigned to the two groups. When the feminists storm the stage in *The Gore-Gore Girls*, they do so to an unnerving, seemingly endless loop of the first bars of Johann Strauss Senior's *Radetzky March* (1848). The piece—not exactly a somber composition to begin with—is rendered in a bouncy fairground version arranged for a circus orchestra of brass, glockenspiel, and marching drums. The loop not only contrasts starkly with the film's general musical theme, which consists of minimal guitar-and-drum Rock'n'Roll instrumentals and Exotica numbers closely resembling those that would be compiled as “music to strip by” (or, sometimes, as “Titty Shakers”)<sup>9</sup> in the decades to come, but also to the Garage Proto-Punk soundtrack of *She-Devils on Wheels*. With its emphasis on the brass section, especially the glide of the trombones, the *Radetzky March* loop conjures up clown acts and dirty jokes about sex gone wrong. Radical feminist action, the gaudy music seems to suggest, is far from being sexy—nor can it be taken serious politically. In contrast, the Man-Eaters' signature instrumental numbers are charged with a savvy underground sophistication that marks these women protagonists as *bona fide* exploitation heroines.

Herschell Gordon Lewis' work obviously features two very different takes on feminism, which calls for a careful discrimination of terms. I will thus refer to the speculative, hyperbolic, fantastic feminism that drives *She-Devils on Wheels* (and, as we will see below, *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*) as *exploitation feminism*, as it very much depends on some of the key modalities of exploitation cinema and deploys them to its advantage. Lewis' exploitation feminism thrives from the fact that exploitation cinema operates with flat, wooden characters and one-dimensional stories, while at the same time offering a wealth of excess trashiness that draws attention to its material underpinnings. The critical potential of *She-Devils on Wheels'* exploitation feminism unfolds in the tension inherent in this exact coupling: the rather banal message the narrative conveys—that the empowerment of women equals a dirty battle fought out between amoral, power-hungry, violent, heterosexual women versus similarly rotten heterosexual men—is accompanied by an abundance of dirt, decay and imperfection, which communicates a much less determinable meaning (cf. Thompson, 1986, 140; Paasonen, 2011, 98), inviting audiences to a more contingent engagement with the Girl Gang narrative. However, key to understanding this potential is a willingness to take the film's material trashiness seriously on its own terms. This means moving past treating trashy textures as a mere passageway to the “real” of historical feminisms, and asking for the *utopian* feminist potential such trashiness harbors. As I will demonstrate below, Michael Lucas' *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* makes liberal use of *She-Devils on Wheels* as an archive—however, not as an archive of historical traces, but as an archive of material excess, where spillover textures lend themselves to reworking and to the re-imagination of exploitation feminist promise.

## Spillover Sound: Texture, Meaning, and the “Incredibly Strange”

One practicable way of approaching the trashiness of exploitation feminist articulations in *Girl Gang* films is sounding their specific textures. Texture is a matter of materiality (Hofer, 2014). In everyday usage, texture shows the stuff things are made of, indicates the weave and pattern of objects, and hints how shapes and surfaces may feel to the touch.<sup>10</sup> Experiencing texture, however, is not limited to moments where “physical substrate” contacts the skin (Birtwistle, 2010, 15, also cf. Marks, 2000, 2002). While defining texture as a surface’s “qualities if touched, brushed, stroked, or mapped,” Renu Bora nonetheless highlights that these qualities “can usually be anticipated by looking” (1997, 98). For a seemingly immaterial medium like film, texture may thus be apprehended from the quality, detail and scale of the objects visible on screen (cf. Paasonen, 2011, 98). In addition, texture becomes perceptible in visual properties that draw attention to film as film stock: grain, color, and flicker, for instance, bespeak the photochemical and mechanical processes specific to film as medium (Birtwistle, 2010, 14). The latter aspect also manifests in medium-specific wear and decay, as in scratches on the film’s surface (and other traces of the film strip’s handling), in alterations in the emulsion due to heat, humidity and other environmental influences, or in the disintegration of the chemical and carrier elements effectuated by the passage of time (Watkins, 2013, 58f).

The important role of the haptic and the visual notwithstanding, touch and sight are not the only senses crucial in perceiving filmic texture (Altman, 1992; Chion, 1994). Reminding us that film is an intrinsically *audiovisual* medium, Andy Birtwistle (2010) insists on considering the materiality of sound as an equally important component of filmic texture. He argues that much like visual texture, the materiality of film sound unfolds in sonic properties pointing to the shape, form and structure underlying specific sonic events, like “complexity, amplitude, tonal qualities, timbre, duration, development over time” (2010, 15). As with the materiality of images, sonic texture shapes according to the rendering and playback technologies employed: the quality of the microphone will determine the dynamic range of the voice captured, as will the dust gathered inside an aged magnetic tape machine add grit to the playback (cf. Birtwistle, 2010, 16, 85ff).

In fact, one of the most prominent textures in both *She-Devils on Wheels* and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* is manifest in the films’ soundtracks and, more precisely, in their sonic excess. The two films offer rough, ragged sonic surfaces that are shot through with unexpected peaks in volume and pitch, uncomfortably intense drones, and confusingly dense moments of different sounds competing and overlapping. While standard film sound design aims towards sleek, smooth sonic surfaces that would not only successfully conceal the labor underlying the production (Doane, 1980, 48), but also “repress” any spillover generating from filmic materiality itself (Birtwistle, 2010, 88), *She-Devils* and *Blood Orgy* sport lo-fidelity textures that place dirt and distraction over cleanliness and transparency. Consonant with Kristin Thompson’s observation that filmic materiality announces its presence loudest when at odds with cinematic conventions (1986), *She-Devils* and *Blood Orgy* become excessive by defying what film scholars have discussed as the “sonic hierarchy of classical cinema” (Birtwistle, 2010, 57; also see Doane, 1980; Altman, 1992; Spadoni, 2007). Unlike mainstream film, the two

features do not privilege dialogue, but often leave the spoken word to drown in music and sound effects. In addition, both films are exceptionally rich in ambient noise, which further distracts the listener's attention away from the sound events motivated by narrative. Moreover, the "sound of technology" (Birtwistle, 2010, 85) suffuses both features: even in moments of silence—that is, moments where no external signal was recorded—blank magnetic tape and optical soundtrack crackle and hum. Textural roughness also spreads throughout the musical tracks. *She-Devils on Wheels'* Garage Rock'n'Roll theme song, "Get Off The Road" (Robert Lewis Band, 1968), for instance, bears the sonic marks of its lo-fidelity production practices throughout. Lewis relates that he did not employ professional personnel specialized in popular music, but produced the song with the film crew.<sup>11</sup> Recording live—that is, with the complete band performing at the same time—with two microphones, all vocals and instruments were simultaneously channeled onto one single track on 1/4" magnetic tape, using the same Uher reel-to-reel recorder the crew employed for rendering sync sound. As a result, the song bears the same cluttered sonic signature as the rest of the film's soundtrack. The fact that all audio was mixed down into a single track and converted into optical print in post-production heightens the effect. Measured against conventional standards of signal-source fidelity, the sonic texture of "Get Off The Road" is marked by spillover, unwanted sound, sound that does not immediately propel a story, communicate meaning or make sense (Hofer, 2014; also cf. Thompson, 1986; Birtwistle, 2010, 2). It thus qualifies as one of those parts of a film that Kristin Thompson identifies as unfit for "a tight analysis," "incomprehensible," and even "disturbing" (1986, 133, 140).

For exploitation cinema, however, such "disturbing" excess of seemingly meaningless material spillover actually seems to be a quite productive modality. As Lewis observes on the audio commentary to *She-Devils on Wheels*,<sup>12</sup> incomprehensible textures can be exactly what draws audiences to certain films. The combination of trashily produced, exaggerated tales of female-on-male violence gone rampant with a lo-fi Garage Rock'n'Roll soundtrack has led exploitation fans to label *She-Devils* as "incredibly strange," an attribute employed, in this case, almost lovingly (see V. Vale and Andrea Juno's edited volume *Incredibly Strange Films* of 1986). With exploitation cinema, which privileges stock figures over rounded characters, lurid tales over complex deliberation, and spectacle over narration (Schaefer, 1999; Sconce, 1995; Jancovich 2002; Sconce, 2007; Shipka, 2011), getting to the bottom of what a film was "really" trying to say is not a top priority for seasoned viewers. The pull of "incredibly strange" films probably resembles more the dynamics Susanna Paasonen describes as "resonance" (2011). Paasonen argues that excessive genres become meaningful and pleasurable not just in an audience's attempts at deciphering, understanding and making (intellectual) sense of them, but also in the moments where viewers and listeners yield to affective and emotional intensities like excitement, amazement, arousal, and thrill, and the bodily sensations that are connected to these movements. Spillover textures, as haptic audiovisual residue that is not easily decoded in terms of language and signification, play a crucial role in sparking these impressions (Paasonen, 2011, 13f, 190, 196f). The way "Get Off The Road" resonates with exploitation *aficionados* may have less to do with the signifiatory content of the song's nursery rhyme lyrics ("We are the Hellcats nobody likes, Man-Eaters on motorbikes. Get off the road before we have crossed . . . or you might get your rear-end tossed"), and more with the exhilaration effectuated by the combination of such lyrics with the rough sonic textures—and excessive visual spectacle—described above.



Paying attention to the pleasure fans invest in the strangeness of lo-fi materiality can offer a different take on the historicity conveyed by exploitation trashiness than the direct “documentary” charge suggested by Jeffrey Sconce (1995) and Elena Gorfinkel (2011, 106). Reading rough textures as imprints of the past means treating them as signs transporting a clear message: if decoded correctly, they would release historical facts congealed into filmic materiality. Engaging with a film as “incredibly strange,” on the other hand, allows for texture to become meaningful not only for the information it possibly carries, but also for the speculations, fantasies, and associations it invites. Renu Bora observes that while an engagement with texture always implies questions regarding an object’s concrete history (“*How did [it] get that way?*,” 1997, italics in original), it also encourages musings about what could be done with a certain intriguing texture, how it could be reworked, or how a certain material could be “act[ed] upon” (1997, 94). Thus, the critical potential of the rough sonic textures of the Garage Rock’n’Roll songs used in *She-Devils on Wheels* might lie not in bearing material witness to extra-textual, possibly feminist transgressions of the past, but rather in lending the film’s very own exploitation feminist projections to appropriation and adaptation in later works.

## Appropriations: Lo-Fidelity, Untimeliness, Utopia

*Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* is one among many appropriations of Lewis’s exploitation feminist take on the Girl Gang narrative,<sup>13</sup> that equally places great emphasis on wild music and trashy sound. It was directed and produced by San Francisco Budget Rock musician Michael Lucas in the mid-1980s. Like Lewis’s *Man-Eaters*, Lucas’s *Leather Girls* are stereotypically flat characters whose individual traits aim for sensational exploit rather than psychological verisimilitude.<sup>14</sup> Echoing the *Man-Eaters*’ one-dimensional projection of “gender equality,” the *Leather Girls*’ idea of emancipation boils down to physically assaulting men. In addition, *Blood Orgy* offers an equally fantastic imagination of feminist payback for the late 1980s as *She-Devils* did for the context of the late 1960s: Lucas drafted the *Leather Girls* as an exploitation feminist alternative to the “Dworkin-esque” radical feminism that trash film screenings in San Francisco at the time were often met with (Lucas in Fielding, 2010b). Shot with a budget of \$10,000 on 16mm, the film failed to play the Bay Area art house circuit it targeted (Fielding, 2010b) and was released directly to video in 1988 by Forbidden Cinema Archives, a company that has no other titles to its name and was most likely brought into being for the very occasion. Though a soundtrack LP of the same title was released in 1994 and drew moderate attention in North American and European Garage Rock circles, the film itself remains marginal, and has never been officially re-released on DVD.<sup>15</sup>

One of the reasons *Blood Orgy* all but vanished into obscurity may be that it pushes material excess to an extreme. Reviewers cautioned that watching the movie was “like watching a filmed headache.”<sup>16</sup> Michael Lucas describes the particular trashiness of *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* as a product of its very own time and place (Lucas in Fielding, 2010b). In fact, Lucas’s Girl Gang conforms to the style codes of 1980s North American Garage Rock’n’Roll sub-cultures: the *Leather Girls* wear their white school uniform shirts one size too large and with the tails out; their Ramones-style leather jackets sport studs and band names (Crime, Iggy and the Stooges) in white marker; their cars and bedrooms are decorated with plastic bats, spiders and skeletons; and

gang member Fleabrain rides a slim, red skateboard to school [8:56]. Nevertheless, the exploitation feminism staged here also conveys a strong sense of pop culture datedness when measured against its contemporary context of the late 1980s. For instance, Lucas intersperses the performance of his timely protagonists with after-the-fact voiceover commentary by an “Inspector Joe Morton” [8:54, 20:03, 23:18, 25:17, 30:06, and so on], which recalls the “square-up” storytelling strategies of “classical” exploitation cinema<sup>17</sup> (cf. Schaefer, 1999, 69ff). In addition, the musical soundtrack includes a number of Rock’n’Roll, Surf and Doo Wop songs from the 1950s and 1960s, like “Nite Owl” (Tony Allen & The Champs, 1955), “Homicide” (Myron Lee & The Caddies, 1958) and “Scream” (Ralph Nielsen & The Chancellors, 1962). In a most notable reference to the historical roots of all-female proto-punk sensibilities, a scene that shows the Leather Girls cruising around town in an open convertible blasting “What A Way To Die” (The Pleasure Seekers, 1964), a mid-1960s Garage anthem to underage drinking by a young Suzie Quatro’s first band [9:22-11:36].

References to 1950s and 1960s pop culture notwithstanding, the Leather Girls do not conjure up pre-1980s exploitation feminism without a twist. Adopting the terminology discussed in the previous section, *Blood Orgy* does not copy or mimic the historicity of *She-Devils on Wheels*, but offers, rather, an “incredibly strange,” offbeat resonance that disrupts the (out-)datedness of Girl Gang cinema’s aesthetics deliberately. After all, an additional, more tentative reference to a less specific past generates from the film’s musical soundtrack. Steering clear from all period purism, *Blood Orgy* also features uncredited minimal synth tracks and songs by two of Lucas’s own bands, The Wild Breed and The Phantom Surfers. Two lengthy scenes in which the Leather Girls chase male victims (that strongly resemble the “What A Way To Die” car cruise scene described above in both their dynamics and subject matter) are accompanied by two of Lucas’ original instrumental pieces, “Pursuit” (David Nudelman and The Wild Breed, 1988) [30:52-32:22] and “Horror Beach” (The Phantom Surfers, 1988)<sup>18</sup> [43:25-45:07]. Though these tracks are much younger than the Pleasure Seekers song, their rough textures nevertheless make them “feel old” (cf. Birtwistle, 2010, 93). This dated quality owes to the very audible presence of technology manifest in the lo-fidelity recordings. As Budget Rock bands, The Wild Breed and The Phantom Surfers do not push for polish, but produce as quickly and efficiently as possible, with whatever equipment is affordable or available at the time. Instead of meticulous engineering, Budget Rock favors live recording, first takes, and minimal post-production. As a result, material detritus of the technologies used—static hiss, feedbacks, coarse grain, print-through echo, dropouts, limitations in frequency and dynamic range—is heavily inscribed in the productions’ sonic texture. As in film, sound currency and timeliness are measured by how well a technology can suppress its materiality (Birtwistle, 2010, 89f), the lo-fi production value of “Pursuit” and “Horror Beach,” which cannot or does not want to meet the standards of the state of the art, registers as out of time. Though contemporaneous to the film in their origin, the songs appear strangely out of sync with the sleek 1980s. Other original tracks featured in *Blood Orgy* pick up on this asynchrony: “Fleabrain” (Lucas & Rosenthal, 1988), for instance, a theme song that introduces the Leather Girl of the same name in an opening montage [7:14-7:51], also seems more akin to much older recordings, like the Robert Lewis Band’s “Get Off The Road” (1968) featured in *She-Devils*. Even the film’s recurring, flat, slow-cooking “mood” score [16:01-17:28; 20:00-21:07; 23:39-24:19; 34:11-35:08, and so on], arranged for rather

un-nostalgic synthesizers and electronic drums, is so rugged in texture that it blends in perfectly with 1950s songs like “Homicide.”

Though *Blood Orgy* seems to consciously adopt such outmoded aesthetics for its reworking of exploitation feminist themes, I am reluctant to address this appropriation as “retro.” Recent literature connects retro sensibilities to a nostalgic longing for the comforts of commodity and pop cultures of the recent past (see, for instance, Gorfinkel, 2011; Reynolds, 2011; also cf. Thorne, 2003, 102). For “vintage” exploitation film fandom, this nostalgia often generates from later audiences investing the dated artifacts with utopian potential. Here, the audibility of outdated technologies and production processes, like direct and live sound recording with analog equipment, gets to stand for the handmade, for “craftsmanship” (Thorne, 2003, 103), and for an empowerment of the producing subject. Textural excessiveness is interpreted as the result of daring, experimental *auteurs* freely expressing themselves in aesthetics that defy the dullness of uniform mainstream artifacts (see Vale & Juno 1986, 4f; or Jeffrey Sconce’s 1995 discussion of “paracinema” fandom). This strand of retro appreciation charges outmoded trashiness with an almost instant subversiveness. Adopting Rosalind Krauss’s (2000) observations on the role of outmoded formats in post-medium artworks with some liberties, the re-appropriation of obsolete technologies for pop cultural artifacts promises to release the utopian potential of these technologies once more in the present, and possibly blasts one’s own creation out of the confines dictated by the commodity market (cf. Thorne, 2003, 107).

Reading Michael Lucas’s appropriation as a retro articulation would mean to assume that *Blood Orgy* channeled part of Herschell Gordon Lewis’ crafty ingenuity to the present, which not only places an uncomfortable emphasis on the role of the individual (male) *auteur* in the utopian potential of exploitation feminism, but also glosses over the intimate entanglement of retro’s obsession with salvaging something “original” from the past with existing commodity markets. Paradoxically, retro fandom often revolves around commodity consumption. Fans invest considerable amounts of energy and labor not only in the preservation of hard-to-find, lost and forgotten “incredibly strange” films, but also in making these artifacts accessible to broader audiences. Since the precarious status of these artifacts often depends on the obsolescence of the formats they come in, providing access also means transferring content to contemporary formats like DVDs or digital streams. This strategy shows a central contradiction in the utopian potential that retro sensibilities confer on outmoded technologies: truly untimely technologies like 16mm film and VHS tape, which seem to realize the resistant promise of dated media most readily by having lost their commercial use value long ago, are shunted exactly because their unyielding materialities get in the way of convenient consumption (cf. Skoller, 2005, 171f). The dilemma also manifests itself in the seemingly opposite strategies adopted in contemporary emulations of retro aesthetics. Here, retro sensibilities often translate into an obsession with “authentic” vintage equipment, which in turn elevates outmoded gear to the very sellable status of the sought-after rarity, and ups its value on special interest markets. Either way, “shopping and owning” (Skoller, 2005, 170) appear to be central axes of retro engagements with incredibly strange pop artifacts.

*Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*, in contrast, seems uninterested in a meticulous re-staging of “authentic” 1960s Garage Rock’n’Roll sound with expensively restored vintage instruments and devices, and thus removes from its exploitation feminism the promise

of creating subversive potential by merely resuscitating 1960s trash pop culture. In a scene that shows David Nudelman and The Wild Breed perform an excessively mangled version of “Hate Teen” (The Wild Breed, 1988) at the “St. Jerome School for Girls First Afternoon Tea Dance” [26:56-30:46], for instance, the guitars sound much too screechy and high on treble, and the vocals and drums lack the pronounced, yet delicate reverb to register as typical Sixties revenants. A concrete periodization of this performance by way of sonic signature seems futile anyway. In fact, the historical characteristics that the different types of music used in the film may bear in their sonic debris are lost in the VHS release version, which, according to Michael Lucas, was launched without having received any of the “necessary post-production stuff” (Lucas in Fielding, 2010b). As a result, the datedness of the sonic textures in *Blood Orgy* fails to recall a specific point or period in historical time, and suggests its specific exploitation feminism as something very different from a rehearsal of some transgressive acts of the past. To argue that this mash-up bespeaks a nostalgic hope for redeeming the utopian promises inherent in some kind of “original” Girl Gang exploitation cinema seems quite beside the point. After all, sonic dirt here figures as *dirt*, as blemish, as distraction, as excess, and not as a marker of authenticity. If the film’s untimely sonic textures harbor utopian potential, this potential is not realized in the sanitation, restoration and conservation of a “vintage” or “authentic” exploitation feminism, but in the accommodation of contingency and change.

If the exploitation feminism of *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* points towards change, however, its trashy, excessive material underpinnings still prevent this openness from promoting teleological ideas of progress. Discussing the work of Jack Smith, who also shares a love for detritus, the rejected, and the incredibly strange (though, in Smith’s case, of Hollywood film culture), Juliane Rebentisch argues that an excess of dated materiality can also call attention to the decay all history is subject to (2013, 169). According to Rebentisch, embracing this decay uncloses a utopia that differs from “escapist and aestheticized visions of the past”<sup>19</sup> prevalent in retro culture. She senses a desire for a utopian “community” based not on possession, but on the understanding that all human and object lives are perishable and vulnerable to the passage of time. This utopia envisions people and matter entangled in empathic “interrelations” not of exploit, but of care (2013, 171ff, also cf. Thorne, 2003, 114).

A very similar empathy for decay and the contingencies it accommodates also manifests itself in the *Blood Orgy* soundtrack LP Lucas compiled for Planet Pimp Records in 1994. Released at a moment in time that saw “paracinema” and “cult film” fandom consolidated in a growing number of reissues (Seattle-based label Something Weird Video had been active since 1990), increasing academic interest (Jeffrey Sconce was about to publish “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” in *Screen*, see Sconce, 1995), and the first surges of a mainstream cinematic retro wave reinterpreting 1960s and 1970s exploitation sensibilities for the multiplexes of the world (*Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino came out in 1994), the album displayed an unorthodox approach to dealing with Girl Gang exploitation cinema’s pop culture history. In spite of its title, and although the back cover spins a tragic tale of unfettered creativity, crushing debt, and suicide supposedly connected to the production of *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* of 1988,<sup>20</sup> the collection of songs assembled for the 12" vinyl record had nothing to do with the music featured in the film. Most notably, all 1950s and 1960s tracks had been ditched in favor of more recent 1990s Budget Rock and Indie productions—though a cover version of The Pleasure

Seeker's "What A Way To Die" by The Mummies (1991) pays homage to the *Girls In The Garage*-vibe<sup>21</sup> of the film music. Moreover, none of the tracks by Lucas's own bands featured in the film were included on the record—they had been substituted by other tracks by the same bands (The Phantom Surfers contribute "11th Frame" instead of "Horror Beach"), or by tracks by some of the director's other, lesser-known side projects (like Three Stoned Men, which features members of The Wild Breed). In addition, a number of then very current Californian bands that formed long after the release of the movie, like Tiger Trap and the Trashwomen, contributed original tracks to the collection, thereby injecting it with a timely, post-Riot Grrrl update on the film's Girl Gang theme. Still, film and LP soundtracks match in a material way. For one, a sense of continuity between this new track list and the music used in the movie is instilled by voiceover snippets rendered from the film audio that intersperse the record. Furthermore, what connects the 1994 soundtrack songs with the sound of the movie is their own pronounced dirtiness, their embrace of sonic debris, and their shared investment in seemingly meaningless, excessive, spillover presence of the sound of lo-fi technology: as Budget Rock productions, the songs collected here sound just as excessive as the film does. In other words, the soundtrack album privileges the material trashiness of exploitation feminism, which is obviously subject to transformation over time, over claims of authorship,<sup>22</sup> origin or "authenticity."

The *Blood Orgy* soundtrack release demonstrates that dated textures can serve as a living archive of material excess, which accommodates a "potentiality" for change (Rebentisch 2013, 170). In a way, the record gives room to a playfully repeated rehearsal of the exploitation feminist themes that appear in *She-Devils on Wheels* and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* in both its narrative and material dimensions: namely, the bold proposal that the fictional women characters of exploitation can be as bad (and badass) as male figures. A track by The Troglodytes, for instance, is titled "Empowerment" (1994), and the contribution by the all-female Sacramento group Tiger Trap is called "Girl With Guitar" (1994). Both tracks function as a successful and meaningful provocation only when read in the context of a hierarchical two-sex, two-gender system, where exploitation film fandom or playing guitar in a Rock'n'Roll band were still predominately male privileges, and where female protagonists, in fact, inhabited an ambivalent place of the "incredibly strange" of their own (cf., for instance, Baldauf and Weingartner, 1998; Hollows, 2003; O'Shea, 2014). The heavy presence of spillover materiality, however, releases a utopian potential that is quite different from mimicking or celebrating historical examples of toppling over these tenacious gendered dynamics of the past. Elena Gorfinkel argues that exploitation productions that combine wooden characters with an overload of texture and materiality often conflate the world of objects and subjects, and at times "create [...] an ideological equivalence between the human and the thing" (2011, 123). Songs like "Girl With Guitar," whose conjunction of exploitation feminist cockiness with an outdated, excessive texture makes heroines like the Man-Eaters and the Leather Girls appear as thing-like as the sonic debris the track flaunts, also marks these characters and the gendered ideologies that continue to produce them as subject to decay, as human-made, sustained, but also open to change in shape and texture by history, and thus also as open to re-working. Exploitation feminist utopia, then, is a place where the ruins of reductive, sensationalist, arguably exploitative imaginations of "gender equality" and the empowerment of women point towards the possible collapse of much larger structures underlying and governing dynamics such as the two-sex system and the

limited, heteronormative matrix of subject positions that it encourages real people (and fictional characters) to claim.

## Conclusion: A Genealogy Without Origin

This article has addressed the material trashiness of *She-Devils on Wheels* and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* not as traces of actual, historical feminist movements of the Second Wave, but as constitutive of an excessive, utopian, fantastic exploitation feminism that imagines and projects the potentialities of feminist empowerment rather than document it. This exploitation feminism does not communicate its politics on the level of content or intellectual reasoning. Rather, it stages ludicrous narratives and simple stock “feminist” figures in conjunction with spillover sound and rough sonic textures to point to a utopia where the norms that bring forth such limited narratives and figures have withered, and are open for negotiation and re-imagining over and over again. Mistaking this strategically simplistic exploitation feminism for a telltale trace of Second Wave feminism not only renders invisible important controversial feminist discussions that are historically accounted for, but also runs the risk of fixating feminist projects as teleological, where infant (or “primitive”) stages needed to be overcome by more enlightened versions of the now (cf. Adkins, 2004, Hanafi el Siofi *et al.*, 2010). The exploitation feminism emerging from these films by Herschell Gordon Lewis and Michael Lucas, in contrast, deploys a very different temporal logic. As it primarily revisits, rehearses, and fantasizes emancipatory projects that have not and could not have as happened such, it shows the past and present as interconnected with each other, and draws our attention towards tenacious gendered ideologies, norms and structures that often underpin politics of reform, however “progressive” they may seem (cf., for instance, Wetterer, 2005; Leonard, 2007). At the same time, however, the exploitation feminism of *She-Devils* and *Blood Orgy* is no retro project rooting for a better, more radical solution for current problems in a recent past. Exploitation feminism, I have argued, generates from appropriations and reworkings, gaining momentum from how earlier and later sonic materializations resonate with each other. This upsets the logic of origin and originality that infuses retro sensibilities: without *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*, *She Devils on Wheels* might indeed have gotten stuck in its own moment, “unable to transcend it” (Gorfinkel, 2011, 96). Folding over each other in appropriations, however, locates the two films’ take on emancipation in a more complex temporal space, which is neither wholly caught up in retrospective, nor exclusively oriented towards the future. Enter potentiality.

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"She-Devils on Wheels" on Celluloid Nightmares, (by John Floyd), no date, <http://www.celluloidnightmares.co.uk/shedevilsonwheels.html> (last accessed on 13 January, 2015).

"She-Devils on Wheels" on Jabootu's Bad Movie Dimensions, (by Sandy Petersen), 25 January 2010, <http://jabootu.net/?p=2618> (last accessed on 13 January, 2015).

## NOTES

1. See, for instance, [http://www.somethingweird.com/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=37957](http://www.somethingweird.com/product_info.php?products_id=37957). Accessed on January 14, 2015.
2. Confusingly, the gang in *She-Devils on Wheels* does not refer to itself as the She-Devils but the Man-Eaters.
3. In *The Mini-Skirt Mob*, for instance, serious, narrative-fueling acts of violence are exclusively committed by male gang members, while the women, clad in short skirts that all too readily reveal their underwear as they are rolling around on the ground, engage in "cat fights" that are intercut with reverse shots of leering males, who cheer them on, comment on their bodily features, and speculate about what sex acts they would yield to [20:00-21:24]. To a degree, such stagings also happen in *She-Devils* and *Blood Orgy*, for instance, when a Man-Eater's shirt rides up during a knife fight, and the camera zooms in to catch a good look at her bra [47:27]; or when a Leather Girl takes her time putting on a transparent raincoat over a sexy black body stocking before setting out to dismember a victim [46:14]. Nevertheless, both films forgo an androcentric, heteronormative focalization through male characters.
4. The "real women biker" aspect is also subject to lengthy discussion in the Herschell Gordon Lewis / Mike Vraney audio commentary on the Something Weird DVD edition (2000) of *She-Devils on Wheels*. Here, Lewis insists that the women he hired were not organized in a club. Lewis repeats this statement in an interview with Ian Johnston of March 2011, <http://louderthanwar.com/the-wizard-of-gore-herschell-gordon-lewis-interview>. Accessed on January 15, 2015.
5. See the cover of the Tartan Video DVD edition (2002) of *She-Devils on Wheels*.
6. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0063595/releaseinfo>. Accessed on January 26, 2015.
7. "Mondo" movies are mock documentaries that aim at serving audiences with sensationalist glimpses at ethnographic others, who could be located both in faraway exotic places or in exclusive contexts in the immediate vicinity, staging rituals like "annual celebration[s] in which men smash in a garage door using their heads," as Boyd Rice explains (in Vale and Juno, 1986,

153). Mondo narratives usually frame these Others' practices as deviant, primitive, novel or scandalous.

8. "Quit with tit," for instance, echoes the bra-burning myth that US media created after the "Freedom Trash Can" action at the Atlantic City Miss America Pageant protest. The myth, which firmly linked being a (radical) feminist to a compulsion to burn brassiere, helped to establish an image of feminists as both obsessing over and militantly oppressing sex and sexiness (Dow, 2003, 129f).

9. See the popular *Las Vegas Grind* (Crypt Records), *Tabu* (Paris Hollywood Records) and *Jungle Exotica* (Strip Records) compilation series, or the TT Shakin singles re-release series on Jazzman Records London.

10. See definitions at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/texture>. Accessed on January 14, 2015.

11. All information concerning equipment and production of *She-Devils on Wheels* is taken from a personal e-mail correspondence between Herschel Gordon Lewis and the author of this article, August 26 and 27, 2013.

12. Herschell Gordon Lewis and Mike Vraney state on the audio commentary: "There is a rawness to it that defies polish. [...] Polish can get in the way of emotional impact."

13. Michael Lucas explicitly names Herschell Gordon Lewis as an influence for *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* (Fielding, 2010b). It is also noteworthy that Lucas has backed Lewis in musical performances with a Jug band called Hiroshi Hasegawa's Poontag Wranglers in the 2000s.

14. See, for instance, Michael Lucas' comments on *Fleabrain* (Fielding, 2010b).

15. Bootleg copies are available from a UK-based burn-on-demand service, a full version of the movie, though with a voiceover fan commentary track, has recently been made available on Youtube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUQtSWG5E8>, last accessed on 30 July, 2014), and Michael Lucas will sell VHS copies for \$12 when contacted per e-mail.

16. [criticononline.com/horror%20a%20-%20c.htm](http://criticononline.com/horror%20a%20-%20c.htm). Accessed on July 30, 2014.

17. As if to further ground *Blood Orgy* in this tradition, the film opens with a "staple" of "classical" exploitation film: stock footage of a human birth (cf. Schaeffer, 1999, 39, 86).

18. A later, slightly cleaner version of the song appeared on the album *18 Deadly Ones!*, Norton Records, 1991.

19. All translations from German are my own.

20. For a detailed discussion of the soundtrack album, see Hofer, forthcoming.

21. *Girls In The Garage* is a compilation series on Romulan Records that has anthologized marginalized productions by all-female beat and proto-punk bands of the 1960s and 1970s since 1987.

22. For a detailed discussion of authorship and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*, see Hofer, forthcoming.

## ABSTRACTS

From the mid-1960s onwards, American exploitation cinema has spawned a number of Girl Gang movies whose potential for challenging androcentric and heteronormative modes of representation have been hotly disputed by fans and academics alike. This article discusses this potential by sounding the trashy material textures of two outstanding Girl Gang films: *She-Devils*

on *Wheels* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1968) and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* (Michael Lucas, 1988). To date, excessive materialities in exploitation cinema have often been understood as traces of actual, historical bodies, objects, and practices. This paper suggests a different approach: by addressing how Lucas appropriates and reworks the outdated aesthetics, especially the untimely lo-fidelity sound, that distinguish Lewis's earlier *Girl Gang* film, I will show how both films propel a utopian, fantastic, exaggerated "exploitation feminism," instead of documenting historical feminist movements of their times. Taking the potential of trashy (sonic) textures seriously on their own terms, I will discuss the particular critical impulses such materially excessive exploitation feminisms can provide for a feminist reception of *Girl Gang* exploitation cinema today.

Le grand nombre de *Girl Gang* films que le cinéma d'exploitation américain a produit depuis les années 1960 a fait l'objet de discussions entre les fans et les critiques concernant son potentiel à remettre en question les modes de représentation androcentrique et hétéronormatif. Cet article s'interroge sur ce potentiel en se concentrant sur les textures *trash* de deux *Girl Gang* films notoires : *She-Devils on Wheels* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1968) et *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* (Michael Lucas, 1988). Les matérialités excessives manifestes dans le cinéma d'exploitation ont, à ce jour, souvent été analysées en tant que traces de corps, d'objets et de pratiques historiques réels. Cet article propose une approche différente : en s'intéressant à la manière dont Lucas s'approprie et retravaille une esthétique datée, et tout particulièrement le son *lo-fidelity*, caractéristique du *Girl Gang* film antérieur de Lewis, je souhaite montrer comment les deux films, au lieu d'attester les mouvements féministes historiques de leurs époques respectives, proposent un « féminisme d'exploitation » utopique, fantastique et exagéré. La prise en compte du potentiel des textures sonores *trash* permettra de s'interroger sur les pulsions critiques particulières que ces féminismes matériellement excessifs peuvent offrir à la réception féministe de ce genre de cinéma d'exploitation aujourd'hui.

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