

CHAPTER 15

Cultural Studies and the Extreme

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By definition, the extreme limit of the 'possible' is that point where, despite the unintelligible position which it has for him, man, having stripped himself of enticement and fear, advances so far that one cannot conceive of the possibility of going farther. (Bataille 1988: 39)

The object of research cannot be distinguished *from the subject at its boiling point*. (Bataille 1995: 10)

First image: X-ray vision

In Roger Corman's 1963 sci-fi movie *The Man with X-Ray Eyes*, the protagonist, Dr Xavier (Ray Milland), experiments with a drug he hopes will enhance his vision such that he can improve his work as a surgeon. At first its effects are promising and he finds he can diagnose the internal conditions of his patients simply by looking at their bodies – as well as cheat at cards and slyly admire the physiques of the unsuspecting people around him. Before long, however, his newly won superhuman capacity turns into something increasingly unbearable. With repeated use of the drug his vision achieves ever more extreme penetration into the physical environment around him, with the consequence that it becomes increasingly difficult for him to see the world as humans ordinarily do. The once-familiar modern, high-rise cityscape, for instance, becomes a surreal light show which he describes as 'a city that is newborn, hanging as metal skeletons, signs without support'. Driven by the urge to see ever further and deeper, he takes yet more of the drug, which this time renders his vision almost supernatural: 'I'm closing in on the gods', he tells a colleague who attempts, to no avail, to warn him of his dangerous hubris. Slipping into an irreversible state of increasing visual dissolution, he plunges into the sheer materiality of the world and begins to 'see through the centre of the

universe'. Unable to discern anything at all by virtue of seeing everything at once, he becomes, finally and paradoxically, both blind and all seeing – an 'impossible', terrifying condition. Unable to be part of society, he is for a while exploited by a freakshow owner and finally he ends up wandering, lost in the desert. There he encounters an evangelical preacher who enjoins him: 'If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out!' And he does so.

There is an obvious Oedipal-Promethean axis to this tragic tale that any detailed reading of the film would have to explore – but that is not to be my theme here. I begin with this vignette of *The Man with X-Ray Eyes* because the image of 'extreme vision' it provides can also be read as an allegory of the television culture in which we all live. I use the term 'television' here not simply in the senses of either the ubiquitous technological device invented in the 1930s, or 'TV culture', or the industrial institutions of broadcasting, but rather in that of Marshall McLuhan's notion of *tele-vision* as the technological extension of human visual capacity. McLuhan thinks of electric media collectively as 'extensions of the senses' and argues that with each new epochal development in communications technology there is a concomitant evolution in the nature of the human itself. He gives an account of how this process of extension has in fact been under way since the invention of writing and later the printing press, but becomes apparent with the acceleration of the process brought about by the arrival of electric media – radio, TV and film (and one may extrapolate, with the development of computer-mediated communications). To be more precise, Corman's film can be viewed as an allegory of the seductions of the television age in its expression of the profound attraction of extending sensory capacity beyond its natural limit and the deep anxiety concerning consequences of doing so. Dr Xavier is seduced by the prospect of god-like vision and an ultimate experience – to use Georges Bataille's expression, at 'the extreme limit of the possible'. But it turns into an experience of unbearable sensory hyperstimulation and overload which finally leads to his destruction.

The subject in the *tele-vision* age lives in a world in which he or she is not only able to see, but can scarcely avoid seeing, ever more of all the possibilities of human existence, piled up, concatenated and conflated. This condition and situation is not exclusive to the actual consumption of TV culture; however, it is, perhaps, nowhere more acutely experienced than in relation to it or, quite literally, in front of the TV. We now live in a culture characterised by an extreme vision of sorts. One has an intimation of this as one skims across the channels of satellite or cable television using the remote control, but what I want to consider in particular here is how the extreme, or extremity itself (just how to describe the phenomenon I'm not

quite sure), has become a prevalent theme within the contemporary cultural nexus of popular, media and consumer cultures.

Of course, the cultural theorist can no more escape this condition of 'extreme vision' than anyone else. Any theory aimed at gaining a perspective on the forms of 'extreme culture' – to which I shall turn in a moment – or at exploring the possibility of seeing beyond its surface phenomena can no more distinguish itself from its objects than can Dr Xavier the images he sees from the light of which they are made. With this observation in mind, my question is: what kind of theory of the extreme/ extreme theory can elucidate the turn towards the extreme across a range of cultural forms and how, if at all, are extremes linked? Just one indication of the way in which different extremes touch upon one another, on the cultural surface of popular discourse at least, is given in a comment by the recently retired chief commissioner of police in the UK, Sir John Stevens, who suggested that the two great challenges facing policing at the beginning of the new century were binge-drinking and international terrorism. There is in his remark, if you will, both an intuition of extremity as the name of anti-rationality in any of its myriad forms, and a reflection of the currency of the extreme as a concept for thinking all manner of cultural phenomena. Now, while excess and transgression may often be deemed matters of criminality and control, they are obviously not always so restricted. At the outset I want to introduce in as simple a formula as possible an idea of Georges Bataille's that I believe can take us some way to grasping the nature of the general and unrestricted *connectivity* thought performs in the context of *tele*-visual culture.

In his short surrealist text *The Solar Anus* Bataille writes: 'It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words that each thing seen is the parody of another, or the same thing in a deceptive form' (1985: 5). There is, he suggests, an unlimited possibility of 'copulation' – productive connectivity – between everything which is 'visible':

Everyone is aware that life is parodic and that it lacks interpretation.
Thus lead is the parody of gold.
Air is the parody of water.
The brain is the parody of the equator.
Coitus is the parody of crime.

Gold, water, the equator or crime can be put forward as the principle of things.
(Bataille 1985: 5)

Indeed, any of these things, or any other thing, can function as 'the principle' of 'all things', as the node of a set of connections. But the

supreme principle of everything is the connective possibility of language itself:

Ever since sentences started to *circulate* in brains devoted to reflection, an effort at total identification has been made, because with the aid of the *copula*; all things would be visibly connected if one could discover at a single glance and in its totality the tracings of an Ariadne's thread leading thought into its own labyrinth. (Bataille 1985: 5)

The 'effort at total identification' is always a matter of expenditure (*dépense*) – for instance, of energy, creativity or innovation in the service of such things as art, life, sexuality or cruelty: connectivity names this open-ended possibility. Of course, there is no (positive) possibility of transcendence as such, at least not according to Bataille; and in any case this connectivity is not in reality merely an intellectual concern or a purely theoretical matter. In the scenes of popular culture and everyday life, however, we do witness countless examples and expressions of the drive towards extreme expenditure: to live well is widely understood and measured in the West in terms of the capacity to consume extravagantly and the ability to intensify experience. I shall return to Bataille's general economics of expenditure later. However, before that I want to indicate briefly what kind of phenomena might be *connected* via a principle of extremity. These are in fact none other than the various elements of contemporary culture which provoked this reflection on the extreme in the first place.

Second image: extreme culture

There is in affluent Western societies today a widespread fascination bordering on obsession with all things extreme. This is increasingly apparent across the entire landscape of culture. What I have in mind is particularly evident in the preoccupation within various forms of popular culture, such as social and leisure-time activities and media entertainments, with experiences of extreme conditions, situations, sensations. The appetite for the vicarious consumption of 'images' of extremity is a part of the same phenomenon, I would suggest. The extreme appears to have acquired a general cultural currency: there is a whole range of cultural phenomena, practices and events which are conceptualised as extreme, and of commercial products and services that are marketed on the basis of their association with the extreme. 'X-treme' has even become a cool shorthand for this non-specific, multifaceted cultural phenomenon I am pointing to – the 'X' accurately conveying the sense of unlimited variability of what might come along next and be included within it. It's even worn as a logo or brand name

on T-shirts and, more banally still, I've noticed, advertises itself on blocks of cheese: 'X-treme Cheddar' (Tesco, £6.36 per kilo). To illustrate the phenomenon further, and for the sake of brevity, I will just survey a few examples of familiar contemporary culture where 'the turn to the extreme' is to be seen. Together they provide a kind of image which illustrates the diversity and dissemination of the phenomenon I wish to identify as having gained a general prevalence in culture today.

First, I suggest it can be seen in the form of extreme sports – a familiar term, but it is not immediately obvious what qualifies: I suggest the set of all 'sports' which expose practitioners to high risk and places them at the limits of what seems to be possible. To mention just a few: activities such as base-jumping, free climbing, high diving, extreme skiing and snowboarding, extreme surfing, hang-gliding and aerobatic flying might obviously be associated with the label 'extreme sports'. Some foreground the label, some do not. Peter C. Whybrow suggests these might be listed under the rubric of 'when you screw up you die' (2005: 121). Of course older sports such as TT motorcycle racing and single-handed round-the-world sailing could be included too. Such activities are typically characterised by record-breaking stunts or feats of endurance and exposure to danger by virtue of their pushing at the perceived limits of what it is possible to do in each context. If such things as these are the pursuits of an elite minority group of extreme sports athletes and experts – as they all involve special abilities, technical skills as well as risk taking – then what could be called extreme leisure activities provide a measure of the wider 'democratisation' of extreme pursuits into the mainstream and into everyday life. So, second, there is extreme leisure – this could include all those things I just called extreme sports but done in an amateurish or lower-key kind of way: for instance, bungee-jumping, jet-ski riding, hobbyist parachute jumping, urban sports such as skate-boarding, BMX acrobatics, *pars court* and extreme 4X4 off-roading.

Extreme leisure, though, whatever one chooses to include in this category – and it is not my aim to provide a taxonomy here – indicates a wider aspect of the relation to the extreme in culture that I want to highlight. Leisure extends the reach of the extreme into the everyday such that things as different from one another as recreational drug-taking, 'getting wasted' or 'getting high' and dancing all night, performing wild driving stunts on public roads, happy-slapping, brawling, hooliganism and vandalism all become associated in relation to an excitement quotient. If leisure activity is defined as whatever people do to amuse and pleasure themselves in their free time, then extreme leisure pursuits are, unsurprisingly, often likely to bring their participants into conflict with the law, which rigidly distinguishes between what is in fact criminal transgression (crimes against the

person or property or public good – such as ‘the peace’, which might be breached in the course of some people having their ‘fun’) and what are widely considered acceptable and legitimate amusements as opposed to unacceptable, illegitimate and anti-social activities. My point here is that extreme leisure pushes at the boundary of the very concept of ‘leisure’ and at the conventional distinctions between what is socially acceptable and unacceptable, legal and illegal. Moreover, it actually challenges and sometimes reconfigures the distinction between such things as public and private space, moral and immoral, responsible and irresponsible acts. Extremity is always related in one way or another to unbounding and transgression. Those manifestations I have just described often involve the redefinition of urban space and architecture by challenging conventional ideas of what a building, a bridge, a street corner or a shopping mall is for. Even the boundary between night and day may disintegrate as a consequence of what extreme culture contributes to producing the 24-hour, ‘always on’ economy.

Third image: *tele-vision* and the extreme on TV

But it is not only in the spheres of sports, leisure and social life that the extreme finds its expression in contemporary consumer culture; it is even more generally ‘available’ in mediated forms. It is, I suggest, generally linked to an ethos of optimisation and the valorisation of doing everything ‘to the max’, and the widespread desire for ‘the extreme case scenario’, such that no sphere of culture remains untouched by it. Science is now conceptualised as extreme, say in genetic modification and cloning of plants, animals or humans, as is engineering in its efforts to construct the highest building, the longest bridge or the fastest plane. Medical conditions and diseases are explained through their most extreme manifestations – such as those in the recent Channel 4 series *Bodyshock*, whose titles include ‘The Boy Whose Skin Fell Off’ and ‘The Woman with the 14 Stone Tumour’. A documentary on the evolution of human life pitches to its audience with the title ‘Mutants’ and with a display of nature’s aberrations – monstrously deformed fetuses preserved in bell jars. Life itself on planet earth is found to be born of extreme natural conditions in the deep oceans and is lived in an ongoing struggle to survive its geological and meteorological contingencies (witness the series *Extreme Weather*). Extremity is, so to speak, both our origin and our destiny.

When we are not being edutained by such accounts, we are entertained by the likes of extreme cosmetic surgery (as in the case of the TV show *Extreme Makeovers*) and are directed (and it seems drawn) towards the most extreme examples of violence in films and computer games. Even the

orgasm has been replaced by the multiple orgasm, erections are enhanced with Viagra, and the details of the worst tortures and cruelties perpetrated in some far-off gaol are 'consumed', sandwiched between any of the above. All of these are signs of the cultural preoccupation with extremity itself.

The drive for optimisation and the 'urge to excess', which is given cultural expression in cultural practices and forms of the kind I have so far described, only becomes visible as such and in its generality as a consequence of *tele*-vision; only with the technologies of image production and circulation has the cultural purview of the multitude of extremes playing out simultaneously across the cultural landscape become possible. It is through this extended power of vision, and through the exposure of the subject to the multiple and diverse instances and possibilities of extremity ('extremity in all things', as it were) in the image, that the extreme has become a general object of consumption and a value in itself. In the context of TV culture proper, just think for a moment what most people, even by the time of their teenage years, are likely to have witnessed (albeit in mediated forms): they have probably seen the extreme violence of war, executions in close-up, starvation, the suffering victims of road accidents and natural catastrophes, all manner of sexual acts, exploding manned space vehicles, people leaping to their deaths from burning buildings, as well as countless examples of spectacular consumption and the squandering of wealth. And all of this may just be in news reportage. To these scenes of 'reality' can be added all the fictionalised and highly dramatised representations of extremity that are a staple of TV and movie culture in general. One consequence of this *tele*-visuality is a concentration of the diverse possibilities of extremity in human experience. This is focused further through the lens of the TV screen, rendering the extreme visible and at the same time integrating it into everyday life. The extreme has thus become a predominant theme by virtue of *its own power to connect* disparate elements and forms of culture, to the point where it is now a discernible vector of cultural life in general.

It is perhaps telling that the word 'surreal' is so now widely used to describe that aspect of everyday experience which is the result of arbitrary sequences of disparate bits of 'cut-up' visual information striking the visual cortex. In fact, in its presentations of collated imagery, the artistic movement of Surrealism in many ways anticipated the consequences of an ever more connected world. The phenomena of what could be called the 'popular extreme' today crystallise among the involuntary collations of extremity originating in any number of contexts. Under such conditions the extreme becomes an element within the cycle of culture and hence a potential object of cultural studies.

The prevailing *tele*-visual culture we now have (whose material forms include such things as photography, film, computer games, DIY video/DVD and webcast as well as TV 'proper') gives rise to the initial intimation of a connection, no matter how ineffable this may at first seem, between such things as extreme sports and forms of extreme (often anti-) social behaviour and the production and consumption of stylised images of actual extreme violence and cruelty. Entertainment products such as the DIY video *Bumfights* and Still Movements Productions' film *Executions* (Arun Kumar, 2000) are examples of this phenomenon. Indeed, a cursory glance across mainstream TV schedules is all that is needed to get a sense of how 'extremity' figures as a key characteristic across several genres of current programme-making. There are, for example, those programmes which are varieties of 'bad behaviour reality TV': ranging from the confessional chat show format, such as the *Jerry Springer Show*, with its 'my husband slept with the baby-sitter' kind of theme, and its displays of verbal conflict and aggression bordering on 'spontaneous' mayhem, to those exhibiting actual acts of street violence, drunkenness, robberies and road accidents as captured on CCTV. Alongside these one might count shows whose primary intention appears to be to make the audience simultaneously laugh and squirm (I studiously avoid assuming these could be described simply as 'comedy'), such as *Jackass* and *Dirty Sanchez* (originally on MTV and franchised to the British terrestrial public service Channel 4), which feature young men performing ludicrous (in the original sense of the word) stunts, often resulting in physical self-injury or injury to each other. More recently the UK terrestrial, prime-time show *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here* stands as a measure of how what was once regarded as excessive and aberrant has become a staple of mainstream popular TV. The show's participants camp in an Australian rain forest and are set tasks and trials which include having their bodies covered with snakes, rats or insects and eating live, slimy grubs or 'repulsive' animal parts such as fish eyes. The revulsion, disgust, horror and fear which these screen antics variously indulge in and solicit from audiences play to an intense sado-masochistic emotionality, which aims essentially at excitement without content or depth; at excitement as an end in itself.

There are, however, other examples of TV culture which contextualise the relation to the extreme differently and are indicative of its wider cultural scope. I will just sketch a few of these, too, to widen out the picture. For instance, *Extreme Celebrity Detox*, a recent production for Channel 4, followed groups of TV personalities as they engaged in a range of activities which could loosely be described as forms of 'alternative therapy', all supposedly aimed at 'self-discovery' and based on ideas associated with

things like shamanism, Tao, Tai Chi and other 'new age' popular interpretations of non-Western ideas. At various points in the programme these included participants experiencing episodes of sensory deprivation, the use of a hallucinogenic concoction (Ayhuasca), the drinking of their own urine, the lifting of weights attached to their genitals and the downing of vast amounts of water to produce repeated vomiting. Such 'extreme exercises' are performed as part of purging therapies designed to eliminate the so-called toxic effects of life in modern society by way of pushing the minds and the bodies of the participants 'to their limits'. (Further details of 'alternative' package holidays promising viewers the opportunity of the same extreme experiences off-screen were simultaneously advertised on the channel's website.)

Not surprisingly, the codes of extremity meet with cultural enquiry itself. Consider the two recent documentary series by the Oxford University geographer Dr Nick Middleton, *Surviving Extremes* and *Going to Extremes*. Middleton's anthropological travelogues are based on his journeys to 'extreme places' – by which he means places where the weather especially, as well as the general living conditions, are very different to those in Oxford. 'This is the story', he says in his Mpeg advert on the Net, 'of four real life adventures to four unpleasant physical environments – ice, sand, jungle and swamp . . . The idea of the project is to see how people survive in these extreme physical terrains and see if I can survive.'¹ In the second series we see the surprisingly hapless traveller, Dr Middleton, trying his hand at the dangerous work tasks and other daily activities of indigenous tribal peoples (such as clambering down a vertiginous cliff face to collect honey). But it is not only in the attempt to reach popular audiences through educational TV that this turn towards the extreme is evident: anthropological cultural research within the academy is also showing signs of it. The work of the anthropologists Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Lawrence Cohen at the university of California, Berkeley, for instance, is presented and promoted by their institution under the rubric of 'Extreme Research'. The university's web page details their activities under this banner and includes an image of a surgical-gloved hand holding open a human eye, underneath which there is a caption: 'Pathologist at a public morgue in Cape Town South Africa harvests an eye from a dead young man without the consent of his family.'² The image heading the web page is reminiscent of the eye-cutting scene in Luis Buñuel's surrealist masterpiece, *Un Chien Andalou*, and is clearly intentionally horrific (even though the only thing which is truly scandalous or horrifying is that organ harvesting takes place without the consent of the family involved). Scheper-Hughes' and Cohen's work on what they call the 'neo-cannibalism' of illegal organ trafficking is not in itself sensationalist,

of course, and I am not questioning its importance and intellectual efficacy. It is, none the less, indicative of the intersection of 'scientific' cultural enquiry with popular understandings and forms of the extreme. Even these researchers themselves are represented as affected by the extreme: they are described as 'professors who depart for places and circumstances more remote and gruelling than most of their students, colleagues and even their own families can – or wish – to fathom . . . [they] not only trek to exotic locales, but also to unsavoury, wrenching and dangerous situations'. Now, whilst on one level this is all an obvious attempt to capitalise on the currency of the extreme, my point is rather that the validity and significance of this work are tied to its investment in and pre-understanding of the 'cultural extreme' given by media culture in the first place.

What all of these examples collectively illustrate is how what has been called the 'circuit of culture' exhibits a tendency towards extremity, and that there is no prospect of theoretical transcendence of the cultural process it describes. Cultural theory, analysis or 'cultural studies' – whatever it is that books like this one are talking about – will in the future have to take into account the consequences of its own situatedness within a *tele-*visual culture as I have attempted to define it here. In this culture, knowledge for most people has become a matter of spectacle, and everyday experience and concerns are mediated by the images it produces of itself. When the traditional conceptual divisions between such things as nature and culture, education and entertainment or work and play have been eroded, then theory, too, needs to rethink the conditions and consequences of its own relationship to the *surfaces of the culture from which it emerges*.

Fourth image: critique

Perhaps there are only formal and superficial similarities between all extreme phenomena and therefore each ought to be examined in a strictly delimited context: for instance, by explaining sensationalist TV culture in the political-economic contexts of the TV industry and its function in society; or by understanding the subcultural *habitus* of groups whose identities are defined by participating in leisure activities; or by considering the aesthetic aspects of consumption and related consumer sensibilities. These are all possible directions for a cultural studies of the extreme. It could be pointed out that all of the examples of extreme culture given – and countless others which might have been added – only have something substantive in common in so far as they are widely disseminated throughout media culture, and what is at issue here is really nothing more than media

culture's representation of a set of phenomena *as* extreme. And if this is the case, then there are several well-established discursive frameworks and a long-standing debate about the production, consumption and function of both mass media culture and popular culture that this so-called 'extreme culture' could readily be referred to. There is no space here to rehearse in detail what such analyses might conclude. I do, however, wish to consider briefly the relation of traditional critique to the extreme.

The familiar approaches would range from Marxian ideology critique, arguing perhaps that extreme culture represses and distracts its consumers, to Gramscian analyses, making of extreme popular and media culture a scene of the struggle for hegemony, through to forms of critical celebration of how its consumption is expressive of creativity and autonomy. From such beginnings it might then be argued that participants and consumers of extreme culture are either the culturally duped, or the politically combative and resistant, or the creative agents of cultural self-determination. John Fiske's accounts of popular culture, for example, typically aggregate elements of all three of these positions, but he particularly champions the producerly creativity of consumers and includes excessiveness within his definition of popular culture:

Popular pleasures must always be those of the oppressed, they must contain elements of the oppositional, the evasive, the scandalous, the offensive, the vulgar, the resistant. Pleasures offered by ideological conformity are muted and hegemonic; they are not popular pleasures and work in opposition to them. (1989: 127)

The analyses of popular and media culture which have predominated over the last twenty or so years have used variations of these basic positions to address issues such as the structures of identity and power, youth, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race as these are articulated by popular and media cultural forms. I remind the reader of this here only to make the point that such critical discourses of culture could clearly, easily and logically be extended to the contemporary forms and phenomena I have identified as belonging to 'extreme culture' – perhaps taking newer issues such as the infantilisation of youth, cultural 'dumbing down' or the role of celebrity as topical points of departure. Yet no matter how insightful such approaches to extreme culture might prove to be, they would not imply, let alone guarantee, that the critical account of extreme culture itself remain *open* to the extreme as such. Furthermore, can we ever anticipate and do we really want a satisfactory explanation of the extreme? Does it make sense to suppose it will ever be fully accounted for? The extreme is, after

all, philosophically speaking, a figure of the supremely irrational; and theory too must, therefore, *encounter its own limit* as it goes towards it in its attempts to know it. This is precisely what Bataille accuses Hegel of doing when he says in his 'comic summary' of him: 'Hegel, I imagine, touched upon the extreme limit . . . I even imagine that he worked out the system in order to escape [it] . . . Hegel attains *satisfaction*, turns his back on the extreme limit' (Bataille 1988: 43; discussed in Derrida 1978: 251–76).

Remaining *open* to the extreme surely means recognising that there is in an important sense a greater 'proximity' to it in each of its cultural manifestations – in the 'doing', 'participating', 'watching' and 'consuming' – than there is in any sober, rational account which might be given of it. If one were to attempt to *explain* the prevalence of the extreme across culture today, for instance in purely sociological terms, then that would literally be at the *expense* of the extreme – a kind of denial and recuperative rationalisation of extremity and an explaining away. Such an understanding of the phenomenon necessarily comes at the price of reducing it to an object. Let me just attempt to illustrate this by providing a couple of examples.

Zygmunt Bauman has written lucidly on the characteristics of the subjectivity produced under conditions of consumer capitalism, the chief among which is evident in the endless quest of the contemporary social subject for new and ever more intense sensations. Consumer culture produces a subject who is a 'sensation gatherer', according to Bauman (1997: 146). Much of what can be included under the rubric of extreme culture is the result of the desire for novelty, excitement and intensity. This is a desire which consumer capitalism does not merely service by supplying cultural commodities intended to satisfy it, but actually accelerates, as anticipated eventual disappointment is a factor in the whole process. The desire for More, More, More! is by its nature both excessive and insatiable. Dissatisfaction and boredom are built into the cycle of consumption and can only be addressed by means of even more exciting and thrilling sensations which only 'new, improved' products can promise to deliver – hence we are living in an age of aestheticised hyperconsumerism. Bigger and faster cars, more violent films, new styles of porn, more exciting theme park rides, happy-hour bingeing and extreme TV shows of all genres are all part of the 'official' extreme culture which emerges in conjunction with stylised hyperconsumerism. But as some so-called transgressive cultural practices become part of the mainstream consumer culture which tracks along with changing cultural norms, values and standards, others constantly position their 'participants', as already noted above, on the wrong side of the law. Hence a substantial element of what I have called extreme culture is quite logically seen as falling within the province of cultural

criminology. The recent work of cultural criminologists such as Mike Presdee (2000) and Keith J. Hayward (2004), for instance, reflects a restitution of the emotional life of the criminal subject (in criminology), in their attempts to explain how cultural life and criminality are interwoven in terms of meaning and behaviour as these are articulated by the urban environment, by popular and media culture and by consumerism per se. Crime should be understood, says Hayward on behalf of cultural criminology, as the 'existential pursuit of passion and excitement' (2004: 9).

Whilst this approach is radical within criminology and, in my view, provides a genuinely useful insight into why today youth criminality especially takes the extreme forms it does (for which Presdee, for example, suggests the rubric 'the carnival of crime'), this discourse does not reflect on *the nature of its own relationship to the extreme*. I am not suggesting that cultural criminologists (let alone Presdee or Hayward in particular) are alone in this; rather that there is a problem for *any* critical discourse at the level of its own relation to the extreme. If it is generally the case, as this cultural criminology claims, that it is the excitement of transgression which is at the heart of much criminality and that this unites it at an emotional level with the ethos of contemporary popular and consumer culture, then it is also the case that this criminological discourse is itself but *yet another image* of the relation to the extreme, which is realised in the 'thrilling' and 'exciting' act of criminal transgression itself. Criminals and criminologists are, so to speak, partners in crime.

In a comparable way, whether someone watches a documentary film 'about' porn star Annabel Chong's record-breaking 251 all-comers gang bang porn shoot with sociological detachment, 'gets off' on the porn film itself, or is one of her fans whose application to the producers to participate in the event itself was successful, such a 'consumer' is in each case located in relation to 'the extreme' the phenomenon instantiates.³ This is an extreme thesis perhaps, pure parody even and an ugly image, but one which expresses none the less how extreme culture is always a matter of the connections which link one image of extremity to the next. It is, though, I claim, a consequence of thinking materialism through to its logical conclusion.

Fifth image: extreme theory

What I am proposing here is, precisely, a specific image of the theory of the extreme as a construction of the *connectedness* of 'extreme phenomena' evident in different cultural registers: an image of theory whose materiality is given by the connectedness of all the possible images of it. Whether we declare that all 'images' are in any case 'phenomena' or vice versa is

ultimately a moot point. Theory, I have suggested, is, in any case, always a matter of reading off the surfaces of the culture; it simply has no other origin. And my own previous 'image' titled 'critique' served to show how the theoretical enterprise at some point or other – usually by arriving at a thesis or position on some bit of contemporary culture, 'X' – always comes to neglect this fundamental condition of all theoretical reflection. In some cases it does this in contradiction to the Marxist materialism it generally aligns itself with; as if theory itself were somehow not subject to Marx's materialist analysis of 'ruling ideas' as the expression of material forces at work in society. In this final section I want to suggest that Bataille's theorisation of the extreme confronts this contradiction otherwise, in so far as his thinking closes the gap between theory of the extreme and what could be called his 'extreme theory'. In other words, in his writings we get a sense of the immanence of theory in the nexus of connections comprising culture as a whole, as well as a sense of how theory may broach the 'extreme limit of the possible' as the *experience* of the impossibility of transcendence. In fact, Bataille holds faith with materialism whilst inverting Marxism's priority of production over consumption.

Bataille's writings contain a sustained meditation on extremity and its various anthropological manifestations (such as death, sacrifice, laughter, eroticism, desire and so forth) In various ways the key determinant of culture is, for him, always a matter of the *surplus* to which extremity in all its forms corresponds. However, I can at this point only draw attention to how the central ideas of Bataille's theory of the extreme might be brought to bear on the contemporary phenomena of extreme culture. Bataille himself did not write about modern 'popular' or media culture – the terms largely used in contemporary cultural studies to refer to the formations of common culture which began to emerge around the middle of the eighteenth century and which are usually associated with the migrations away from the rural life to life in industrial centres. His critical perspective on modern culture is mainly rooted in analyses of quasi-anthropological, some would say largely notional, models of varieties of pre-modern cultural phenomena and experience. However, his understanding of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist cultures and societies in terms of a shift from what he calls 'general economies' of expenditure (*dépense*) – of the surplus or excess of energy – to restricted economies of production and (capital) accumulation are, none the less, relevant to the attempt to understand the cultural phenomena of late capitalism, including those of *tele-*visual culture as I have identified it.

This all important *surplus*, as Bataille imagines it, exists not as the outcome of industrious productive labour, but rather simply as a material

given, in the same way that the surplus of solar energy falling on the earth's surface does. This is, in fact, as much a cosmological thesis about the natural world as it is about the formation of cultures whose practices he understands primarily as the forms of its *expenditure*. (Bataille would thus have immediately intuited a set of connections linking 'extreme weather', sacrificial executions, 'mutants', the evolution of life itself and so on.) Life is certainly engendered by the sun's energy and Bataille argues that it is in all cases *lived* fundamentally *for the sake of* expenditure of the surplus it gives. Hence, in his famous inversion of Hegelian-Marxist thinking, the need to consume/expend is said to precede the need to produce/accumulate. According to Bataille, non-productive expenditure underwent a general repression with the rise of commodity capitalism and from then onwards came to be regarded as antithetical to the system of values the ruling bourgeois elite established in order to secure its accumulation of capital and power of reproduction. But whereas the Marxist political-economic critique of this society accepts its principal terms of reference – market exchange, need, scarcity, labour value, accumulation and especially utility – Bataille's 'solar' or 'general economics' invokes the notion of 'useless' or 'absolute' expenditure, and he claims this as the primary determinant of every culture and society. In other words, it is a society's capacity for 'waste', or more precisely 'wastage' (waste without remainder), that gives it its specific identity and structure.

This critique of rationalist political economy on the basis of a partly fabulous account of pre-modern culture and society could no doubt be subject to critique – and unfortunately there is no space for that here.⁴ I only wish to note at this point that Bataille's prioritising of non-productive expenditure in the forms (to cite his own examples) of 'luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity', such that 'as much energy as possible is squandered in order to produce a feeling of stupefaction', seems well-primed to anticipate many of the forms and phenomena of extreme culture I have described above (1985: 118–19). And when, for example, he defines human existence in general as 'the life of "unmotivated" celebration, celebration in all meanings of the word: laughter, dancing, orgy, the rejection of subordination, and sacrifice that scornfully puts aside any consideration of ends, property and morality' (1992: xxxii), and writes 'should one desire to lose oneself completely: that is possible starting from a movement of drunken revelry' (1988: 23), then one cannot help but think of the Bacchanalian dimension of a multitude of contemporary popular cultural activities.

However, Bataille is also quite clear that the term 'expenditure' should be exclusively reserved for activities where 'the accent is placed on a *loss*

that must be as great as possible' (1985: 118). Bearing this in mind, on the one hand, we could view the prevalence of the extreme in contemporary culture as a kind of blind groping to give expression to the urge to excess which consumer capitalism continues to repress (something reflected in its moral panics, its arbitrary prohibitions and condemnations and its 'incomprehension' of unruly behaviours and offensive practices). On the other hand, it is not clear that any of the instances of extreme cultural practices one might care to examine ever 'succeeds' in effectuating such *pure* loss at all. What Bataille was unable to anticipate was the ability of entrepreneurial capitalism to accommodate, even to exploit economically, commodify and develop into an industry in its own right, the very fundamental urge to excess and non-productive expenditure he identified and sought to found a critique of capitalism upon. And isn't this famous recuperative capacity of capitalism clearly evident today in its contemporary commodifications of popular culture's wildest excesses? Just think for a moment of how the recent phenomenon of 'Ecstasy culture' (whose name is already a 'parody' of a major theme in Bataille!) is commodified in a range of forms from fashion and the pop music product through to the bottled water market and the Ibiza package holiday scene – not to mention 'branded' Ecstasy pills themselves.

If Bataille was unable to anticipate this paradox surrounding non-productive expenditure in entrepreneurial capitalist society – namely, that it accommodates and yet 'fails' in the sense that its extremes are never extreme enough – he does none the less identify it as a theoretical problem and even as the specific problem of theory as such. In the preface to his great book *The Accursed Share* (1995), he draws attention to the paradox of his own analysis of 'productivity' as it might be applied to the very theoretical project he is embarked upon. Bataille says that he is unable to escape the fact that his own intellectual efforts will result in a product, namely the book or the thesis itself, whilst all along wanting to argue that energy 'can only be wasted':

This invites distrust at the outset, *and yet*, what if it were better not to meet any expectation and to offer precisely that which repels . . . : that violent movement, sudden and shocking, which jostles the mind . . . How, without turning my back on expectations, could I have *the extreme freedom of thought* that places concepts on a level with the world's freedom of movement? (1995: 11, my emphasis)

What I have attempted to show here with reference to Bataille's thinking of the extreme is that, for theory to be truly adventurous, it must be cognisant of its own kinship with its object; it must, in Bataille's phrase, aim

to become 'extreme free thought'. But what does this mean in practice? I suggest it means being open to the contingent articulations of theory with the specific excesses of the culture from which it emerges. (In my own recent work, for example, I have investigated how modern cultural theory and philosophical thought must be viewed in the context of the wider culture of drugs and intoxication within which they have been formulated.)⁵ Perhaps all adventures in cultural studies should reflect on the idea that theory is not anything other than culture, and all culture is but an 'excess of energy, translated into the effervescence of life' (Bataille 1995: 10).

Notes

- 1 The Mpeg can be viewed at www.geog.ox.ac.uk/staff/nmiddleton.html. There are, incidentally, two accompanying books available, *Surviving Extremes* (Pan 2003) and *Going to Extremes* (Pan 2004).
- 2 See www.berkeley.edu/news/magazine/summer_99/feature_darkness_scheperer.html.
- 3 I refer the reader to Gough Lewis' documentary on Chong's career, *The Annabel Chong Story* (1999).
- 4 For a succinct discussion, see Goux (1990: 206–24).
- 5 See Boothroyd (2006).

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