

Snuff in Fictional Films & John Carpenter's CIGARETTE BURNS

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I Introduction to snuff

This paper is a summary of some key arguments of a longer paper about snuff (about 40 pages), which is available online in German.¹ This selection focuses on the digital turn and death. The discussions of the history of cinematic realism, the history of the mondo genre, the comparison to pornography and recent aesthetics of violence such as torture porn, the discourse analysis about snuff in the debate about happy slapping in German press, the semiotic model of cinematic indexicality, and the sketch for a media history from the perspective of the paradoxes of death are omitted.

II A short history of snuff

“To snuff out” has been a slang term for violent death and killing since the turn of the century (1900). In Ed Sanders’ book from 1976, he writes about how Charles Manson and his family recorded their crimes on film, which were hidden somewhere in the desert. Sanders called these movies “snuff movies.” Almost at the same time, rumors about illegal imports of snuff movies from South America were echoing in the New York press. In 1971 Michael and Roberta Findlay had shot a cheap exploitation movie loosely based on Charles Manson. Shackleton, who held the rights for this movie, didn’t distribute it until 1976. He shot an additional ending, in which the last scene of the movie is revealed as a setting of a movie-in-the-movie, where a member of the crew is killed live on camera. Shackleton gave the movie the new title SNUFF and used advertising slogans such as “The film that could only be made in South America... where life is CHEAP!” Furthermore, he distributed the movie with a self-ascribed X-rating; the movie had not been rated officially. At the screenings of the film, protests against the depiction of real murder took place in front of the cinemas, which were most likely paid/ staged by Shackleton. His campaign promised the presentation of a real death/ murder on film instead of the usual *representation* of a death/ murder. A state attorney of New York established officially that the murder was staged/ faked. However, the myth that snuff featured a real murder had become very popular in another discourse, which fostered the myth. In the feminist protest against pornography, snuff represented the peak of the general abuse and exploitation of women in pornography and an overall misogynistic film culture. Other discourses used the myth of snuff in a similar way: for instance, the very aggressive campaign against child-pornography in the UK in the 90s, or the German debate about happy slapping in 2006/2007. Snuff was modeled as a modern myth (Barthes), as its history, existence and realism -- or rather reality effects -- were not discussed. This in-transparent and vague use of the term suggests an aura of the absolute taboo of media violence, and of the unethical abuse of media. Today, snuff is considered to be “Gewalt-Pornographie” and real violent death/ murder captured on film.

Since 1976 there have been some fictional films, dealing with snuff. Since 1999 there has, however, been a steady number of films, mostly labeled as some kind of horror film.² The year 1999 can be described as the year of the crisis of cinematic realism, as three crucial movies were released, which were very successful, highly popular and highly influential: THE MATRIX, THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT, and 8MM. All of these movies dealt with cinematic realism and deconstruct the strategies of simulation. The biggest impact of 8MM is that the film fixed the collective concept of snuff. These movies also

¹ <http://www.peterscheinpflug.de/PeterScheinpflugSNUFF.pdf>. You can find several additions/ modifications for the paper in a series of blogs called “Afterthoughts on Snuff...” at the following link: <http://www.peterscheinpflug.de/links.html>.

² 2000: 3, 2001: 6, 2002: 4, 2003: 6, 2004: 3, 2005: 4, 2006: 4, 2007: 12, 2008: 4. These numbers represent my own research and film knowledge; the actual numbers might be higher.

mark an important point of time in the period of digitalization of commercial cinema, often called the digital turn (at least: ~ of cinematic realism). Recent movies dealing with snuff or that are pseudo-snuff or are meta-pseudo-snuff, which play with the expectations of the audience and the conventions of pseudo-snuff, can be read as raising some very interesting questions about the medium 'film' in the digital age. Some of these questions/ discussions will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

I.II Snuff in the context of 'lens culture' and 'culture of death'

Snuff has to be seen in context of two modern conditions. The first is what Winston called "lens culture." (Audio)visual media became the essential agents of the constitution of our social reality -- ranging from microscopes and news clips to surveillance cameras. These media types also have the highest status of truthfulness or evidence ("Evidenz"). Black pointed out that this process of the rising hegemony of (audio)visual media has been accelerating and extending exponentially. According to him, the 20th century could be described as being determined by a "graphic imperative." With the digital turn, this development was fostered by the rapid spread of digital media and the global circulation of digital information -- with a certain dominance of (audio)visual material on the Internet. On the other hand, the availability and simplicity of programs manipulating digital information illustrated the problems of (audio)visual media claiming the highest realism in a lens culture. The popularity and familiarity with simulations after the digital turn made the construction of modes of realism very clear, stressing the "reality effect" (Black refers to Barthes) of cinematic strategies. These strategies are negotiated with the audience based on popular/ collective concepts of the medium and realism. For the crisis of realism and the order of simulations, Baudrillard coined the metaphor of death. For a better understanding of the link between death and reality, one should take a look at the cultural history of death in modernity.

Sobchack argued that the extinction of real death from the public/ social sphere in modernity was supposed to make death invisible. Death and especially, violent death became a taboo. A collective desire for a pornography of death in the form of spectacles of simulated violent deaths resulted from this. In contrast, other scholars of cultural studies stressed the differentiation between death and dying, in order to emphasize the general paradoxes of the concept 'death.' Nonetheless, they concluded that the 'Leerstelle' of death can be seen as a historically constant engine of cultural progress, as discourses are permanently circulation around death (Lacan, Bazin, Benjamin, Macho/Marek, Assman). Baudrillard argued that the repression of death as the Ur-Other of modern culture is not only structuring all other binary codes but results in a 'culture of death' as the repressed returns as a rich imaginary of death. Power is coming to life in the form of control over the imaginary of death. This concept sustains a constant 'phantasm of death,' which allows controlling the individual's life by conceptualizing death itself as meaningless on the one hand, and life as a calculation of goods/ value and meaning on the other hand. The 'phantasm of death' is sustained by an omnipresence of signs of deaths. Kellner illustrated this argument by pointing out several current examples of simulated death and death as a popular theme, which we encounter in audiovisual mass media such as television shows, movies, computer games, news reports, etc. Macho/Marek argued that the visibility of death reached a new climax in recent years. Since the imaginary of death is omnipresent but the real death is repressed, snuff allows fictional films to play with this cultural configuration by manipulating the perception of death -- as they play with snuff as the myth of the real death on film. In the following section, some arguments for the confusion of reality effects are outlined.

I.III Cinematic strategies of snuff in fictional film

There are four major strategies of snuff, mostly combined in movies with a positive effect on each other:

Violent death in film is generally a shock, but there are many other ways of shocking the viewers. Most commonly, documents of real violence like slaughter of animals are shot in the same way as simulated death. Or, the documentary

footage is presented in a way that it appears to be less realistic than the simulated deaths. CANNIBAL HOLOCAUST combines both by including several scenes of animal-slaughter and documentary footage of an execution known by the audience back then from television. Nevertheless, in the movie the footage is told to be staged/ simulated. In comparison the simulated death appears to be more like a real documentary. Another very popular strategy is the doubling of the audience in a *mise-en-abîme* configuration. In the end, these shocks can never result in the assumption of a real death, but they can confuse the audience in their perception of reality. This is less a strengthening of the reality effect than it is a deconstruction of the idea of a hierarchy of realism. Editing is a crucial mode of modeling the reality effect. As Sobchack pointed out, editing is mostly associated with continuity editing, which provides a coherent fictional world but is usually considered an alteration of an originally raw and true footage. Editing also results in additional meaning that is modifying or even overshadowing the images of any documentary material.

Like pornography with its highly staged settings but its claim for their absolute realism, most movies contain only single snuff scenes, which can be considered a set-piece within the narration. Except for pseudo-snuff movies and meta-pseudo-snuff movies, snuff is not a genre but a certain cinematic strategy (“Inszenierungsstrategie”). It is permanently renegotiated in discourses and movies dealing with snuff.³ Like the sex scene in pornography, the snuff scene itself contains usually no narration. Narration can be ascribed to it by the audience using codes and generic knowledge. The scene itself is ‘meaningless’ as it doesn’t intend to tell but to show.⁴ This strategy is conflicting with modern concepts of death as Lacan, Žižek and Baudrillard have described them. More important than the marginalized real death is the symbolic death. Žižek and Baudrillard describe the symbolic death as a final calculation of meaning and goods that could be collected in a lifetime determining the meaning and value of the individual as they inscribe his life and death into the symbolic order. In most movies, these two aspects fall together as the death of a character is happening at the right time, bearing meaning for the narration or following the logic of generic verisimilitude. In snuff the aspect of symbolic death is missing since there is no narration/ (generic) structure to determine the meaning of whatever signs the audience might want to read. Moreover, according to Žižek and Baudrillard, the absence of a symbolic death cannot be tolerated by the mechanisms of the symbolic order. The symbolic order demands a symbolic death, in order to stabilize the whole model of the interrelation of both types of death. Following the implications of their argumentation, the discourses about snuff create meaning and therefore a symbolic death, i.e. death *for* orgasm. The paradox within this logic is that the dominance of the symbolic death is re-establishing the sphere of the Real. At the time that the concept of a ‘real death’ in snuff is supposed to be disempowered by several discourses offering concepts of a symbolic death; snuff as a myth can move onto the ‘Leerstelle,’ the empty centre, which is the Real of death. The repression of any notion of a real death on film allows movies to treat snuff as the Real of death, as the myth is marking snuff as a taboo of unknown horror.

As the extreme violence is evoking either revulsion or sexual excitement -- if we believe the common myth of snuff as “Gewalt-Pornographie” -- the audience participates in the perception with a bodily experience. This affection of the recipient’s body might appear to be rather counterproductive for a stronger reality effect since the audience might become aware of its own reality of perception instead of the reality of the diegetic world. Several film scholars emphasized the importance of the narcosis of the body of the recipient. Baudrillard even claimed that man has forgotten his body in a modern culture. Another level of materiality, which is made visible in snuff scenes, is the materiality of the film. The conventions of snuff are determined by the media used in each individual film and differ from grainy, outworn 16mm material to time codes

³ One can argue for an intense time period of renegotiation after media turns, as old and new media (forms) are compared in order to differentiate and define each other.

⁴ From a perspective of semiotic theory, the problem of this claim, as it is raised by the cinematic strategies, is that every ‘showing’ in film is actually an act of pointing at something, which is a process of signification. For a solution to this problem developing a semiotic model of a heightened reality effect of snuff scenes, please see footnote 25 of my longer paper.

and readymade (special) effects of common digital video recorders. The medium itself and the production of the film are becoming visible. Both levels of materiality are highly important since they substitute the only level of materiality that must be assumed to be real but most probably isn't -- the tortured body of the victim in the snuff scene. While there are modes of adapting a bodily experience in film such as haptic cinema, the materiality within the frame is always lacking. In snuff the frame itself materializes and the audience can project their own material experience onto the 'Leerstelle' of the materiality within the frame. Thereby, a material realism is constructed on the side of reception which overcomes common 'illusionistic' cinematic strategies and is linked to the absent but assumed materiality of the snuff event.

Based on the news reports about snuff movies from South America and the rumored snuff movies by Charles Manson, Shackleton's campaign showed already that the reality effect is highly affected by interlinked discourses. The same can be said of other cinematic movements/ waves, which have always been accompanied by debates certifying their realism -- since realism is usually defined as a greater grade of realism in comparison to another realism, or in comparison to the 'illusionism' of Hollywood (-like) cinematic strategies. This web of discourses can be found with very popular examples such as Dogme 95 or the movie THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT. As Baudrillard has argued, the idea of facts is only an effect of an intersection of models/ discourses. Therefore, the intersection can strengthen the reality effect but not determine it. In the case of snuff, fictional films are very often based upon the actual model of the myth as it is negotiated at the time. A movie like EMANUELLE NERA IN AMERICA builds up the expectations of the audience by dealing with snuff as the document of a real murder, but instead shows scenes of almost comical, misogynistic torture. This refers to the underlying snuff-concept of the feminist discourse against pornography at the time the movie was produced. It presents, however, this concept as being completely different than the original concept of snuff. Recent movies are largely based upon the concept of snuff that 8MM has established, but they take up many interlinked discourses about death in the media, reality television, and discussions about the new agency of users of the Internet. UNTRACEABLE is a very rich collection of all these discourses and has many various references to the history of snuff, mondo and 'death trip documentaries' like FACES OF DEATH. These genre films, which might appear to be less provoking and radical than a rather experimental movie breaking the boundaries of commercial film making, allow a very rich discussion of cinematic realism due to the very fact that they are determined by the laws of verisimilitude. The attempt to construct a coherent text, including snuff scenes or the topic in general, performs general strategies of the construction of cinematic/ media realism.

II "Cigarette Burns" or: reel/real/Real-change

For my next essay about snuff in fictional films, the movie CIGARETTE BURNS would be perfect to raise most of the questions and arguments outlined above. However, the movie managed somehow to escape my analytical logic. For this reason, I would like to discuss the movie and its twisted relations to the recent snuff hysteria in horror movies. On the following pages, you will find some of the questions and topics I associate(d) with the movie.

Recent developments in horror:

CIGARETTE BURNS is clearly marked as a rather 'classical (post-classical)' horror film. This aspect is quite important because the 'torture porn' respectively 'gorno' labeled aesthetic of violence in recent horror films is very much driven towards a cinematic realism-- that blurs the border between conventional horror and snuff aesthetics. The director of the movie, John Carpenter, represents a generation of horror directors using mainly classical gore effects with rather comical and/or fantastical violence as in the form of radical bodily transformation. CIGARETTE BURNS is contextualized by the standardized

intro to all movies of the *Masters of Horror* television series. It presents some iconic images of death and violence, emphasizing the familiarity between these topics and the genre horror. One could also ask, how the movie can be read as a commentary on recent developments in (realist) horror and aesthetics of violence.

Indexicality (Peirce):

Many of the scenes in the movie follow the logic of a tongue-in-cheek humor, operating with the inversion of common ideas about film and exploring the problems and implications of these ideas. By this logic, the angel is the proof of the existence of the film!-How does this comment upon ontological concepts of indexicality?

Editing:

How is editing described in the movie as a psychological manipulation, a weapon in the hands of an auteur?

There are some ellipses, but also some errors in continuity editing. The ellipses can easily be explained by psychological models (?). Can we also ascribe meaning to the errors in continuity editing (especially in the first scene with the angel)?

There are two philosophies of editing presented in the movie. While one is following the conventions of snuff, the other one follows the conventions of regular horror movies. How does the movie play with these two opposing editing styles? Does it strengthen or weaken their claims (especially in the snuff-sequence)?

Editing and materiality:

How is editing described as a mode of violence within film as much as violence against film as much as violence against the audience? Does the movie hint at any ethical argument concerning violence in movies (especially with the question of whether the violence against the angel is breaking a taboo or the taboo is rather the profanity of editing it like any movie)? How is the materiality of the film stock presented in relation to the materiality of objects in film and of the materiality of the viewers? How is bodily transformation linked to film and editing? How is the materiality of the film stock linked to concepts of aura and singularity? How much does the movie explore the medium as celluloid film? What relation does the movie imply to other old fashioned media (like the audio recorder or the type writer of the critic)? What other kinds of playing with editing and relations between the materiality of the movie-in-the-movie and the movie are presented (very early in the narration attention is drawn towards them by linking cuts of film stock in the movie to the editing of the movie)?

The Real: violence and trauma

The whole story is very similar to movies like 8MM, which deal with the investigation of a snuff movie leading to some kind of exposition of the 'real' and the discovery of the 'truth' in the end. The movie follows this hunt for the real and at the same time diffuses the idea, by mixing it with fantastic aspects like the angel and with the psychological Real. How are the logic and the process of this relationship between a real and the Real described in the movie? How do the absence of the Real and its repression respectively comment upon the real? How is trauma linked to film in this movie and which semiotic and psychological models are possible references (especially in the scene with the critic)? How is the making of sense about the movie compared to any instance of intentionality? How much does the logic of the narration present a tongue-in-cheek humor, as reel-change is translated into 'real change'?

Violence and Death:

The movie shows much less death than violence. Furthermore, both differ a lot in their presentation -- the violent scenes being rather comical. Especially in the snuff scene the act of violence and cinematic (re)presentations of violence and death

are accompanied by a philosophy of film. Which relations between violence and death and film are modeled throughout the whole movie?

Linked discourses:

How are the discourses about the movie-in-the movie described in terms of staging expectations of the audience, shaping its perception and marking taboos? In the end, which movie is actually presented to us as the real movie-in-the-movie? Most of these movie scenes are the same as the production stills seen earlier. The scene about the suffering woman seems to fall out of the pattern and is linked to the psychological processes of the characters watching the movie. How are these scenes presented once as movie-in-the-movie, once as movie-instead-of-the-movie and once as part of the narration of the movie (as the screen is opening up)?

“Medialität” and materiality:

Snuff in the digital age is stressing the necessity of updating or reimagining some theoretical concepts for digital cinema. Comparing celluloid aesthetics to digital aesthetics is one way snuff raises the question of how much our concepts of the medium ‘film’ are based on its materiality, technology, their circulation and perception and “Dispositive.” For example, most psychoanalytical theories of film are based on film perception in a movie theater (like Mulvey, Metz, Baudry et al.). Most concepts of cinema as a medium operating in a realm between life and death are based on the assumption that distinct photographic images, are put into motion, creating the illusion of a living/ motion image (like Barthes, Benjamin, Liebrand et al.). These concepts should be reconsidered as movies are being perceived increasingly outside of the cinema. Also, the materialization of (audio)visual information has been shifting from the photographic image towards first the magnetic then the digital code. Films like CIGARETTE BURNS lead us to the question of whether we might not have to think of a celluloid-film, video-film and digital-film. Although Luhmann tried to avoid the matter of materiality with his concepts of ‘medium’ and ‘form,’ it might offer us a clue; how to conceptualize the medium ‘film’ as a virtual potential that necessarily is materialized in a certain form that doesn’t use all of the potentials.

Authorship:

The story deals a lot with questions of cinematic authorship. How does it model the author as an instance of intentional work and as an audience? What are the statements about the relationship between an author and his audience? Which impact does the record of the voice of the director have on the listener, who will later become an audience? One might also think about the relation between the audio recorder and film -- for example in aspects of the voice/ sound being superior in terms of its relation to the soul (phonocentrism) or in terms of its realism (according to Metz audio is considered as proof for past events and therefore testifies for the visual information in film)?

Back-story wounds:

The movie contains many back-story wounds (the protagonist’s, the collector’s, the critic’s, the wife’s) which are all linked to film. Is film often related to drugs and euphoria? This topic of addiction goes back into the back-stories and is continued in the present events. Which function does this topic have in both the narration and the comment on violence in film and film itself?

III Materials

III.I Literature mentioned or referred to in the text:

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For a general list of mondo and snuff films please see the original German language text:

<http://www.peterscheinflug.de/PeterScheinflugSNUFF.pdf>.