

Framing Death: Death, Film and Digital Media

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As reported by the news headlines handling death footage seems to concern viewers, producers and broadcasters, since its emergence is increasingly evident and death is perceived as a pervasive presence scattered throughout the mediascape.

This dissertation focuses specifically on audiovisual content, and considers how cinema, and its derivative forms, is capable of recording an event involving actual deaths. It attempts to map some trends ranging from silent films to the contemporary digital media, taking into account case studies in moral panic such as the mythology of snuff movies, as well as specific subgenres like *mondo* and those horror films that blurred the line between fact and fiction.

After an overview on the international literature on the space of death within society, which examines the tensions between the urge to think of death as the ultimate taboo, and its widespread popularity within the so-called necroculture,² by surveying case studies from broadcast media and the arts chapter 1 questions the effectiveness of comparing death to pornography and underlines the need for more complex analytical perspectives.

Chapter 2 addresses cinema and how filmmakers have dealt with death. Case studies include examples from the silent era to notable documentaries and experimental projects, such as *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (Stan Brakhage, 1971), *Nick's Movie* (Wim Wenders, 1981) and *The Bridge* (Eric Steel, 2006). Given the fact that these films were accused of being pseudo-snuff, the chapter questions what snuff means today, considering that the label was initially used by the film industry and the media to refer to urban legends rooted in the infamous Manson Family murders, as well as to the marketing campaign for the film *Slaughter* (Michael Findlay, Roberta Findlay, 1971). Since snuff is not the only subgenre dealing with death, commercially successful examples within shockumentaries and cannibal movies are also taken into account. Their international reception shows that they align to snuff as they were highly problematic to frame from a critical perspective, particularly when they were

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² Fabio Giovannini, *Necrocultura. Estetica e cultura della morte nell'immaginario di massa*, Castelveccchi, Roma 1998.

involved in media frenzy cases such as the Video Nasties. Ultimately they are calling for new categories, like the ones provided by Jeffrey Sconce “paracinema”³ or Mikita Brottman “offensive films.”⁴

However, how exactly were death scenes incorporated into feature films and documentaries? Chapter 3 examines the structure of shockumentaries, snuff movies and very well known footage depicting real deaths, questioning how their features (script, editing, format, style, credits, “codas” etc.) played a decisive role when sequences portraying actual killings, or staged one passed by for real, were inserted into these films.

If this peculiar structure eased to host death footage into horror movies and documentaries, marketing strategies played a key role in the international success of commercial flicks that exploited the idea of death on screen. Chapter 4 overviews films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) and *Snuff* (the 1976 version of *Slaughter*), which were involved in media panic episodes precisely because of the fact that their promotional campaigns blurred the line between reality and fiction. Franchises like *Faces of Death* and *Guinea Pig* regularly made headlines all around the world for the same reason, mixing staged deaths with real ones. Decades later, young filmmakers used the same strategies to promote and distribute small budget films that exploited the niches of the most hardcore horror fans, ensuring the success of disturbing low budget films like the *August Underground* series.

Finally, Chapter 5 considers what can be labelled as “death 2.0” While images of “impending death” in the media are not new (see Barbie Zelizer’s study on the “about to die paradigm,”⁵) and neither are deaths recorded by CCTV, personal cameras or smartphones, digital media today allow for their widespread circulation and manipulation. Death is therefore scattered into the contemporary mediascape, in the form of compilations of deadly accidents, war footage re-edited for online consumption or shocking documentation of killings recorded by the perpetrators themselves. As crime news show, cases such as the hunt for Luka Rocco Magnotta and the media frenzy unleashed by the online dissemination of his gruesome video *1 Lunatic 1 Ice Pick* remind us that there is a high concern for the distribution of such content on the Internet.

Nowadays, footage depicting real deaths is easily remixed and broadcast through video sharing websites such as YouTube, or streamed on the so-called shock sites. Platforms like Bestgore.com are the new media outlet for death videos and can thus be considered as ephemeral archives because it is very problematic to frame their services. As Sue Tait noted writing about Ogrish.com, when shock sites are rebranded they switch from exploitation websites, source

³ Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” in *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 4, Winter 1995, pp. 371-393.

⁴ Mikita Brottman, *Offensive Films*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville 2005.

⁵ Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, Oxford University Press, New York 2010.

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of Internet memes, to digital spots addressing citizen journalism issues.⁶ As this dissertation aims to show, on these platforms communities are involved in trolling and flame wars, but users also find the way to open a debate on the space of death in the public sphere, considering the relationship between death footage, gore and body horror, censorship issues, clashes between online services and mainstream media, and calling for more transparent policies regarding the way death is manipulated by broadcasters.

⁶ Sue Tait, "Pornographies of Violence? Internet Spectatorship on Body Horror," in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2008, pp. 91-111.