A Pre-History Of ‘Reality’ Horror Film

by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

With the rising popularity of ‘reality’ based horror films such as Cloverfield (Matt Reeves, 2008), Paranormal Activity (Oren Peli, 2007) and their sequels, it is fruitful to reflect on the history of such movies. While the international phenomenon of The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) significantly marks the beginning of this newest cycle of ‘reality’ based horror film, its origins are fascinating and diverse. As far back as Michael Powell’s Peeping Tom (1960), the lines between real and represented death and bodily trauma were explored. In its telling of a man who finds pleasure in filming the killing of women with his gruesome camera-tripod-come-knife, Peeping Tom suggests that the very acts of ‘filming’ and ‘killing’ are inextricably linked. Similar connections have been expanded to varying degrees of success, sophistication and controversy in a subgenre of films loosely identified as ‘snuff’ fictions, whose spectacular and affective qualities stem from their intrinsic association between film and its ability to capture real horrors—torture, violence, and death—in the moment of its execution. Movies including Emanuelle in America (Joe D’Amato, 1977), The Last House on Dead End Street (1977) Hardcore (Paul Schrader, 1979), Mute Witness (Anthony Waller, 1994), 8mm (Joel Schumacher, 1999), Cradle of Fear (Alex Chandon, 2001), Demonlover (Olivier Assayas, 2002), and No Vacancy (Nimród Antal, 2007), manifest at this intersection between death, film and the real. In particular, notorious examples such as Cannibal Holocaust (Ruggero Deodato, 1979), Snuff (Findlay, 1976) and the Japanese Guinea Pig series (1985-1990) demonstrate just how tenuous the lines between acceptable and unacceptable allusions to ‘reality’ in the horror film can be. This article argues that these boundaries—ones which now have set the ethical and formal parameters of the contemporary ‘reality’ horror blockbuster—were established through the trial-and-error of these more controversial ancestors.

Capturing the ‘reality’ of death has a long history in the visual arts, spanning far beyond the origins of the cinematic image. Drawings of cadavers were at one point the primary method of studying the human body for would-be medical practitioners, and as Deanna Petherbridge has noted, “the body has been central to Western Art for most of its history, and to represent bodies in all their expressivity artists have needed to study anatomy: dissecting the dead in order to depict the living” [1]. Both Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci produced anatomical sketches based on dissections, and Caravaggio was rumoured to use the bloated, drowned body of a prostitute as a model for his painting “Death and the Virgin” (1606). The 18th century French painter and engraver Jacques Gautier d’Agoty is known for his vivid and highly detailed anatomical drawings that show the opened body meticulously, and in the early 20th century, Théodore Géricault painted highly detailed studies of severed heads and limbs, keeping body parts from a local hospital in his studio and studying them as they decayed [2]. While the functions of such work is far from the exploitative intent of the films mentioned above, these paintings articulate the historical
importance of verisimilitude in depictions of the human form. As demonstrated perhaps nowhere more clearly than in myriad depictions of the crucified figure of Jesus Christ and the oft-reproduced Pietà, the more vivid and realistic the depiction of a suffering body, the more impacting its ethical meaning.

Not all reality horror affects stem from the visceral intensity of bodily trauma, and the relationship between fear and terror, verisimilitude and textual materiality have their own media traditions. One of the most obvious ancestors for contemporary ‘reality’ horror is Orson Welles’ 1938 radio adaptation of H.G. Wells’ 1898 novel, The War of the Worlds. Replicating the formal structures and stylistic devices of the newscast format that would have been highly familiar to its US wartime audience during this period, the panic, confusion and hysteria that followed the broadcast has been widely documented and debated. Some listeners—even briefly—were concerned that an alien invasion was actually occurring, and that what they were listening to was a real news broadcast. And while not the first attempt to attain a sense of verisimilitude in the horror film via cross-media intertextuality (radio broadcasts play an important role in James Whale’s 1933 film The Invisible Man, for example), one of the most famous is the television news broadcasts that appear throughout George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead (1968). The narrative functionality of these sequences neatly provides plot information unable to be otherwise communicated convincingly through the necessary isolation of the film’s key players: the scale of the zombie phenomenon, advice for what to do, and even potentially the cause of the outbreak. The film’s simple production values, use of black and white film, and documentary tone mirrors aspects of cinéma verité, but the inclusion of these television news updates add a crucial element of the everyday experience of its viewers. It is the very familiarity of these news broadcasts, both tonally and stylistically, that convert the fantasy of the dead rising from the grave into something far more credible and authentic.

While the intersection of horror and verisimilitude has precedence in terms of genre history, it was not until the controversy surrounding Snuff in 1976 that the conceptual force of ‘reality’ horror could truly be seen to manifest [3]. Like many issues surrounding this notorious text, ascribing authorship to a single figure is difficult: the bulk of the film consists of an unreleased exploitation film called The Slaughter made by Michael and Roberta Findlay in South America in 1971, loosely based around a Charles Manson-like figure and the escapades of his attractive female followers in the lead up to the eponymous bloodbath climaxing in the killing of a pregnant woman in a clear reference to the murder of Sharon Tate in 1969. Unable to release the technically substandard film as it was, distributor Allan Shackleton hired adult movie director Simon Nuchtern to create a short five-minute coda to attach to the film, showing the supposed evisceration of a female ‘crew member’ by its ‘director’. Re-titled Snuff and playing up suggestions that this added sequence was an actual murder, the film was greeted by great hostility in New York in particular, where it became a primary case study in the burgeoning anti-pornography feminist movement.
that was mobilizing during this period. Although Snuff was promptly exposed as a ‘hoax’, that it was so difficult to tell ‘real’ snuff from ‘fake’ snuff became precisely the point that many antipornography feminists championed: whether real or not, that it could be denotes precisely the danger contained within such misogynistic images. That those final five minutes of Snuff are so rich in technical flaws merely emphasized its difference from slick, polished horror films such as Richard Donner’s The Omen that came out in the same year. Aside from the focus upon characters presented to be the very crew who filmed The Slaughter component of the film, that these final moments have no non-diegetic sound and no end credits underscores Nuchtern and Shackleton’s deliberate and conscious efforts to make the Snuff coda appear as real as possible.

Ruggero Deodato’s Cannibal Holocaust (1980) deliberately blurred the lines between the real and the fictional in a horror context, and met with similar controversy. The film follows New York University Professor Harold Monroe (Robert Kerman) and his team, sent to the Amazon to investigate the disappearance of a documentary film crew who had vanished while making a film about cannibalism. Monroe discovers the remains of the crew and trades a tape recorder with the tribe for the surviving cans of film. In New York, the television network who sent Monroe on his mission urge him to host a showing of the found footage, but Monroe insists on viewing the material first. In the films, he is horrified to discover the team—led by Alan Yates (Gabriel Yorke)—set up fake scenarios and presented them as real, but in doing so they engaged in a range of horrific acts including rape and other forms of sexual torture. The final moments of the footage show Yates and his crew graphically tortured and eaten, and upon viewing it, the television executives agree with Monroe that the film should not only go unaired, but that it should be burnt and destroyed.

With its depictions of “savage” natives, the accusations of racism lobbied against Cannibal Holocaust paled in comparison next to the storm of legal problems it faced both in Italy and around Europe. Like other films in the Italian cannibal subgenre such as Cannibal Ferox (Umberto Lenzi, 1981) and The Mountain of the Cannibal God (Sergio Martino, 1978), Cannibal Holocaust derives in part from the legacy of the mondo films of the 1960s. The publication in French magazine Photo in 1981 of an article about Deodato’s film called “Grand Guignol Cannibale” claimed that people were actually murdered in the making of the film, and much of the film’s notoriety in both Italy and abroad (particularly in the United Kingdom, where it became a key text in the ‘Video Nasties’ scandal) stemmed from similar beliefs. As David Kerekes and David Slater have observed, this sense of verisimilitude stems not just from the convincing effects of bodily violence themselves, but also from their proximity to the very real violence committed against a number of animals in the film, which “increases the potency of all subsequent acts of violence ten-fold. Cannibal Holocaust manages to anaesthetize rational thought with the shock of real live things being killed: if this is real, what else might be real?” [4]. Although today some of the special effects regarding bodily violence in Cannibal Holocaust may be deemed as less shocking than they may have been at the time of the film’s release, by contrast the graphic scenes of real
violence against animals that litters the film is as powerful and as shocking as it ever was. These unnecessary images of cruelty and torture against these animals highlight what remain inescapable areas of concern when addressing the film. Significantly, however, these are issues that the movie itself—with its film-within-a-film structure—addresses from within its own diegesis: when the television station that initially wished to broadcast Yates' footage itself deems it unwatchable and demands that it is destroyed, Cannibal Holocaust self-reflexively confirms that the very horrors that it has just shown its audience should not be seen by anyone.

By no means is this pre-'reality' horror collision between the real and the fictional specific to Europe or the United States, and the Guinea Pig—or Gini Piggu—films (1985-1990) from Japan offer yet another scandalous instance where fake violence is depicted as being real to create its gruesome impact. Although followed by Flower of Flesh and Blood (Za ginipiggu 2: Chiniku no hana, Hideshi Hino, 1985), and five other titles until 1990, Satoru Ogura's original The Devil's Experiment (Akumano Jikken, 1985) arguably remains the most shocking example of Japanese ultraviolence from this period. With no plot to speak of and lacking the polish of more mainstream horror films, The Devil's Experiment simply shows the torture and mutilation of a young woman for close to an hour, almost completely in close-up. The films became infamous in Japan when discovered in the video collection of serial killer Tsutomu Miyazaki in the late 1980s, and their reputation internationally was compounded with the rumour that Hollywood actor Charlie Sheen had contacted the FBI after viewing Flower of Flesh and Blood, believing it to be a real snuff film. Like both Snuff and Cannibal Holocaust, the notoriety of the Guinea Pig films is fuelled by urban legends such as these. In terms of marketing strategies in particular, the contemporary 'reality' horror film has harnessed the conceptual energy of these more obscure ancestors, directing it away from the grindhouses and underground fan cultures and towards a more accessible mainstream. This very shift from the outskirts of the cinematic badlands of exploitation to the multiplex-oriented blockbuster adds a degree of safety to the experience of watching 'reality' horror today: the sensation of thrill and danger resultant of watching a film like The Blair Witch Project, [REC] (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007) or Paranormal Activity stems not from the fact that it may or may not have happened, but from the formal construction suggesting that if they did occur, this is how they may look. Just as prime-time television shows like CSI and NCIS have brought a mainstreaming of forensic images to a broad audience, granting them a degree of gore literacy that was previously specific only to trash horror audiences, so too the aesthetics of ‘found’ footage are now commonly recognized by audiences as precisely that: a deployment of a specific stylistic system. Wobbly hand-held camera movements and spikes and drops in sound and vision quality are not so much markers of authenticity now as they are now markers of an authentic style. As The Poughkeepsie Tapes (John Erick Dowdle, 2007) demonstrates—a film that engages simultaneously with material shifts in filmmaking technologies, real world events such as 9/11, and art historical references to the work Hieronymus Bosch—there is still ample space for danger in contemporary ‘reality’ horror. But as ‘reality’ horror audiences become increasingly
saturated in a glut of violent images through mainstream news outlets and television dramas, it is now not merely enough that these films ‘look’ real.

Notes

Bios
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