



Snuff: Real death and screen media

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Review

Snuff: Real death and screen media

by Neil Jackson, Shaun Kimber, Johnny Walker, and Thomas Joseph Watson

London: Bloomsbury, 2016, 322 pages

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Reviewed by Alex Adams, Independent Researcher, UK

The snuff film is defined as a commercially produced movie of unsimulated murder distributed for economic gain. The objective existence of such material is uncertain, but the emotive mythology associated with it involves snuff in many debates about extreme pornography, terrorism, law and morality, sexual crime, horror movie subculture, transgressive fiction, and the limits of representation. *Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media* addresses each of these dimensions of the 'ongoing cultural dialog linked to the mythologies of snuff' (226) in the course of its sustained interrogation of the characteristics, origins, meanings and cultural rearticulations of real death imagery. There is much to be said for this timely collection of essays, as it is a unique foray into an area that has seen (perhaps due to the illegality and extreme affective charge of the territory) considerable neglect in mainstream academic film studies. Many of the essays address texts that have enjoyed very little prior exegesis, and, like many an edited collection, it provides a rich archive of sources for interested readers; it is diverse in range but coherent in remit, and it addresses the topic broadly enough to appeal to many different scholars working across the arts and humanities.

The book is split into two distinct sections, the first of which examines broader issues of context, history and definition, and the second of which narrows into considerations of individual texts in order to explore the way that snuff has been deployed as a fictional trope in film from the 1970s to the present. The methodological heart of this volume originates in horror film studies and the primary object of attention is genre film, but it nevertheless has much to offer many scholars of visual materials who do not share this disciplinary focus. There are essays on photography, expressionism, online media, execution propaganda, art cinema, and on the finer points of production, reception (both critical and fandom), and circulation. One of the tasks of the volume is to document the

visual and formal characteristics of a form which does not exist, for example, and another is to track taxonomies of the ways in which creators of film fictions deploy footage purporting to show real death. Many of the essays gesture towards ways in which real visual records of death and violence underpin, as a terrifying real-world referent, many recent developments in horror film production such as the found-footage movie. Scholars of the visual will find much of interest here.

Many of the writers appear to be fans of the genres that they dissect, and there is accordingly a level of enthusiasm and attention to detail which maintains the reader's attention through the frequent passages describing challenging content. However, this fan interest can lead in some of the essays to a lack of critical distance, and some chapters feature a tone that is more journalistic than scholarly. Indeed, this volume may leave readers with more theoretical, materialist or political preoccupations feeling frustrated; there is a general reluctance to engage with the politics of snuff beyond discussions of censorship and moral panic, and the essays often fail to address with much rigour the sensitive issues raised by the intentionally provocative texts that they analyse. The racism of *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) is often acknowledged, for example, but just as frequently left unexamined. In addition, where feminist engagements with violent imagery are mentioned, they are dismissed as though they simply represent a variety of univocally censorious anti-pornography moralism rather than a heterogeneous critical tradition with complex arguments (9–10, 99). Notable exceptions to this occasional lack of depth are Tina Kendall's contribution, which explores questions of audience implication and the ethical projects of transgressive texts such as *Benny's Video* (Michael Haneke, 1992) and *A Serbian Film* (Srđan Spasojević, 2010), and Simon Hobbs' essay on filmed animal death, which provides a perceptive and nuanced examination of the parameters of the term 'snuff'.

This criticism notwithstanding, however, there is a great deal to recommend this collection of work. It is a serious intervention deliberately situated at the intersection of debates about violence in society and violence in

representation, which has long been a somewhat sensationalised space; it is an original and stimulating contribution to an otherwise undersubscribed area of intellectual interest. This book will be valuable to anyone

interested in the ongoing debate about visuality, violence and death.

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