

# SNUFF



REAL DEATH AND SCREEN MEDIA

EDITED BY NEIL JACKSON, SHAUN KIMBER,  
JOHNNY WALKER, AND THOMAS JOSEPH WATSON

FOREWORD BY DAVID KERESKES

B L O O M S B U R Y

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**SNUFF**



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Real Death and Screen Media

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

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# FOREWORD

## A CULTURE OF CHANGE

David Kerekes

*Is this the place the killer Luka Magnotta was captured?*

That was the first question. No need for an answer. The sign over the door had changed, but there was no mistaking that this was where it happened; through the corridor and out onto the Berlin streets the self-aggrandizing fugitive had been led in cuffs. The second question was equally moot: “Would you be willing to talk about it?” CCTV footage of the arrest showed the owner of the Internet café (Figure 1) slip out to make the call to police, shortly after Magnotta had entered



**FIGURE 1** Inner-city locality of Berlin, where Luka Magnotta was captured (Photo: David Kerekes).

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the building. I recognized the owner at the desk in front of me, inspired by my questions to slouch deeper into his chair and absently tap away on a computer keyboard. He mumbled something fast in German. There was nothing further to do or see and so I left.

Luka Magnotta played an important role in the update of *Killing for Culture*, the book I wrote with David Slater.<sup>1</sup> This was my reason for visiting the place of his capture and arrest; an urge to see one small piece of the puzzle, as if somehow all other pieces might then fall into place and the big picture be revealed. The craving for celebrity had pushed the Canadian model and small-time porn actor into increasingly heinous acts that he filmed and placed online. A clip showing the suffocation of two kittens was uploaded anonymously to YouTube (and quickly removed) in December 2010. More followed. Behind fake profiles and blog posts Magnotta sought to avoid detection, if not willing to abdicate responsibility entirely. The mythos he was fabricating culminated in the murder, desecration, and dismemberment of student Lin Jun. The clip, uploaded with the title *1 Lunatic 1 Ice Pick* in May 2012, was met with shock, disbelief, and bafflement. There were some who considered the grueling ten minutes the manifestation of the most enduring of urban legends, the snuff film. Others were not so sure. “I say fake,” commented one viewer online:

some of the cuts just look like rubber or... I dunno, just not real human flesh ... would love to know one way or the other tho ...

Snuff films: murder on camera for commercial gain. The world’s first conference devoted to the mythology of snuff took place at the University of Bournemouth on a weekend in November 2012, a clear indication of how attitudes have changed in the last two decades: the organizers and a number of the delegates had arrived in academia on the back of fan interests. And also *Killing for Culture*, about which I was invited to talk.

Originally published in 1994 and updated shortly thereafter, *Killing for Culture* (Figure 2), a study of death on film, is considered ground-breaking for the most part. Neither of the early editions makes reference to the Internet, however, which is what sparked the 2015 revision. The Internet certainly existed in the mid-1990s, but the information superhighway was yet a humble backstreet. People watched videocassettes then, not YouTube.

Invited to explain how the book came about, I felt certain it could not have been written at any other point in time. Partly because as authors we were young and reckless, and partly because the door through which it appeared was not

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<sup>1</sup>David Kerekes and David Slater, *Killing for Culture: An Illustrated History of Death on Film from Mondo to Snuff* (London: Annihilation Books/Creation Books, 1994). A second edition was published in 1995.



FIGURE 2 *Killing for Culture*, second edition, 1995.

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accessible for long. Let me explain: Pop culture in the early 1990s was still defined by the printed word. It is the last era to be informed this way, the last revolution for the medium of print, when ideas circulated on paper rather than digitally online. *Killing for Culture* didn't appear in a vacuum; books and zines on outré topics were almost commonplace due to various small press and DIY publishers. Some made a concerted effort to explore the limits of free expression and/or question traditional values; others were simply content to shock. As one closely involved with the scene, J.R. Bruun observes

there was a wave of so called "hate" zines in the late 1980s through early 1990s, as this was a time of a lot of true crime collecting by hipsters... and there was also a kinda pre-millennium, pre-apocalypse, nihilist feel to this whole mailbox/zine scene of killer groupies and Satanists... and Nazi chic.<sup>2</sup>

Adding to this a book about death on film was nothing haughty at all. It was absolutely logical at a time when transgression was a buzzword for the underground. As early as 1986, author Bob Black was considering the US publisher and book distributor Loompanics Unlimited in terms of societal shift. He drew a comparison with the hippies' *Whole Earth Catalog* from the late 1960s. But where that espoused Utopian ideals of self-sufficiency, innovative technology and personal growth, Loompanics was quite different: the *Whole Earth Catalog* as if edited by Friedrich Nietzsche. "Times are tough," wrote Black, "and nice guys finish last."<sup>3</sup>

Black's opinion that Loompanics is "visionary, almost mystical" carries weight. They took obstinate pride in supplying books not found in even the largest libraries. "We are the lunatic fringe of the libertarian movement," boasted their *1992 Main Catalog*,<sup>4</sup> where books on film and media sat with practical guides on how to kill. This was incendiary stuff and would keep Loompanics shy of the mainstream. They weren't alone.

Each generation is reactionary, be it punk in the 1970s, freaks in the 1960s, beatniks in the fifties. The 1980s and 1990s were no different in this respect, forging a counterculture as cynical as it was self-absorbed. Case in point: the quixotic status of Charles Manson and his hippy followers, brought to trial in 1970 for the Tate-LaBianca slayings. America considered them guilty, but the underground was torn. Guilty of murder or not, Manson had throttled the 1960s and with it the hippy ideal. Yet, for all his ills he was seen by some as symptomatic of the Vietnam War, himself a victim of the established order and hailed by

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<sup>2</sup>JR Bruun email to the author, October 17, 2011.

<sup>3</sup>*Chaos 4*, edited by Joel Biroco (1986). Thanks to Stephen Sennitt for bringing this and other occultzines to my attention.

<sup>4</sup>The slogan very likely appears in earlier Loompanics catalogs, prior to 1992, but I no longer have them to hand.

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factions of the underground press as the man of the year.<sup>5</sup> The dichotomy of the antihero was reawakened in the 1980s, visiting Manson anew in books such as *The Manson File*,<sup>6</sup> but also on more general terms through serial killers and mass murderers as some sort of noblesse oblige.

When it all came, it came as a breath of fresh air. All that mass delirium, all those unrepentant necrophiles—where had this aesthetic terrorism been hiding all these years? Why had no one thought of bringing black messiahs and schizophrenic responses together before? It didn't matter, it was here now in *Apocalypse Culture*—a tome of all things “weird.”<sup>7</sup>

Among the newly babbling brook of transgressive literature, *Apocalypse Culture* (1987) read like a psychotic *Reader's Digest*. The editor was Adam Parfrey, who, in 1984, created *EXIT* magazine with George Petros, a visual grab-bag of questionable intent giving an indication of what lay ahead. *Apocalypse Culture* seemed like a step waiting to be taken in the natural order of things. It was where “we” were coming from. The content itself wasn't the key, it was the package, which took subjects, irrespective of genre or convention, and quantified them. The culture was apocalyptic.

In the past, extreme books tended to be standalone artifacts, like *Covenant with Death* (1934) and *Violence in our Time* (1977), two volumes of disturbing photographic imagery decades apart. The mid-1980s were different in that they brought an increase of edgy arcana, polarizing the underground and helping to orchestrate attitudes.

Fan bases were evolving independent of one another. Points of contact between them gave the appearance of a cohesive underground movement,<sup>8</sup> when actually there was no conscious attempt at uniformity, much less direction. In Britain, magic was re-energized and thriving in the 1980s thanks to “occultzines” *Lamp of Thoth*, *Chaos International* and *Nox* among others, which focused on Chaos magick, a belief system more psychological than paranormal. On the other side of the tracks, film fandom was undergoing upheaval through black

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<sup>5</sup>“MAN OF THE YEAR: CHARLES MANSON.” This was the front page headline of Los Angeles underground tabloid *Tuesday's Child*, February 9, 1970, 1.

<sup>6</sup>*The Manson File*, edited by Nikolas Schreck (New York: Amok Press, 1988). This book is a revisionist take on Manson via unexpurgated letters, songs, art, testimony and other documents.

<sup>7</sup>David Kerekes, “Apocalypse Cultured,” *Headpress* 1 (1991): 26–28. An illustration used in the article, taken from the Loompanics Unlimited 1990 *Main Catalog*, was the reason *Headpress* had been rejected by at least one printer. The illustration was for the book *Home Workshop Explosives* by Uncle Fester. As many books in the Loompanics catalogs, it was “sold for informational purposes only.”

<sup>8</sup>Points of contact may include interest in certain books, music, movies. A literal point of contact would be the Compendium bookshop (where I picked up my copy of *Apocalypse Culture* among others). No visit to London was complete without a detour to this oasis on Camden's high street, a worthy point when evaluating British counterculture.

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economy and trade lists. The introduction of the Video Recordings Act 1984 inadvertently created a collector's market in movies no longer officially obtainable in the UK on videocassette. Predominantly these were "pre-certs," aka "video nasties," uncertified horror films whose gore content put them (and the people who collected them) in line for prosecution. The situation was one of unease, and inspired a glut of Brit zines, a subculture removed and at once similar to that of occultzines. The like of *Samhain*, *Imaginator*, *Shock Xpress* and many others featured reviews and interviews consumed by the issue of censorship, creating a united front among readers against a common enemy. In other words, a sense of us (the underground) and them (everyone else).

Horror fans in the USA were spared the "video nasties" and consequently the voice of its zines differed to that of Britain. Times Square, in particular 42nd Street, the sin and sleaze capital of the world, was eulogized. *Sleazoid Express* and *Gore Gazette* adopted a gonzo slant, with films an afterthought among writers who spoke of scoring bad movies in bad places. The abstraction was more acute in the 1990s. Among a new breed of zine, *Headpress* in the UK arrived with the bold cover proclamation: "BIZARRE CULTURE, DEVIANT CONCEPTIONS, CINEMATIC EXTREMES." *Headpress* was a platform for writing not necessarily related to film, although this was the background cofounders David Slater and I shared as pre-cert collectors, meeting for the first time to swap videocassettes beneath the Queen Victoria statue in Manchester's Piccadilly Gardens, downwind of the public lavatory like dodgy geezers.

From *Headpress* sprang *Killing for Culture*. Rather, it sprang from an idea to publish a special edition of *Headpress* devoted to mondo films. (*Psychotronic Video* had the same idea, with a two-part feature on the subject beating us to it.) The strain of commercial pseudo-documentary that emerged with *Mondo Cane* in 1962 had hit its stride in the late 1970s. But only now were these films coming into circulation via bootleg tapes. Earlier Mondo efforts that were beautifully shot and composed seemed twee and deflated in eyes fuelled by "video nasties"; the new mondo was much tougher than those before and more in tune with our trenchant sensibilities.<sup>9</sup> Key elements remained, such as death and the marketing of death. "We, the 1960s audiences," decreed J.G. Ballard of the original *Mondo Cane*, "needed the real and authentic (executions, flagellant's processions, autopsies etc.), and it didn't matter if they were faked."<sup>10</sup> Crafted by directors Antonio Climati, Mario Morra, brothers Castiglioni and others, this haunting parade—sometimes authentic, often not—rushed to the fore of the new mondo and intrigued us most.

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<sup>9</sup>Mondo got a reboot with *Faces of Death* (John Alan Schwartz, 1978), which did receive a legitimate British release before falling foul of the Video Recording Act 1984 and becoming a bona fide "video nasty."

<sup>10</sup>J.G. Ballard, "An Exhibition of Atrocities: J.G. Ballard on Mondo Films," in *Sweet & Savage: The World Through the Shockumentary Film Lens*, edited by Mark Goodall (London: Headpress, 2006): 13–15.

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The proposed special edition of *Headpress* never happened: *Killing for Culture* took its place, a book-length treatise on death as cinematic commerce and Mondo as harbinger of the snuff legend.

Academia didn't much like it. As late as 2002, in a review for *Postscript*, Ken Gelder wrote that the *raison d'être* of a book like *Killing for Culture* is "to excavate minor film genres that remain ignored by academics." In so doing it has to "pretend that [Mondo films] are both popular/influential and convoluted/complex."<sup>11</sup> Okay, the book baits the academy somewhat by acknowledging its ignorance. Truth is, when Gelder's words appeared in print, Mondo was not simply undervalued as a body of work spanning several decades but ignored absolutely. The popularity of these films, deduces Gelder, is doubtful. His lofty assumption is charged with irony. The book in your hands is evidence of how far opinion has since travelled.

As the twentieth century slowly peeled away, the end of the millennium fell onto the horizon like a gloomy fog, posing more of a threat the closer it got. One persistent rumor was that society might collapse at the new dawn; that computers could not handle the point at which 1999 became 2000, and technology would fail. Pamphlets appeared on remediation of the Year 2000 problem, much as they had in the days of civil defense when a kitchen table was protection against the Bomb. Needless to say, terrifying acts of insurrection suddenly seemed inevitable...

So, this was the world of the old *Killing for Culture*, a decade fidgeting in its last moments with deep-seated unease. The medieval mind-set of End Times prophecy had been realigned with ones and zeros, but media however was still based around print and television. New media began in a North London pub in 2011, when a friend of mine who calls himself Alex DeLarge confided he was involved in the Animal Beta Project. The purpose of the group, he said, was to locate and bring to justice one Luka Magnotta. The name meant nothing. But his videos had gained the attention of concerned citizens with various skillsets. Magnotta was killing animals in order to be famous, said DeLarge, who believed people would be next, possibly a snuff film.

The margins have become fudged. That's one reason the latest revision of *Killing for Culture* has taken so long to complete (perhaps available in shops by the time you read this). The likes of the Dnipropetrovsk maniacs, Islamic State and Magnotta were never a foreseeable part of the original "plan," goalposts change often in the new millennium. The visit to the Berlin Internet café, where Magnotta was apprehended, indicates the extent of these deviations, when the search for snuff films becomes a mad quest for clues deeper in meaning.

Apocalypse culture is now the Internet, its global authors prolific but lacking in imagination. They are not like Johnny Depp, who one day strolled into the

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<sup>11</sup>Ken Gelder, "Review of *Killing for Culture*," *Postscript* 1, no. 3 (2002): 131–33.



publisher's London office and asked for a copy of *Killing for Culture*. This was prior to *The Brave* (1997), a movie about snuff he directed and starred in. He was wearing a cowboy hat.



**FIGURE 3** David Kerekes, London, 2015 (Photo: Clare Butler).

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# INTRODUCTION

## SHOT, CUT, AND SLAUGHTERED: THE CULTURAL MYTHOLOGY OF SNUFF

Neil Jackson

*It was kind of an interesting flick (!!)*

**ANONYMOUS<sup>1</sup>**

*If this snuff rumour goes on long enough,  
eventually some asshole will do it for real.*

**AL GOLDSTEIN<sup>2</sup>**

This book deals with a terrifying cultural phenomenon for which there is no proven starting point, merely speculation, conjecture, and confusion. Consequently, discussion of the so-called snuff movie is informed from the outset by the vexed question: do such things exist? While snuff has been present within popular and subcultural discourse, yet absent as a “proven” artifact, any study dealing seriously with the phenomenon is immediately obliged to stress the malleable nature of the debate. Therefore, the term “snuff” is applied liberally in the forthcoming pages in the discussion of fictional *and* documentary texts, a reflection of the manner in which the topic has seeped into general modes of discourse. Nevertheless, it seems important to stress that this book attempts neither to prove nor to disprove the disputed claims for snuff, a quest that is at once thankless and futile due to the ever-shifting comprehension of the term itself.

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<sup>1</sup>Ed Sanders, *The Family* (Boston, MA: De Capo Press, 2002): 168.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Jay Lynch, “The Facts About the Snuff Film Rumors,” *Oui*, July 1976, 118.

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Rather, the aim of the book is to evaluate fictional and reality-based media narratives that have informed our understanding of the snuff phenomenon since its origins. Accordingly, the evolution of this particular folk devil is charted from a variety of perspectives, each providing an insight into real and imagined manifestations of the form. Although the methodologies are eclectic, there is a coherent discourse through which the issues might move forward sensibly and objectively, acknowledging historical manifestations in several media sites and observing the impact of new technologies upon modes of consumption.

Since its infiltration of popular cultural fears in the 1970s, a common assumption regarding snuff is that it combines explicit images of mutilation and defilement with hardcore sex. Discussion of snuff has often observed an unholy alliance of conventions from realist horror films and pornography, hybridizing disreputable generic modes emblematic of the lowest common cultural denominator. Several commentators have observed a shift from horror's gothic foundations since the 1960 release of *Psycho* (directed by Alfred Hitchcock) and *Peeping Tom* (directed by Michael Powell). Philip Brophy goes so far to define realism as “[the 1970s] gulping, belching plughole”<sup>3</sup> that refined and diffused several genres simultaneously, while the visibility of a vaguely defined realist approach revealed a tension between what Andrew Tudor identifies as the “supernatural” and the “secular”<sup>4</sup> branches of the genre, with titles such as the *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1973), and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1976), foregrounding psychopaths, rapists, and cannibals rather than the threats embodied by supernatural or extraterrestrial entities.

Cynthia Freeland sees realist horror as a subgenre that “creates links between the dark side of male traits (violence, uncontrolled sexuality) and the heroic side (power, independence, etc.)... [it] legitimises patriarchal privileges through the stereotyped and naturalised representation of male violence against women,”<sup>5</sup> arguing that the emphasis upon male serial killers and sexual deviants is steeped in a (perhaps unconscious) legitimization of gender inequality, obfuscating wider issues of social deprivation, economic exploitation, political corruption, and institutionalized violence. She also sees an untapped potential for audiences to form a “critical awareness of its own interest in spectacle,”<sup>6</sup> and this emphasis upon the “spectacular” (particularly in relation to the affective mechanisms of sex

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<sup>3</sup>Philip Brophy, “Horrority—The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films,” *Screen* 27, no. 1 (1986): 4

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989): 8.

<sup>5</sup>Cynthia Freeland, “Realist Horror,” in *Philosophy and Film*, edited by Cynthia Freeland and Thomas Wartenberg (New York and London: Routledge, 1995): 136.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 139. Several snuff-themed films, including *Peeping Tom*, *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Effects*, and *Special Effects* are focally concerned with the relationship between the creation and consumption of images of violence, actively encouraging the spectator to consider the limits of representation and moral responsibility.

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and violence) stokes the fears of those who see the horror film as a dangerous sensory exciter that encourages imitative behavior. Consequently, the closer realist horror comes to its social referent, the more dangerous it is seen to become. This is particularly relevant in relation to early assumptions around snuff, wherein the murderous acts onscreen were seen to sate perverted or homicidal proclivities.

The sexual dimension of the realist horror film found a natural imaginary space within an emergent fictional snuff subgenre, its embodiment of deviant desire dislocating it from the notion of “art horror” (with its emphasis upon the supernatural and the *fantastique*) identified by Noel Carroll.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Freeland argues that in order to construct any kind of critical or theoretical framework for realist horror, it is far more useful to consider it as a fictional adjunct to representations of death in news media, arguing that they can be “easily, commonly and quickly integrated into new feature film plots... realist horror can present violent spectacles with an uncanny immediacy right before our eyes.”<sup>8</sup>

This binds the debate amid particular stylistic conventions, including the use of the long take and its claim to veracity and authenticity. In this sense, snuff has become emblematic of the death-centered narrative as a “wild signifier,” a term coined by Catherine Russell to illustrate her argument that death “remains feared, denied and hidden... we should be prepared to understand this wildness as an opening up of representation.”<sup>9</sup>

Russell’s work is concerned with fictional film, but is very useful here in its identification of the limits to which the moving image can plausibly present an aesthetic of realistic violence. She argues that violent death constitutes “a special crisis in believability, a threshold of realism and its own critique”<sup>10</sup> and several snuff-themed films have negotiated this dilemma through foregrounding self-reflexive methods that seem at odds with realist aspirations. Tzvetan Todorov argued that there are *generic* and *social/cultural*<sup>11</sup> branches of verisimilitude, with frames of reference never necessarily being discrete, and just as conceptions of reality may be partially shaped through media, social and cultural objects are very often affected by basic truths. Therefore, within plausibly imagined snuff scenarios, foreknowledge of the dynamics of the corporeal is in constant tension with an understanding of cinematic conventions. Many films that have appropriated the snuff mythology both mediate and exploit discourses of death

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<sup>7</sup>See Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990): 179.

<sup>8</sup>Freeland, “Realist Horror,” 134.

<sup>9</sup>Catherine Russell, *Narrative Mortality* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995): 1.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Steve Neale, “Questions of Genre,” in *Film Genre Reader II*, edited by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986): 160.

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imagery, accentuating the epistemological breakdown of the real and the fictional and problematizing Todorov's concepts of verisimilitude.

Despite its nominal basis in the depiction of mutually pleasurable sexual activity, hardcore pornography has often been characterized as harmful to social formations, with some radical feminists defining it as the cinematic expression of violent misogyny. Consequently, with its connotations of sexualized murder, the snuff film embodied pornography's most pernicious tendencies, the ultimate perversion of a morally and aesthetically impoverished form. Linda Williams sees the alleged existence of snuff as a corruption and betrayal of pornography's "knowledge-pleasure of sexuality"<sup>12</sup> and its (unfulfilled) potential to refute dominant patriarchal modes. Ideological assumptions regarding horror and pornography have been shaped by issues of objectification, abjection, terrorization, and control; combining those themes we soon arrive at the common denominator of male hegemony and its dominion over image manipulation, dissemination, and consumption. Even Williams, interested in identifying progressive possibilities within pornographic film, was frustrated by the arguments generated by *Snuff* (Michael and Roberta Findlay [uncredited], 1976). The visual rhetoric of that fictional, nonpornographic film's final sequence located it squarely within the adult film ghetto, "an utterly sadistic perversion of the pornographic genre's original desire for visual knowledge of pleasure."<sup>13</sup>

During its theatrical release, the appropriation of porn and horror tropes in *Snuff*'s advertising vividly brought together emotional and corporeal spectacle, elements central to what Williams dubbed "body genres" (pornography, horror, and melodrama).<sup>14</sup> *Snuff* becomes the ultimate corruption of the most exploitative elements of these "body genres," with Williams arguing that porn is "more often deemed excessive for its violence than for its sex, while horror films are excessive in their displacement of sex onto violence."<sup>15</sup> This should not be taken as a foundation upon which to build a critical vocabulary for the elusive, genuine porno snuff movie and, indeed, its existence would have manifold implications for her argument. However, it becomes very useful when we identify snuff thematics within fictional narratives. Some of the examples emergent from the international exploitation sector have become definitive statements of cinematic excess, displaying a complex interplay of voyeuristic, sadistic, and masochistic drives, charting gender iniquities inherent in processes of interpersonal power enabled by capitalism. This all points to a profound crisis in masculinity that paradoxically

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<sup>12</sup>Linda Williams, *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 3

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>14</sup>Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2–13.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

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questions the dominance of the masculine cinematic gaze while giving it full rein in the most delirious way imaginable. Resultantly, the global appropriation of snuff's mythology brings all manner of sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociosexual structures into sharp relief.

This porno-horror hybridization has influenced perceptions of what a real snuff movie might formally and narratively comprise, informing its representation in various fictional film genres (horror, melodrama, crime thriller, etc.). In fact, the assumed conventions of snuff have become sufficiently entrenched to the point where particular texts might be read as critiques of one another. Steve Jones<sup>16</sup> identifies the graphic representations of the notorious *August Underground* trilogy (Fred Vogel et al., 2001–2008) as unfettered reactions to the relatively discrete representations of snuff in mainstream Hollywood productions such as *8mm* (Joel Schumacher, 1999). This highlights the extent to which generic boundaries might be collapsed by the presence of snuff, and Jones encapsulates this very usefully when he argues that any imagined snuff scenario “hinges on the desire to know if snuff really does exist, what snuff depictions look like and fundamentally if there is truth in the myth.”<sup>17</sup> Of course, snuff's status as a morally indefensible underground criminal practice moves it away from discussions of audio-visual *realism*, into the tangible social dimensions of the *real*.

The etymology of the term “snuff movie” has its basis in common English slang, referring succinctly the act of “snuffing out” a human victim, providing a sense of a cruel and callous fate in which life is not merely taken, but casually extinguished like a candle flame. The linguistic association with “sniff” and its connotations of respiratory functions also evoke a victim's final, desperate breath. The designation “snuff movie” therefore provides a pithy encapsulation of its primary function: to exploit and record an act of homicide for the perverse edification of its maker and consumer. However, as a form of generic description, the term has been attributed to Ed Sanders in his 1971 book *The Family*, wherein it is claimed, without any form of substantiation, that members of the murderous Manson cult filmed some of their varied atrocities. Sanders states quite clearly that “I coined the term ‘snuff film,’” but its origins lie in an interview he conducted with “a person who had been hanging around on the edges of the Family.”<sup>18</sup> The revelations of this anonymous witness are couched in vagueness, typical of the lack of clarity which would inform the subsequent snuff mythology. However, they are significant for the tantalizing glimpses and fragments which would color the whole subsequent controversy

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<sup>16</sup>Steve Jones, “Dying to be Seen: Snuff-Fiction's Problematic Fantasies of ‘Reality,’” *Scope* 19 (2011), accessed July 15, 2015, <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/5145/1/Jones.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 10

<sup>18</sup>Sanders, *The Family*, 163.



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