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Killing For Culture: An Illustrated History of Death Film from Mondo to Snuff

By David Kerekes and David Slater

London and San Francisco: Creation Books, 1995. ISBN 1-871592-20-8. vii + 284 pp. £14.95 (pbk)

A Review by E J M Duggan, Suffolk College, UK

The term "snuff" as applied to film derives apparently from Ed Sanders's 1976 book, *The Family*, about the Charles Manson "Family" and the Tate/LaBianca murders. According to Sanders, the Manson gang had made "brutality films" or "snuff films", though no such film has ever come to light. In the wake of the Manson trial in 1970 a wave of "hippy cult" hysteria flourished (of which Sanders's book is part). Against this background of real horror and media hysteria, a badly made exploitation film screened in New York was promoted as showing a real murder. From these beginnings, argue David Kerekes and David Slater, the urban myth of the "snuff movie" derives.

Killing For Culture is divided into three sections: Feature Film, Mondo Film and Death Film. Not always pleasant reading, the book is sometimes interesting and engaging. It offers dozens of lengthy plot summaries and (brief) analyses of films ranging from *Peeping Tom* to *Mondo Cane* via *Emanuelle in America*. Compendious in scope, it is copiously illustrated with monochrome production stills, posters and publicity material. While the images tend to be less disturbing than the descriptive prose, the warning on the back of the book is fully justified by the relentlessly unpleasant content.

The first section offers an historical overview of films purporting to be, or which allude to the issue of, snuff film. Snuff has its genesis in a controversial film which came to be released under the title *Snuff*. Originally a poorly made exploitation film entitled *Slaughter*, it languished unreleased for five years on the shelf of a New York skinflick distributor. Later the credits were removed, five minutes of new footage added to the end and, in 1976, the film was released as *Snuff*. The film attracted considerable controversy, cinemas were picketed and the media developed a panic about "snuff movies" which had allegedly been smuggled into the United States. This controversy was encouraged, if not partly whipped up, by the film's distributor.

Subsequent chapters in the first section discuss *Peeping Tom* (1960); *Emanuelle in America* (1976); *Last House on Dead End Street* (1977) and *Hardcore* (1979). The first, according to Kerekes and Slater must have had some influence on *Snuff* because of the film-within-a-film device which each employs. The latter films are, they claim, directly inspired by *Snuff* and serve to concretise the notion of snuff because of the way in which representations of the snuff film are

established: what we might call snuff's generic tendencies and working practices, together with a critique of the snuff film as a commodity.

In the 1980s, focus in film shifts from the snuff movie itself to the snuff film-maker. Chapter three discusses the 1970s cannibal cycle, including *Cannibal Holocaust* (1979) which includes news reel footage of a military death squad at work, presented as a film within the film. According to Kerekes and Slater, the distinction between actualite and fiction is problematised here because the footage of real killings is dismissed within the film as "fake" while fictional deaths are presented as implicitly not fake. The remaining discussion of the snuff film maker includes *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1989) and *Man Bites Dog* (1992).

Section Two offers an overview of so-called Mondo Film, the collective name for oddity compilation films, generally travelogue-style compendia of clips of human and animal behaviour ranging from the curious to the perverse via cruelty and death. Maiming and killing feature in the Mondo Film, as does a range of sexual behaviour, generally presented to play up bizarre or salacious aspects. Some events included in Mondo film are real, in the strictest sense, while others are reconstructions, or are the result of the film-makers staging or manipulating events, which sometimes include killings (*Africa Addio*, 1966).

Mondo cinema originates in Italy with *Mondo Cane* (1962) although, as Kerekes and Slater note, the filming of executions and sexual activity is as old as film itself. The genre is less educational or informative than a pretext for gratuitous nudity or sexual behaviour. Later examples - post *Deep Throat* (1972), when hard core pornography has a deeper penetration in the feature film - include more explicit scenes of sexual behaviour and violence. By the 1990s, the focus of the Mondo film is almost exclusively death and its aftermath: images of warfare, executions and accidents: *Death Scenes* (1989) *Executions* (1995).

Section Three ranges from documentary film showing death, which here includes *De ewige Jude* (1940) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970), to suicide video, televised deaths at the Hillsborough football stadium and the Waco siege, as well as recordings of mass suicides. A postscript suggests the Roswell "alien autopsy" film, in terms of hype and controversy, is comparable to *Snuff*.

The text is largely descriptive in Sections Two and Three, offering detailed accounts of the contents of many Mondo films and death films. The final chapter, Propogating a Myth, discusses the media's obsession with the idea of the "snuff film", maintaining that the snuff film proper is a modern myth: the existence of any snuff film (as distinct from Mondo film, documentary, or reality TV) has yet to be confirmed, a single copy of any genuine snuff film has yet to be siezed.

As a book, it will appeal to cult film fans as well as to those who offer a loftier justification for engagement with the death film. Despite the fact that this is a revised and updated edition, a number of typographical and proofing errors remain, while references to secondary sources are not always given in full, making it difficult to verify or follow up particular articles. Poor referencing may be due in part to the nature of the literature of exploitation cinema: the short lived specialist magazines which provide much of this book's secondary material may not themselves provide dates and part or volume numbers; but it is also because this is not an academic text book per se, but one which is also part of the cult phenomenon which it describes.

Despite some shortcomings with referencing, and the inclination toward description rather than analysis, *Killing For Culture* is as compelling as it is repulsive. It is clearly the result of much research and appears as much a labour borne of obsession as of love. If this book's intention is to shock and disturb it will doubtless succeed more often than not.

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