



Dr. Mark Benecke
Photo by Claus Pütz

Snuff - Comments on the historical background of a current topic by Dr. Mark Benecke

1. Abstract

The "snuff" movie genre appeared in the late 70s and shows the allegedly real, often very cruel killing of people. More recently, a growing number of short video clips has been distributed via the internet. They also belong to this category, and some were clearly recognized as fictional on the basis of technical details in two independent forensic investigations. By means of a brief review of movie history, this article shows that snuff movies originated from a certain prevailing trend in the 1970's, influenced by the murder of actress Sharon Tate by the Charles Manson group, the development of B horror movies, and a promotional campaign for a film which flopped in 1971 (renamed several times by the distribution company from *American cannibale* to *Snuff*, to *Big Snuff*). Retrospectively, there are no clues that snuff movies, i.e., movies openly distributed and actually available to the public, exist. In contrast, there are private documentations found by the police at the homes of killers during investigations of homicides (such as in the murder series of the couple Bernardo/Homolka) that do show actual killings; however, these videos are never available on the market. Other types of actual footage are used in documentary collections like *Faces of Death*, which do, however, never claim that the killings were performed for the reason of movie making.

Due to the low resolution of many movies distributed in the internet (always 72 dpi compressed), it becomes increasingly difficult to decide if a movie shows a real killing or not. The most recent case was the filmed killing of Nick Berg in which no blood splatter can be seen. From our own case work experience, we do however know that persons experienced in beheadings of animals will not necessarily produce blood splatter on crime scenes. For the average viewer, the lack of spurting blood makes it difficult to evaluate the truth behind the actual events depicted in the movie. Whilst in this case, the video may very well show real events, in most other cases that are submitted to us, the videos are fake but seem to look more realistic to lay persons because of either an excess of blood or body movements that seem to be appropriate.

The term "snuff" has been taken to movies that purport to show the actual killing of humans in their production. They are to be kept apart from documentary movies and photographs that were not marketed after having been secured in the course of criminal investigations, such as in the Canadian case of Bernardo and Homolka.

Creating the "snuff" category was originally a marketing gag for a movie distributor who tried to use this name to make failed movie productions more attractive by hooking them to motives known to the general public and akin to popular perceptions and beliefs at that time. One of those referred specifically to the murder of actress Sharon Tate, who was killed on August 9, 1969, in her own house, by a group led by Charles Manson.

The court proceedings against Manson started in the summer of 1970; they established a personification of evil that persists to this day. The rock musician Ed Sanders wrote a book titled *The Family: The Story of Charles Manson's Dune Buggy Attack Battalion*. In this book, he maintains that there must be photographic evidence of the killings committed by the Manson group. It may be hidden somewhere, or even be in circulation. He thereby started a legend that intertwined reality (those killings) and assumptions (there must be photographic evidence) in a manner that cannot be disentangled by outsiders. Thus started the belief that there is a chance to exploit "Snuff Movies" for commercial and promotional purposes. The created fictional stories helped to promote cheaply produced movies with horror stories, often including erotic elements, in which sensational action substituted for quality.

As a matter of fact, in some developing countries, human life was sometimes not well protected. This became very obvious in the 1970's and is until today reflected in the the very frequently heard urban legend of a kidney that is cut out of a victim's body at the end of a drinking bout "somewhere in Mexico or Southeast Asia"; the stolen organ is allegedly sold, and the victim wakes up in an ice cold bath. The context of such alleged violence in developing, allegedly "wild" countries together with the atrocities in the Vietnam War, established fictional as well as non-fictional photographic images in the mind of the people.

Finally, in early 1976, a movie was to be shown in Manhattan with the promise it would depict an actual killing of humans. A poster announcing it used, for the first time, the word "Snuff". The poster showed a blood-soaked naked woman, cut to pieces. The inscription said: "*Never has a camera witnessed such bloody action. This movie had to be produced in Latin America, where life is cheap.*"

There were protests in front of the movie theater, with the motto "*Murder is not a form of entertainment*". However, not even the New York newspapers understood that the images were largely a marketing gag. The movie had actually been produced years earlier, in 1971, originally titled *Slaughter*. Its low budget had caused it to be

shot in Argentina. Its producer, Monarch Releasing Company (usually dealing in explicitly erotic movies) then decided it was too bad for English speaking audiences, and therefore, it did not even release the movie for years.

It was only after Lynette Alice Fromme, another member of the Manson group, attempted to murder President Ford, that things took a different turn. Court orders now forbade the publication of documentation of the group's activities in parts of the U.S. At that time, the Italian movie *Savage Man, Savage Beast* (1975), pretended to show actual images of the killings of native Americans; and a movie entitled *Brutes and Savages* (also 1975), showed images of a man dying after being attacked by a crocodile. That is when Allan Shackleton, head of Monarch Release Company, decided to release his movie *Slaughter* for distribution with the new name *Snuff*. Its many shortcomings could now be explained in terms of the illegality of its origins. This aspect was strengthened by the omission of all further headlines, names of actors, directors, technicians, etc.

For editorial reasons, additional elements were specially added in a second version of *Snuff*, such as a scene depicting a castration or the killing of a pregnant woman. There is also an element of "double fiction", where a technician is being killed while shooting the movie. This movie is then the one that is allegedly shown. Director Shackleton originally told the magazine *Variety* that *Snuff* showed true documentary materials; but he retracted this statement later and admitted that the core elements were fictional. Until today, these statements were not generally perceived.

2. Further Developments

The materials covered by the original *Snuff* movie clearly indicated the time it originated: there were women as killers (Manson Family, women's movement), allegedly illegal documentation of killings (again, exploiting an existing legend, and faking its contents by inserting real, filmed acts of violence in a new context), the murder of a pregnant woman (again, originally by the Manson Family), and the alleged shooting of a movie in economically weak regions, where acts of violence look more likely – all this were popular beliefs at that time.

The "*snuff*" motive has persevered to this day, depicting killings purposely committed for films such as *Special Effects* (1984) and *8 mm* (1998); but it was never again exploited as viciously as in the 1970s.

The movie *8 mm* shows most clearly the connection to problems of its time. It deals with the murder of a child, a topic close to what happened at the time. Other movies, such as *Snuff - Vitimas do Plazer (Victims of Pleasure)*, where the movie producers kill the principal actress in 1977 under the direction of Claudio Cunha, made sure the topic was clear in the movie's title.

The success of the movie *Snuff* opened up chances for several additional directions of production, where loose sequences of (mostly true) animal killings and the showing of already dead people are accompanied by descriptive comments. That means these were not truly snuff movies. The most popular series in this context (real killings yet not snuff) became *Faces of Death*, parts 1 through 4, produced from 1978 to 1990.

A related genre of movies popped up in the 1970s, called "*Mondo*" movies. They purported to deal with "*true*" habits of people all over the world; they depicted what were apparently authentic descriptions of a sexual and violent behaviour. They also exploited existing albeit deeply anachronistic elements of popular beliefs, such as, for instance, opinions of what was seen as "wild" practices of people living in other continents and cultures.

A third type of movies is separately treated under the descriptive name of "Thrill Kill". It clearly defines itself as invented. A typical motive is a film crew travelling to the location of cannibalistic crimes: the material of the film action is then later found by unrelated travelers, thus showing up as double fiction. Good examples for this category are Ruggero Deodato's *Ultimo Mono Cannibale* (1976) and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1979), which was marketed also under the titles *Jungle Holocaust* or *Canibal Holocausto*. Here, true killings of animals such as turtles or pigs are combined with the apparent killing of humans, including the film crew, in a manner that looks realistic to the layman but is put together with movie techniques (as, for instance, an impalement).

The motif of recently detected film reels or lost footage, always showing the killing of the film crew, was recently picked up with enormous success by the movies *Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Book of Shadows* (2000). The fact that these movies were intentionally described on the internet as showing events that really happened saw to it that *Blair Witch* was taken for a documentary film by many credulous people.

There are many other clearly fictional movies that deal in often very cruel ways with the belief that snuff movies could exist by introducing those movies as alleged "*extra footage*", e.g. in *Emmanuelle in America* (1976, alleged "*Venezuelan copy*", director: Joe D'Amato) and to a lesser extent *Thesis* (or *Tesis*; 1996, director: Alejandro Amenábar). However, of particular interest today are movie clips that come along recently over the internet, that put the police in a difficult position because they have hardly any trails to follow.

However, during the 80th annual meeting of the German Society of Legal Medicine, two working groups clearly recognized the fictional character of a number of brief movie sequences that were massively appearing on the Internet. They resemble their movie ancestors from the 1970s in both contents and form with the exception of their digital technology, low resolution, and forensic errors. In that sense, they continue a movie tradition that has been around since 1975.

3. Final Remarks

A short review of movie history shows that when filming became cheaper in the 1970s, and special effects became more easily available, together with the psychological changes occurring in those years, it favored the development of new kinds of genre movies. They pretended to deal with actual depictions of sexual and violent acts with a focus on excessive force and killings. Those movies can be purchased or rented in specialty stores, as this author is constantly confronted with in case work. The relevant movies are usually not blacklisted; even in the United States, they can be rented in large cities (especially the original movie actually named *Snuff*, available in two different versions; also, *Cannibal Holocaust*, a precursor to *Blair Witch Project*, which is a quite popular DVD in the genre).

Summarizing our findings, there are no indications in movie history that Snuff products are based on actual instances of the killing of human beings for the purpose of selling the footage. There are movies available in video rental stores, on the black market, and in the internet that do show killings, yet they were not filmed for the purpose of selling the footage.

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Interview with Dr. Mark Benecke

Born in 1970, Dr. Mark Benecke works as a molecular biologist and invertebrate scientist on criminal and forensic medical issues and the biology of death. He is a guest lecturer and professor at universities in the USA, the Philippines, Vietnam and Colombia, as well as an instructor at police academies and a guest at the FBI Academy and the "Body Farm", among others.

He studied biology, zoology and psychology at the University of Cologne and received his doctorate in genetic fingerprinting. Afterwards, he worked intensively in forensic medicine and was trained at the FBI Academy, among other places. He has since been involved in solving international criminal cases. Benecke lectures all over the world. He is also an instructor at German police schools.

Mark Benecke has been a columnist for various newspapers and magazines. He appeared as a forensic pathologist on the Sat 1 show *Niedrig und Kuhnt* until 2007. He also appeared several times in *Galileo-Mystery*. Benecke is a welcome guest on German-language talk shows. Most people will know him from the true crime documentary series *Medical Detectives*, where he appears in numerous episodes and analyzes the cases.

Jean Rises: How and where did you first come across the subject of "snuff"?

Dr. Mark Benecke: I was probably the only German person who not only subscribed to *Bizarre Magazine* from England (1997-2015), but also wrote for it (about vampire corpses and my friend Jeanne Youngson in New York, head of a vampire fan club) as well as had its issues hardbound in the crime library. Before reading about snuff movies in this magazine, I only knew rumors about them.

Then when I was living in New York in St. Mark's Place, I just went over to what was probably the craziest and perhaps the wickedest video store and got down to business. Luckily the guys there were nice and told me about this story.

It always annoys me when something becomes legendary in the legal-medical-police-criminalistic field, but the traces of its existence are missing. So I looked for the traces.

I knew from Jörg (Buttgereit: *Nekromantik*, *Todesking*), with whom I had given a lecture a long time ago (and who I had been wandering around at a comic fair), how difficult it used to be to make corpses for films.

Today Claudia Rindler or Robert Rebele can create fantastic "fake" corpses, after all, but it was different at the time of the alleged snuff films, so I was able to apply not only the film-historical, but also the trace-historical comparison technique - film images versus reality: does it fit or not, or how, or what? .

I also found it interesting that according to *Bizarre Magazine*, for example, the film *Guinea Pig 2: Flower of Flesh and Blood* (ギニーピッグ2 血肉の華) was the only film in the series even known to exist and, second, voted the most gruesome film of all time. For laymen, the killing depicted there is hardly distinguishable from a real one, but why should it be more blatant than *Cannibal Holocaust* & Co. where real animals die? I found it strange and interesting.

JR: How would you define/describe snuff films from your point of view?

MB: They are films that claim to show real, intentional, deliberate killings of people, although this is not the case.

JR: Where does snuff begin for you, personally? Would you place shockumentaries or videos compiling murders or accidents in that category?

MB: Yes, because we had access to such clips more often in the 1990s and - with decreasing frequency - even after that. The most famous is probably the one with the woman who is shot while sitting in a wheelchair, the whole thing in close-up. Here, the head movement during the shot was wrong, and some of the pixels that were supposed to represent smoke were also misplaced.

JR: There were some murderers in the past who deliberately filmed their actions and uploaded them to various forums on the Internet. Among others Luka Magnotta ("1 Lunatic 1 Icepick"). Would you say that this is a snuff film, since the media often declared this to be the first real snuff film?

MB: For me it's only snuff when the perpetrators want to do more than just capture it, make a souvenir, so to speak. So it depends, I would have to ask the perpetrators concerned. Nowadays, there's a lot of filming going on, which was completely different when the snuff genre was first created.

JR: What is the fascination with films and images about death and accidents?

MB: For some, perhaps, it depicts their fantasies, for others, it's to reassure themselves that they are better off than being dead, no matter how bad they may be - and certainly many other reasons.

I've seen so many reasons for all sorts of things over the last thirty years, so the answer to "*why*" can be left open from my experience.

JR: With the modern age also came various shock sites like Rotten.com, Ogrish and other sites that showed real gore relentlessly. Should such images and video footage be accessible on the web? On the one hand there is the freedom of the press, on the other hand we must protect young audiences.

MB: Hahaha, protection of minors on the Internet? Next question, please.

JR: The existence of real snuff films has not been finally confirmed until now. Have you ever been confronted with this issue professionally?

MB: Yes, through the aforementioned short clips and because I published the whole thing in the *Archives of Criminology*, the oldest criminology journal in this country. When it comes to this kind of thing, I am sometimes approached. In the meantime, however, the topic is purely historical for me, because at the latest since the beheading of Nick Berg on camera, there should be a new perception: Yes, people are killed on purpose and fully staged in front of running cameras to show that to as many people as possible. I have seen too many real beheadings which were carried out exactly because of this.