Dying to be Seen: Snuff-Fiction's Problematic Fantasies of "Reality"

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The mythic Snuff film has remained a persistent cinematic rumour since the mid-1970s. Snuff has been defined by the FBI as a "visual depiction" of murder, intended to sexually arouse, and which is "commercially distributed" (Ken Lanning, in *Does Snuff Exist?*). It has been perpetuated through fictional films that either seek to explore the production of such films, or attempt to emulate what Snuff could look like. The first fiction film widely acknowledged to exploit the use of the Snuff motif is (perhaps unsurprisingly) entitled*Snuff* (1976), and even then its murderous finale was infamously tacked on to sell an otherwise substandard film via controversy (see Kerekes and Slater, 1995: 11-22, and Petley, 2000: 206). Numerous films have employed the same technique and gained notoriety in doing so, including *Last House on Dead End Street* (1977) and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), the latter being banned in the UK amidst the Video Nasties furore and the introduction of the 1984 Video Recordings Act (Kerekes and Slater, 2001: 50). This is not to say that all films utilising the motif have been illegitimated – many mainstream films have used the same premise, including *Hardcore* (1979) and *Videodrome* (1983), or more recently *My Little Eye* (2002)*, The Last Horror Movie* (2003), and *Vacancy* (2007).A wealth of literature is available concerning the origins and development of Snuff fiction (see Kerekes and Slater, 1995; Petley 2000 and 2005; Carol, 1993 to name just a few examples), and so I will not dwell on that topic.

Discourses surrounding Snuff fiction are foremost concerned with the issue of authenticity, even though there is no known real Snuff film on which to base the tropes expected of these simulations. Clearly, these assumptions have been founded on discourses of cinema vérité, documentary realism and so forth. The methodologies of mediating and constructing portrayals of reality have become increasingly familiar to a mass audience since the mid-1990s due to the rise in what Eric Cazdyn refers to as "reality culture" (Cazdyn, 2002), where reality TV, surveillance footage, amateur porn, and home movies distributed via YouTube have become staples of popular visual entertainment. Faced with the ubiquity of reality in visual media, the pseudo-Snuff film has its work cut out in trying to appear "real."

My intention here is to investigate some examples of faux Snuff made in this climate, considering how they relate to the critical paradigms that were applied to their forebears. The first Snuff-style films made in the late

1970s and into the 1980s attracted a great deal of attention from anti-pornography feminists, especially using the critical rhetoric of the media-effects model. That is, these earlier faux Snuff films were accused of inciting violence in the audience, acting as a kind of titillating pornography. One of my aims is to ask how more recent Snuff simulations fit into this schema, particularly since the case study examples I am exploring actively blur the lines between sex and violence. Again, this is informed by a contemporary climate characterised by a desire for what Swartz dubs "humilitainment" (Swartz, 2006: 318). While Swartz directly refers to a rise in reality-porn coupled with increasing cruelty, other visual forms stand accused of popularising sadistic voyeurism; as is the case of "Torture Porn" horror movies (Edelstein, 2006), and also other forms of "real" humilitainment (manifested in the "Happy Slapping" phenomena, for example).[1] My focus will lean towards British responses to Snuff fiction, primarily because of the legal context out of which I am writing: the 1984 Video Recordings Act may have villainised early pseudo-Snuff films under the sway of media-effects theory, but this is currently being replicated by the 2008 Dangerous Pictures Act, which (I have argued elsewhere) seems to rely on the same fears regarding images and reality (Jones and Mowlabocus, 2009).

My interest in faux-Snuff is not just based around sexual violence, but how the form balances fantasy with an aesthetic of authenticity. My textual analysis will therefore spend some time considering the uses of perspective in my case study films, which combine a first-person "presence" as witness to murder with narrative structures that are more concerned with observing the motivations of the killers. The former provides an immediate, emotional space, the latter permits distance from the action. Proximity and reality are key to the horrors of the faux-Snuff film, and the response of reviewers (as I will expound) even suggests that recognising that the film is fake is of little comfort compared with the reality effect: the possibility that it *could* be real.

The central focal texts will be those of the *August Underground* trilogy (2001-2007). Unlike *Snuff* or *Cannibal Holocaust,* these films attempt to pass themselves off as authentic from the outset, without framing the footage as fiction. Snuff-style images wholly constitute the content of the *August Underground* films. My motivation for focusing on *August Underground* is that it achieves a level of found-footage authenticity that its predecessors do not (as I will demonstrate), meaning that it is the most "successful" attempt to emulate Snuff – at least conceptually – that I have encountered to date.

Pseudo-Snuff and Sex

The connection between pornography and Snuff was facilitated and fixed in the cultural consciousness by the public protests of anti-pornography

feminists (Petley, 2000: 209), particularly following the release of *Snuff* which founded its "murder" upon a sex scene. Beverly Labelle, for example, declared that the fictional film *Snuff* aimed to entice "the regular [pornographic] market" (Labelle, 1992: 189). The *August Underground* films embrace the connection between sex and violence as part of the makers' desire to be anti-mainstream, going to "unspeakable lengths to produce something that is diametrically opposed to your standard overhyped PG-13 (or even 'hard-R')" studio horror film (Hill, n.d. [a]). Accordingly, the extreme pseudo-Snuff texts I investigate graphically sexualise murder in ways their certificated counterparts (such as *The Great American Snuff Film* (2004), for instance) do not. While some films, such as the latter, contain feigned rape as well as simulated murder, it is clear that they are meant to be received as horror rather than pornography: the sex is not usually particularly graphic, and tends to spring from narrative motivation in these mainstream movies.

However, in some cases sex and violence are so intricately intertwined that it becomes difficult to distinguish how the film is intended to be decoded. Perhaps evincing the connections between hardcore pornography and the pseudo-reality claim made by Snuff fiction, sex and bodily torture occur in extreme Snuff simulations on a more frequent and literal level than in their softcore horror counterparts. The degradation of the victims in *August Underground* (2001) is a case in point. Laura has her nipple removed, is groped and covered in her own urine and excrement before the cameraman decides to "stick her shit back in" to her anus. Elsewhere, a hitchhiker is told to expose herself then perform fellatio upon one of the victimisers in exchange for a lift, before being severely beaten and left for dead. Sex is a kind of horror here, as *August Underground*'s world is one of sexual violence that does not pander to notions of consent. The same is true for the hyper-sexualised sequel *August Underground's Mordum* (2003), which tries to break as many sexual taboos as possible. Thus the skimpily attired Cristie tortures, kisses, vomits upon, and gyrates against a lesbian couple while Fred looks on, masturbating. When the victims have both been dispatched, Cristie orders her brother Maggot to "fuck that gash in her stomach" where one of them has been disembowelled. Maggot and Cristie's sexual relationship places incest (and therefore sexual deviancy) at the centre of the narrative.

Violation is the central motif in the *August Underground* films. The interactions are based around humiliation and degradation, dominance and abuse. In *Mordum*, the homicidal siblings violate a couple that have been locked in separate chests (bound and naked) for "so long." Maggot declares that the naked, bound, masked woman, covered in her own faeces, is "so sexy." Cristie rapes the woman with a dildo ("my cock"), forcing the woman's hand down her pants ("you don't want to touch it, but you're touching it"). She then demands to Maggot "you gotta kill her,

this isn't working. You fuck her." While he does, Cristie, shouts "fuck her harder [...] fucking choke her, fucking kill her," raping the woman through him. They then force the woman's partner to "cut his own dick off" with scissors before inserting it into the woman for "one last fuck." While lengthy, this description should illustrate how sex and violence coalesce here in ways they do not in Hollywood versions of the snuff myth such as *8mm* (1999).

However, these films are not alone in combining a reality-aesthetic with sex -- or indeed sadism -- in this period. The blurring of fantasy and reality of sexual depictions has become particularly troubled by the rise of real sex in mainstream cinema, which, as Tanya Krzywinska observes, results in "a modal ambiguity [being] created between the real and fiction" (Krzywinska, 2006: 222). Jensen argues that pornography is becoming "more normalised than ever" in that sense (Jensen, 2007: 16), and amateur porn and faux-reality porn have surged in prevalence in the last twenty years (Sarracino and Smith, 2008: 46). According to Swartz, these branches of porn are also becoming increasingly cruel, coupling "authentic action" with "abuse" (Swartz, 2006: 318). For Jensen, such an escalation in onscreen degradation indicates that the United States is founded upon what he terms "a rape culture" (Jensen, 2007: 16-47).

Indeed, Swartz notes that "[f]aux reality has become the norm in pop culture…pander[ing] to a collective schadenfreude" (Swartz, 2006: 318-200), in a similar manner to the "freakshow" nature of reality TV (Dovey, 2000; and Kilborn, 2003: 168). Moreover, the authenticity of Happy Slap attacks illustrates one way in which reality culture seems to dispel the gap between images and the real-life occurrences they represent. This is certainly how McGuire views the Happy Slapping phenomena, citing it as "a peculiar example of the interface between violence and the representations of violence ostensibly promoted by communicative technology" (McGuire, 2007: 108). The line between off-screen reality and on-screen (mediated) reality has become blurred, and this climate facilitates the fantasy depictions of hardcore faux-Snuff.

The importance of reality in this branch of horror is made clear by comparing them with supposed Torture Porn films (see Edelstein, 2006, Cochrane, 2007). The categorising term has been coined to describe movies such as *Saw* (2004), *Hostel* (2005) and *Captivity* (2007), which stand accused of being "stomach churning ... morally repellent" and celebrating "insane levels of festive violence" (Queenan, 2007: 16). Yet, it is worth noting that these films, although graphic, are still certified uncut by the BBFC (bbfc.co.uk), while pseudo-Snuff films such as *August Underground* and *Amateur Porn Star Killer* (2007) are not. I contend that this distinction is founded on the reality effect. It is true that Torture Porn does not feature graphic sex acts in conjunction with death, even if nudity and murder are juxtaposed in *Hostel*. However, Torture Porn, I contend,

is less likely to face official censure because it is clearly marked as fantasy, and is not intended to be decoded as real(istic), while Snuff-fiction hinges on such a deceit (Petley, 2005: 174). The crux of the issue then appears to be based on realism, and the coalescence of horror and sex in an age where pornography itself is becoming increasingly sadistic.

Underpinning the responses and villainisation of simulated Snuff is the premise that depictions pertaining to realism are seen as more horrific or disturbing because they do so. This may be because of the aesthetic immediacy of the text, or a failure on the part of the film to explicitly acknowledge distances between reality and fantasies presented onscreen. The majority of viewers will no doubt understand that they are witnessing a fictional approximation of Snuff. Yet there has been notable critical concern that this is not the case, and that film viewers will be negatively influenced by such fictions, seeking to replicate violent action in their own lives. Clearly this is of interest to the reality/fantasy balance at the core of what the pseudo-Snuff film is, but it is also worth addressing because while I share Julian Petley's scepticism regarding the existence of the genuine commercial Snuff film (Petley, 2005: 173-4), the persistence of the myth partially stems from the utilisation of the concept in pro-censorship and identification discourses.

Proponents of the media-effects model aver that watching representations of violent activity "has a causal effect on the aggressive behaviour of viewers" (Felson, 2000: 238). Porn has been at the forefront of such accusations (see Segal, 1993: 8-15), precisely because it makes a greater claim to reality than horror (which is often reliant on the supernatural or fantastic) does. Snuff works well as a point of comparison because it directly pertains to reality. Also, champions of the media-effects theory commonly make little distinction between sexual and violent pleasures: a line the faux-Snuff films intentionally blur. The porn-effects debate is largely intertwined with viewer-response theory dealing with behavioural reactions to screen violence, even if the massive wealth of literature on the subject yields very little conclusive evidence (see Segal, 1993: 8-15; Black, 2002: 111; and McNair, 1996: 65). The same is true of academic responses to depictions of violence, which are equally inconsistent (see Prince, 2000: 20-24; Rothman, 2001: 37; Glucksmann, 1971: 75; Hill, 1997: 104-6; and Barker, 1984).

In that sense, this issue requires addressing, though I will remain focused on the textual content of the films in this article rather than on viewer response per se because of this dearth of stable, persuasive evidence. To try and prove a connection between depiction and likely viewer reaction seems to me to be a fruitless task, and is certainly beyond the scope of this article. I am not interested in trying to prove a connection between portrayal and response here, just as I am not able to engage in semiotic analysis or demographic study of viewer responses to the films.[2]

Instead, I wish to engage with the primary material itself, not to cast aspersions about viewer pleasure, demographic or behaviours, but to explore how the films use perspective and the vérité style.

Points of view: Form and perspective in the faux-Snuff film

The critical rhetoric of identification with the killer's perspective (see Clover, 1992, and Dika, 1987: 89) seems to have been spurred by the first-person murder sequences of seminal slasher films *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980). In these cases, concern has been raised regarding the position of the viewer "as" killer (Pinedo, 1997: 73-74, Dika, 1990: 40). This is of specific interest to my analysis of the *August Underground* films, as they are shot entirely from the killers' points of view. While the majority of *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* is filmed from a third-person perspective, marking the films' events as constructed fictions, the reality aesthetic of the pseudo-Snuff films under scrutiny makes no attempt to contextualise the killings from any vantage points other than the killers'. It is for this reason that reviewers have referred to the films as a kind of immersive experience: "You [the viewer] are drawn into [the killers'] world of no cares and no remorse. Sometimes you actually forget you are watching a movie." The immediacy of the vérité first-person camerawork then leads the reviewer to conclude that "to watch [*Mordum*] is to be an 'accomplice' of sorts." (Hill, n.d. [b]; see also Dingermtb, n.d.). The extreme Snuff-fiction films I take as my case studies use form and viewpoint in ways worthy of scrutiny, balancing seemingly authentic depictions of graphic sexual violence with subtle irony.

Formally, these films use home video equipment to evince their authenticity. *August Underground* begins with blank video static and makes use of residual footage supposedly occupying the tape prior to the killing spree that supplants it. The final film in the trilogy, keeping up-to-date with technological shifts in its quest for authenticity, makes use of a digital camera. The grainy/ghosted picture and shoddy handheld camerawork progresses as any real home footage would, without the air of technical forethought or overt plotting as such.

The form draws attention to itself, making it difficult to forget the process of mediation. The intentional degrading of image quality in the first two films makes a claim to authenticity – that the tape is sourced from a long line of duplicates. This aesthetic is not conducive to suspending disbelief as it foregrounds formal properties, yet those markers are required to pass the film off as reality. Furthermore, as the cameraman is never revealed, the other victimiser (Fred) speaks directly to camera, thus addressing the audience with commentary such as "you are going to love this [...] what do you think dude? Fucking beautiful?" during scenes of mutilation and humiliation. While the onscreen atrocities may inspire

horror (and are clearly intended to do so), the address to camera continually hints at the characters' motivations in filming the events – to record the murder for their own visual edification later. In that sense Fred is speaking to himself when he addresses the camera. The audience are positioned in this intimate space, which adds to the sense of being an "accomplice" the aforementioned reviewer identified (Hill, n.d. [b]), though this is balanced with the immediacy of revulsion such a mode of address intends. In his director's commentary, Vogel comments that he wishes the viewer to have a sensory experience: "I wanted the audience to put themselves in that place [...] imagine what it would smell like." Given that even the murderer is vomiting because of the odour in this sequence, the intent is to repulse through proximity. In that respect, the film anticipates and mocks the tenets of the effects-model by playing with viewpoint control while maintaining a vérité aesthetic. As I have previously outlined, depictions of first-person events have been vilified for their corrupting potential. I contend that the use of first-person perspective in this case responds to those concerns with rebellious aplomb.

The interactions between characters in the sequel also toy with perspective. *August Underground's Mordum* has a much greater sense of plot movement than its prequel because of the onscreen presence of three murderers. It hangs the murder spree upon declining relationships between the unhinged killers. An increasingly intense incestuous relationship between siblings Maggot and Cristie means the film is essentially a love story, however unconventional.[3] The violent sexual pleasure Maggot and Cristie attain from cruelty reveals the extent to which they invest in the infliction of pain upon others in place of their own damaged selves. This is no more evident than in Maggot's self harm; his attempt to "look beautiful for" Cristie – or "Sissyfuck" as he calls her. He labels her by culminating her dual incestuous roles. Above all, it is the sexualisation of the torture that is most concerning, not only because they break the taboo of familial intercourse, but also because their activity so readily aligns rape and murder with their own voyeuristic gratification. In turn, the question of what kind of visual entertainment or gratification can be gained from watching *Mordum* is implied.

Fred (the killer from the prequel and Cristie's boyfriend), objects to the incest, and this eventually results in insurrection. Again, this is intricately related to the issues of voyeurism and victimisation in the film's climatic scene. Maggot rapes the corpse of a young girl for Cristie's voyeuristic pleasure, as they both scream "Sissyfuck." The projection of incestuous desire onto a corpse is a disturbing mirror of their relationship ("I'm fucking for you, I love you"), where their love is physically manifested as sexual violence. Maggot rapes the corpse in place of his sister, and she takes pleasure in witnessing what is the figurative rape of her own passive body; this is paralleled by the earlier sequences in which Cristie

self-harms for the camera. The complex dynamic of voyeurism is highlighted by Cristie's recording of the act. As wielder of the camera, she turns the spotlight onto this action, displacing herself. She only fleetingly captures her image in the mirror, and her visage is obscured by the camera.

Cristie's position is tenuously self-denigrating, but Fred's is also highly troubling. Voyeurism is again implicated in his reaction to the incest. In the opening of the film, Fred uses the camera to spy through a keyhole to catch Cristie and Maggot having sex. The limitations imposed on Fred's (and therefore our) perspective are made clear, as is his inability to interject other than through verbal insult. Similarly, in the climax, he hears the events ensue, and responds by shouting "why do you fuck him?" to Cristie, thinking that she and Maggot are again engaging in intercourse beyond his field of vision. He misperceives the event because he cannot *see* it, yet the problem is occurring on a symbolic level, and has physically transpired elsewhere in the film (notably in his absence). In the finale, he cannot directly observe the events as he specifically rejected the camera at the opening of the scene ("get that fucking thing outta my fucking face"). Again, viewpoint is paramount. Fred's inability to witness events is mirrored by the camera's first-hand presence and recording of murder and rape.

The third film, *August Underground's Penance* (2007), complicates its depictions by coupling them with a different kind of narrative arc. Being much more about character motivation than the first film, here Cristie and Fred are the focus (Maggot is absent), and while graphic murder does still occur, the tone is very much driven by their central decline rather than an unalloyed revelry in the victim's suffering as it was previously. The "reality" is of the effect homicide has had on their relationship (especially if it has entailed the murder of Maggot, as we may assume from the fighting at the close of *Mordum*). Here then, Fred and Cristie are the victims inasmuch as it is their suffering that drives the plot rather than that of those killed as it was in previous entries. While *Mordum* prioritises violence and taboo, *Penance* illustrates the consequences of their homicidal regime. Read against media-effects discourse, this final film gestures towards the results of violence, but firmly for those involved and depicted, not for the unspecified and unknown viewer of *August Underground*. After all, from the characters' perspectives, they are the only intended audience.

The first-person perspective is retained in *Penance* – thus the form remains naturalistic – but is complicated by the shift in focus. In a mirror of Cristie's torture of the masked victim in *Mordum*, in which she moves the mouth-piece of the expressionless mask to further the victims anonymity by literally speaking for her ("I feel violated. I feel like my womanhood has been stolen away"), we see from Fred's perspective as

he manipulates the mouth of his catatonic victim. Yet in this case, the words Fred puts into his victim's mouth are clearly a projection of Fred's own self-dissatisfaction; "I don't like myself, I don't feel good." Moreover, he follows this by hollering "look at the mess you made… blood everywhere." In this sense, the victims are becoming externalisations or are indicative of the killers' own inner malcontent. Instead of addressing the camera as he did in the first film, declaring the torture to be "beautiful," here Fred uses the victim as a mouthpiece to camera to give voice to his own insecurities and fears.

Cristie's self-hate is manifested in her assignation with a stranger at a concert, coming on to him and instructing him to "fuck [her] ass," but crying and retching as he does so. Later, Fred tries to rape Cristie as she sobs "I want to die," illustrating the breakdown between the line of victim and killer whereby they begin victimising each other. Their use of an abducted female as conduit of their hate for each other (which is ironically caused *by* their murderous lifestyle) is also significant. Fred sexually abuses the victim to make Cristie jealous, and Cristie murders the bound female declaring "I hate you," but ultimately seeking to usurp Fred's dominant position while he is asleep. Moreover, after choking the anonymous victim, Cristie hyperventilates and strangles herself, reversing the process into a suicide attempt, however childish or naïve. Her confusion over the victim/killer line here is coupled with an inability to function. Just as she cannot facilitate her own death, she is unable to escape the living situation of her own creation: her murderous lifestyle with Fred.

Previously the meanderings of the killers' social lives were juxtaposed with murder to mark the homicides as everyday, routine, or as a moment of excitement to break-up the boredom (and thus all the more sinister). In *Penance*, the killings reveal much more about how mundane and empty life has become for them: even violence offers no thrill. Their misanthropy cannot be projected anymore, and so homicide becomes laborious, and the film spends more time with Fred disposing of the bodies rather than filming the torture of the victims. Again the film is more invested in documenting "effects," emphasising the removal of evidence over the murders themselves. Thus Cristie is more anxious about "taking care of" a dead male body than enjoying the slitting of a throat, detracting from Fred's delight that it "feels like pussy." Elsewhere, Cristie's childlike "playing" becomes an increasingly frequent motif in signalling her mental decline, and is interrupted by Fred's request for "cloth" to clean up with. This is the symbolic sign of the responsibility negated elsewhere in the series. The larger picture suggests that there will be consequences for their actions: not necessarily being "caught," but their own self-victimisation, and, given the title, of retribution on a larger scale (even in the religious sense, since catholic rites are referenced elsewhere in the series).

Fred uses the refrain "what you gonna do?" both to a dog and a homeless man to project his own frustration onto them as "lesser" or Other. The refrain embodies an inability to act that reflects Fred and Cristie's own imprisonment and impotence. This is also sexual in Fred's case, as he complains he cannot "get hard" during attempted rape sequences. Furthermore, the filmmakers use footage of a pet alligator in a tank eating a live rat to allegorise the ensnared routine rage of Fred and Cristie, tying it specifically into a formal desire for "authenticity" via the employment of genuine animal cruelty. This is repeated on a larger scale later in the film as the couple feed part of a dead animal to a lion. The increase in magnitude between these animal feeding scenes demonstrates the escalation of their decline, but because it is enacted in a zoo (in a legitimated context) it also signifies the sterility and routine nature of their murder-spree, as well as evoking an imminent threat of incarceration. While the objective is to show murder in the first films, the final part of the trilogy combines its realistic mode with more sequences of metaphoric significance.

It is in this sense that the trilogy appears to be quite aware of the theoretical discourses that surround Snuff-fiction. Vogel develops on the established tropes of Snuff fiction by including more taboo acts than preceding faux-Snuff films, and employing an aesthetic that strives for authenticity. He also uses the shifts in narrative across the series to place stress on the consequences of violence. In my reading of the films, and given the uses of camera throughout to highlight the complications of position and witnessing violence, the films seem to address apprehensions raised in media-effects discourses regarding the presumed consequences of fictional violent depictions.

"Maybe too convincing?": Faux-Snuff, reality and fantasy

The increased emphasis on narrative structure across the series might make the final film in the trilogy more palatable than the first, being less about displaying motiveless violence than it is situating the characters' responses to violence. Again the comparison with pornography is salient in revealing the rhetorical problem at hand. Pornography is particularly perturbing for media-effects scholars because as a genre it tends to combine limited plotting with a call to reality. The narrative structures of porn are required only to facilitate sexual encounters, which are emphasised. The aim is to evince that the sex act "really happened" by supplying "visible proof," as famously articulated by Linda Williams (1989: 230). In actuality, "Pornography is exciting only because it *isn't* anything like real life," as Joel Black observes, before adding his own proviso that the "orgasm […] must be elaborately staged to provide maximum visibility [...] despite its documentary pretence and its supposedly graphic realism." Clearly, "perceptual realism is altogether different from making

[events] explicit" (Black, 2002: 29 and 8), though this distinction is conspicuously absent from much media-effects scholarship.

The same dynamic Black identifies cannot be applied to faux-Snuff so easily. The desire is to show, but its mode must be convincing. It is entirely plausible to fake reality on film, emulating "un-staged non-fiction conditions" to give an illusion of reality, even if the images do not conform to "the way in which the human eye would perceive such situations" (Grodal, 2002: 77). Yet *August Underground* uses first-person perspective not to emulate the eye, but to situate the camera as part of the scene instead of seeking to make its presence "invisible." It is the crew's attention to detail that makes the series a success for many reviewers. For example, Lawrence Raffel declares that "[o]ne of the strongest selling points of *Mordum* is the fact that it seems VERY real" (Raffel, 2002), while Jon Condit avers that "it all seems so possible, so real [...] you can't help but feel like you're watching the real deal" (Condit, 2007). Most telling is the response from fatally-yours.com that adds an important caveat to its statement of belief: "If you found *August Underground* lying somewhere as an unmarked movie and put it in and watched it, you'd swear it was a real snuff film." In that sense, they state that it is "one of the most realistic exhibits of murder/torture ever filmed" (Fiend of Grue, n.d.), but the reviewer is careful to maintain that there is a distinct difference between believing the film to be real, and appreciating that it is fiction pertaining to reality.

Beyond the narrative content and formal aesthetic, it is necessary to also account for the way in which these films are contextualised at point of consumption. The digitalisation of these images has meant that this footage has become widely accessible via the internet, being illegally disseminated in a manner that was previously unavailable. Vogel anticipates that the viewer of *August Underground* will have previously encountered the film via a "crappy bootleg [...] from the Internet" prior to purchasing the DVD.[4] Such modes of distribution have, for instance, overcome some of the pitfalls of exchange that hindered the collector's video-rings of the 1980s (see Kerekes and Slater, 2001: 287-313) by making it difficult for authorities to track online video trade.

Given that few of these "extreme" films feature the word Snuff in their titles, it is likely that potential viewers will be familiar with the contents and their fictional status before they begin viewing. Indeed, as the *August Underground* films are not available for purchase in the UK, and have not received certification from the BBFC or MPAA, they have to be sought. The audience for these films is therefore likely to understand what they are going to witness. Moreover, following Robert Morgenthau tracing the alleged victim of *Snuff* for police interview (Petley, 2000: 206), *Photo* accusing Deodato of filming real murder for *Cannibal Holocaust* (Petley, 2005: 174), and the FBI investigating Charlie Sheen's claim that *Flowers*

of Flesh and Blood (1986) was genuine (Balun, 2002, and Kerekes and Slater, 1995: 173), the makers of faux-Snuff films commonly supply the viewer with "making of" featurettes, explaining how the effects were achieved and thereby quelling possible legal repercussions. Thus, the makers of the *Guinea Pig* series released such a documentary as a separate film in 1986, while the advent of DVD made this possibility somewhat routine for the makers of *August Underground*: Toetag Pictures has released multiple disc versions of all of the *August Underground* films. DVD extras have thus become a means of supplying the viewer with "added value" content, while also providing an anticipatory and necessary legal caveat.

Yet extra features would seem to contradict the authenticity quest of the film itself by revealing its production processes. Their presence may seem to "ruin" the narrative by making it clear that the film which tries so hard to look real, is not to be mistaken as such. Where DVD extras typically aim to involve the viewer on this technical level, enhancing enjoyment by heightening one's interaction with the processes and understanding of the text (Bennett and Brown, 2008: 138; Jess-Cooke, 2009: 1), this would seem to be directly at odds with the vérité form that attempts to pass itself off as legitimate. Such revelation of its production process should shatter this illusion.

Again, the connection to pornography is pertinent. A similar problem is posed by porn blooper reels and behind the scenes footage. The DVD *Café Flesh 3* (2003), for example, contains behind the scenes footage that reveals one of the come shots to be inauthentic; Tony Sexton fails to feign a "fake internal pop-shot," and is then unable to obtain an erection (much to Serena South's boredom). Eventually, fake semen is used, undermining the fantasy. However, we may read the inclusion of such extras as a means of making porn performers seem real or knowable rather than appearing untouchable objects of fantasy. While contradicting the fantasy on offer in the standard text, behind-the-scenes featurettes may heighten it in another sense.

Suspension of disbelief is an integral part of emotionally connecting with fiction, and despite the contentions of the media-effects model "most viewers […] doubtless realise they are watching a movie and understand that there are boundaries between movie experience and real-life experience" (Prince, 2000, 18). Clearly fantasies of horror do not directly threaten the safety of the audience, even if they cause an emotional response, such as fear, disgust, pleasure, and so forth (for a detailed discussion of the complications of these overlapping responses, see Hills, 2005). As Schelling observes, "in horror movies the sensation of risk is controlled; self-deception is partial" (Schelling, 1986: 179). Even if not accompanied by a requisite documentary or a disclaimer, direct acknowledgement of the fictionality and performance involved in pseudo-

Snuff may bolster rather than disparage the fantasy. As Hill concludes, "it is precisely because violent movies are fictional that viewers can feel safe to experience a range of complex and sophisticated responses to violence" (Hill, 1997: 106-7). In the case of faux-Snuff the implications are clear: if the depictions were real, portraying genuine homicide, such films would cross a moral line. While I cannot speak for all individuals who watch such films, I am confident that the majority would feel sickened by the prospect of authentic Snuff. Yet the fictionality of pseudo-Snuff provides a space in which such points of morality can be debated and explored.

The problem is that the first-person, vérité aesthetic lends itself to being read as real. Reviews of the *August Underground* trilogy testify to this deception. Some of these comments are based on the premise of the films as trying to look like Snuff: "if you didn't know any better you'd think you were watching a snuff film. The violence and effects are very convincing, maybe too convincing?" (Raffel, 2002). Raffel clearly establishes the problem that despite 'knowing better', there is some doubt over the fictionality of the portrayal, manifested in his closing question. Other reviewers express the same concerns over the use of special effects; "that was the worst feeling of all; not knowing if what you're seeing is real or an effect" (Butane, 2005). In this case, the reviewer is concerned over the extent to which injuries are real or faked, where other reviewers are again disturbed by the belief process; "That the 'shit' is actually 'brownie batter' (as Vogel assures us in his commentary) is of little consolation. The point is that the 'shit' certainly *looks* real enough ... so much so that one almost gags at the sight of it" (Hill, n.d. [a]). For this reviewer, then, the idea is paramount even when the 'reality' is made explicit. Similar issues are raised regarding the actors: "It didn't matter how much I knew it wasn't real the movies [sic] actors and passion that went into the acting kept me thinking, am I sure this ain't really [sic] and I was tempted to be [sic] calling the police" (Terrorwatch, n.d.). Again the reviewer expresses clearly that knowledge of the fictional construction "didn't matter" in comparison with the emotional effects and the apparent reality of the action. Another reviewer articulates the same concern over onscreen and off-screen personae: "most of the performances are absolutely seamless, so much so that one starts to question whether or not they are actually like that in real life." They go on to relate this specifically to the reality aesthetic:

> I'm sure that Fred Vogel is a nice enough fellow, and my logical mind tells me that he is simply a filmmaker, but [...] I mean, who knows, right? Is this guy gonna pull out a hammer and start pounding my head in with it, or what? [...] [T]he point is that Vogel and his cast and crew manage to build an atmosphere of bloody, filthy realism that is truly palpable; so much so that the line

between what is real and what isn't becomes irreparably blurred. (Hill, n.d. [a])

In order that the pseudo-Snuff film can have any impact, it must conform enough to a realistic depiction that there can be a possibility that it could be real. When one fails to be engaged by the fantasy possibility of fiction, they are unlikely to connect with the content. This seems to have been the case for a number of reviewers who received *August Underground* negatively, being either distracted by the absence of plot, the formal effect, or the morally questionable content; for instance, Derek Carlson accuses the films of being so "calculated and outlandishly offensive that the only feeling the viewer will get is 'who thinks of this stuff?', ruining any chance of this being taken seriously" (Carlson, n.d.).

The balance between belief in fiction, a viewer's playful willingness to "believe" whilst being mindful of the fictionality of a film, and a film's performance of realism is a complex dynamic. As Michele Aaron contends, "we 'forget' we are watching a contrived fabrication, a film, provided that we are encouraged to do so…it requires an artful forgetting on both sides of the screen, for the spectator, but also for the spectacle itself." Aaron argues that this "process fortifies the spectator's sense of self" through the viewer's "complicity" in disavowing the spectacle's substitution of reality (Aaron, 2005: 213-4). Similarly, Eskjaer avers, "the difference between the screen and what is on the screen" is used as by the viewer as "a process of self-observation. This new distinction also creates a blind spot, that is, the point from which we distinguish between observer and observed" (Eskjaer, 2002: 119).

This combination of a complex relationship between screen and viewer (rather than a one-way hypodermic model) and a scrutinising of the authenticity premise is inherent to Snuff fiction because it is contingent on realistic portrayal, and an individual response to the content (belief or disavowal). Yet, both Aaron and Eskjaer discuss the viewer's relation to the image in a way that neglects the possibility of scepticism. According to Sontag, "[c]itizens of modernity, consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk, are schooled to be cynical about the possibility of sincerity" (Sontag, 2003: 99), and she asserts too that "all widely distributed images of suffering now stand under that suspicion – and [are] less likely to arouse facile compassion or identification" (Sontag, 2003: 24). If viewers are, as Sontag suggests, prone to scepticism – at least partially brought about by the prevalence of reality culture – a common response to extreme material that seems authentic would be to probe the image for signs of fakery. This may be especially true if the viewer is seeking assurance that what they are watching is a fabrication rather than 'real' Snuff.

In comparison to Carlson's dismissal of *August Underground*, Mayo manifests the scepticism Sontag refers to in a manner conducive to the fantasy of pseudo-Snuff:

> This couldn't be real could it? After all, with 'Property of Absu Films' appearing onscreen, this must mean it isn't real, but rather, a very well orchestrated pseudo-Snuff film. But if this is the case, then who in their right mind would willingly showcase himself on video enacting such debauchery? On the other hand though, if this were genuine snuff, wouldn't it be smart to make it seem 'staged' by placing a production companies name strategically throughout the film? All these thoughts crossed my mind, while the experience truly frightened, disturbed and sickened me like no other 'film' before. (Mayo, 2008)

In this case, doubt is present, but is intertwined with a kind of paranoia that facilitates the horror. This is the central premise on which pseudo-Snuff 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. Mayo's doubt implies that fake Snuff seems so realistic that it may be possible to disseminate a real Snuff film, and it be treated as a simulation. It is this fear that *S&Man* riffs upon. The film is part documentary (interviewing the likes of filmmaker Bill Zebub alongside scholars such as Susan Kaplan), and part mockumentary Snuff-fiction in which a director known as "Eric" appears to be making genuine Snuff films under the title "S&Man" (which we are shown as part of the *S&Man* uber-text), but refers to them as pseudo-Snuff. As Carol Clover puts it in interview during *S&Man*, the film's conceit asks "in a world where we assume images have been manipulated…have we been desensitised to the point that when it really is real we can't see it anymore?" *S&Man* cleverly juxtaposes these interviews with the onscreen director's increasing suspicion that Eric is "for real." Offering the viewer no clear answer to that query, the film plays upon exactly the scepticism to which Clover refers.

In conclusion then, as mentioned in the introduction, one of the central problems is that "real" Snuff is an unknown quantity. Even if "real" Snuff is an urban myth, it has already been subjected to deconstruction through the fiction that perpetuates the myth. That is to say that films about the production of Snuff (such as *Hardcore, 8mm* and *Snuff Killer* [2003]) shape responses to the idea of Snuff, while films pertaining to be approximations of Snuff constitute what Snuff "is," because as far as it is possible to ascertain, no real cases of murder purely for filmic pleasure and profit have ever been discovered (Petley, 2005: 173).

Yet, the myth lives on through fictional representations – at the time of writing, imdb.com lists over sixty individual films that fall into the Snuff-

fiction category, and this number is ever-increasing. One reason the myth continues to be popular may be precisely its plausibility, and this is augmented by the presence of the fiction. The danger (however remote) is that while there is a market for such representations, and while the myth maintains its grip on the cultural consciousness, there is a potential for murder to be filmed and distributed as a viable commercial venture. The difference between the markets should be noted, however; I would argue that pseudo-Snuff audiences are not necessarily the same audiences that would enjoy watching depictions of real murder, a view shared by Clover in *S&Man*. Yet, the possibility that "someone else" might enjoy making or watching Snuff might add to the appeal of pseudo-Snuff fantasy.

None of this suggests that the conjectures of the media-effects model are correct, or that it will be a crazed fan of Snuff-fiction that will make a Snuff film, simply that the pervasiveness of the idea – alongside the proliferation of real death footage on the Internet, or the dissemination of "Happy Slapping" films via internet video-streaming sites – either manifests that some members of the populace wish to witness such depictions, or reveals something about the sadistic nature of viewing more generally. As mobile-video technology and the difficulties of policing cyberspace make it potentially easier to create and disseminate unclassified material (Thornton, 2002: 187), there is a distinct possibility that real filmed murder for profit could become commercially available under the guise of Snuff-Fiction. The question is whether the fiction will eventually become a reality by proxy of the developments of Snuff-fiction towards reality, and towards a cultural setting that commonly employs mediated reality as a form of entertainment.

Notes

[1] For examples of the media rhetoric surrounding the phenomena, see "Curse of the Happy Slappers," *Mail on Sunday* 24 April 2005; "Yobs' Sick Net Flicks," *Daily Star* 2 November 2004; and "Happy Slappers Rape Girl of 11," *Daily Mail* 18 June 2005. See also Kehily (2007: 275-8) for a discussion of the media's role in inciting moral panic around the topic. Happy Slapping is one of the social activities undertaken by the protagonists of *August Underground*, testifying to the prevalence of the idea in the cultural consciousness.

[2] For anyone casually interested in individual responses to these films specifically, since there is not a great deal of public debate available (these are not widely disseminated feature films), I have posed questions to imdb.com forum users regarding the connections between sex and violence. The responses reveal a great deal about how viewers anticipate or respond to the connections between image and reaction, sex and violence that I do not have space to detail here. They also reveal a

significant resistance to the idea that a juxtaposition of sex and violence can incite sexual enjoyment of violence off-screen, and that the negotiations are clearly more complex than that (few of the users could articulate or explain their interest in the combination). See imdb.com threads entitled "views on violence" posted under my username "Sarahfirman" 24/05/07:
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0412467/board/nest/75116776,
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0161634/board/thread/75117595,
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0811073/board/thread/75117996,
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0161635/board/thread/75117702,
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0141459/board/thread/75117308.

[3] This is particularly emphasised in the Michael Schneider edit of the film, dubbed as the "Maggot Cut" on the special "Snuff" edition DVD of *Mordum*.

[4] Here I refer to Fred Vogel's "Director's Commentary" on the 2006 Toetag Pictures DVD release of *August Underground.*

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