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A View to a Kill: Perspectives on Faux-Snuff and Self

Steve Jones

To date, scholarly debate about the content of snuff-themed fiction has predominantly focused on two co-joining issues: realism and affect.¹ That emphasis is unsurprising given snuff's ontological foundations. Unlike other horror subgenres – such as the werewolf film, the zombie movie, the slasher flick, and torture porn – simulated snuff is not principally defined by its content, but rather by its realist form.² Although pertinent then, the attention devoted to realism in scholarly writing about snuff has resulted in under-theorization of feigned snuff narratives' symbolic meanings.

This chapter seeks to offer one alternative interpretation of snuff-fiction's narrative content, examining what the simulated snuff form reveals about self. Although largely disparaged as cultural trash, fabricated snuff films give voice to complex social ideas. Numerous deep-seated fears that underpin both interpersonal interactions and self-conception are routinely reified as horror in these films. Moreover, snuff-fiction's particular articulation of self encapsulates concerns about selfhood that are similar to those expressed in concurrent philosophy. That is not to suggest that the horror filmmakers in question have been directly influenced by recent movements in self-philosophy, but rather that the films and philosophy in question are products of the same climate of ideas. Fake snuff movies and philosophy occupy different cultural spheres and certainly utilize very different languages, yet their contiguity becomes apparent via their correlating visions of self.

Here, I will address a particular form of snuff-fiction that has grown in popularity since the fin-de-siècle: faux-snuff. Rather than embedding snuff sequences in a broader narrative framework – a technique employed in *Hardcore* (1979, USA, dir. Paul Schrader), *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980, Italy, dir. Ruggero Deodato), and *8mm* (1999, USA, dir. Joel Schumacher) for example – faux-snuff films such as *Tumbling Doll of Flesh* (aka *Niku Daruma*, 1998, Japan, dir. Tamakichi Anaru) and *August Underground* (2001, USA, dir. Fred Vogel) are fictional simulations: attempts to mimic what real snuff might look like.³ Faux-snuff is not only the antecedent of snuff-themed “classics” such as *Cannibal Holocaust*, but also of the “found footage” boom that followed in the wake of *The Blair Witch Project*'s box-office success. The latter has been notably succeeded by numerous fantastical, camcorder-shot pseudo-reality horror films such as *Paranormal Activity* (2007, USA, dir. Oren Peli) and *Grave Encounters* (2011, Canada, dirs. The Vicious Brothers). However, many indie horror filmmakers have equally latched onto the same techniques to create realistic visions of filmed murder, resulting in faux-snuff films such as *The Great American Snuff Film* (2003, USA, dir. Sean Tretta) and *Thumb'N'It* (2012, UK, dir. Paul T. T. Easter), for example.

One particular case study will provide a focal point for this chapter: Shane Ryan's *Amateur Porn Star Killer* series (2007-2009, USA). Ryan's trilogy concerns a homicidal male – known as “Brandon” – who records, charms, has sex with, and then murders young women. The

three films repeat the same cycle of events. The series epitomizes the faux-snuff methodology, being mainly constituted by real-time, camcorder-shot footage, while encapsulating characteristic shifts in recent self-philosophy, which will be delineated in the next section. The paradigm drawn upon below is aligned with Farmer and Tsakiris's proposal that self is comprised of three elements: "Bodily Social Self," "Narrative Self," and "Phenomenological Self."⁴ Their unified, tripartite model summates numerous key trends within contemporary self-philosophy. Once established, I will delineate how this paradigm manifests in *Amateur Porn Star Killer*, exploring some of the complications that arise from balancing these three elements of selfhood. Finally, faux-snuff's contribution to debates about selfhood will be expounded, paying particular attention to the collapse of various ostensibly dichotomous relationships.

Theory/Self

Traditionally, approaches to selfhood have been divisive. Arguably the most notable divergence has been between philosophical-theoretical approaches to self on one hand, and scientific/empirical approaches on the other. The "explanatory gap" debate is indicative of that opposition, being founded on the premise that "third-person scientific theories" fail to capture the "qualitative first-person experience of mental states."⁵ Although some thinkers, such as Martin, remain skeptical about the possibility that "the self" can become a "unitary explanatory postulate" while disciplines lack a shared theoretical framework,⁶ there have been significant advances towards developing such unification in recent years. Butler is among the theorists who have sought to broach the gap by championing the legitimacy of "first-person descriptions of experience" alongside "third-person scientific descriptions."⁷ Dullstein (presents theory of mind itself as "an interdisciplinary debate," involving "not only philosophers of different backgrounds, but also psychologists and neuroscientists."⁸ Moreover, Thomson's belief in a future of "promiscuous miscegenation" between all "philosophical traditions and styles" is founded on perceiving the self as a bridging-point between various schools of thought.⁹

Key to such bridging has been an emphasis on the body. Corporeality unifies various branches of neuroscience, social/cognitive/developmental psychology, phenomenology and philosophy of mind, bringing empirical study and theoretical discussion of self into a continuum.¹⁰ More specifically, the body has become a conduit for discussing the self as belonging in the world, divesting self of its Modernist, solipsistic connotations. In contemporary debate then, a Merleau-Pontian emphasis on embodiment such as Zahavi's¹¹ is typically favored over Cartesian-influenced accounts of independently existent minds. *Pace* Descartes, in contemporary debate it is frequently taken for granted that embodiment is a prerequisite for selfhood, and that selves are intersubjective.¹² Farmer and Tsakiris's term "Bodily Social Self" neatly encapsulates that belief. The body situates the self in the world, and enables interaction with other embodied beings. Furthermore, socio-embodiment shapes self-conception: "Bodily Social Self is based on the recognition that one's own body can be the object of other's perceptions and thus that the bodies of others are like one's own."¹³

Movement away from a Cartesian position in twentieth-century philosophy has facilitated a rendition of consciousness studies that evades the pitfalls of egoism.¹⁴ As Berendzen posits,¹⁵ the emphasis on embodiment has divested the conventional mind-body hierarchy of legitimacy. One result is clearer integration between materialist science and phenomenology. Thus Farmer and Tsakiris refer to a second strand – the Phenomenological Self – as operating alongside the Bodily Social Self.¹⁶ Indeed, recent discussions regarding internal mental states are informed by the dual roles embodiment and phenomenology play in understanding others,¹⁷ demonstrating that the Bodily Social Self cannot be reduced to behaviorism. Again, such discussion elucidates connections between analytical and empirical study of the self.¹⁸

The third stand Farmer and Tsakiris identify is Narrative Self. Following the propositions of thinkers such as Ricoeur, MacIntyre, and Dennett, the Narrative Self is the element that allows one to apprehend their continued existence over time. Phenomenological experiences, memories and aspirations for the future are gathered together to provide the self with temporal and ontological stability. Again, this facet of self has been utilized across various disciplines. For example, Gallagher has made a case for Narrative Self's relevance to a variety of empirical disciplines including neuroscience and psychiatry.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, Narrative Self has also been adopted within much developmental psychology, where language acquisition is a key issue in theorization about self-formation.²⁰

Alone, the Narrative Self is clearly flawed. One's self-narrative begins before language acquisition occurs. Moreover, since the "author" is not present in the instance of their own demise, the narrative can never be complete.²¹ As such, the Narrative Self cannot offer a comprehensive account of personal identity. A more satisfying paradigm is offered by joining Narrative Self with Bodily Social Self and Phenomenological Self. Indeed, Narrative Self enables the subject to order and reflect upon their phenomenological experiences. Strawson's complaint that the "stream of consciousness" metaphor does not match actual experiences of being conscious²² – of interrupted, fragmented, memory-laden thought processes – can be usefully revised once Phenomenological Self and Narrative Self are combined. Narrative Self brings the experiences of the Phenomenological Self into temporal continuity.²³ As Farmer and Tsakiris have it, the Narrative Self is "constituted through the stories that we and others tell about ourselves."²⁴ *Pace* Zahavi's insistence that "the decisive paradigm shift...from a philosophy of subjectivity to a philosophy of language" has more recently "been replaced by a return to consciousness,"²⁵ it would be more accurate to suggest that narrative theory has been combined with phenomenology to compensate for weaknesses in both.

Narrative Self and Bodily Social Self are also symbiotic. One's self-narrative is shaped by external socio-cultural factors. Although Schechtman rightly observes that autobiographical accounts are biased by one's first-person perspective,²⁶ Narrative Self is intimately intertwined with processes of intersubjective communication.²⁷ Self-narration is a "social process" because we "co-construct" our narratives.²⁸ Narrative Self also compensates for weaknesses in the Bodily Social Self model. Since the body provides continuity for one's sense of self over time, it could be suggested that the self is simply material. Self-narration

bridges between continuity and self-conception without reducing the self to corporeality alone.

Although different terms may be utilized to express their ideas, Farmer and Tsakiris's unified self paradigm is shared by various theorists.²⁹ For some theorists, unified models are either the product of, or are facilitating multidisciplinary engagements with self.³⁰ This disciplinary fusion crucially parallels the tripartite paradigm's main strength: amalgamating separate elements into a more coherent, integrated structure. Just as the "specifically modern conception of the self" as "fragmented" is largely rejected in contemporary debate,³¹ the interdisciplinary field of self-studies is itself becoming less fissured.

Over the last decade, that field – encompassing philosophy, psychology and the sciences – has been gradually finding a shared language. Scholarly discourses are not the only means of articulating these ideas, however. Issues of self are also reified in culture, as the following dissection of *Amateur Porn Star Killer* will demonstrate. One aim of analyzing cultural representations via the language of selfhood scholarship is to bridge another disciplinary gap. By nature of their story-telling devices, fictional narratives are particularly apposite as a route into understanding Narrative Self. Fiction is communicative, and thus social. Film's various elements – scripting, performance, editing, image composition, lighting, sound, and so forth – are forms of communication that operate in a different way to the language-based conventions of academic work. Thus, a second objective of this approach is to evince how cultural representations *contribute* to theoretical discussion of self.

Trilogy/Self

In order to explain how self is rendered in *Amateur Porn Star Killer*, I return to Farmer and Tsakiris's three aspects of self, beginning with Phenomenological Self. Faux-snuff is principally invested in killers' first-person perspectives, and *Amateur Porn Star Killer* epitomizes that trope. The trilogy is constituted by footage captured via Brandon's camcorder (killer-cam). Resultantly, the narrative events are mainly (although not exclusively) shot from Brandon's point-of-view. At this basic level, much of the series' duration is spent replicating a singular perspective on the world. This is a characteristic trope of the faux-snuff film. In this way, faux-snuff evokes the foundational problem that self-philosophy has sought to address since Descartes: that embodiment restricts one's perceptual frame. We each experience the world from a limited, singular position.

Despite the widespread rejection of Descartes' dualistic approach, self-theorists remain fundamentally interested in the kinds of access introspective subjectivity provides to one's self, and the various ways we apprehend others' states. Phenomenology's continued prominence in the field evinces theorists' sustained fascination with inner-perspectives on lived experience. Indeed "first-personal access to one's own experiential life" is presupposed in any claim to selfhood.³² The same lexis ("first-person") is employed in film studies to refer to the hand-held shooting technique employed in faux-snuff. Although complicated by various other factors (as I will demonstrate),³³ this mode of camerawork

provides a natural bridge between film and philosophy that is a useful starting point for comparison.

Some caveats are immediately necessary, however. First, it is inadequate to suggest plainly that first-person camera provides identificatory access to Brandon by placing the audience “in” his position. Like Cartesian dualism, psychoanalytically infused models – such as Braddock’s, which leaps between viewing positions, empathy, and identification³⁴ – tend to be treated skeptically in the current intellectual climate. The identificatory paradigm has long been contested in reference to uses of first-person camerawork in horror film (particularly the slasher film),³⁵ so those ideas will not be dwelt upon here other than to support rejection of the identification premise. Secondly, it is worth noting that *Amateur Porn Star Killer’s* first-person camerawork does not capture Brandon’s full phenomenological experience. Rather, only an audio-visual representation of Brandon’s viewpoint is conveyed. Without access to his other sensations, and associated qualia – his experiences – the film’s rendition of his Phenomenological Self is incomplete. That said, the faux-snuff form offers an additional compensatory gesture. Faux-snuff’s realist mode is partially a tactic to draw the viewer into an affective engagement.³⁶ As with other faux-snuff films such as the *August Underground* series, *Amateur Porn Star Killer* blends graphic sexual depictions with explicit violence. Drawing on the conventions established within body genres, faux-snuff films frequently provoke visceral reactions from viewers, including fear, anger, and disgust. That is, the narrative’s mechanisms do not prompt identification with Brandon or the victims, but instead offers ways into interacting with the text that remain attuned to the viewer’s own embodied perspective. The gambit may not be successful for all individual viewers, but where efficacious, faux-snuff’s realist body-horror expedites sensational experience in compensation for Brandon’s phenomenologically evacuated first-person perspective.

These provisos are necessary insofar as Phenomenological Self alone is inadequate as an explanatory framework. The second strand – Narrative Self – fortifies and enriches the picture of selfhood. Being presented almost entirely from Brandon’s perspective, the *Amateur Porn Star Killer* movies are explicitly coded as Brandon’s story. Brandon provides the trilogy’s continuity, unlike the victims who are present (and are killed) within single films. Additionally, the films stand-in for Brandon’s self-narrative: the footage is explicitly referred to as such within the series. In *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2*, Brandon directly explains that he uses the camcorder to document his life: “[i]n 20 years I’m not going to remember everything, but I’m going to have it on camera...it’s nice to sit back and enjoy [your own life] like a movie.” Accordingly, the footage captured constitutes Brandon’s memories of his experiences.

Narrativization permits the subject to organize their phenomenological experiences into continuity over time. The Narrative Self thereby does more than allowing the subject to access and reflect on sensations relative to previous and consequent happenings. Much like Brandon’s footage, Narrative Self provides temporal coherence, allowing the subject to envisage his or her experiences as unified across time. Just as the three films provide an increasingly detailed picture of Brandon as they develop, the Narrative Self enables the subject to better evaluate the significance of their actions, rather than perceiving every

incident in isolation. The “movie” version³⁷ of *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* is especially pertinent in this regard, since its over-arching narrative is interpolated with Brandon’s (auto)biography: his development as a murderer. Incidents from Brandon’s past are also represented via camcorder footage, and are thus part of his self-narrativization schema. The camcorder offers a frame of significance, both capturing and *preserving* various occurrences. Delineating his homicidal history as part of *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* denotes that Brandon’s Narrative Self is comprised of memories in which he victimizes others.

The Phenomenological Self’s stream of consciousness is not entirely overcome by its Narrative Self organization, however. *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* is still driven by a largely real-time depiction of seduction and murder. Segments of Brandon’s past are distinctly memory-like, interrupting the chronological flow at tangentially relevant moments. For example, after entering Brandon’s apartment, Brandon exhibits his sexual motivation by groping “Victim #12” (as the character is credited). She is unaware of the threat posed, and tells him to “be patient” while she changes outfits in his bathroom. As she dresses, Brandon waits, rubbing his crotch. At this point, one of his memory-footage segments intersects the temporal flow. The footage – labelled “Victim #2” in an onscreen caption – depicts a couple having sex in a car. The film returns to the narrative present when “Victim #12” returns from the bathroom. In this case, the interpolated memory-footage provides access to what appears to be Brandon’s daydreaming as he waits. His arousal in the narrative present manifests as a sexual incident from his kill-catalogue. The method encapsulates the disjointed quality of phenomenological stream of consciousness, while also evoking the Narrative Self’s organizational structure.

Furthermore, since the three films are entirely constituted by Brandon’s recorded footage constructed (edited) together into a time-line, the films replicate the artificial, reflective nature of self-narrativization. The Narrative Self is constituted not by experiences, but by severely biased renditions of self-memory. The camcorder footage’s pastness is apt because narrativized reflection on the self is likewise an *ex post facto* mode of arranging experiences. It is also apposite that the footage is skewed towards Brandon’s first-person perspective, since Narrative Self is biased in orientation: the narrative is shaped around events the subject considers significant in formulating who they are at any given moment.

The films are constituted almost exclusively by footage of sexualized murders. *Amateur Porn Star Killer* is not only about Brandon’s actions however, but also how Brandon himself is composed via his deeds. As a reflection of Brandon’s Narrative Self, the series’ repeated plot indicates that his identity is constituted by those homicides. Indeed, as a caption in *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* reveals, although he is most commonly referred to as Brandon, he also adopts the aliases Christian and John Lee. Thus, the caption identifies Brandon as “The Killer.”³⁸ “Brandon” is a persona that belies the man’s identity as murderer. “The Killer” is only meaningful as a killer. In order to author his own autonomous meaningfulness, he must eradicate others. Consequently, the victims are co-authors in Brandon’s Narrative Self story:³⁹ both parties are necessary to affirm “The Killer” qua killer. Although slaying is contra-social, it is not asocial. Even when they are harmful, sex, homicide and conversation – the three activities Brandon engages in during these films – are interpersonal

engagements. Since those relations define Brandon's identity, *Amateur Porn Star Killer* depicts Brandon as a Bodily (contra)Social Self.

Faux-snuff evokes many of the elements found in contemporary philosophy of self then, yet the tripartite model's unity is complicated by the series' murder-based plots. Homicide is dependent on a relationship between killer and victim, but the victim is eradicated during the engagement. That is, the victims vanish in the moment they constitute "The Killer" qua killer. Brandon's identity is thus jeopardized as much as it is constituted by the engagement. Resultantly, *Amateur Porn Star Killer* centralizes not only sexual slaughter, but also Brandon's compulsive drive to repeat the same murderous actions across the trilogy. In their own brutal fashion, these films convey that the process of self-narrativization is "an on-going process,"⁴⁰ which "continually amends itself,"⁴¹ and so is experienced as "perpetual (re)begin[ning]."⁴²

Self/Perspectives

Envisaged as a process of becoming rather than simply being, selfhood is divested of egoistic connotations. The self is neither fixed nor auto-constituting. *Amateur Porn Star Killer's* prolonged first-person camerawork could be misconstrued as centralizing Brandon, but it more pertinently signals inadequacies with solipsistic conceptions of self. Events are depicted from one position when shot via killer-cam, but that technique also excludes all other possible perspectives. The form reifies Brandon's contra-sociality, which culminates in his willingness to eradicate others. By formally omitting other viewpoints, the killer-cam motif reflects Brandon's failure to acknowledge selfhood's interdependent nature. Every individual's subjectivity is founded on a claim to legitimacy. Brandon's willingness to murder other people unambiguously exhibits his inability to perceive his victims as equal to himself. The emphasis placed on his first-person perspective in these films hypostatizes Brandon's socio-pathology via the biased camerawork, and by associating that viewpoint with destructive, criminal behavior.

The series' first-person self-narration thereby evades lapsing into the kind of autonomy prizing self-realization Gergen warns against.⁴³ As Gergen has it, even the most private memory is "a collectively defined action...fashioned within a complex relational history."⁴⁴ The diegetic videos point towards such interconnectedness. Despite Brandon's discussion of his camcorder footage as a personal *aide memoire*, the cassettes are not private per se. Indeed, *Amateur Porn Star Killer's* closing captions assert that Brandon disseminated his murder videos by substituting them with tapes from more than 80 video-rental stores. As another caption in *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* has it, this means "all of his victims were exposed to the public through [sic] VHS." His videos are expressly communal documents.

The films undercut any sense that Brandon's auto-documentation is simply to be construed as narcissistic self-bolstering by bridging to broader, collective spheres. Brandon's self-narrativization is more akin to the kind of reflexivity that transforms the subject into an object: that which is reflected upon. For Sartre, such deliberation necessitates perceiving

oneself as an other,⁴⁵ and so is imbued with a third-personal, intersubjective sensibility. Since Brandon's videos are public articles – intentionally disseminated to the populace by Brandon himself – a viewer other than Brandon is implied in the very making of the tapes. His pathologised self-filming is an example of “compensatory hyperreflexivity”; voluntary “reflective self-monitoring in an attempt to compensate for...diminished self-presence.”⁴⁶ Brandon's auto-documentation exposes flaws in his self-conception that can only be remedied by accommodating rather than eliminating other perspectives.

Although the films are principally relayed from Brandon's first-person vantage point, it is significant that other perspectives are briefly included. These distinct deviations from the series' normative mode occur at analogous junctures in each movie, taking one of three forms. The first occurs when Brandon hands the camera to his victims. For example, in *Amateur Porn Star Killer 3*, Brandon's victim-to-be (Nikki) takes the camera while Brandon searches for his car keys. Although brief and naturalistic, shifting to the target-subject's perspective draws attention to how oppressively exclusive the series' primary filming position is. Switching to an alternative outlook, however fleetingly, undercuts the legitimacy of sovereign, egoistic selfhood. In the second type of deviation, the camera perspective is similarly disconnected from Brandon's first-person viewpoint during some incidents of violence. Brandon puts the camera down to film himself harming Stacy in *Amateur Porn Star Killer*, for example. Although the footage is still “his,” the vantage point is uncoupled from Brandon's point-of-view. Brandon's first-person perspective is not totalizing, and so his filmed auto-documentation does not equate to unerring, autonomous self-possession.

The third deviation is the most significant. In the final moments of each film, Brandon captures his own face on camera. In *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* and *3*, these sequences last over a minute, representing the trilogy's most sustained engagements with Brandon. In all three films, Brandon is only shown at length after the lead victim has been dispatched. This recurring pattern has a causal flavor, connoting that Brandon's identity is indeed constituted by killing. As a process of self-narrativization, these moments allow Brandon to locate himself relative to the murders he commits. He is only captured as “complete” in the afterglow of homicide. However, it is also only at these junctures that Brandon is in need of completion. Eliminating his victim-to-be – who complements Brandon as a killer-to-be – entails divesting himself of the counterpart who brings meaning to his identity.

One reason that murder cannot provide an adequate foundation for self-construction is because the act is ephemeral. Despite Brandon's attempts to capture homicide on video, the murders remain transitory rather than constitutive. His attempts to preserve himself as killer after-the-fact are equally unsound. Homicide denotes that Brandon apprehends other subjects' claims to self as insignificant compared with his own fulfilment. However, filming himself in this manner underscores just how *equal* Brandon and his victims are. Brandon uses the same apparatus to capture both himself and his victims. Consequently, Brandon is most knowable – to himself and to *Amateur Porn Star Killer's* viewer – when he occupies the same representational field as his victims. Brandon treats his victims as subhuman objects while filming them. When he records his own visage on-camera, it is also as an object rather than as a subject. As an articulation of his socio-pathology, the camcorder footage – a

recording, distanced from immanent events – is apposite, since the mode inherently objectifies more than it subjectifies.

In this light, it is apparent that Brandon's attempts to self-narrate via first-person filming are self-abnegating. Killer-cam may principally exclude other perspectives, but the mode also displaces Brandon. Because he operates the camcorder, Brandon remains off-screen for the majority of the series' duration. Since faux-snuff footage is explicitly located within the crime scene as the act unfolds, the form ostensibly provides more intimate access to filmed murder than other fictional forms do. However, Brandon's semi-presence is a constant reminder of the viewer's profound distance both from the action and from Brandon himself.

Despite being the series' core, Brandon remains tantalizingly out of the viewer's reach. That ungraspable quality is apt, encapsulating why both faux-snuff and self are so fascinating. "Snuff" and "self" seem to indexically refer to objects, but neither snuff nor self can be pinned down as objects. The snuff myth is constituted not by any one single object, but rather a network of representations, allegations and speculations. Faux-snuff is the closest available iteration of that myth, and its constructed falsity attests to the unattainability of real snuff. Faux-snuff cannot replicate authentic snuff because there is no genuine article: faux-snuff hypostatizes the *mythology*. Self is similarly slippery. Much like Brandon, self is an ever-present foundational core that is simultaneously ungraspable. Brandon's first-person perspective limits the viewer's ability to perceive him. The viewing frame is inadequate to capture both Brandon and his perspective in a sustained fashion. This constraint encapsulates the essential problem that self poses for philosophers: our (in)ability to understand the world begins with our limited access to others and to ourselves. Based on such intangibility, some scholars have argued that self is an illusion.⁴⁷ Much like snuff then, self could be read as a constructed mythology.

Yet, such argumentation abandons self too hastily. It is not self, but rather the *language* of self that fails: like Brandon's first-person perspective, the language of self offers a limited frame that is unable to provide a holistic picture. Like snuff, self is not a locatable object *per se*, but is a nexus of ideas, speculations, and discourses. It is only by apprehending the broader interconnections between various articulations of self that selfhood might be understood. This is why recent shifts towards interdisciplinary theorization are vital in moving away from the traditionally limited and limiting frameworks of selfhood studies. Precisely the same is true for our understanding of snuff.

Self/Implications

As the *Amateur Porn Star Killer* series illustrates, faux-snuff reflects various concerns that have been concurrently raised in the field of self-studies. However, this chapter has not sought to impose a paradigm on *Amateur Porn Star Killer*, to reclaim the subgenre from its maligned status, or to uncover some supposed "hidden truth" about faux-snuff narratives. The primary objective has been to demonstrate what can be gained by apprehending the already existent similarities between ideas conveyed via film and those expressed via

scholarship (outside of film studies). As proposed in the early stages of this chapter, the field of contemporary self-studies is notably characterized by its dissolving disciplinary divisions. Thomson's Hegelian vision of a philosophy that "sublat[es] dichotomous oppositions" by synthesizing traditions⁴⁸ succinctly encapsulates the power of combining extant ideas: doing so requires reimagining conventionalized assumptions. One such supposition might be that neuroscience experiments and textual readings of popular culture occupy entirely separate spheres. The ideas offered within recent self-philosophy are applicable to both, and so bridge between those apparently antithetical domains of thought.

The *Amateur Porn Star Killer* films epitomize why faux-snuff is so apt as a contributor to that ethos. The trilogy routinely disturbs seemingly absolute binary oppositions, each of which are fundamental to self-conception. Despite reputedly portraying murder sprees in a manner that solely objectifies the victims and identifies with the killer, *Amateur Porn Star Killer* demonstrates that faux-snuff is principally invested in the tipping points between victim and killer. Homicide is not self-bolstering eradication of the Other in these movies. Although focused on engagements between Brandon and his victims, none of the *Amateur Porn Star Killer* films are mainly spent probing death, the victim qua victim, or the killer qua killer. Rather these films explore the build to homicide. As such, the trilogy is focused not on polarized binaries but on the infra-dichotomous states in-between life and death, victim and killer.

The faux-snuff form provides a natural conduit for this kind of exploration because the form playfully blurs supposed dichotomies between fantasy and reality, fiction and truth. As I have argued elsewhere,⁴⁹ faux-snuff filmmakers do not necessarily seek to trick viewers into believing realistic looking events are genuine. Ryan certainly does not try to obscure or quell skeptical reactions to the verité-style footage contained in his trilogy. Indeed, he openly provokes such incredulity from the series' outset. *Amateur Porn Star Killer* opens with captions that proclaim snuff's inauthenticity. These statements include *Hardcore* director Paul Schrader's comments regarding the public's "willingness to believe" in snuff, and a declaration that snuff remains an "urban legend." All three films contain credit sequences, exposing their artifice. The second film was packaged on DVD in two edits (a "snuff" cut and a "movie" version), and the trilogy was later released in 3D.⁵⁰ These formal interventions underline that the films are contrived, edited, commercial products. Although no genuine snuff has been proven to exist, faux-snuff remains powerful because its mechanisms underscore a truth about self. The idea that individuals might film, sell or consume murder for entertainment, profit or sexual gratification summates the human capacity for contra-sociality. Faux-snuff is horrifying not because the footage looks realistic, but because its apparent authenticity is a reminder of how real human cruelty is. The snuff myth may have been articulated in many different forms, but it retains its impact precisely because contra-sociality is so at odds with the inter-subjectivity on which selfhood is founded.

Moreover, faux-snuff's playful approach to authenticity is potent precisely because "truths" are products of inter-subjectivity. Absolute truths are unattainable because humans have no access to objectivity. Our viewpoints are necessarily limited and subjective because humans are embodied. "Truths" are formed when enough individuals concur on specific points. Consequently, as Gergen observes, "knowledge of the world and self finds its origins in

human relationships,” because beliefs are “brought into being through historically and culturally situated social processes.”⁵¹ Cultural objects are thus part of a truth-making process. In the case of faux-snuff, several “truths” are created. First, as a representation of human interaction, faux-snuff communicates a “truth” about human relationships, probing how complex intersubjectivity is. Second, faux-snuff perpetuates a false truth: that genuine snuff exists. That is, the extant idea that snuff is being manufactured is bolstered by the film, which perpetuates the notion that snuff is plausible. Indeed, “snuff” only exists as a nebulous human discourse: the myth is constituted by inter-subjective truth-making alone. Third, one of the “culturally situated social processes” Gergen refers to is reified by bridging between snuff and self-studies. The two might be thought of as incompatible because the former is typically perceived as culturally inferior to the latter. Historically, scholarly proclamations have been treated as offering “truths” that are more legitimate than those offered by, for example, fiction films. When both are perceived as inter-subjective agreements – communication processes – that hierarchical distinction is exposed as being somewhat arbitrary.

Although filmmakers and philosophers may utilize significantly different languages, to ignore the similarities between the ideas and themes raised in those respective forms of communication is tantamount to wilful negligence. The separation between scholarship about self and representations of selves is comparable to the Cartesian split between mind and body: scholarship and the sciences have been traditionally associated with the mind, while popular culture (and the arts more generally) have been perceived as being of the body and the audio-visual senses. That hierarchical relationship is as flawed as the dualistic premise the difference is founded on.

Faux-snuff offers numerous reasons for spanning established disciplinary and cultural divisions. The “truth” constructed around snuff is that of a base, deviant, unjustifiable mode of filmmaking: a cultural product that represents human interaction at its worst. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, such denigration is myopic. Those who wish to territorialise self-studies might consider it irreverent to bridge between the “lowest of the low” and the heights of current intellectual understanding. However, much stands to be gained from collapsing the conventional dichotomies that separate disciplines and investigating the dialectical spaces in which dialogue can occur.

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¹ See, for example, Joel Black, "Real(ist) Horror: From Execution Videos to Snuff Films," in *Underground USA: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*, edited by Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1997): 64.

² It is noted that snuff-themed films do share broad thematic, situational and character tropes. However, simulated snuff films are foremost recognizable as faux-snuff by their realist aesthetics.

³ It is acknowledged that no genuine snuff movie has ever been found, and thus faux-snuff is a fiction based on a myth; see Julian Petley, "Cannibal Holocaust and the Pornography of Death," in *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond*, edited by Geoff King, (Bristol: Intellect, 2005): 173. For a detailed discussion of the differences between faux-snuff and conventional narrative films that contain snuff sequences, see Steve Jones, "Dying to Be Seen: Snuff-Fiction's Problematic Fantasies of 'Reality'," *Scope* 19 (2011).

⁴ Harry Farmer and Manos Tsakiris, "The Bodily Social Self: A Link between Phenomenal and Narrative Selfhood," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2012): 125-44.

⁵ M. Pauen, "Materialism, Metaphysics, and the Intuition of Distinctness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 18, no. 7-8 (2011): 71; see also Declan Smithies, "The Significance of Cognitive Phenomenology," *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 8 (2013): 734-737.

⁶ Robert Hanna, Gerald Izenberg, Raymond Martin, Norbert Wiley, and Jerrold Seigel, "Me, Myself, and I: The Rise of the Modern Self," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1234, no. 10 (2011): 118.

⁷ Jesse Butler, "Introspective Knowledge of Experience and its Role in Consciousness Studies," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 18, no. 2 (2011): 143.

⁸ Monika Dullstein, "The Second Person in the Theory of Mind Debate," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2012): 233. See also D. I. Dubrovskii, "Subjective Reality and the Brain: An Essay on a Theoretical Solution to the Problem," *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 83, no. 1 (2013): 59-60.

⁹ Iain Thomson, "In the Future Philosophy Will Be Neither Continental nor Analytic but Synthetic: Toward a Promiscuous Miscegenation of (All) Philosophical Traditions and Styles," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 50, no. 2 (2012): 191.

¹⁰ See Adrian Alsmith, John Tetteh, and Frédérique de Vignemont. "Embodying the Mind and Representing the Body," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2012): 2; Beate M. Herbert and Olga Pollatos, "The Body in the Mind: On the Relationship between Interoception and Embodiment," *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4, no. 4 (2012): 693; J. C. Berendzen, "Coping without Foundations: On Dreyfus's Use of Merleau-Ponty," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 18, no. 5 (2010): 637.

¹¹ Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (London: MIT Press, 2005): 159.

¹² See A. A. Johnstone, "The Basic Self and its Doubles," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 18, no. 7-8 (2011): 176-7; V. Gallese and C. Sinigaglia, "How the Body in Action Shapes the Self," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 18, no. 7-8 (2011): 135; Alvin I. Goldman, "A Moderate Approach to Embodied Cognitive Science," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2012): 71.

¹³ Farmer and Tsakiris, "The Bodily Social Self," 128.

¹⁴ See Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 100.

¹⁵ Berendzen, "Coping without Foundations." 629.

¹⁶ Farmer and Tsakiris, "The Bodily Social Self," 126.

¹⁷ See Herbert and Pollatos, "The Body in the Mind," 696; W.E.S. McNeill, "Embodiment and the Perceptual Hypothesis," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 62, no. 248 (2012): 573; Jaime A. Pineda, "Sensorimotor Cortex as a Critical Component of an 'Extended' Mirror Neuron System: Does It Solve the Development, Correspondence, and Control Problems in Mirroring?" *Behavioral and Brain Functions* 4, no. 47 (2008).

¹⁸ See Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 177; Pauen, "Materialism, Metaphysics, and the Intuition of Distinctness," 85.

¹⁹ Shaun Gallagher, "Philosophical Conceptions of the Self: Implications for Cognitive Science," *Trends in Cognitive Science* 4, no. 1 (2000). See also Sally Prebble, Donna Addis, and Lynette Tippett, "Autobiographical Memory and Sense of Self," *Psychological Bulletin* 139, no. 4 (2013); Butler, "Introspective Knowledge of Experience and its Role in Consciousness Studies," 138.

²⁰ See Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Self as Social Construction," *Psychological Studies* 56, no. 1 (2011): 111.

²¹ See David Lumsden, "Whole Life Narratives and the Self," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2013).

²² Galen Strawson, *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 139.

²³ For an interesting variation on this approach see John Devlin Smith, "Self-Concept: Autopoiesis as the Basis for a Conceptual Framework," *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 31, no. 1 (2014).

²⁴ Farmer and Tsakiris, "The Bodily Social Self," 125.

²⁵ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 147-148.

²⁶ Marya Schechtman, "Memory and Identity," *Philosophical Studies* 153, no. 1 (2011): 70.

²⁷ See Marjorie Jolles, "Between Embodied Subjects and Objects: Narrative Somaesthetics," *Hypatia* 27, no. 2 (2012): 309-11; Gallagher, "Philosophical Conceptions of the Self."

²⁸ Dullstein, "The Second Person in the Theory of Mind Debate," 246-7; see also Erife Tekin, "How Does the Self Adjudicate Narratives?" *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2013): 27; Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 108-9.

²⁹ Including Johnstone, "The Basic Self and its Doubles," 182; Butler, "Introspective Knowledge of Experience and its Role in Consciousness Studies," 132; Jennifer H. Pfeifer and Shannon J. Peake, "Self-Development: Integrating Cognitive, Socioemotional, and Neuroimaging Perspectives," *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience* 2, no. 1 (2012): 55.

³⁰ See Hanna et al. "Me, Myself, and I," 119; Thompson in Krista Tippett, Thomas Metzinger, Evan Thompson, and Pim van Lommel, "To Be or Not to Be: The Self as Illusion," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1234, no. 1 (2011): 8.

³¹ Hanna et al. "Me, Myself, and I," 114.

³² Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 12-14; see also Farmer and Tsakiris, "The Bodily Social Self," 129.

³³ There are budgetary advantages to shooting in an "amateur" style and utilizing widely available home-video cameras, especially for independent filmmakers. For example, Shane Ryan claims that the budget for *Amateur Porn Star Killer* was \$45 in total. For a detailed discussion of micro-budget faux-snuff and its "underground", anti-mainstream connotations, see Steve Jones, *Torture Porn: Popular Horror after Saw* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013): 171-8.

³⁴ Louise Braddock, "Psychological Identification, Imagination and Psychoanalysis," *Philosophical Psychology* 24, no. 5 (2011): 3.

³⁵ For example, see Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 174-5; Peter Hutchings, *The Horror Film* (Harlow: Pearson, 2004): 195-6.

³⁶ See Jones, "Dying to Be Seen".

³⁷ *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* was released in two formats: the "snuff" version and the "movie" version. The latter is intersected with captions outlining Brandon's history, and footage of previous kills. The film also contains an extra-diegetic score and post-production effects (such as colored filters) not present in the snuff cut (which instead pertains to faux-snuff realism). As such, the two versions offer a bridge between faux-snuff and conventional narrative films that contain snuff themes (rather than seeking to emulate snuff). All references to *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* in this chapter will refer to the "movie" version.

³⁸ Although it is revealed that the Killer's birth name is Reid at the close of *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2*, the film's final caption subsequently refers to the Killer as Brandon, signaling that Brandon remains the primary name by which the Killer is known in the series.

³⁹ It is also worth noting that the actors playing lead victims in the first two films (Michiko Jiminez and Kai Lanette respectively) are credited as co-writers and co-directors alongside Shane Ryan (who plays Brandon): that is, the victims are co-authors in a meta-sense.

⁴⁰ Metzinger in Tippett et al. "To Be or Not to Be," 6.

⁴¹ Jefferson A. Singer, Pavel Blagov, Meredith Berry, and Kathryn M. Oost, "Self-Defining Memories, Scripts, and the Life Story: Narrative Identity in Personality and Psychotherapy," *Journal of Personality* 81, no. 6 (2013): 570.

⁴² Thomson, "In the Future Philosophy Will Be Neither Continental nor Analytic but Synthetic," 194.

⁴³ Gergen, "The Self as Social Construction," 112.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 114.

⁴⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957): 65.

⁴⁶ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 137.

⁴⁷ See Tippett et al. "To Be or Not to Be."

⁴⁸ Thomson, "In the Future Philosophy Will Be Neither Continental nor Analytic but Synthetic," 191.

⁴⁹ Jones, "Dying to Be Seen."

⁵⁰ Cinema Epoch released the double disc version of *Amateur Porn Star Killer 2* in 2008. Mongolian Barbeque released the 3D trilogy DVD in 2012.

⁵¹ Gergen, "The Self as Social Construction," 109.