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## Chapter 7

### Traces of snuff: black markets, fan subcultures and underground horror in the 90s

#### Johnny Walker

This chapter seeks to explore the centrality, and significance, of underground horror films to fan cultures in the 1990s, demonstrating how a swelling interest in gory paracinema<sup>1</sup> coincided with the emergence of an array of contemporary, direct-to-video “death films” which collated sequences of genuine human tragedy and atrocity for the purposes of entertainment. Drawing specifically on the little acknowledged *Traces of Death* (Various, 1993-2000) series and its producer, Dead Alive Productions, I will show how, at a time when fans went to great lengths to obtain explicit and gory exports of uncensored horror and death films, Dead Alive sought to align itself with a new breed of horror film fan, producing a series of videos that, in various ways, chimed with discourses that surrounded fan subcultures. Additionally, the chapter will briefly reflect on how the series was positioned to appeal beyond the arena of horror film fandom, reaching out to niche music subcultures, before concluding with a discussion of the legacy of the *Traces of Death* series in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The elusive snuff movie had been a sporadic feature of press discourse on both sides of the Atlantic since the mid-1970s,<sup>2</sup> but concern over its actual existence in the UK appeared to reach its apex in the early 1990s. British newspapers reported that genuine snuff films were

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995).

<sup>2</sup> See the introduction to this collection.

being traded at horror video collectors' fairs, circulated in school playgrounds and, worse still, traded in pedophile rings.<sup>3</sup> In the US, fears of snuff were also generating mainstream media coverage. In 1991, actor Charlie Sheen reportedly called the FBI after having watched a film in which a young woman was, Sheen believed, dismembered *for real*.<sup>4</sup>

However, it soon transpired that neither the British press nor Sheen was correct in their assumption. Assessing the British press reaction, Julian Petley demonstrated that the press had rather foolishly mistaken pirated versions of "video nasties"<sup>5</sup> for something far more sinister, resulting in a situation whereby the ongoing institutional reticence towards wholly fictional horror and violent entertainment being consumed in the domestic sphere "[was] being spiced with references to the entirely mythical 'snuff' movie.<sup>6</sup> As for the "snuff movie" Sheen claimed to have seen: it was soon established that this was *Flower of Flesh and*

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<sup>3</sup> Julian Petley, "Snuffed out: nightmares in a trading standards officer's brain," in *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and Its Critics*, edited by Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper (Guildford: FAB Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> David Kerekes and David Slater, *Killing for Culture: An Illustrated History of Death Film from Mondo to Snuff* (London: Creation Books, 1995): 173.

<sup>5</sup> "Video nasties" is a moniker given to 39 videos that were banned in Britain before the passing of the Video Recordings Act 1984: a law which dictated that all videos needed to be certified by the British Board of Film Classification prior to release. On the "video nasties" moral panic, see Julian Petley, "'Are we insane?' The video nasty moral panic", 2013, <http://rsa.revues.org/839>. See also Mark McKenna's contribution to this collection.

<sup>6</sup> Petley, "Snuffed out," 214.

*Blood* (Hideshi Hino, 1985), the second entry in the technically accomplished, but resolutely fictional Japanese video series, *Guinea Pig* (1985-1988).<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, for all these high-profile, frenzied misjudgments, the fact that fictional horror films were being confused with genuine snuff is a significant point. Such confusion would appear to suggest that media coverage had equated the alleged underground practice of snuff production and distribution with both the makers and dedicated fan consumers of trashy, disreputable horror films. The reasons for this are clear, if ultimately ridiculous. The advent of home video in the late 1970s meant that, through to the 1990s, doors were opened for the production and transnational circulation of violent films that were unlikely to get any sort of “formal” release.<sup>8</sup> Horror film fans swiftly began duplicating and swapping cassettes of what, at the time, were often exotic rarities from a whole range of territories. These included older, controversial films that were being sought out because of their banned status, such as the infamous Italian “mondo” films of the 1960s,<sup>9</sup> “shockumentaries” or “death films” such as *Faces of Death* (John Alan Schwartz, 1978), graphically violent, realist horror fictions such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980), and cult gore films of

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<sup>7</sup> Kerekes and Slater, *Killing for Culture*, 173. See also Anon., “Snuff video shook star,” the *Daily Record*, 13 August, 1994, 13.

<sup>8</sup> “Formal” is used to signify mainstream distribution that is legal and above board. “Informal,” by comparison, refers thing like piracy, and other “shadow economies of cinema.” See Ramon Labato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: BFI, 2012). On underground horror, see Steve Jones, *Torture Porn: Popular Horror after Saw* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 171.

<sup>9</sup> For an in-depth history of the original mondo cycle, see Mark Goodall, *Sweet & Savage: The World Through the Shockumentary Film Lens* (Manchester: Headpress, 2006).

directors such as Herschell Gordon Lewis.<sup>10</sup> Also highly desirable were more recent films such as the *Guinea Pig* series and a number of other gruesome films from East Asia (primarily Japan) that had been shot solely for the horror video market. The infamy of this new strain of Eastern extreme cinema derived chiefly from their unflinching and direct corporeality, a feature that was compounded in the eyes of Western audiences because so little was known about their production context.<sup>11</sup> While these films were definitely not “snuff,”<sup>12</sup> they certainly fell within the parameters of “schlock,”<sup>13</sup> and their exotic qualities

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<sup>10</sup> See Randy Palmer, *Herschell Gordon Lewis, The Godfather of Gore: The Films* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Little has been written about this series in scholarship. However, for a lucid overview of the *Guinea Pig* series, and its distributor Japan Shock Video, see Jay Slayer, “Flowers of the Flesh,” *The Dark Side* no. 87, (2000):40-43).

<sup>12</sup> While *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Faces of Death* both used sequences of genuine animal slaughter, “snuff,” in the context of this essay, is employed only in relation to the expiration of human life.

<sup>13</sup> “Schlock” is term often used to invoke gory, and often cheap, horror and exploitation cinema. See, for example, Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the academy,” 6. See also Kay Dickinson, “Troubling Synthesis: The Horrific Sights and Incompatible Sounds of Video Nastes,” in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema and the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, edited by Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press): 167. It should be noted, however, that some films once dismissed on these grounds, have now been reappraised. This is certainly true of *Cannibal Holocaust*. See Simon Hobbs, as well as Xavier Mendik and Nicolo Gallio’s, respective contributions to this volume. See also Simon Hobbs, “*Cannibal Holocaust*: the paratextual (re)construction of history,” in *Popular Media Cultures*, edited by Lincoln Geraghty (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

and gory content, along with their informal international distribution channels, ensured that they remained intriguing to genre connoisseurs who embraced video as a means of acquiring films that were deemed out of step with mainstream (and often heavily censored) horror production. The video black market allowed for the circulation of uncut and unregulated films, with the audience often acquiring unofficial, pirate copies from underground networks of distribution, collectors' fairs similar to those Petley discusses, or from mail-order adverts in the pages of horror-themed magazines. Indeed, it was through the indirect contact with the editor of one such American magazine, *Deep Red*, that Sheen's copy of *Flower of Flesh and Blood* was acquired.<sup>14</sup>

As far as the British press was concerned then, it appeared that the market for horror video collectors was the same as that for genuine snuff. Horror fans, just like the elusive snuff producers, were unknown quantities, and appeared to operate in society's darkest corners. In the US, the production and distribution of the amateur publication, *Deep Red*, was similarly peripheral and little-understood beyond its hardcore readership: a factor which no doubt compounded Sheen's belief that what he was watching was a genuine snuff movie from the lower reaches of a pernicious underground. It was the anonymity of both the films and their audiences that abetted the films' veracious, and thus illicit, potential.

Some of the notable death films to be released on U.S. home video in the late 1980s and early 1990s include *Death Scenes* (Nick Bougas, 1989), *Death Scenes 2* (Nick Bougas 1992) and *Faces of Death IV* (1990), *V* (1995) and *VI* (1996). However, while these examples attempted, with varying degrees of success, to target the niche market for underground horror

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<sup>14</sup> Albeit not by Sheen personally. It was actually given to Chris Gore by *Deep Red*'s editor, Chas. Balun, who then gave it to Sheen. See Kerekes and Slater, *Killing for Culture*, 173.

cinema,<sup>15</sup> it was the *Traces of Death* series that spoke more outwardly to horror film fan communities. Comprising five films produced and released between 1993 and 2000, *Traces of Death* was the flagship production of Dead Alive, a low-end distributor which would go on to be a central force in the low-to-no-budget, direct-to-video (DTV) horror market throughout the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> In showcasing scenes of arbitrarily-linked real live death, body modification and atrocity for shock value (including shots of corpses in a morgue, autopsy footage and untelevised news footage in which people are shot or blown up), the first *Traces of Death* anticipated the imminent boom in internet “shock sites,”<sup>17</sup> and shared the affective aspirations (if not the tone) of contemporaneous reality television shows such as *America’s Funniest Home Videos* (1989-present), due to its “repetition and [...] very limited palette of formal variations.”<sup>18</sup> However, Dead Alive was also riding a much more marginal wave of horror interest: devising *Traces of Death* to tap into a demand for horror film product that was, in one respect, fresh, challenging and beyond the taste dictates of mainstream horror (and thus in keeping with the fearsome reputation of films such as the *Guinea Pig* series) while, in

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<sup>15</sup> Kerekes and Slater, *Killing for Culture*, 152-159.

<sup>16</sup> Dead Alive’s first release was a violent Hong Kong/Chinese film, *Men Behind the Sun* (Tun Fei Mou, 1988), which depicts in graphic detail the Japanese torturing Chinese prisoners during World War II. The company’s second release was an amateur “shot on video” film of German origin: *Violent Shit* (Andreas Schnaas, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> See Julian Petley and Mark Astley’s respective contributions to this volume.

<sup>18</sup> Jason Middleton, *Documentary’s Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 2014): 123. On the confluences between reality television and “death film” see Randy Squalor, “Postcard from Colonel Kurtz: realiTV [sic] and the death film,” in *Flesh and Blood... Compendium!* (Guilford: FAB Press, 2004): 340-347.

another respect, building upon a legacy of films such as *Faces of Death*, using its cult aura to give visibility and credibility to its new, and frankly amateurish, product.

Yet, it was precisely the film's amateur, "do it yourself" qualities and its associations with the obscure interests of horror film fans that were paramount to *Dead Alive*'s efforts in successfully presenting the film as a worthy investment to its prospective audience. The video black market was, by its very nature, an underground affair, driven by and designed to appeal to a cadre of videophiles set on valorizing "all manner of cultural detritus."<sup>19</sup> In the classified ads of mainstream horror magazines such as *Fangoria*, genre enthusiasts passionately marketed such films to like-minded readers, mindful of the fact that they were unlikely to get any coverage in the main body of the magazine. The ways that such products were advertised did much to underscore how unusual and at odds with mainstream culture these films were, reaffirming the subcultural credentials of both the sellers and their consumers. Due to issues of cost, the ads were typically very modest affairs, often made up of merely a few lines of text or, at most, a small image. In an effort to make their product appear distinctive, they utilized short and sharp hyperbole akin to the "noisy, vulgar spiel"<sup>20</sup> of ballyhoo typical of exploitation film distributors of the past. Examples included low-end video bootlegging firms such as Threat Theatre, which sought to entice *Fangoria*'s readership with the question: "DO YOU LIKE SADISTIC SEX, VIOLENCE AND TORTURE?"<sup>21</sup> (Of course, the question would appear to be wholly rhetorical, working under the assumption that the inevitable response of the magazine's readership would be: "Yes, we do!"). Similarly, other advertisements offered "INDEPENDENT VIDEOS" of the "amateur, semi-pro & schlock"

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<sup>19</sup> Sconce, "'Trashing' the academy," 372.

<sup>20</sup> Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 103.

<sup>21</sup> Advertisement for Threat Theatre, "Classified Ad Vault," *Fangoria* no. 121 (1993): 78.



variety,<sup>22</sup> as well as “SHOCKUMENTARIES AND CULT HORROR CLASSIC VIDEOS”, including “FACES OF DEATH – DEATH SCENES – SHOCKING ASIA – MONDO CANE – ASSASSINATIONS OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY AND OTHER CULT HORROR AND SCI-FI,”<sup>23</sup> and “GORY, VIOLENT, UNCUT HORROR, MONDO, SLEAZE AND EXPLOITATION VIDEOS,”<sup>24</sup> as well as “horror obscurities” and “taboo subjects” from “THE MACABRE VIDEO UNDERGROUND”<sup>25</sup> (Figure 7.1). Even companies that were not selling videos, but merchandise such as t-shirts, were capitalizing on the booming interest in extreme horror, selling garments featuring “mass murders [...] all *very graphically depicted*.”<sup>26</sup> The *Traces of Death* films were evidently cultivated to ride this wave of interest in the visceral, the real and the taboo. Through the re-appropriation of real life atrocity footage, the films were responding a niche sector of the horror fan community which, as the aforementioned ads suggest, were less interested in mainstream product than marginal and independent fare beyond Hollywood’s approach to the genre, which would inevitably impinge upon the range of titles available in “your sterile video-chain.”<sup>27</sup>

**FIGURE: 7.1 AROUND HERE**

It would therefore be reasonable to propose that the *Traces of Death* series constituted a hybrid moving-image extension of American horror fanzines that facilitated niche tastes in

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<sup>22</sup> Advertisement, “Classified Ad Vault,” *Fangoria* no. 120 (1993): 64.

<sup>23</sup> Advertisement, “Classified Ad Vault,” *Fangoria* no. 127 (1993): 82.

<sup>24</sup> Advertisement, “Classified Ad Vault,” *Fangoria* no. 133 (1993): 76.

<sup>25</sup> Advertisement, “Classified Ad Vault,” *Fangoria* no. 134 (1993): 88

<sup>26</sup> Advertisement for Underground Screen Prints, “Classified Ad Vault,” *Fangoria* no. 122 (1993): 78. Emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Advertisement for Video Wasteland, “Classified Ads Vault,” *Fangoria* no. 127 (1993): 82.

the 1980s and 1990s, being informed by a similar DIY sensibility. These were typically “independent, non-commercial, amateur publications”<sup>28</sup> that were “different”<sup>29</sup> to—and, more often than not, reacting against<sup>30</sup>—the “commercially-orientated” *Fangoria*, and its tendency to focus on glossy, mainstream films.<sup>31</sup> The *Traces of Death* series, in a way comparable to underground zines such as the aforementioned *Deep Red* and others such as *The Splatter Times*, *Subhuman*, *Gore Gazette* and *Blackest Heart*, boasted an enthusiasm for the marginal and the abject, advocating a zealous resistance to the mainstream that the likes of *Fangoria* were seen to endorse.<sup>32</sup> Dead Alive was, as with the fanzine publishers, very much an amateur upstart company with limited resources and, in the early days at least, relied upon selling copies of its films through mail order catalogues advertised in magazines. In collating “actual scenes of human destruction,”<sup>33</sup> and then releasing them as feature-length videos, the company seemed to embody, as per the zines, a carefree “interest in putatively indefensible outrage for outrage’s sake.”<sup>34</sup> And, similar to game-changing exploitation films of the past that the fanzines celebrated, such as *Blood Feast* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1963), which had

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<sup>28</sup> David Sanjek, “Fans’ notes: the horror film fanzine,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1990): 151.

<sup>29</sup> John Szpunar, *Xerox Ferox: The Wild World of the Horror Film Fanzine* (Manchester: Headpress, 2013): 10.

<sup>30</sup> Sanjek, “Fans’ notes,” 151-2

<sup>31</sup> Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007): 107.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 106-108.

<sup>33</sup> Voice-over, *Traces of Death*.

<sup>34</sup> Sanjek, “Fans’ notes,” 151.

pioneered “special-effects scenes of torture and dismemberment in graphic color,”<sup>35</sup> *Dead Alive* prided itself on providing horror fans with a product that was promoted as being more outrageous than anything extant in contemporary horror cinema. Consequently, conveying a sense of subcultural distinction akin to that possessed by underground horror fans became a key element of the company’s brand image.

The films’ narrator, *Brain Damage* (voiced by Damon Fox for parts *I* and *II*, and then by Darrin Ramage from parts *III* to *V*), was particularly significant to the series’ fan-friendly tenor. Direct, tasteless, and blackly humorous, *Damage*’s irreverent tone mimicked the “fuck you” attitude of revered zine editors such as Shawn Smith of *Blackest Heart*, and was central in reinforcing the film’s DIY aura.<sup>36</sup> As David Sanjek once suggested of such editors, *Damage*’s “juvenile fascination with grue and gore” was a key component of the series, as was his “insist[ence] upon the pleasures to be found in the consumption of [...] raw, undiluted imagery.”<sup>37</sup> And just as “fanzine editors feel obliged to no one, save their subscribers,”<sup>38</sup> *Damage* exudes a similar sense of exclusivity and identifies his audience from the outset: we are his “disciples of death” and are encouraged to “revel [together] in the terrors of the tormented.” This posits that “we,” as assumed fans of niche horror, are part of a community who, through sharing and understanding such bizarre interests, are also in possession of the exclusive credibility *Damage* represents as a gatekeeper of marginal tastes.

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<sup>35</sup> Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 289.

<sup>36</sup> See Szpunar, *Xerox Ferox*, 672-689.

<sup>37</sup> Sanjek, 152.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Key to the tone of many fanzines was the destabilization of notions of good taste and an aspiration to be as objectionable as possible. As such, a number of publications employed a provocative, misanthropic tone that was tempered through a knowing irony and playfulness. For instance, issue number three of *Blackest Heart* carried the tagline “EXTREME HATRED”<sup>39</sup> and, in its promotion, claimed hyperbolically to be the “most dangerous, perverted, degrading, angry, cruel, hateful, sexist, underground-horror-exploitation mag in the whole damn world!”<sup>40</sup> This kind of assaultive hyperbole is evident in the *Traces of Death* films. By offering sardonic and seemingly amoral commentary over filmed instances of human tragedy, *Brain Damage* shares the “nihilistic manner” of the zine editors.<sup>41</sup> His running commentary, for instance, is often accompanied by booming, cruel, laughter, and he speaks of the most gruesome images with the most ardent enthusiasm. Indeed, just as it was typical of fanzine editors—in echo of classic exploitation distributors—to promise an “uncensored” and “powerful” insight into the “THE UNDERGROUND WORLD OF HORROR,”<sup>42</sup> *Damage* fervently offers up “the most graphic and ghastly images ever brought forth on any screen!”<sup>43</sup> In *Traces of Death IV: Resurrected* (Darrin Ramage, 1996) he boasts of how “proud” he is to showcase “the most heinous collection of birth defects,” before cutting to a sequence of grisly illustrations. In *Traces of Death II: It Just Got Deader* (Darrin Ramage, 1994) he, over footage of a tightrope performer struggling to maintain balance on a

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<sup>39</sup> *Blackest Heart* (3) 1994, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Advertisement for *Blackest Heart* issue 3, “Classified Ads Vault,” *Fangoria* no. 131 (1994): 78.

<sup>41</sup> Sanjek, “Fans’ notes,” 151.

<sup>42</sup> Advertisement for *Blackest Heart* issue 1, “Classified Ads Vault,” *Fangoria* no. 121, (1993): 78.

<sup>43</sup> Voice over, *Traces of Death II*.

windy day, proclaims: “the last remnants of brain in his head now will surely be glistening on the pavement soon!” Following the performer’s inevitable fall to death, Damage continues with macabre glee: “His screams must have been devastating; though he had wonderful form!” And, in the series’ third entry, *Dead and Buried* (Darrin Ramage, 1995), Damage boasts: “*Traces of Death III* is proud to bring to you the exclusive footage of the El Salvador Death Squad at their *best*.” The film then proceeds to show amateur video footage of the Salvadorian Civil War, in which a group of armed men set fire to woodland as they pursue a civilian. They then pin him to the ground, castrate him, cut his tongue out, scalp, and then behead, him; all the while laughing and joking to the camera. Damage ignores the tragedy at the core of these sequences, and, perhaps most troublingly, encourages the audience to laugh along. The redeployment of these sequences as entertainment, for shock value, directly mimics the jocular and the distasteful fanzines and their readership which, as titles like *Blackest Heart* would suggest, were knowingly positioned as being at odds with good taste, political correctness, and morality.

In the original mondo films of the 1960s—which, it must be remembered, were originally produced for mainstream audiences—the kinds of sequences that the *Traces of Death* films showcase would typically have been afforded some degree of critical commentary. As Eric Schaefer notes, exploitation films dealing in taboo subjects would typically be preceded by a “square up”, a statement at the beginning of a film which, as a means of justifying the film’s lurid, provocative content, would (insincerely) “apologize for the necessity of bringing an unsavory subject to light” or “claim the producer’s earnest hope that such exposure will put an end to an evil or bring about a greater understanding.”<sup>44</sup> Mondo films also had square-ups of sorts, and, as with the kinds of films Schaefer discusses,

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<sup>44</sup> Schaefer, “*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*” 71.

were mostly framed as educational and informative, rather than as prurient and salacious.<sup>45</sup> The *Traces of Death* films, by way of comparison, are explicitly *unapologetic* and *openly exploitative*, and discard the square-up trope altogether: a choice that bolsters the series' oppositional tone. As the British Board of Film Classification reported in 2005, when the first *Traces of Death* was rejected a certificate, and thus prohibited a video release, the film:

[could not] accurately be described as 'documentary' as [it] failed to present any journalistic, education or other justifying context for the images shown. Rather the [work] presented a barrage of sensationalist clips, the purpose of which appeared to be prurient entertainment. The trivialization of human and animal suffering was exacerbated by the loud music soundtrack and the tasteless inclusion of occasional 'comic' [...] voiceover.<sup>46</sup>

Put differently, the makers seek to reject faux claims to sincerity that would have potentially made their film more palatable for a wider audience. They make it explicit how such films are designed to cater, as Damage asserts in *Traces of Death III*, to a new cult of "gorehounds" and not, as the opening title card for all of the sequels asserts, "CHILDREN or the SQUEAMISH of any kind." Thus, similar to the oppositional "frat-boy sensibility" typical of fanzine editors, the *Traces of Death* films revel in the "evil" that a conventional square-up

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<sup>45</sup> *Faces of Death* also adopted such an approach. Hosted by a (fictional) University Professor, Frances B. Gröss, the film plays out as though it were a documentary of academic intrigue and not as the "freak show exploitation" film it truly is. See Kerekes and Slater, *Killing For Culture*, 136-141.

<sup>46</sup> *British Board of Film Classification Annual Report* (London: BBFC, 2005), 75, accessed 5 April, 2015,

[http://www.bbfc.co.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/BBFC\\_AnnualReport\\_2005.pdf](http://www.bbfc.co.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/BBFC_AnnualReport_2005.pdf)

would try to cloak, infantilise or emasculate those who cannot stomach it, and, in the process, fortify the series' nonconformist credentials.<sup>47</sup>

For all that the *Traces of Death* series was riding a wave of contemporary interest, its effect also partly hinged on an explicit acknowledgement of the past. That is to say, whereas *Dead Alive* was trying to orientate the series as being *different* to most other contemporary horror films (just as the fanzine editors were presenting their publications as different to mainstream horror magazines), the company was also keen to present the series as remaining firmly within the parameters of the horror genre. Indeed, horror fans were the series' target demographic (and remain so to this day).<sup>48</sup> Resultantly, the series tipped its hat to horror films which were either deemed to be indisputable classics, or which had gained recent interest due to the video black market. Horror fanzines, as a means of setting themselves apart from the likes of *Fangoria*, would often set out to celebrate older horror films that were long forgotten by the mainstream media. Kate Egan, writing about the 1990s British horror magazine *The Dark Side*, has shown how the likes of *Fangoria* were often dismissed by *The Dark Side*'s readership for focusing on the "new and vacuous" rather than older material which was imbued with a sense of history and, by extension, subcultural authenticity. *Fangoria*, because of its tendency to review, promote and endorse new, mainstream product, was thus rendered "inauthentic" among hardcore horror fans.<sup>49</sup> This is a binary that Mark

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<sup>47</sup> Sanjek, "Fans' notes," 154.

<sup>48</sup> As Darrin Ramage, former co-founder of *Dead Alive*, recently stated to *Gorezone* magazine: "I call this [the 'shockumentary'] a sub-genre of horror, if you will, because it is horrific." See John Torrani, "Assault yourself: an oral history of death tapes," *Gorezone* no. 33 (2015): 7.

<sup>49</sup> Egan, *Trash or Treasure?*, 106-108.

Jancovich has also explored in relation to what he sees as a distinction drawn by fans between “authentic” and “inauthentic” types of horror. The former, Jancovich argues, is constituted by gory marginal works and the “secret and/or illegal” lengths fans go to acquire them (i.e. the horror video black market supported by underground zines), while the latter is constituted by “mainstream” horror production (i.e. those films given most coverage in issues of *Fangoria*).<sup>50</sup> This is a method of distinction that extends, of course, to the fans themselves. The *Traces of Death* series, as we have seen, expresses an allegiance to the underground, its fans and, by extension, the subcultural authenticity that surrounds them. As such, on several occasions, the films intertextually hark back to “authentic” horrors of years gone by, as a means of acknowledging the subcultural capital its makers share with its desired audience.

The opening shot of *Traces of Death Part IV* shows a graveyard, replete with ornate gothic headstones. The scene is black and white and appears to have been shot on low-end film stock (likely 8mm), and depicts Brain Damage walking slowly among the tombstones, zombie-like. Considered in light of the film’s subtitle, this sequence is most obviously paying homage to the opening scene of genre cornerstone *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), when Barbara (Judith O’Dea) attempts to escape the clutches of the shuffling corpse that just killed her brother. Indeed, the low angle shots, and the shaky camera work succeeds in evoking the low production values of the original film, while also helping to situate *Traces of Death IV* as part of a tradition in credible, DIY, horror cinema. Taken in the context of the late 1980s/early 90s, the scene resonates with horror fan’s continued interest in

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<sup>50</sup> Mark Jancovich, “‘A real shocker’: authenticity, genre and the struggle for distinction,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2000): 25-6. See also Mark Jancovich, “Cult fictions: cult movies, subcultural capital and the struggle for distinction,” *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2000): 306-322.



directors such as George A. Romero, as well as Italian filmmakers such as Lucio Fulci and Umberto Lenzi, whose zombie and cannibal films were frequently discussed in the pages of zines such as *Deep Red*,<sup>51</sup> *The Dark Side* and others.<sup>52</sup> Such references worked to reaffirm the series makers' subcultural capital, displaying an implicit awareness of horror cinema's past, at a time when the genre struggled to remain untarnished by all that contemporary developments had come to signify. Such allusions are apparent throughout the series and, in other instances, are even more overt than in the example just given. In the first film, *Damages* goes so far to directly namecheck controversial Italian horror films of a kind similar to those celebrated by contemporary fans of underground horror:

We are proud to offer you this very rare footage of the actual skin and face collections of Ilse Koch; the *real* Ilse, immortalized in numerous movies...

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<sup>51</sup> This fanzine took its name, incidentally from Dario Argento's classic gialli *Profondo Rosso* (1975). Raiford Guin's explores the significance of this film (and other classic Italian horror films) in relation to US horror video culture in "Blood and black gloves on shiny discs: new media, old tastes, and the remediation of the Italian horror film in the United States," in *Horror International*, edited by Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005): 15-32.

<sup>52</sup> *The Dark Side* sits comfortably in between "fanzine" and "prozine." It is, and has always been, a glossy affair that is circulated throughout the UK and abroad, but has nowhere near as wide a readership as *Fangoria*. Through the 1990s *The Dark Side* would often run features on gory Italian horror films of the 1970s and 1980s, largely because of such films' centrality to the "video nasties" panic in Britain. On the video nasties panic and horror fandom see David Kerekes and David Slater, *See No Evil: Banned Films and Video Controversy* (Manchester, Headpress, 2000), and Egan, *Trash or Treasure?*

The films to which Damage is referring are *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975) and its sequels, films based on the exploits of the wife of a Nazi general who, during the Second World War, reputedly “order[ed] lampshades made from the skin of tattooed prisoners and [had] ditch diggers beaten for looking at her after she paraded above them in a short skirt without underwear.”<sup>53</sup> As Alicia Kozma has it, the first film in the cycle “has become the representative example” of the “Nazisploitation” cycle of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>54</sup> Nazisploitation films—produced in response to the global popularity of “women in prison” and “sexploitation” movies<sup>55</sup>—were, through their unsavory blending of historical trauma, violence and eroticism, just one of the kinds of exotic horror films both reported on and sold in underground fanzines. They were also films that, due to their grounding in historical actuality, resonated with the other kinds of realist-inflected horror product that was so readily sought after by videophiles. Invoking films that distastefully (albeit deliberately) juxtaposed sexually violent titillation with the atrocities of the Holocaust, as well as the cult legacy that surrounds them, *Traces of Death IV* resonated with the outwardly offensive tone integral to the horror fan’s (and, by extension, fanzine’s) maintenance of an outsider status. In the minds of its makers, these invocations work to concretize the *Traces of Death* films as a series that understands, and is itself a part of, the exclusive arena of underground horror.

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel H. Magilow, “Introduction: the Nazi image in low-brow cinema and culture,” in *Nazisploitation!*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Alicia Kozma, “Ilsa and Elsa: nazisploitation, mainstream film and cinematic transference,” in *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, edited by Daniel H. Magilow, Elizabeth Bridges and Kristin T. Vander Lugt (London and New York: Continuum, 2012): 55.

<sup>55</sup> Julian Petley, “Nazi horrors: history, myth, sexploitation,” in *Horror Zone*, edited by Ian Conrich (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009): 213.

We have seen how conveying an awareness of the horror genre's past and present was crucial to the projected subcultural authenticity of the *Traces of Death* films. However, besides the horror film and its dedicated fan community, the series also alludes to a sub-cultural category of music which became a key component in its stylistic strategies. More specifically, from *It Just Got Deader* onwards, the footage of real life horrors is played out against a raucous metal music soundtrack. Steve Jones has acknowledged this musical sub-genre's relationship to several notable underground horror films, particularly in what he calls the "hardcore horror" independent cinema that emerged in the wake of the so-called "torture porn" phenomenon of the 2000s. Jones notes that *August Underground's Mordum* (Jerami Cruise, Killjoy, Michael Todd Schneider, Fred Vogel, Cristie Whiles, 2003) features scenes shot at niche metal gigs and even features a role played by vocalist of the cult group, Necrophagia. Jones contests that these "musical associations" are a means to "evinced the filmmakers' subcultural credibility" because underground metal, in a manner reminiscent of politicized punk and hardcore of the 1980s, exists outside of the cultural mainstream.<sup>56</sup> There were also notable confluences between the underground horror fan community and the underground (or "extreme") metal scene in the 1990s, which are worth unpacking in light of the *Traces of Death* series. These confluences are particularly significant because both extreme metal and the modes of underground horror under discussion here were born of the same historical moment.

Keith Kahn-Harris dates the emergence of extreme metal, along with subgenres such as "death metal" (encompassing bands that write and perform songs addressing themes of violence, sexual depravity and human expiration), to the mid-1980s. Central to his definition are noted differences between extreme metal bands whose reputations have historically relied

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<sup>56</sup> Jones, *Torture Porn*, 172.

on word-of-mouth (such as pivotal late 1980s/early 1990s death metal acts Cannibal Corpse and Obituary) and those more commercially oriented heavy metal bands that have

achieved a broader reach and mainstream success (such as Iron Maiden and Mötley Crüe). Indeed, clear comparisons can be made between Kahn-Harris' definition of this musical movement to the oppositional politics of underground horror film fandom and the *Traces of Death* series:

In contrast to heavy metal's mainstream commercial reach, extreme metal is disseminated through small-scale 'underground' institutions that extend across the globe. The differences between extreme metal and most other forms of popular music are so pronounced that those who are not fans may not see its considerable internal differences. Extreme metal music frequently teeters on the edge of formless noise. Whereas heavy metal was at least intelligible to its detractors as 'music', extreme metal may not appear to be music at all and its attendant practices may appear terrifying and bizarre. On the edge of music, on the edge of the music industry, extreme metal thrives.<sup>57</sup>

*Traces of Death*, as we have seen, stands in opposition to conventional narrative cinema (and, for that matter, documentary cinema) in a way that is not dissimilar to how extreme metal rejects the formal properties of most other popular forms of music. Likewise, the audience that *Traces of Death* was produced for, as with extreme metal fans, relied on small trading "networks," and had, on these grounds, been rendered similarly "terrifying and bizarre" by the mainstream media.

### **[FIGURE 7.2 AROUND HERE]**

However, there is yet another way in which the series aligns itself explicitly with death metal culture. In the introductory framing sequence of *Traces of Death III*, Brain

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<sup>57</sup> Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007):

Damage is presented as a death metal fan, framed in a dark, candlelit room, dressed in heavy metal regalia, including a tee shirt identifying the specialist label, Relapse Records, and a baseball cap which carries the logo of the extreme metal band, Core (Figure 7.2). Dressed in this way, Damage conveys a sense of authenticity, and his apparent knowledge of a band and a label likely unfamiliar to a significant proportion of dedicated music enthusiasts, let alone general audiences, would imply that he is himself a part of the extreme metal scene. Having explained in grisly detail what kinds of visceral imagery awaits the audience, he proceeds to introduce “some of the hottest talent in the metal industry ... Messhugga, Core, Deceased, Hypocrisy, Dead World, Mortician and Gorefest, just to name a few.” His voice is emphatic and gruff, echoing the “growled vocals” of extreme metal bands,<sup>58</sup> while his identification of the likes of Deceased, Dead World and Gorefest, appropriately typifies the content of the film. The same is also true of the songs which feature on the soundtrack by these and other artists: “Traces of Death” by Mortician, “Blood Everywhere” by Dead World, “Slaughtered” by Hypocrisy, “Sadistic Intent” by Sinister, “Violent Generation” by Brutality, “Bodily Dismemberment” by Repulsion and “Into the Bizarre” by Deceased. These kinds of song titles and band names were typical of extreme metal bands of the 1980s and 1990s, resonating with the abject preoccupations of contemporaneous underground horror cinema. As with the *Guinea Pig* series and, indeed, the *Traces of Death* films, the lyrical content of death metal bands would centre on themes of “human weakness, mortality” and, perhaps most crucially “gore.”<sup>59</sup> These were all factors that resulted in some bands having material banned in several

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<sup>58</sup> Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 3

<sup>59</sup> Keith Kahn-Harris, “Death metal and the limits of musical expression,” in *Policing Pop*, edited by Martin Cloonan and Reebee Garofalo (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 84.

countries in the early 1990s.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the pairing of *death* metal music with *death* imagery in the *Traces of Death* films, can be seen as an apposite means of emphasizing Dead Alive's penchant for contravening moral (and, it is implied, legal) codes of conduct. Furthermore, the controversy surrounding niche death metal was almost literally a dissonant musical echo of the concern the UK and US news media's concerns had expressed about snuff and horror film communities and collectors. Ultimately, the practice of conflating horror with extreme metal music distinguished Dead Alive's product from the prevalent mainstream horror films of the period, which often had heavy metal soundtracks produced by the kinds of wide-reaching bands mentioned earlier.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, in light of Matt Hills argument that "fans of trash horror other and devalue" horror orthodoxy on account of their

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<sup>60</sup> As Kahn-Harris explains: "in Germany, government censors banned the first three albums [*Eaten Back to Life* (1990), *Butchered at Birth* (1991), *Tomb of the Mutilated* (1992)] because of their covers and lyrics. There have been similar problems in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Taiwan, and South Korea." See Kahn-Harris, "Death metal and the limits of musical expression," 87.

<sup>61</sup> For example, rock legend Alice Cooper provided the soundtrack to *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part VI: Jason Lives* (Tom McLoughlin, 1986) and the mainstream metal band Dokken provided the title song for *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Chuck Russell, 1987). Similarly, Gene Simmons, the bass player of the iconic "shock rock" band, KISS, along with former Black Sabbath front man, Ozzy Osbourne, appeared in the rock music-themed *Trick Or Treat* (Charles Martin Smith, 1986).

being “overly commercial and non-underground,”<sup>62</sup> Dead Alive, through doing the opposite of its Hollywood contemporaries, heightened *Traces of Death*’s dissentient aura.

The foregoing analysis of fan cultures, horror fanzines and, briefly, niche musical interests, has shown the ways that “real live death” was appropriated by Dead Alive in its *Traces of Death* series, indicating its subcultural authenticity among underground horror fans. Furthermore, it is evident how Dead Alive operated amidst a range of historical circumstances, while responding distinctively to its historical moment, using lo-fi technology to create a series of films that were at odds with mainstream horror culture of the time. From a historical perspective, the influence of the *Traces of Death* series is clear, with internet sites such as Rotten.com and Bestgore.com having provided similarly affective content for the digital age. In accumulating random images of death and atrocity footage, they convey the same kind of formal arbitrariness as *Traces of Death*, while adopting a familiar sardonic tone: Rotten.com’s slogan, for example, is “Pure Evil since 1996.”<sup>63</sup>

In 2006, the creators of Rotten.com would go on to establish Shockumentary.com, a website dedicated exclusively to the sale of death films, from which the *Traces of Death* series (according to the site, “Probably the best shock series available”) is obtainable.<sup>64</sup> The existence of this site demonstrates not only how *Traces of Death* has influenced the form and tone of contemporary shock sites, but also, and perhaps most crucially, the cult status that the

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<sup>62</sup> Matt Hills, “Para-paracinema: the Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> films as other to trash and legitimate film cultures,” in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, edited by Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007): 224.

<sup>63</sup> Rotten.com, accessed 1 May, 2015, <http://rotten.com>

<sup>64</sup> Shockumentary.com, accessed 1 May, 2015, <http://shockumentary.com>

series has amassed since its humble beginnings. Indeed, in way similar to horror fanzines of the 1990s, *Traces of Death* has been sewn into the tapestry of historically authentic horror cinema. By the same token, it is also a series that has come full circle. No longer strictly on the periphery, it is now celebrated in niche circles as being iconic. Brain Damage Films,<sup>65</sup> the company that now boasts ownership, derives its name from the series narrator, his face featuring prominently in the company logo. Once obscure and anonymous, this would suggest Brain Damage is now a recognizable commodity (indeed, he now makes special guest appearances at horror film conventions).<sup>66</sup> Moreover, in 2015, the series was featured alongside both *Faces of Death* and *Death Scenes* in a “death tapes” retrospective in the pages of the prozine, *Gorezone*: an offshoot publication of *Fangoria*, no less.<sup>67</sup>

Emerging from a marginalized and little-known sub-cultural space, *Traces of Death* was once a film that was shockingly transgressive, taking inspiration from an underground shadow economy. However, these factors would suggest that the series has now entered, and has been at least partially validated by, the mainstream voice of the horror genre. The availability of a collector’s edition DVD box set from Amazon.com suggests that the films can no longer be successfully imbued with their original sense of danger or, indeed, the subcultural kudos of the underground from which they stem. Rather, they are now easily

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<sup>65</sup> Brain Damage Films was established when Darrin Ramage, one of the co-founders of Dead Alive, left the company, to establish his own. Alongside the now historically authentic *Traces of Death* films (“the oldest and best!”), he sells a host of other death films, including the *Shock-X-Treme* (Various, 1997-2006) and *Facez [sic.] of Death 2000* (Various, 2000-unknown) series’ and *Executions II* (Unknown, 1995).

<sup>66</sup> Darrin Ramage, email interview with author, 13 May, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Torrani, “Assault yourself,” 7.



contained and, by proxy, understood. *Traces of Death*, having achieved canonical status, is now at odds with both its amateur origins and the underground aura its producers originally strived to achieve and maintain.

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