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The Disturbing Art of Sight and Sound in Ruggero Deodato’s Cannibal Holocaust

by David Lavrencic

Ruggero Deodato’s Cannibal Holocaust (1980) is arguably one of the most controversial movies in the history of cinema. Although the cannibal subgenre of Italian horror and the mondo genre of sensationalistic documentaries that inspired it are infamous for depicting gore and real acts of cruelty, many consider Holocaust superior to those kinds of films because it gives rise to sustained and serious reflection on social and cinematic matters alike (Petley 184). Arguing that “Holocaust is so clearly conservative in its narrative impact,” Brottman finds it “difficult to understand why reviewers consider it to be such a destructive and disturbing film” (127).

Consistent with McLuhan’s view that a medium should be studied rather than the content it carries, this essay’s position is that Deodato’s cinematic telling of Gianfranco Clerici’s screenplay is what makes Holocaust disquieting. The scenes through which we are exposed to the narrative are a combination of fiction and reality, and the film’s deceptive treatment of the footage as real in some instances and staged in others raises concerns of how death is depicted. Cinematographic aspects like the framing and length of shots agitate us by reinforcing the controversial nature of death and its contextualization. The film’s score is thematically and instrumentally incongruent to some of its key visuals, giving us a seemingly discordant context for interpreting what we see.

Because it is a mosaic of real and staged footage, Deodato’s film vexes audiences by forcing them to question and even second-guess the authenticity of its scenes. The Last Road to Hell, which Holocaust’s diegesis treats as a documentary shot by Yates’ team before it goes missing in The Green Inferno, is a crucial moment in which Deodato’s story fictionalizes reality. The footage is an outtake compilation of military prisoners actually being executed by firing squads (Kerekes and Slater 68), although it is treated as a snuff film that Yates’ crew stage for the publicity such a film is expected to attract (Brottman 130). Petley argues that as troubling as Deodato’s mingling of fictional and factual modes of representation may be, the effect is most pronounced in this moment of crossing conventional barriers between fictional and factual modes of representing death. He insists that for all its “brevity and artlessness,” this sequence is “actually far more disturbing than any of the orchestrated horrors, however convincing, elsewhere in Cannibal Holocaust” (180). I disagree, partly because the victims do not suffer during their swift executions and partly because of how this footage is framed relative to scenes of death shot specifically for the film.

As “a fleeting and crucial glimpse of the unimaginable reality that Cannibal Holocaust (falsely) disguises itself as,” (Brottman 131) Last Road is distinguished from other representations of death throughout Deodato’s film by the way its shots are framed (Barsam and Monahan 210). Last Road conforms to documentary conventions for representing ‘real live death,’ signifying justification for the inclusion of this kind of footage. This signification is conveyed through the camera’s stability relative to the scene it captures, the way it frames its objectified vision, the persistence or reluctance of its gaze, and by maintaining noticeable distance from the situation (Sobchack 292). Conversely, death scenes filmed specifically for Holocaust challenge these conventions and thus unsettle us with their technique.
In collaboration with cinematographer Sergio D'Offizi, Deodato disturbs us with the setup of his film’s death shots (Barsam and Monahan 210). The deaths which Yates’ crew shoot while in The Green Inferno are filmed from multiple angles by unfixed cameras. We feel as though these diegetic shots ‘rub our noses in entrails’ because of the way they approach and zoom in on people and animals that are being killed or have already been killed. The way they linger on slayings and the occasional consumption of the slain makes the frame itself a source of uneasiness (Atkinson, 2006). The point of this tension is to reinforce the fact that Yates’ crew do not merely instigate sensational events; the team capture such events with techniques that are themselves startling, even for their exploitive - and often falsified - documentaries.

There is an exception to Holocaust’s tactic of provocatively framing shots of death as a means of fostering animosity toward Yates’ crew and the exploitation personified by its members. This aberration occurs when “the camera lingers in voyeuristic close-up over Chako picking fat slugs off Fillippe’s corpse and Monroe vomiting at the sight” (Brottman 124). Because the camera that captures these shots is non-diegetic, Deodato uses this footage to imply criticism of himself and his crew on a meta-cinematic level (Petley 179). This auto-critique is suggested by the fact that a medium shot exposes us to the film’s wisest and most stoic character vomiting. The three-quarter front angle from which this shot is taken conveys the depth and volume of Monroe's upset face and compromised posture. His disgust is a reaction to the adjacency between the corpse and Chako, whose point of view the camera assumes immediately before cutting to Monroe.

The assertion that Deodato criticizes himself when Monroe's display of revulsion coincides with an invasive, non-diegetic close-up of Fillippe’s decomposing head is stressed by Monroe's tendency to stay calm during other encounters with death. Although many examples can be drawn to illustrate this point, the most convincing instance occurs when Monroe maintains his composure in spite of Miguel slaying an animal in his presence. Monroe does not merely see and hear the creature endure a painful death from Miguel's inept act of butchering it; he watches as it is disemboweled and its organs are eaten raw by the indigenous prisoner leading the group. The fact that this scene occurs soon after we see Monroe vomit underscores the meta-cinematic significance of the camera technique preceding his revulsion. The non-diegetic shot of Chako examining Fillippe’s corpse mirrors the cinematography normally reserved by Yates’ crew for its diegetic footage. Thus, Deodato masterfully structures Holocaust to draw a parallel between the technique championed by his crew and Yates'. The film’s unsettling camera technique shares an affinity with its disorienting score.

Holocaust’s music thematically "refuses to reiterate a closely empathetic message about the film’s action,” striking us with a sense of ambivalence (Dickinson 169, 171). Because a film’s symphonic score tends to manipulate our emotions in ways that lend support to its ideas, (Barsam and Monahan 383) we find Holocaust’s deviation awkward, particularly since the movie edges toward ‘extreme’ obsessions (Dickinson 176; Fischer 8). Deodato's choice of Riz Ortolani as his film’s composer does more than draw attention to its roots in shockumentary; like his scoring of the first mondo flick, 1962’s Mondo Cane (Petley 174), Ortolani infuses Holocaust with music that is out of place considering the film’s content (Dickinson 180).
As we see the jungle’s natural splendor during the movie’s establishing shot, we hear Holocaust’s mellifluous main theme. The dissonance between what we see and the song that opens the film becomes apparent once its title – which, by itself, “is enough to stop one in one’s tracks” (Cros) – appears captioned. Because the opening shot is framed through the window of an airborne plane, those who are familiar with the film’s savagery may wonder whose jungle-bound point of view we are appropriating– Monroe’s or someone of Yates’ crew. The latter possibility compels one to realize that the song may reflect how blissfully indifferent the crew is to the harm it will inflict across the region.

An example of Holocaust’s image-music disconnect that requires less familiarity to feel agitated occurs during the Last Road scene. As we hear “a haunting and romantic” tune (Brottman 130), we witness actual human executions. Even if we regard these deaths consistent with the diegesis, which treats them as fiction, they still appear convincing (Petley 180) and are thus oddly juxtaposed by pleasant music. Just as Holocaust’s score is thematically dissonant from its imagery, so too is its instrumental selection.

The synthesizer featured in the film’s score entices viewers to adopt feelings which are culturally at odds with its disturbing visuals. Because most “horror soundtracks deploy instruments that sound as close as possible to humans in pain” (Dickinson 175), Ortolani’s very use of a synthesizer for Holocaust is alarming. This is because its “surface textures were too even to immediately evoke rupture, emotion, or distress, and [its] workings and histories of technical achievement seemed coldly scientific and futurist rather than … concerned with sensitivity toward human suffering” (Ibid 176). Indeed, synthesizers have long been associated with films dealing with the unearthly, nonhuman, and supernatural (Ibid 173). During the making of Holocaust, they were also associated with hedonism; many synth-based film scores sounded like those of coexistent porno movies (Ibid 177-178). Outside of film, the debauchery implied through this pairing was bolstered by the instrument’s use in discos (Ibid 177). The disrespect for horrific death connoted by synthesizers is reinforced by the way Ortolani’s synth-based songs are composed.

The upsetting relationship between the film and its music is not just a function of synthesizers being used, but also an effect of how that instrument is used to evoke reactions. As instrumentally diverse as Holocaust’s score is, we almost always hear a synthesizer contextualize acts of savagery with melodies that are wafting and ethereal or jubilant and approving (Ibid 180). The former sounds have already been assessed in terms of the Last Road scene, albeit referring to classical instruments rather than electronic ones. We are distanced from the horrors of castration, dismemberment, decapitation, and cannibalism during the final scene of retribution by an elated composition that is up-tempo and positively groovy (Ibid 180-181). Synth-based ‘pow’ noises that characterize this melody seem like “little explosions of pleasure” because of the instrument’s aforementioned association with decadent settings (Ibid 181). Rather than being catered to with ‘stabs’ - aural spasms that encourage us to sympathize with people meeting a horrific demise (Ibid 175) - we are made to relish harsh redress through the film’s score. This is a means by which the film delivers its ideological message, discouraging exploitive (and vaguely imperialist) relations like the sort which Yates’ crew unilaterally impose on the jungle’s tribes.
Audiences are more likely to be disturbed by Holocaust’s narrative representation than by its actual narrative. Deodato’s film is startling for its use and treatment of real and fictitious footage. The cinematography and music of Holocaust also makes the experience of enduring it an uneasy one. Although the narrative makes many powerful statements about sensationalism and the media, the value of conduct-regulating norms, and ethnocentric notions distinguishing citizens from savages, its mediated delivery inclines many people - rightly or wrongly - to avoid or abandon it in disgust (Géré).
Works Cited


Films Cited