Cinematic shots and cuts: on the ethics and semiotics of real violence in film fiction

Erik van Ooijen*
Department of Literature and History of Ideas, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract
In this article I discuss a few ethical and semiotic problems related to reality's ability to actually take place within, and break through, fictional representations. I am particularly concerned with the presence of material bodies in the performing arts. I consider Hideshi Hino's *Flower of Flesh and Blood* (*Ginigūgu 2: Chiniku no hana*, 1985) as an initial example of purely fictional film violence. From a brief presentation of traditional theatre semiotics and the concept of a fictive stance, I then discuss two specific films where the body of the actor functions not only as the carrier of symbolical meaning but also as an indexical reference to a factual situation: John Waters' *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). My main interest lies in the occurrence of real violence, and particularly animal killings, in exploitation cinema. By considering directors' own statements on the matter, I suggest that such violence can not simply be dismissed as ethically flawed; rather, it carries a potential critique of the ideology of meat as pure commodity.

Keywords: violence; fictive stance; theatre semiotics; bodily presence; exploitation cinema; animal killing

There is something wrong with “snuff films”, even if all the acting is excellent right up to the murder of the actress. John Gardner

Discussions on the distinction between factual and fictional discourse often begin with an illustrative example of someone mistaking signs for reality: the early cinematic audience throwing itself out of the way of Lumière’s arriving locomotive, the hick boarding the theatrical stage in order to save the heroine in distress, or the upset fan blaming the actor for the actions of the soap opera villain. My article follows convention and opens with a similar anecdote related to Hideshi Hino’s notorious film *Flower of Flesh and Blood* (*Ginigūgu 2: Chiniku no hana*, 1985). The remaining part of my discussion will, however, be devoted to a different problem: reality’s potential of actually taking place in and breaking through fictional representations. I am particularly concerned with some possibilities and problems

*Correspondence to: Erik van Ooijen, Department of Literature and History of Ideas, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden. Email: erik.van-ooijen@littvet.su.se

©2011 E. van Ooijen. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, Vol. 3, 2011 DOI: 10.3402/jac.v3i0.6280

(page number not for citation purpose)
associated with the presence of material bodies in the performing arts. From a brief presentation of traditional theatre semiotics, I will discuss two specific films where the body of the actor functions not only as the carrier of symbolical meaning but also as an indexical reference to a factual situation: John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and Ruggero Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). My main interest lies in the ethical and semiotic problems related to the presence of real violence in fiction films.

**VIOLENCE AND THE FICTIVE STANCE**

Let us start by attempting to distinguish a pragmatic distinction between witnessing fictional and factual representations of violence.

As part of a psychological experiment on feelings of disgust, three short film sequences were shown to subjects who each could decide independently when to turn off and stop watching. The sequences depicted a surgical procedure where the face was removed from the skull of an infant; a dinner company killing a monkey and eating its brain; and the killing, flaying, and cutting up of cows in a slaughterhouse. In a later article, one of the researchers, Clark McCauley, seeks to answer why most of the participants turned the tapes off halfway through—while many of them were presumably willing to pay money to watch feature length depictions of violence like Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). After having tested and rejected several possible explanations, McCauley points out the simple fact that the documentary nature of the images apparently makes them less attractive than their purely fictional counterparts, and he refers to Noël Carroll’s remark that we, in order to properly appreciate a horror movie, must be absolutely certain of its status as a purely fictional spectacle. As regular filmgoers, we are not only well prepared for violent and potentially disgusting images but also certain of their ontological status as representational constructions; whereas the situation of the experimental subjects was far more unclear—they did not know what to expect or how to relate to it. This pragmatic difference is discussed by theorists of fiction in terms of a “fictive stance”: unlike the experimental subject, the regular filmgoer will adopt a specific attitude, which entails that feelings aroused by fictional violence—such as horror, or disgust—will be qualitatively different from those prompted by documentary depictions of violence. During the specific experiment, the subjects had no reason to adopt such a stance and, according to McCauley, they reacted as they did due to the films’ lack of “cues of unreality” (or what may be called “signals of fictionality”) or aesthetical and technical devices common to fictional films such as, for example, an accompanying musical score.

While such an explanation seems fairly agreeable, we must remember that the horror genre includes a great number of fictional works that actually strive to reduce the number of fictional cues to a minimum: just think of the prevalent trend in hyperrealist “dummies” such as Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez’ *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and Fred Vogel’s *August Underground* (2001), i.e. films intentionally constructed so as to give the audience the impression of authentic factual recordings. If we were to stumble upon unmarked copies of these films and, having never heard of them, started to search them for signals of fictionality, we would risk ending up frustrated and perhaps even deceived; but the whole scenario is quite unlikely. In fact, situations where we actually have to rely on a step-by-step analysis of individual signals are rare and, as a rule, we have already decided what stance to adopt way before we actually encounter a specific work or document. Instead of aligning our attitude to the work as we go along, we assume a firm position and an interpretational framework at the moment of deciding to turn on the TV news or renting a DVD from the horror shelf in the first place. There may, accordingly, be reason not to overstate the importance of the guiding function of signals of fictionality, for in contrast to the experimental subjects, we are rarely in the dark about what kind of activity we partake in, and we often manage to determine the status of a discourse before we encounter the discourse itself.

I will try to elucidate this pragmatic distinction between stances by way of an anecdote. In 1991, actor Charlie Sheen supposedly handed in a copy of Hino’s *Flower of Flesh and Blood* to the police, suspecting it to depict the real killing and dismembering of a human individual. The FBI assured him that the movie had already been
investigated and proved legal, i.e. a work of fiction. Today, *Flower of Flesh and Blood* has reached the status of an underground cult classic, and Sheen has become the laughing stock of gorehounds and horror aficionados ridiculing him for not having been able to spot its signals of fictionality, so blatantly overt in spite of its pseudo-documentary style. The movie opens with a scene of a woman being assaulted and put to sleep by a man, and while some of the cinematic cuts of the initial scene are presented from the point of view of the assailant—as if shot, for example, by his own camcorder during the actual hunt—other cuts are presented from various and entirely different angels, suggesting a larger camera crew and the possibility of several retakes. The subsequent scene of the woman waking up uses a common technique for representing the experiential perspective of fictional characters as we first witness the face of the character looking at something, and then see what it is she is looking at. Just like her, we “wake up” to a strange and unknown environment, and we join her in trying to familiarise ourselves with the surroundings as a take of her slowly opening her eyes is followed by a pan of the room as if experienced from her point of view. When the camera finally spots an odd *kabuto*-wearing individual lurking in the shadows of the room, it quickly zooms in on his white painted face that is suddenly lit up while a dramatic sound effect goes off. Thus, the scene is an obvious example of how the director has constructed a cinematic effect by letting editing techniques, makeup, light, and sound all come together to dramatise the sense of horrified shock, and the signals of fictionality may seem even more conspicuous if we consider the prevalent use of a musical score and the wide array of sound and special effects. The ridiculously excessive amount of spurting blood, for example, and the rubbery nature of the cut-up limbs, certainly transcends a sense of physical reality, and all in all, the aesthetics of the film resemble that of contemporary styles like the splatter comedy of Peter Jackson and the body horror of David Cronenberg. It is quite apparent, then, that instead of trying to deceive us into believing it to be real, *Flower of Flesh and Blood* rather plays about with the conventions of aesthetic realism by presenting its pseudo-documentary devices in a rather stylised and perversely humorous way. It even begins with a tongue-in-cheek declaration providing all traces of artifice with a naturalising motivation as a prologue explains that the film is not a real snuff film but merely the artistic *re-creation* of one. We are told how a package containing a reel of film and a set of stills depicting a real murder was sent to *mangaka* Hideshi Hino by an anonymous fan, and that the movie we are about to watch “has been recreated by Hideshi Hino as a restructured Semi-Documentary based on the above 8 mm film, pictures and letter”. We are obviously not meant to take the director on his word here, but should rather consider the prologue as a kind of cinematic counterpart to the playful meta-fictional prefaces to such blatantly fantastic stories as Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and C. J. L. Almqvist’s *Amorina* (1839), where the author lets a fictive editor explain how the “authentical” manuscript now in print originally came into his possession. By letting an equally self-parodying director explain how a few “authentical” documents, too gruesome to show as such, have been re-enacted as a kind of fictionalised docudrama, Hino manages both to underline and undermine the matter-of-fact exactitude of documentary discourse at one blow and, as Jay McRoy concludes, the movie is certainly one that “at once conforms to and confounds standard documentary practice”.¹⁰

In evaluating Sheen’s reaction it is, however, not enough to take the film itself into consideration, but we must also ponder his peculiar situation. In 1991, snuff movies were still a much debated and mythologised phenomenon, and films outside of the public mainstream were often traded from hand to hand as rare copies of copies. The chance of actually coming across a suspicious cassette of unknown and potentially dubious content was, in all likelihood, greater than it is today, and the grimy feel of bootleg VHS copies would certainly add an extra aura of authenticity to the film. According to some versions of the (highly apocryphal) anecdote, Sheen is even supposed to have watched a cut-and-paste *montage* of some of the goriest bits of the movie and, if this is correct, his reaction will undoubtedly seem a bit more sensible.¹¹ Today, on the other hand, the movie has been demystified and even received a canonical status in the (admittedly obscure) genre of gore

---

*Cinematic shots and cuts*
cinema, and it is one of the milestones in a tradition of equally hyperreal and stylised Japanese film violence whose contemporary, and far more extreme, successors—work of directors like Takashi Miike or Yoshihiro Nishimura—are readily available at your closest rental store. Since a large part of Hino’s main oeuvre as a mangaka or cartoonist has furthermore been translated and published by major companies, we are offered a far better chance of evaluating the movie aesthetically, as an instalment of a well-known temperamental and artistic style. Thus, we will be prepared for and even expect its mix of juvenile naivism, intense grotesquerie, and twisted melancholy and we may even pick up on how the prologue’s reference to Hino as a “bizarre cartoonist” relates to the self-reflexive and ironic inscription of the authorial I in the graphic short story “A Lullaby from Hell” (2005), where the author figures as a character-narrator who constantly addresses the reader and even is supposed to finally kill him using the comic book as his deadly medium; or how the house where the kabuto killer dwells bears a striking resemblance of the residence of the author as depicted in the graphic short, i.e. a rickety house “full of books, pictures, and items that are grotesque and unique”.12

These are things we reflect upon when adopting a fictive stance and an aesthetic approach, but they are also consequences of a pragmatic situation which is far more clear-cut for us than it was for Sheen: in contrast to the latter, we do not have to hesitate on the nature of the representations as our stance has been already determined before we encounter the specific signs and signals of the work. According to an implied logic of the aesthetic, we do not have to search for clues indicating whether what we are witnessing is a real murder or merely an entertaining spectacle, and we may even presuppose that the representation of violence is produced by means of acting, props, and special effects.

In what follows, I will try to sketch out the semiotic implications of such a logic by revisiting a few seminal texts in theatre semiotics. Then, I will discuss how the norms of that very logic may be transgressed as part of an artistic strategy. And finally, I approach the ethical dilemmas associated with the presence of real violence in film fiction.

THEATRE AND THE SEMIOTICS OF BODILY PRESENCE

As we adopt the fictive stance towards a film or a play, we seem to acquire a kind of double vision: on the one hand, we watch the actions of an actor performing a story while, on the other hand, we watch the actions of a character situated in the fictional story. This semiotic duality of performance, based on the status of the actor as sign and individual, forms the core concern of theatre semiotics.

According to Prague School semiotician Petr Bogatyrev’s lucid definition, the theatrical costume or the set of a theatrical stage “is a sign of a sign and not a sign of a material thing”.13 In ordinary life, a house is a functional object with a primary function (e.g. providing shelter) that also may achieve a kind of secondary sign value, such as indicating the nationality or the financial position of its owner. The set pieces depicting a house on stage, on the other hand, lack the primary function and prompt the secondary sign value directly: they are included for the sole purpose of portraying a dramatic character or staging a dramatic situation. Bogatyrev also presents the example of a diamond ring that signals wealth in everyday life but may be replaced by a simple piece of glass in order to reproduce a corresponding notion on stage: since theatrical meaning depends less on the authenticity of the object as such than on its ability to signify in a given context, the piece of glass is more than sufficient to function as “a sign of a sign of a material thing (for example, a sign of the wealth of the character but not a sign of the material object itself”).14 The spectator may even presume that the on-stage diamond really is fake, since genuine jewellery would only make the practical handling of props more difficult. So far, the example indicates at least three important aspects of the theatrical sign: that it relies on the presence of material objects and bodies; that the relation between meaning and object is arbitrary since the thing may always be switched for a different, and perhaps better suited, one; and that theatrical meaning is governed by a kind of practical economy subordinating other aspects of a thing to its function as a material vehicle granted a particular position within a regulated framework of meaning-production.
The first and the last of these aspects indicate, in turn, a potential conflict generated by the object’s dual status as prop and material thing. The conflict is the prime concern for an essay by Roland Barthes on the semiotic status of theatrical costumes. According to Barthes, the costume should not be considered as an autonomous object but as “an argument”; while the ordinary object harbours an infinite surplus of potential meaning, the prop should be designed so as to demonstrate precisely those properties activated by the performance as an encoded aesthetic and semiotic system.

In historical realism, costume often seemed to achieve a kind of fetishised status that risked turning the theatrical performance into a mere display of spectacular outfits and in order to avoid its breaking out of the signifying context, Barthes argues that costume “must always keep its value as a pure function, it must neither smother nor swell the play; it must avoid substituting independent values for the signification of the staged action”. Bogatyrev demonstrates a similar understanding in pointing out how in theatre you only use “those signs of costume and construction which are necessary for the given dramatic situation”. So, while Barthes and Bogatyrev establish the fact that theatre uses the presence of material objects as sign-vehicles for fictional meaning, they also acknowledge the functional dangers inherent to the possible conflict between the object as such and the object as prop: since the object must be there, it always risks breaking out of its representational and symbolic role in order to meet the spectator as autonomous and uncoded material thing.

According to theatre semiotics, aesthetic meaning is, in other words, not produced by the autonomous object but by way of it: the thing does not communicate with the spectator but functions as a material signifier regulated by the theatrical performance as a system of semiotic relations. A similar view is condensed in Umberto Eco’s description of the ability in theatre of “de-realising a given object in order to make it stand for an entire class”: the thing ceases to be a thing and becomes a pure sign value. In theatre, the value associated with an object may be produced by an entirely different kind of object, and when a piece of glass is used to signify wealth, it could be said to cease functioning as a piece of glass and rather become a diamond-signifier. Therefore, a prop may actually prove better suited for producing the sign value associated with an actual object than the actual object would be itself, and the presentation of an object qua object may in fact even prove counterproductive. Barthes addresses this point by using the fitting concept of “accentuation”, and tells of how Brecht once found it insufficient to simply use worn clothes to signify wear-and-tear and rather “accentuated” meaning by treating the theatrical costume with a complicated chemical process. The excessive use of fake blood in Hino’s film may perhaps be considered a corresponding example of semiotic accentuation: theatrical fiction relies on the real object, but it de-realises it, turning it into a vehicle for accentuated meaning.

While the replaceability of things and props suggests the symbolical or arbitrary nature of the theatrical sign, the presence of real material objects and bodies in theatre separates the art form from purely symbolical representations of fictions like novels. On the one hand, we may conceive of fictional narrative independently of medium, as a kind of simple, flat surface of aesthetical meaning formed by signifiers constituting a unified plane of composition: this would be the symbolical level of aesthetical meaning directed at us as a kind of pure outside without an inside, as apparent, for example, in the fact that an actor may switch between different characters simply by changing his mask—the material “inside” of the body is less significant than the surface of regulated meaning. On the other hand, we find important media-specific differences between separate art forms, and while it is true that the arbitrary relation between material sign and fictional meaning is somewhat similar to that of linguistic inscriptions, it is also true that theatre, in contrast to the novel, operates through the presence of actual living bodies. The distinction becomes clear if we consider that while the actor certainly may be conceived of as someone being transformed into a different person as soon as he enters the stage, it is equally important to remember that, as Bogatyrev reminds us, “we see in him not only a system of signs but also a living person”. What Bogatyrev terms the “dual perception of the actor by the spectator”—our simultaneous apprehension of the actor as sign and body—is, then, not only one of the main characteristics distinguishing theatre from other
art forms, but also something which charges it with specific values of attraction,\textsuperscript{22} for just as the autonomy of costume may turn staged action into a pure spectacle of dress, the presence of the actor may break fictional narrative and turn performance into a pure spectacle of flesh. While we may visit the theatre for the performance of a particular play, we may also visit it for the performance of a particular actor; and sometimes we may even go just to get a glimpse of the individual person on stage. Consider, for example, the 2005 production of Strindberg’s Miss Julie at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. While it drew a sizeable audience, we may suspect that many of its members were just as interested in witnessing the erotic tension played out between the two leading actors as that played out between fictional characters Jean and Julie: for the actors were a celebrity couple right in the process of breaking up due to a messy affair heavily exploited by the tabloid papers.\textsuperscript{23}

An important lesson from theatre semiotics then, is to distinguish the symbolic level of fictional meaning from the objects and persons constituting its material vehicles; but also to acknowledge that theatrical fiction will always be accompanied by a material inside, a man behind the mask. Since the spectator will perceive the dual expression of the actor, her attention may always slide between signified meaning and the material level of semiotic superabundance, a something\textsuperscript{24} that may even be a something else to story and gestus. The possibility of spectacle then, seems to be an inherent potential of theatrical performance that we may not simply dispose of in the name of semiotic purity. It is, not least, important to remember that the presence of the material body generates a certain kind of ethical situation. While Eco, for example, oversteps the mark of theatre semiotics in stating that a man put on the stage “has lost his original nature of ‘real’ body among real bodies”, we must acknowledge the fact that the man is also a body, and sometimes perhaps even primarily a body.\textsuperscript{24} This duality of the actor makes it possible to use theatre as a presentation of the real body in fictional disguise, a point recently touched upon by Swedish theatre critic Ingegärd Waaranperä in a feminist critique of the prevalence of naked and sexualised female bodies in Swedish performances. In her polemical article, Waaranperä stresses the fact that a spectator watching a naked teen actress crawling across the stage while playing Medea certainly witnesses “an artistic vision” but also, and more importantly, “the sexual dreams of the older, male director come true”.\textsuperscript{25} As one of her examples, Waaranperä further questions the aesthetical importance of having renowned Swedish actress Lena Endre play Lady Macbeth in the nude whereas the rest of the cast consisted of fully dressed men. This prompted Endre to reply with a simple argument fully in line with the Ecoian theory of pure semiotics in theatre as she states that “Lady Macbeth was naked, not Lena Endre”,\textsuperscript{26} but in contrast to Eco, Endre remains fully aware of the ethical and political implications of bodily presence as she demonstrates the tension inherent to the dual status of the actor as sign and body. For while Endre certainly seems to imply that her body has merely functioned as a sign for a sign, she nevertheless goes on, in accounting for the artistic reasons behind playing the part in the nude, to emphasise that it really was her own body that was presented to the spectator. According to Endre, it was high time for the audience to “stand face to face with the full nakedness of a 50+ woman”, and she intended for her own exhibition of a “middle-aged actress in action” to constitute a contrast to the “teenage boy-girl staring at us blankly from the advertising bills”.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, she “strikes a blow for feminism” not by portraying the character in a specific way but by presenting her own body as a body among other real bodies, all sharing the same social and material space.\textsuperscript{28} In Endre’s case, we are apparently no longer dealing with the arbitrariness of exchangeable props for her body can not be switched for a mannequin just as her nudity can not be represented by costume: in her Lady Macbeth, the elaborate aesthetical effect is produced by the very constitution of the actress and the presence of her physical body as such.

While bodily presence will not disrupt the fictive stance in most cases, it facilitates a potential semiotic transgression of levels as directors and actors may play around with the dual perspective of the spectator. That it, furthermore, generates a direct material connection between the actor and the spectator was evident during a performance where Swedish actor and director Thorsten Flinck darted across the small, intimate stage, holding an axe over his head. Since the audience was located
only at arm’s length from the actor, they reacted by intuitively crouching down in their seats; but in contrast to Lumières’ spectators, they never mistook signs for reality but were actually put in danger by the actor as a physically present individual. While textual violence will always be symbolical, scenic violence may be materially real; and thus, the theatre will always have to be clear on the status of certain kinds of represented acts. Perhaps the point may be underlined by an example from Eco who questions whether or not there is a semiotic difference between “an actor who, to pretend having been whipped, draws red lines on his shoulders and another one (a more professional actor more religiously following the principles of realism) who really wounds himself in order to get really bleeding traces”.

As Eco leaves the question unanswered, we must conclude that he finds the distinction fuzzy at best, but perhaps the answer will arrive more readily if we consider the ethical difference between an actor simulating a fight and one actually bashing another person bloody. In the latter case—or one similar to the mock performances staged by the Théâtre des Vampires in Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire (1976)—we may actually be called upon as spectators to board the theatrical stage and save the heroine in distress.

While the fictive stance generally allows us to take the representational status of staged violence for granted, the dual status of the actor will nevertheless render the inclusion of factual violence within a fictional context possible. Like every norm, the divide between acting and violence harbours its own transgression. So let us consider an example of a work that uses such transgressions as a general aesthetical strategy. While it is taken from cinema, it is nevertheless directly related to the discussion of the actor as body and sign.

**Pink Flamingos and the Indexical Actor**

While film as a medium certainly lacks the direct presence of theatre, it nevertheless presents a similar set of problems associated with the double expression of the actor. As Susan Sontag points out, photographic media harbour the dual representational powers “to generate documents and to create works of visual art”, and film fiction is therefore always indexical in the sense of constituting “a trace of something brought before the lens”. Thus, it differs from the purely symbolical nature of the novel as well as from mainly iconic media like paintings, and the distinction entails a corresponding ethical difference, pointed out by Sontag as the difference between finding aesthetic beauty in war paintings and in war photographs. While there is a certain banality to the former idea, the latter notion seems more morally complex as it indicates a kind of proximity between the person watching an image and the person the image depicts. In painting, we only meet the pure surface of structural composition and the tactile materiality of paint and texture, but in film, our body seems to meet, at least to some degree, the body of the index as our gaze comes to behold the person gazed upon. And in contemplating the war painting, we may appreciate the artistic presentation of war as theme, but in contemplating the war photograph, we witness the reality of suffering and death. This kind of proximity is perhaps most evident in the case of the pornographic image and the fact that, pointed out by Robert Kolker, sexualised representations of the body have been captured on film for as long as the medium has existed: just as theatre harbours a potential of the spectacle, the burlesque, and the strip-tease, so the very medium of film seems semiotically apt for presenting the sexualised body in a way that “brings” what was put before the lens in front of the spectator. In contrast to fictional representations, where a body may always be replaced by a prop, a costume, a stuntman or a body double, the pornographic film seems to demand that the image is indexical and the sexualised body is represented authentically as such.

This indicates the ability of the photographic image to form a relation between spectator and spectated in a way that makes filmic representations similar to the theatre due to the presence of real bodily indexes. As in theatre, actors and directors may accordingly also play around with the dual status of bodies and signs as when, for example, fictional narrative is employed as a kind of legitimising framework for the sexual representation of real bodies. Tanya Krzywinska has pointed out the several examples from the history of film of directors using accepted and established fictional genres for “the inclusion of
publicity-garnering risqué sexual imagery”, and while works of exploitation cinema are often criticised for the way story is used as a simple excuse for sexual imagery, this must be considered a definition of the premises of the genre rather than as a criticism of it. Rather than simply being hypocritical, exploitation deliberately exploits the semiotic duality of the medium corresponding to a kind of dual ideology of art and morals, and thus, the “negative example” has become a standard model for letting a moralising tale on the dangers of depraved behaviour embed the always far more essential images of sexualised bodies taking part in the very same kind of behaviour. The success of movies like Gustav Wiklund’s Exposed (Exponerad, 1970) and Torgny Wickman’s Anita: Swedish Nymphet (Anita—ur en tonårsflickas dagbok, 1973), for example, relies on an audience being more interested in watching the naked body of young actress Christina Lindberg than in learning the fate of the characters she portrays.

This transgressive power has allowed exploitation cinema to blend in with the paradoxes of transgression found in more intellectually oriented movements of avant-garde modernism as both traditions form an often similar critique of bourgeois culture. A prime example is found in the work of John Waters and his notorious breakthrough film, Pink Flamingos. While its spindly plot centres on a basic conflict between a sovereign protagonist and an usurping antagonist—heroine Divine is challenged by the Marbles for the title of “filthiest person alive” and, therefore, must restore order by eliminating them in the filthiest way possible—the movie achieves its packing punch from the way it plays with the duality of the actor and the fact that the fictionally represented filth often falls short of the filth taking place among the real persons acting in front of the camera. The indexical aesthetic begins in the deliberately poor and extravagantly clumsy acting that immediately directs our attention towards the actions of the actress rather than the character, and her bodily presence is further accentuated by a complex play of identities involving the actress as body, as public persona, and as fictional role, since the female protagonist Divine (who, according to the plot, appears under an assumed name) is played by a drag queen also known as Divine. Such a game of identities, where a female character with a false name is played by a male actor with a female persona, reminds us of the modernist and post-modernist tradition of Pirandellian meta-fiction, but also of the burlesque, the vaudeville and the sideshow, and thus we see how Waters’ manages to let high and low culture intersect. The effect of the game becomes particularly apparent in an explicit sex scene where fictional character Divine performs fellatio on her son. As if fictional incest was not scandalous enough, the scene actually achieves its transgressive force from the fact that what we really see is the actual recording of a sturdy transvestite giving a young man a blow job. As fictional scandal is pushed into the background by factual scandal, the scene succeeds in manifesting a kind of joyous and queerly carnivalesque activism where one representational taboo is transgressed under the guise of another. Thereby the movie transcends the merely exploitative and becomes gay in the double meaning of the word: it is happily homosexual in a way that radically challenges the norms of representational restrictions.

Gaiety aside, the indexical strategy may nevertheless generate ethical problems. As already stated, we may rest assured when witnessing fictional violence and humiliation even of the most realistic kind that it all is the skilful product of acting, editing and special effects. Just consider the case of coprophagia in film fiction. In Thai director Chukiat Sakveerakul’s 13 Beloved (13 game sayawng, 2006), a desperate young man partakes in a clandestine game where he must perform 13 secret missions in order to win a large sum of cash. Having killed a fly, eaten it, made three kids cry, and beaten up a beggar, his fifth assignment is to eat a plate of human excrements. At this point, the spectator is obviously meant to identify with the character and ask herself what she is willing to do for money, and the scene constitutes a pivotal plot point where a distinct boundary is transgressed: for the first time, the protagonist must really overcome his personal boundaries. But no matter how nauseous we may feel while watching the scene, we never believe that the actor is really eating faeces. In Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma, 1975), coprophagia is presented in a somewhat different way, as the utmost symptom of the perverted decadence of fascism. Were we to learn that director
Pasolini had actually forced his actors to perform the acts portrayed, we would probably condemn him for having abused his sovereign position in exactly the way the movie so vehemently criticises. But we never suspect this, and rather presume that all measures have been taken in order to secure the comfort of the cast. In these cases, our attention is never directed at the actual situation of production, but we are still well aware that what we really witness is something entirely different from what is factually represented.

In Pink Flamingos, on the other hand, coprophagia suspends the fictive stance. When Divine collects the poop from a dog and puts it in her mouth during the final scene, the indexical aesthetics of the film has prepared us for perceiving it as the actions of the real actress. So, while the scene forms the climax of the dramatic plot, it also, and more importantly, forms the final stage in a progression of increasingly transgressive violations of representational taboos. The final shift from symbol to index is even pointed out by a voice over narrator:

The filthiest people alive? Well, you think you know somebody filthier? Watch as Divine proves that not only is she the filthiest person in the world, she is also the filthiest actress in the world. What you are about to see is a real thing.

The entire structure of the movie may in fact be described as a break with plot-oriented dramatic function in favour of the paratactic aesthetics of the burlesque or the side show, where one trick follows after another. During the scene of a birthday party, several performances of the variety kind are actually enclosed, such as a stripper dancing with a snake or an acrobatic young man performing the infamous “singing asshole” routine. In accordance with the burlesque design, we will come to expect a kind of grand finale where the actress Divine, rather than the character, demonstrates her filthy title. Due to the cheerful temperament of the movie, and to the fact that Divine so evidently acts on her own initiative, Waters is able to steer clear of any ethical blame; but what we really watch is nevertheless presented as an actual event where a real individual is involved in a degrading situation. As soon as they are no longer performed voluntarily, scenes of this kind will obviously become ethically problematic, and while the dog poop scene is endured in a happy mood, a different scene borders on the abusive, viz. the infamous “chicken scene”. While the artificial nature of most of the violent scenes are greatly accentuated by particularly “bad” and over-the-top acting as shots are fired and bodies fall, one scene turns indexically violent as a couple of chickens are crushed while being stuck between two persons aggressively having sex. In contrast to the scene of coprophagia, the chicken scene has been considered as ethically flawed even among the movie’s many cult followers.

Violence against animals is obviously a particularly sensitive topic in the history of cinema, and its former prevalence is demonstrated by the care modern producers take in establishing that no animals were harmed during the making of a movie. Before we further address the chicken scene, I would however like to discuss one of the most notorious movies ever made, and one that certainly prompted the need for such explicit remarks, viz. Deodato’s Cannibal Holocaust.

**CANNIBAL HOLOCAUST AND THE ETHICS OF SLAUGHTER**

Like Flower of Flesh and Blood, Cannibal Holocaust is characterised by a pseudo-documentary style, and a prologue assures us of the authenticity of the images. As Julian Petley points out, a wide array of technical devices are used to achieve the documentary feel, such as “shaky, hand-held camerawork, ‘accidental’ compositions, crash zooms, blurred images, lens flare, inaudible or intermittent sound, direct address to camera, scratches and lab marks on the print, and so on.” The story begins with a North American anthropologist going to South America in order to locate a lost documentary film crew. It turns out that they have been killed by a native tribe, but the anthropologist manages to retrieve their filmed material. Back in the United States, he examines the reels that show the crew assaulting, raping and murdering native villagers, and it turns out that they even provoked the tribal war they merely purported to be documenting. Just as in The Blair Witch Project, the events are presented as the crew’s actual recordings, but whereas this is all we get in The Blair Witch Project, here, the simulated _objets trouvés_ are intermingled with scenes showing the indignant reactions of the
anthropologist as well as the cynical small talk of a group of network representatives. The latter plan to air the material according to the journalistic credo that the more you rape the senses of the viewers, the happier they are, but having grasped the full width of the staged atrocities, they finally decide to burn it instead. The moral of the film is summed up in the closing words of the anthropologist—“I wonder who the real cannibals are”—and as Ed Morgan puts it, the movie is certainly one “that manages to both condemn and exploit the grossest excesses of violence”.40

The mood of the movie is quite grim and it bears no trace of the kind of stylised and naive grotesquery typical for Hino. Deodato’s style consists of a grittier form of realism reminiscent of the aesthetics of Dogme 95, and the level to which his pseudo-documentary approach succeeds is indicated by the fact that Italian authorities confiscated the movie right after its premiere. Deodato was arrested and detained until he was able to demonstrate how certain scenes were made; the famous shot of an impaled girl, for example, was achieved by having the actress sit on a concealed bicycle seat while holding a piece of balsa wood between her teeth. The length to which Deodato went to accomplish the documentary expression is furthermore indicated by the contract he made his actors sign, forcing them to go underground for an entire year after the film was premiered so as to strengthen the impression that they really had disappeared.

One point in particular makes watching Cannibal Holocaust a quite different experience from watching a movie like Flower of Flesh and Blood. In an interview with Hino, Jay Slater and Junichi Tomonari pointed out the fact that a scene depicting the killing of a chicken stands out as so obviously fake in an otherwise realistic movie, and Hino’s answer is brief and to the point: “I can’t kill any animal or insect. I am absolutely against the shooting and death of any creature”.41 Deodato’s film, on the other hand, provides several scenes where violence against animals becomes explicitly real: for example, a pig is shot, the head of a monkey is cut off, and during a particularly drawn out scene a giant turtle is systematically beheaded, dismembered, and has his shell removed. The fact that such scenes easily could be created by regular means of acting and special effects is demonstrated by the many scenes successfully simulating violence against humans, but just as in the case of Pink Flamingos, indexical presence seems to be a main part of the very aesthetic of the film. Whereas exploitation cinema uses narrative fiction as a semiotic framework for the presentation of sexualised bodies, cannibal movies seem to use it as a framework for depictions of real killings, and thus we may distinguish cannibal film from the Italian “mondo”-style documentary just as we have distinguished exploitation film from pure pornography. But like exploitation cinema in general, the cannibal genre relies on the ability of the indexical body to break through the layers of fictional meaning.

It is impossible to watch Cannibal Holocaust without reflecting upon and reacting against what happens in front of the camera. Thus Petley comments on the turtle scene:

From the way the scene is filmed it is obvious no trickery was involved; in particular, the initial decapitation of the turtle by the guide Felipe (although, again, it is the actor who performs the deed) is filmed in one shot precisely to emphasise that what we are seeing is “real live death”. The only purpose for which montage is used in this sequence is not to obscure a fake turtle being substituted for a real one at the apparent moment of death, because this clearly did not happen. Instead, it is brought into play simply to maximise the number of angles from which the spectator can view the creature’s still pulsating innards. One is also left wondering, incidentally, whether it is “Faye Daniels” or the actress portraying her who throws up at the sight of this extremely unpleasant scene.42

Elements of this kind have made Cannibal Holocaust infamous, and rightly so; but from an ethical point of view, we must ask whether its explicit depictions of violence marks a difference of kind, or merely one of degree, in relation to more palatable and streamlined movies. In mainstream movies, animal meat is often portrayed as human food, and it is rarely replaced by a prop; rather, it may actually substitute for human body parts, as when pig intestines signify human innards. While very few films show the real process of slaughter, a large number still show the real products of such processes. It is also worth pointing out that most productions with a fairly big budget presumably have catered its cast with meat at some point. The
violence shown in *Cannibal Holocaust* is hardly more severe or drawn out than that which takes place in our industrial slaughterhouses, and with this in mind, we may have to consider the killing and slaughtering of animals an integral (if often implicit) part of the great majority of movies. Arguments along these lines have actually been presented by directors accused of cruelty to animals. Consider Deodato’s comment during an interview:

> All the animals which were killed were then eaten by the natives. For example, they were greedy for crocodile meat, and when we killed one they always went for the paws, which were the first parts to disappear. [...] It is also important to consider the fact that the natives ate these animals because that is their food. The animals we killed in the various films were rodents, wild boars, perhaps we over-did it a bit with the turtle, however that also was eaten. [...] Nowadays I wouldn’t do it anymore, times have changed. When I was a child I lived in the country and it was normal to see a chicken, a rabbit or a pig being killed. Today my daughter sees it and becomes distressed.43

Or Waters’ similar remark, presented in his filmed afterword to the 25th anniversary re-release of *Pink Flamingos*:

> Animal rights activists always say to me: “How could you kill a chicken for a movie?” Well, I eat chicken and I know the chicken didn’t land on my plate from a heart attack. We bought the chicken from a farmer who advertised freshly killed chicken. I think we made the chicken’s life better: Got to be in a movie, got fucked. And then right after filming the next take the cast ate the chicken.

Yet another version is offered by South Korean director Ki-duk Kim regarding *The Isle* (*Seom*, 2000), a movie also containing brief scenes of animal violence such as the skinning of a frog:

> [T]he way I see it, the food that we eat today is no different. In America you eat beef, pork, and kill all these animals. And the people who eat these animals are not concerned with their slaughter. Animals are part of this cycle of consumption. It looks more cruel on-screen, but I don’t see the difference.44

As well as by Canadian director and queer pornographer Bruce LaBruce apropos his *Otto; or, Up with Dead People* (2008), where a dead animal is used for a scene where the protagonist zombie eats road kill:

> In fact, I wanted to see if we could eat the hare at the end of the day’s shoot, but the carcass was left out in the sun for too long and it was inedible.45

Since these comments certainly touch upon a kind of double standard in our ideology of meat, let us try to use Marxist terms in order to briefly draw out their consequences. Meat, it may be suggested, could be considered as a form of reification of violence. In reification, the industrial product achieves a kind of “phantom objectivity” making it appear as a pure thing, a commodity disconnected from the processes of production and the (often exploitative) relations making industrial production possible in the first place. As Georg Lukács puts it, the autonomy of the commodity “seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people”.46 If we include animals and not just people in the definition, we may go on to consider how the totality of the chain of food production and consumption in capitalist society is differentiated and turned into a series of seemingly autonomous specialisations: the farmer, the butcher, the wholesaler, the retailer, the prop master, the film director, and so on, all seem to work independently, although in reality they constitute a joint system of exchange. Through this separation of professional roles, the film maker may present meat as a natural object dislodged from the act of killing and butchering living animals: for, in contrast to Waters, few directors kill their own food. In comparing the filming of death with the everyday production and consumption of food, all the directors quoted above indicate how their “shocking” images help to defamiliarise a dominant and two-faced ideology of meat. We may actually find an ethical and political potential in the depicted dismembering of animals as contrasted to the purely reified presentation of a steak.
or a hamburger in, for example, a seemingly harmless romantic comedy. In both cases, deadly violence is an inevitable part of movie production, but while the mainstream comedy conceals real violence in the reified props of fictional meaning, exploitation cinema uses indexical presence in making strange our ideological relationship to food as pure commodity. Thus LaBruce may claim, and quite convincingly so, that the dead animal body becomes functional in a film “that is very much about consumerism, the aversion to consuming flesh and meat, and the way that pornography and the popular media package sex and body parts as so much meat.”

*Cannibal Holocaust* is, however, a particularly complicated case since it counterbalances the relation between human and animal violence by also including brief images representing the killing of humans. When the anthropologist returns to New York, the network representatives show him one of the lost film crew’s previous productions, a documentary titled *The Last Road to Hell*, depicting, among other atrocities, the execution of children and adults. As spectators, we are presented with a montage of scenes from this picture-within-a-picture, but the images we see are in actual fact taken from real news footage that Deodato bought and inserted into his fictional movie. Petley points out how these briefly passing factual images of death actually are “far more disturbing than any of the orchestrated horrors, however convincing, elsewhere in Cannibal Holocaust”, and their inclusion generates the most striking demonstration of how a symbolical level of fictional meaning is rendered ineffectual by the presence of indexical signs referring to real situations. The ethical situation discussed in relation to the drawn out violence against animals may seem even more acute in relation to these quickly passing images of human death. But wherein lies the real problem of such a strategy? I will now conclude my article by trying to narrow down the pragmatic complexity of the problem.

**CONCLUSION: ON VIOLENCE AS A TRANSGRESSION OF THE FICTIVE STANCE**

My opening discussion of Hino’s *Flower of Flesh and Blood* was intended to establish that the ethical problems I am concerned with do not involve purely fictional representations of violence: fictional images of persons being cut into pieces, impaled, or forced to coprophagia are, as far as I can see, ethically uncomplicated. What has interested me are, on the other hand, situations where material bodies cease to function as mere vehicles for fictional meaning and rather present themselves as indexical referents. Such situations I consider ethically unflawed where the actors participate voluntarily: in *Pink Flamingos*, for example, even possibly humiliating scenes seem initiated by the actress herself, and they carry an aesthetical as well as political potential of positive and affirmative transgression. The chicken scene, on the other hand, I consider as ethically more problematic.

The mere presence of indexical violence is obviously not a sufficient criterion for making a film ethically flawed, and the recordings of slaughter found for example in Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s documentary on industrial food production, *Our Daily Bread* (*Unser täglich Brot*, 2005), have escaped the criticism directed at Waters and Deodato. Since Geyrhalter adheres to the journalistic rule of simply registering rather than provoking the violence he portrays, potential indignation will presumably be aimed not at the director but the food industry. In matters of a possibly exploitative nature, this classic distinction between registering and partaking in an event seems especially important, as is indicated by the criticism directed at a Swedish TV feature on Internet strip shows when it turned out that the crew had paid a girl to strip “for the movie” instead of simply recording her performing a show for one of her regular customers. A similar, if more extreme example, is found in Swedish artist Pål Hollender’s *Buy Bye Beauty* (2001), a documentary on the economy of sex tourism that ends with the director paying his Latvian interviewees to have sex with him. Perhaps even documentary depictions of human killings may seem warranted under certain specific conditions, granted that death is merely registered and never caused or enacted “for the movie”; but as soon as an unethical act is performed for the sole purpose of filmmaking, the film itself seems to be ethically implicated.

I have argued, however, that as long as we accept the simple killing of an animal “for the movie” as ethically flawed, we will have to include
any movie using any kind of meat in its production in the class of flawed movies. In *Pink Flamingos*, there is a scene where Divine picks up a big slab of meat from a butchery shop and puts it between her thighs, and it is obvious that the scene would not have been possible without the killing of an animal. Still, the meat scene has garnered no indignant reactions at all, and neither has the plethora of seemingly inoffensive movies exhibiting the products of animal slaughter as human food.

Most people will probably find such an argument unreasonable if not absurd, and if we really were to consider all aspects of production, most movies would probably prove troublesome. In his dictionary entry on the ethics of film, Folke Tersman, for example, points out the obvious fact that the life threatening risks Werner Herzog exposed his cast to during the making of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) raises certain ethical questions, and nevertheless Tersman concludes that there is reason to separate the act from filmmaking from the products it generates.51 After all, a bad act performed “for the movie” seems insufficient to render an entire movie flawed.

We must also consider the fact that the documentary images of human executions found in *Cannibal Holocaust* never were produced “for the movie” but consists of news material, and nevertheless they prompt an ethical reaction. In fact, they even seem to be bothering us more as part of fictional context than they would as part of a televised newscast, and this brings us right back to the concept of the pragmatic stance and our initial discussion on the rare uncertainty of not knowing what attitude to adopt. As part of a newscast, we would know how to relate to the images of death as we would already have adopted a “factual” stance, but when they suddenly pop up as unexpected indexes of violence right in the middle of a fictional film, we waver as our stance is broken and suddenly proves inadequate. Watching a fictional film, we adopt a stance of aesthetical and entertainment-oriented appreciation52 that will not only prove deficient in relation to the images of death but also may seem unethical itself.

Vivian Sobchack presents a lucid argument on this topic in relation to the scene where a (real) rabbit is killed in Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu*, 1932). According to Sobchack, the ethical force of documentary representations of death is due to the way they establish a kind of joint space between the film maker, the spectator, and the event taking place before the lens. Apparently, the presence of the camera inscribes the film maker’s gaze within the cinematic image in a way that forces the spectator to evaluate how the individual behind the camera positions herself in relation to what takes place in front of it. And the gaze of the spectator, too, seems to be inscribed in a way that turns the viewer responsible for what is depicted as it forces us to clarify our own attitude towards the seen. As Sobchack puts it:

> At minimum two viewers are ethically implicated in their relations with the viewed event, both the filmmaker viewing the event of death through the camera and the spectator viewing the film that makes that death visible. Thus, responsibility for the representation of death by means of the inscribed vision of cinema lies with both filmmaker and spectator—and in the ethical relationship constituted between the vision of each.53

Perhaps, then, the real ethical dilemma of films like *Pink Flamingos* and *Cannibal Holocaust* lies in the way they put the spectator in an uncertain and uncomfortable situation similar to that of Sheen or the experimental subjects. The movies instil us with a sense of indeterminacy and prompt an incongruous and vacillating stance, propelling the spectator into an anxious hunt for cues and signals of the semiotic nature of the representation. First, the fictional film invites us to assume a fictive stance towards the material and then the factual images of violence prove that stance to be semiotically and ethically deficient. Thus, the spectator becomes engaged in a situation that suddenly changes its premises, and she is consequently hurled from one representational regime to another; or, as Sobchack puts it, from a fictional space “that confines itself to the screen or, at most, extends offscreen into an unseen yet still imagined world” to a factual space depending “on an extracinematic knowledge that contextualises and may transform the sign-functions of the representation within a social world and an ethical framework.”54 While the rules of the pragmatic activity are radically changed, the spectator remains unprepared for this change.

It is obviously not enough to respond to the violence in movies like *Pink Flamingos* or *Cannibal
Holocaust with a simple indignant dismissal. Whereas an upset Wayne Booth once reacted to the fictional violence in George Miller’s Mad Max (1979) by concluding that the best act of ethical criticism would be to simply refuse watching the sequel, I maintain that such an effortless rejection is no act of criticism at all. Surely, these movies provoke difficult but important theoretical questions worthy of careful scholarly investigation and, as Petley contends, “any film which can give rise to sustained and serious reflection [...] and which does so in a way that gets under the skin of the censorious, must surely have something going for it!” Being intellectually and theoretically intriguing is, however, rarely a sufficient justification for the inclusion of images of animal killings in these films as a productive defamiliarisation of meat as reified violence. By putting the already flawed than much of what seemingly inoffensive mainstream entertainment has to offer. In any event, examples from John Waters to Lena Endre to Bruce LaBruce show that the transgressive representational strategies common for trashy exploitation culture carry great aesthetical and political potential.

NOTES
1. John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 22.
2. Paul Rozin et al., “Individual Differences in Disgust Sensitivity: Comparisons and Evaluations of Paper-and-Pencil versus Behavioral Measures”, Journal of Research in Personality 33 (1999): 330-51. cf. Jonathan Haidt, Clark McCauley, and Paul Rozin, “Individual Differences in Sensitivity to Disgust: A Scale Sampling Seven Domains of Disgust Elicitors”, Personality and Individual Differences 16 (1994): 701–13.
3. Clark McCauley, “When Screen Violence Is Not Attractive”, in Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment, ed. Jeffrey Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 145.
4. Cf. Noël Carroll, The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart (New York: Routledge, 1990), 68.
5. Nicholas Wolterstorff relates the fictive stance to the author’s approach to his literary work considered as an utterance, while Lamarque and Olsen rather associate the concept with the pragmatic attitude of the audience. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, Works and Worlds of Art (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 231–34; and Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, Truth, Fiction and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 43–46.
6. McCauley, “When Screen Violence Is Not Attractive”, 161. “Signals of Fictionality” is taken from Ch. 7 of Dorrit Cohn, The Distinction of Fiction (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
7. On the concept of “dummies” in theory of fiction, Cf. Göran Rosholm, To Be and Not To Be: On Interpretation, Iconicity and Fiction (Bern: P. Lang, 2004), esp. Ch. VII.
8. The release of both movies was actually preceded by different strategies of guerrilla marketing intended to enhance the impression of authenticity; but quickly, they became known exactly for their way of simulating the factual. The general audience interest was peaked by the way they applied the documentary aesthetic, not by the suspicion that “this could be real”.
9. Cf. Jay McRoy, Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 15-16.
10. Ibid., 32. Consider, for example, the initial establishment of time and place: ‘It was in April 1985, the time of full cherry blossoms in Tokyo’. While the first part of the sentence provides precise and relevant information on the state of the (purportedly) real event, the last part rather dissolves into poetic mood or atmosphere.
11. Cf., e.g. Bryan Layne, “Media Interview: Getting DEEP RED with CHAS. BALUN”, Fearzone, September 15, 2007. http://www.fearzone.com/blog/media-interview-getting-deep-red-with-chas-balun (accessed January 20, 2011).
12. Hideshi Hino, Lullabies from Hell, trans. Naomi Kokubo (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Manga, 2005), 6.
13. Petr Bogatyrev, “Semiotics in the Folk Theater”, trans. Bruce Kochis, in Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1976), 33.
14. Ibid., 34.
15. Roland Barthes, Critical Essays, trans. Richard Howard ( Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 46.
16. Ibid., 42.
17. Bogatyrev, “Semiotics in the Folk Theater”, 33.
18. Umberto Eco, “Semiotics of Theatrical Performance”, The Drama Review 21 (1977): 110.
19. Barthes, Critical Essays, 65.
20. Material presence also separates theatre from primarily iconic mediums like comics and sculpture.
Here, I focus on the general distinction between index as related to material presence and symbol as a vehicle for fictional meaning, and thus I will play down the iconic aspect of the theatrical sign.

21. Bogatyrev, “Semiotics in the Folk Theater”, 48.

22. Ibid.

23. In fact, often the very same papers running ads for the production.

24. Eco, “Semiotics of Theatrical Performance”, 110.

25. Ingegård Waaranperä, “Herrarna i hagen” [Lords of the Manor], Dagens Nyheter, February 15, 2010. Translations from the Swedish are mine.

26. Lena Endre, “Vi vill vara fria i vårt skapande” [We want creative freedom], Dagens Nyheter, February 19, 2010.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. The example is taken from a performance revolving around the dissolution of the relationship between actor, person, and character: Teater Plaza’s production of The Ballad of Reading Gaol, aptly titled Flinck Goes Wilde, in Stockholm 2001. At a different point, Flinck accidently threw his coat at the audience, and the mishap certainly emphasises the risk of a stray axe slipping out of the wielder’s grip. It is also worth pointing out Flinck’s reputation as part madman, part genius, and his history of drug abuse and often erratic behaviour.

30. Eco, “Semiotics of Theatrical Performance”, 113.

31. Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 76.

32. Ibid., 24. Well, not always, but in most traditional cases. Cf. next note.

33. CGI (and some older experimental uses of the film reel, etc.) will obviously be excluded from such a strict definition. As computer-generated imagery always has its material origin in binary code, it may be classed in the same semiotic category as symbolic scripture, or as an interpretational icon having a symbolical (arbitrary) material foundation.

34. Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 75–76.

35. Robert Kolker, Film, Form, and Culture (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002), 18.

36. Tanya Krzywinska, Sex and the Cinema (London: Wallflower, 2006), 218–19.

37. In this particular case, a mix of chocolate and orange marmalade was used, and several of the actors were actually surprised that the pleasant shoot could result in such an uncomfortable movie. Cf. Gary Indiana, Sálo or The 120 Days of Sodom (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 42.

38. Of course, we also know of the long and close friendship between director and actor in this particular case.

39. Julian Petley, “Cannibal Holocaust and the Pornography of Death”, in The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond, ed. Geoff King (Bristol: Intellect, 2005), 178.

40. Ed Morgan, ‘Cannibal Holocaust: Digesting and Re-Digesting Law and Film”; Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal 16 (2007): 561.

41. Jay Slater and Junichi Tomonari, “Dark Side Magazine Interview with Hideshi Hino”, included in Unearthed Films’ DVD release of Flower of Flesh and Blood.

42. Petley, “Cannibal Holocaust and the Pornography of Death”, 180.

43. Harvey Fenton, Julian Grainger and Gian Luca Castoldi, Cannibal Holocaust and the Savage Cinema of Ruggero Deodato (London: FAB, 1999), 16.

44. Andy McKeague, “An Interview with Kim Ki-Duk and Suh Jong on The Isle”, Monsters & Critics, May 11, 2005. http://www.monsertandcritics.com/dvd/news/article_7779.php (accessed April 24, 2010).

45. Bruce LaBruce, “YouTube Censors LaBruce”, Bruce LaBruce (blog), September 16, 2008. http://brucelabruce.blogspot.com/2008/09/youtube-censors-labruce.html (accessed January 26, 2011). Minor misspellings corrected.

46. Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972), 83.

47. LaBruce, “YouTube Censors LaBruce”.

48. Petley, “Cannibal Holocaust and the Pornography of Death”, 181.

49. We must also ask to what degree the voluntary participation of the actor always will exempt representations of violence. Certainly, all representations of human killings will be considered as ethically difficult, even in the (highly unusual) case where a victim gives his consent. I do not believe that Cannibal Holocaust would become a less difficult case if, for example, we learned that the persons being executed in the inserted news footage died of their own volition.

50. Cf. Magnus Ullén, “Pornografi—en mediehistoria” [Pornography—a media history], in Berättande i olika medier, ed. Leif Dahlberg and Pelle Snickars (Stockholm: Statens ljud- och bildarkiv, 2008), 275–76.

51. Folke Tersman, “Ethics”, in The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (London: Routledge, 2008), 111.

52. Or of “disinterested pleasure”, if one will.

53. Vivian Sobchack, Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 244.

54. Ibid., 247.

55. Wayne C. Booth, The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 294–95.

56. Petley, “Cannibal Holocaust and the Pornography of Death”, 184.