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# Invisible Culture

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## "Eat it alive and swallow it whole!": Resavoring *Cannibal Holocaust* as a Mockumentary

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"The worst returns to laughter"  
Shakespeare, King Lear

We all have an appetite for seeing, an *appétit de l'oeuil* as Lacan explains it: it is through our eyes that we ingest the Other, the world.<sup>1</sup> And in this sense, what better way to introduce a film on anthropophagy, Ruggero Deodato's 1979 film, *Cannibal Holocaust*, than through the different ways it has been seen.<sup>2</sup> It seems mankind has forever been obsessed with the need to understand the world through the eyes, with the need for visual evidence. From Thomas the Apostle, to Othello's "ocular proof," to our television "reality shows," as the saying goes: "Seeing is believing." We have redefined ourselves as *Homo Videns*: breathers, consumers, dependants, and creators of images. Truth, in our society, now hinges on the visual; it is mediated by images. Thus it is from the necessity for ocular proof that Cinéma Vérité, Direct Cinema, documentary filmmaking and the mockumentary or mock-documentary genre stem. It is within this tradition that the Italian production *Cannibal Holocaust* inserts itself, as a hybrid trans-genre film. To better understand this film, I will not only look at it as a traditional horror film, but also as a contemporary mockumentary satire that presents itself as "reality" and highlights the spectator's eye/I's primal appetite.

In the manner of Peter Watkins' film *Culloden*, Deodato's film is intended to confuse the audience's perception of fiction and reality through the insertion of films within the film: interviews and footage from a supposedly fake documentary, "Last Road to Hell" are actually real while the scenes from the "Green Inferno" documentary (handheld sequences with little editing, scratches, etcetera) are seemingly real but actually fake.<sup>3</sup> Yet at the same time, *Cannibal Holocaust* satirically follows the mockumentary tradition of films like *Mondo Cane* (1962) and *Nanook of the North* (1921) or the infamous 1938 radio show, *War of the Worlds* by Orson Welles.<sup>4</sup>

In the spirit of the literary mock-heroic, a mockumentary uses the formal codes and conventions of the documentary -- especially the implication of presenting "the most accurate and truthful portrayal of the socio-historical world" -- and subverts those conventions by representing a fictional subject and critiquing its content.<sup>5</sup> The mockumentary, mocks the documentary genre's "cultural status," as Roscoe and Hight explain in their recent text, *Faking It*; it imitates documentary stylistic conventions and aesthetics but only to destabilize truth.<sup>6</sup> Hight and Roscoe also call this a "latently reflexive" genre because it is difficult to predict how audiences will read the films.<sup>7</sup> Such a problem is evidenced not only in *Cannibal Holocaust* but in fictional precursors such as the infamous 1971 film *Snuff*, where a murder myth is spread for publicity's sake through real institutions and media, thus changing the film's status from fiction into scandalous fact. The problem is also present in the *Mondo* genre itself (with films such as *Mondo Cane*, *Mondo Magic*, *Mondo Bizarro*, *Africa Addio*, *Mondo Freud* or telling titles like *Beasts and Savages*). These films usually present different "exotic" cultures and rituals with the typical official sounding documentary-type voice over (preferably British, of course), but with facts blended with deceptions to achieve the status of "reality." At times, such blatant artificial constructs create humor and/or satire, but at other times they are exploitative and problematic constructions of so-called facts around the world[[Fig.1](#)].

There are also mockumentaries which "develop the satiric possibilities of the form in order to critique an aspect of popular culture."<sup>8</sup> This is precisely the type of mockumentary *Cannibal Holocaust* is. A film on cannibalism, it utilizes the audience's assumptions on documentary and truth to undermine both but also to critique and satirize our attitudes toward exploitative anthropological documentaries such as the era's ever-popular *Mondo* films, thus confusing the audience's reception of the film, and ultimately perpetrating a hoax. The movie's politics question who is the cannibal? As the anthropologist Professor Monroe asks in the film's ending sequence: Is it the viewer who has just ingested this most unsavory film? Is it the documentary filmmakers of the "Green Inferno"? Is it the director himself who has just made us watch it? These very questions destabilize our notions of fact and fiction[[Fig. 2](#)].

Nonetheless, aside from its tremendous popularity in Japan (second only to E.T., it claims), critics of *Cannibal Holocaust* have deemed it a disgusting, scandalous, abhorrent film. Some naïve critics have misunderstood it to the point of suggesting that it is really a snuff movie.<sup>9</sup> As Mikita Brottman explains: "Contact with such contagious films, some claim, can even lead to confusion or disregard for the distinction between reality and representation."<sup>10</sup> This "power of the false," as Gilles Deleuze calls it, is what becomes the very structure of the film and the root

of the discomfort for its viewers.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the theme of cannibalism itself contributes to the vitriolic criticism: while cannibalism is sanctioned in some "serious" instances (i.e. the film *Alive!*), it is considered completely abhorrent and taboo in other films such as Deodato's.

Other critics view Deodato's film as overtly racist and misogynous, limited perhaps by their own unconscious projections regarding colonial guilt that the film reflects back at them. The critics' reaction to the film has to do with the violent tension between the "developed" West and an "undeveloped" non-West, or what Tzvetan Todorov has called "Nous et les autres." The non-Western societies the imperialist West had encountered were often tribal, deemed as "primitive," "savage," and certainly exotic. Structuralist anthropology implies that these "primitive" societies are signs of a past, the past of all humanity. In this film's case, if the anthropophagy recalls our distant past, the violence recalls a not-so-distant past that post-colonial guilt is all-too ready to erase.

It may also be that the critics' misunderstanding of the film stems from the fact that they are reading it as a tragedy of exploitation rather than a satire. Some deemed it immoral and unethical even though, like most horror movies and scary fairy-tales, *Cannibal Holocaust* is not at all subversive but rather moralistic -- an anti-*Mondo* film where the unethical documentary filmmakers die horribly for their transgressions. To fully grasp its meaning, we must not forget *Cannibal Holocaust* maintains itself as a film that is in fact, "deliberately resistant, knowingly radical in content or form, [and] self-consciously ironic."<sup>12</sup> This is the film's most important artistic contribution: it is deceptive, but cunningly so. Not only does it lure the audience into its fiction but even so-called "critical viewers" such as film critics, who end up thinking the film is snuff. Nevertheless, the film's essential moralistic satirical dimension lies in the fact that, like satire as defined by Bogel:

It enlists the audience in what is an exemplary vision and condemnation. Vision, because the audience, and the normative or ideal society for which it stands for, is to be persuaded that the satiric object exists and that it is repellent, even if it seems otherwise (whence the frequent recourse to metaphors of surface and depth, outside and inside, superficial attractiveness and deeper corruption).<sup>13</sup>

This is the moralistic tone most horror films adopt; in *Cannibal Holocaust's* case, what it condemns is the powerful ethics audiences assume documentary filmmaking has and the lack of ethics some documentary filmmakers have proven to have. It also denounces racism and positions of superiority vis-à-vis "the savages." Nonetheless, a cautionary word about satire has been given us by Anna

Jameson: "Correct them! Show me that one human being who has been made essentially better by satire! Oh no no! there is something in human nature which hardens itself against the lash – something in satire which excites only the lowest and worst of our propensities."<sup>14</sup> Perchance this excitement of the "low" is the inherent flaw to any satirical attempt at morality, or perhaps this excitement has to do with satire's inherently deceitful nature, its capacity to question and cast doubt.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the roles of comedy (with satire as a sub-genre) and tragedy, explaining that ultimately both lead to Catharsis. If we follow this definition, then *Cannibal Holocaust* is cathartic to the point of nausea. In this sense, the film is also directly related to the genre of farce, which uses humor and every bodily function imaginable to create meaning. As Brottman concludes:

Above all, *cinéma vomitif* is the most bodily of all filmic forms . . . It has long been testified that what causes fear and horror (and also, in a somewhat different context, what causes comedy and laughter) is evidence of an absence of bodily control, witnessed most vividly by the collapse of bodily boundaries and the external appearance of things that should properly be kept inside.<sup>15</sup>

And in Deodato's film, this collapse of bodily boundaries becomes also a collapse of other boundaries: between the spectator and the actor and ultimately between documentary and fiction.

If horror, exploitation, or *vomitif* films are so repugnant it is mainly because we have lost our moorings, we no longer know what is "right" and "wrong" or "true" or "false." Like other *vomitif* films, *Cannibal Holocaust* is also abhorrent because, "they all deal with bodies inverted, reduced, transmogrified and therefore made ridiculous."<sup>16</sup> It is this ridicule that is the source of satire in the film, the "fear and pity" in Aristotle's words, which causes catharsis. If a turtle and a muskrat are killed, and documentary footage shows men being executed, the audience asks, "If this is real, what else might be real?" As Kerekes and Slater explain of the film, "This honed abhorrence increases the potency of all subsequent acts of violence ten-fold"<sup>17</sup>[Fig. 3]. Thus the film also seems to announce the link between the ruthless killing of animals and fascistic behavior, ultimately coming together in the rape of the Yacumo woman the film crew call a "little monkey"<sup>18</sup> [Fig. 4].

*Cannibal Holocaust* begins with a long panning shot of New York City as we hear a voice-over of a newscast reporter discussing the "fact" that humankind's conquest of space and the universe proceeds while "some parts of this planet remain in the stone-age." Then the reporter alludes to cannibalism, and introduces the film's plot: the search for Alan Yates (Robert Kerman) and his disappeared film crew. In this

news story, the crew is presented as a group of daring young individuals willing to do anything in order to film a documentary about the "Green Inferno," a secluded part of the Amazon rainforest [Fig.5]. As Faye Daniels (Francesca Ciardi) the crew's scriptgirl and director's girlfriend explains: "For us the difficult just doesn't exist, and the impossible takes a little more time." Then the audience learns that they have been missing for many months and that a search funded by the Pan Am broadcasting corporation and lead by NYU Anthropologist, Professor Monroe, (played by porno star R. Bolla, a.k.a. Salvatore Basile) is going to look for them in the "Green Inferno." Appropriately, during this section of the film every time the "Green Inferno" is mentioned there is a wide-angle shot of NYC buildings, introducing the film's satirical juxtaposition of civilization and savagery [Fig. 6].

Professor Monroe's search sequences play out as "reconstructions of the facts" as in a documentary drama; the audience knows they are "reenacted" and contrast with the "Green Inferno" sequences. After following a trail of clues (and a one-legged corpse) left behind by Yates's crew, the search party observes a ritualistic rape and execution of an adulterous Yacumo woman, and meets with the Yacumo, a warrior tribe [Fig. 7]. Then, Professor Monroe, Chako (Ricardo Fuentes) and Miguel decide to look for the Yanomamo and Shamatari who are reported to be anthropophagous and enemies to each other. After allying themselves with the Yanomamo, the professor's party witnesses the ritualistic mutilation of a warrior and find an altar made with the remains of Yates's film crew [Fig. 8]. Finally after some trading, the Yanomamo give Monroe the film cans and invite the professor and his team for "dinner": a feast of warrior flesh [Fig. 9].

The section regarding Monroe's fair exchange and visit to the "Green Inferno" ends and cuts to New York City and the Pan Am Broadcasting offices where the broadcasting executives and Monroe are deciding on how and when to present the footage he has recovered. But first the audience is shown another documentary film directed by Yates and his crew called "The Last Road to Hell." As the Pan Am executive puts it, it's "Pretty powerful stuff, eh?" In this film we see the execution of enemies by an army in an anonymous African country. The broadcasting executive actually explains that this is all a set-up created by Yates and his team -- this documentary is a lie. In truth, however, the audience seems to intuit that this is real footage taken from some familiar newsreel and in fact included in many prior *Mondo* films. Following the logical consequences of this deception, the audience is set-up to believe that the following documentary sequences must therefore be true. The hoax is perpetrated and the supposedly real, but really fake, footage of the "Green Inferno" is no longer clearly perceived as such by the spectator: the thin line is now completely blurred. The final part of the film consists of alternating sequences of the "Green Inferno" with the executives and Professor Monroe discussing the contents of the film they are watching. The audience watches a

rough cut of that footage consisting of grainy reels interrupted by numbers and scratches (for enhanced "verisimilitude"). At one point, after watching the unethical footage, the broadcasting executive tells the professor that, "the more we rape their senses, the happier they are" [Fig. 10]. This seems to be a wink of the eye on the part of Deodato. Ironically, he's telling the audience that this is exactly what he is doing by showing this footage; he's raping their senses, or raping them senseless. Either way, the audience continues to swallow the film and its fiction, no longer knowing what is genuine and what is fake, alternating nausea with nervous laughter. This rape of the senses is part of what the film satirizes. In an interview Deodato explains that the idea for the film came from the news media's constant search for a scoop (especially during the time of the Red Brigades in Italy) and the subsequent rape of the spectators senses.<sup>19</sup>

The audience slowly learns of the team's many transgressions, of their intrusions into the private sphere with a camera. The film shows four young documentary filmmakers ready to do anything to get the right shot, to create the right fiction. "Keep rolling, we're gonna get an Oscar for this," one of the filmmakers excitedly declares while the Yacumo eat Jack Anders (Perry Perkamen), another of their fellow crew members [Fig. 11]. The "Green Inferno" film culminates as the director, the last one to die, even manages to capture his own death on film [Fig. 12].

*Cannibal Holocaust's* structure is a quixotesque *mise-en-abyme*. We find metafiction within the film or the film itself is metafiction: we end up watching two films within a third film. The film not only uses special effects to underscore its "realness," but it also presents real deaths of animals and uses non-actors as cast: the Yacumo, Yanomamo and Shamatari truly are indigenous peoples from the Amazon rainforest, and it was shot on-location. These elements of reality make the film seem so real, perhaps even too real; its violence is necessary, it is part of the rape of the spectators' senses, the "Ocular Proof" of the truth. Thus finally, even though the cannibals are not really cannibals it doesn't matter, the audience believes they are. They devour the idea of cannibalism and through the act of watching the *Cannibal Holocaust* unfold, the audience in turn become cannibals of the visual sort [Fig. 13]. From the scenes of ritualistic rape and abortion to those of transgressive rape, of animal killing, of man eating, etcetera, what Deodato relies on the most – aside from special effects and a spell-binding musical score directed and composed by Riz Ortolani (the Oscar-winning *Mondo Cane* score composer) – is the spectator's primal condition as a visual cannibal, as a consumer. The film's ultimate satire is that the spectators visually ingest the world of *Cannibal Holocaust* and no longer know where to stand.

According to Christian Metz: ". . . the activity of perception which [cinema] involves is real (the cinema is not a fantasy), but the perceived is not really the object, it is

its shade, its phantom, its double, its replica in a new kind of mirror.”<sup>20</sup> What spectators perceive in a film is not the subject of the film, but themselves as objects within the film; this is cinema's greatest deception. This is an operational example of what Picasso explained as art making us realize the truth. *Cannibal Holocaust* reveals, veils, and unveils the many dimensions of deception. This explains the feelings of horror and abjection experienced while watching the film. Yet at the same time, with the introspective humor that some of the film's "serious" critics lack, the horror may be turned into satire, the lies into truth and vice versa.

It is from this dissolution of boundaries of film/reality, actor/spectator that the critics' distaste for Deodato's film and the audience's fear and nausea stem. On the one hand these feelings originate in the cathartic power the movie conveys, but our abjection and fear can also be explained through Lacan's concept of the gaze. The gaze is both refracting and reflecting. With the gaze we lose the position of figure ground, what I look at is never what I wish to see, I want to see more. If beyond appearance there is nothing in itself, that is the gaze. If we define ourselves in the world through the gaze, we find ourselves in an ungraspable world of chaos and thus, trying to set limits to this chaos, we look at the world through a film screen. But the reflection *Cannibal Holocaust* shows is still that of a taboo world of chaos where spectators can only define themselves as cannibals. As Lacan explains: “It is through the gaze that I enter the light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. . . . the gaze is the instrument through which . . . I am photo-graphed”<sup>21</sup> [Fig. 14]. And this photographing of the audience within the context of cannibalism is perhaps the ultimate aberration and the only truth to which the film deceitfully leads.

In Lacan's "Mirror Stage," the child looks into the mirror and sees not itself but another, this other who alienates it from itself. And in a similar way, the film screen makes the audience define itself either as flesh-eating "whites" who dismember and devour a tortoise or a muskrat, who rape a Yacumo woman, and burn their village; or as the man-eating Yanomamo; or simply as spectators who become aware of a voyeuristic and visually cannibalistic condition. In any case, the reflection is clearly taboo and must be censored. As Freud explains, “. . . things that are shunned frighten us because they manifest, in a terrifying or unfamiliar form, those parts of ourselves we are afraid to acknowledge: our repressed appetites, libidinal instincts, *schadenfreude*, fascination with flesh and death.”<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising therefore, that the audience is afraid and the critics are reluctant to digest this film at all. Yet what most forget is that it is still a *reflection*, never the thing *itself*, and this according to Lacan might be the ultimate level of deception and dissatisfaction.

If *Cannibal Holocaust* is so horrifying to many it is because it destroys boundaries

between the spectator and the representation. Like the act of vomiting or screaming, it goes inside the bodies of the spectators as well as the bodies on the screen. The film may at first seem simplistic and naïve in its mise-en-scène, its acting, and character development, yet it is purposely so. Unlike other cannibal films of the seventies and eighties, Kerekes and Slater state that “. . . it remains by far the most interesting, intelligent and commanding of the cycle to date.”<sup>23</sup> Like most satires its structure is simple yet the underlying themes are mordant and multi-levelled. Says Brottman: "*Cannibal Holocaust* is an “improper” film because it is a film of chaos and warning. It warns of the consequences of social breakdown, of moral collapse, and the failure of the system of exchange, of what happens when the system of giving and taking back is replaced by the system of taking and taking back”<sup>24</sup> [Fig. 15]. It is also a film that critiques “Western man’s” megalomaniacal savagery and media practices themselves; the film becomes especially disturbing because it alters parameters of truth and fiction. Ultimately the spectators participate in its chaos (and so do the most skeptical critics) by watching the entire film, by becoming cannibalistic voyeurs, and by wondering aloud whether the alleged projectionist *did* steal the footage as a written disclosure explains at the end of the film (the ultimate attempt to deceive through “official” rhetoric). But as with any other satire, this film metamorphoses into that which it criticizes, shape-shifting into confusion and doubt.

Through its presentation of the man-eating "savages," a recurring term during the film, and through its dissolution of the reality-fiction boundary, *Cannibal Holocaust* becomes a satire of documentary filmmaking, of colonialism, of exploitation, and especially of our hypocritical yet "politically correct" reactions to these issues. The film is the lie that reveals the structure of the truth (or in this case denounces it), as Campbell explains in relation to Lacan,

Truth may be revealed in speech which contains an abundance of falsehoods . . . he insists that truth discloses itself, not in plain propositions, but in lies, mistakes, trickery, and tall stories. Lacan's truth has the structure of fiction.<sup>25</sup>

This fictional structure or tall-tale as revealed in the film's trickeries is nonetheless a revelation of the truth. In Spanish, when someone criticizes someone else with virulence we say "¡te lo/a comiste vivo/a!" ("you ate him/her alive!"), and when one tells a lie and someone believes it we say: "¡te la tragaste enterita!" ("you swallowed it whole!"). Interestingly, this is how most critics understand (or rather misunderstand) *Cannibal Holocaust*. Ironically and comically enough this is perhaps exactly what the film asks us to do: eat it alive and swallow it whole [Fig. 16].



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1. “Modifying the formula I have of desire as unconscious *-man’s desire is the desire of the Other-* I would say that it is a question of a sort of desire *on the part of the Other*, at the end of which is the *showing (le donner-a-voir)*. How could this showing satisfy something, if there is not some kind of appetite of the eye on the part of the person looking?” Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. H. Norton & Co., 1998), 115. ↑

2. Ruggero Deodato, *Cannibal Holocaust*. 35mm., 98 min., FD Cinematografica, Italy/Colombia, 1979. ↑

3. Peter Watkins, *Culloden*, video, 69 min., BBC, UK, 1964. ↑

4. Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero Jacopetti, and Franco E. Prosperi, *Mondo Cane*. 35mm. 105min., Video Dimensions, Italy, 1962. Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*. 35mm, 79 min., Revillon Frères, USA/France, 1922. ↑

5. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking It: Mock Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2001), 6. ↑

6. *Ibid.*, 5. ↑

7. *Ibid.*, 53. ↑

8. *Ibid.*, 71. ↑

9. See *Photo France*, January, 1981. For more on British snuff scandals please see David Kerekes and David Slater, *See no Evil: Banned Films and Video Controversy* (Manchester: Headpress, 2000), 110-113. ↑
10. Mikita Brottman, *Offensive Films: Toward an Anthropology of the Cinéma Vomitif* (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 4. ↑
11. As Deleuze explains, in such a film or through such a film, "Even 'the truthful man ends up realizing that he has never stopped lying' as Nietzsche said. . . . Everywhere it is the metamorphoses of the false which replace the form of the true." Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 133-34. ↑
12. Brottman, 2. ↑
13. Frederick V. Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes: Rhetoric and Reading from Johnson to Byron* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 3. ↑
14. Anna Jameson, *Characteristics of Women* (New York: AMS Publishers, 1967), 7. ↑
15. Brottman, 11-13. ↑
16. *Ibid.*, 14. ↑
17. David Kerekes and David Slater, *Killing for Culture, An Illustrated History of Death Film* (London: Creation Books, 1994), 48. ↑
18. See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1978). Adorno likens cruelty to animals to fascistic cruelty against humans: "The possibility of pogroms is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally-wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze –'after all, it's only an animal'- reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings, the perpetrators having again and again to reassure themselves that it is 'only an animal', because they could never fully believe this, even of animals" (68). ↑

19. "Interview with Ruggero Deodato," *Cannibal Holocaust*, DVD Special Features. ↑

20. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifiers: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 45. ↑

21. Lacan, 106. ↑

22. Sigmund Freud quoted in Brottman, 2. ↑

23. Kerekes and Slater, 45. ↑

24. Brottman, 137. ↑

25. Jeremy Campbell, *The Liar's Tale- A History of Falsehood* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 200. ↑

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