

The Real ‘Faces of Death’: art shock in *Des Morts*

NO ONE ESCAPES FROM THE CYCLE OF REBIRTH,
FROM THE KING OF DEATH
(Buddhist Funeral, Thailand)ⁱ

“When we started the filming we were faced with the brutality of death and the intellectual ideas that we had at the beginning just faded away”.
(Thierry Zéno)ⁱⁱ

“Masters of Death
I have neither blasphemed nor applauded you”
(Henri Michaux)ⁱⁱⁱ

Introduction

Throughout the long history of documentary cinema it is the mondo ‘shockumentary’ film that emerges as its most transgressive artefact. Despised by Anglo-Saxon critics/commentators and post-colonial theorists alike the mondo film, originally an Italian invention, has gone on to profoundly influence many aspects of the contemporary media landscape (actuality TV, shock reality docs, extreme anthropology specials, email and mobile phone death virals). The critical response to mondo films is confused and largely negative because of mondo cinema’s shocking and brutal imagery, moral ambiguity and unstinting devotion to one of the key principles of documentary practice—the ‘creative treatment of actuality’.^{iv} Buttressed in the 1960s by gritty direct cinema, ‘kitchen-sink’ realism, ethnographic research, and the politics of revolution and social change the mondo film seemed glossy, garish and dishonest. The hidden ‘classics’ of mondo cinema thus languished in the ‘unclassifiable’ sections of video rental stores and film encyclopaedias (if they were there at all).^v

The subject of this chapter is one of the most unforgettable examples of mondo cinema: the 1979 Belgian film *Des Morts* (Of the Dead). The creators of *Des Morts*—principally Thierry Zéno, working with Jean-Pol Ferbus and Dominique Garny—emerged from the Brussels avant-garde scene of the late 1960s, energized by the transgressions of experimental art. Their first feature was the widely-banned *Vase de Noces*; the sensational alternative title attributed to the film—‘The Pig-Fucking Movie’—wrongly condemning the film as a debased horror in much the same way that the video box cover art for *Driller Killer* defined that as a prime ‘video nasty’.

Their second feature, *Des Morts* recounts the death rituals (executions, autopsies, funerals, wakes) of the world with *sang-froid* clarity aligned with a sardonic mondo wit leaving the viewer drained, shocked, numbed yet certainly more aware of their encroaching mortality (one reviewer described it as a film you ‘watch with your gut’). *Des Morts*, a documentary film made by artists using garish shock tactics and avant-garde sensibilities (notably in Alain Pierre’s soundscape for the film) therefore operates within and across notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. When the mechanics of death as media spectacle rears up today (in the work of Gunther von Hagens—‘Doctor Death’—for example) we are reminded of the role mondo cinema played in this macabre fantasy. In the work of Zéno however, this fantasy is not clear cut. Ultimately, the fact that *Des*

Morts was admired by both cinema aesthete Amos Vogel (he called it ‘horrifying and liberating’) and sleaze fanzine editor Charles Kilgore demonstrates the brilliant way in which this haunting transgressive film defies all ‘respectable’ boundaries. The way in which this works is the subject of this chapter.

What is mondo cinema?

Traces of the mondo film, one of the most controversial and overlooked genres in cinematic history can be found in a bewildering array of contemporary mass media product (cable and satellite TV shows depicting ‘the world’s worst...’; the voyeurism and surveillance of ‘reality TV’; the anti-narrative fictions of J.G. Ballard and Patrick McCabe; Godfrey Reggio and Ron Fricke’s ‘cinema of looking’; the ironic mockery of Eurotrash; the infantile sick-making of Bizarre magazine). Media forms that promote a voyeuristic agenda (*National Geographic* for example) and those that promote a social one (*New Internationalist*) together with most contemporary news reportage, draw heavily on the aesthetics of the mondo film. Jonathan Ross once dismissed mondo as a “short-lived craze”^{vi} yet it lives on today in manifest forms. Common opinion states that the mondo film began at the inception of cinema; as soon as film cameras were pointed at things. In my book on mondo cinema I argued that the mondo film truthfully began in the early 1960s when an Italian film based on a Tuscan colloquial expression called *Mondo Cane* directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti, Franco Prospero and Paolo Cavara was released.^{vii} The trail of mondo films begins properly with this film because it was a beautifully crafted, mesmerizing and unique; there had been nothing like it before. The discussion here over the fine line and the blurring of the boundary between ‘art’ and ‘sleaze’ originates in the curious ambiguity of Jacopetti and Prospero’s work.

The intentions of the creators of the most exceptional mondo films were entirely serious and artful and should be respected as such (see for example Jacopetti’s *Considerations on the Documentary Film*^{viii}). Such films were often not conceived to ‘exploit’ audiences although many mondo films later did this; they were not made to ‘break the taboos’ of societies or to agitate for any meaningful socio-cultural or political change, but some did this too; they were not intended to be pornographic, although many exhibited and encouraged voyeuristic tendencies. These films were created as cinematic, poetic and useful commentaries on human behaviour in some of its wildest and weirdest formations. The supreme mundos were, unlike many of their offspring, created with great skill and craft supported by not insignificant budgets. The most noteworthy mondo films were films that certainly changed forever the way the world was viewed and reported on through a lens. Mondo was a global phenomenon: there were examples from France (Claude LeLouch’s *La Femme Spectacle (Paris in the Raw)*), Germany (Manfred Durniok’s *Welt Ohne Scham/Mondo Bizarre*, Scandinavia (*Naked North*) and the USA (*Mondo Mod*). Even Britain enjoyed a mini mondo flurry: Norman Cohen’s *The London Nobody Knows*, Edward Stuart Abraham’s *Our Incredible World*, and Arnold Louis Miller’s *Primitive London/London in the Raw* all offered shockumentary thrills to Europe’s staidest audience.

Jacopetti noted in *Mondo Cane* that “though this is a world which has gone to the dogs, it is also a world in which we are happy to live”^{ix}. This utterance epitomises the mondo paradox writ large. This type of conceptual contradiction has arguably done a disservice to the critical record of the genre over the years and yet it is these very

contradictions that make mondo films so fascinating and prescient. These apparently contradictory aspects are evidenced in the differing ways that mondo cinema can be defined: as documentary; exploitation and as art.

Mondo and Documentary

In his *Introduction to Documentary* Bill Nichols defines mondo films' relationship with documentary as that of being a "cabaret of curiosities (which) is often an embarrassing fellow-traveller more than a central element."^x In this he reinforces the received wisdom that in the documentary tradition mondo films are at best pseudo-documentary films, at worst sensations contrary to all that is known as actuality (that is if the films are mentioned at all). There are clear stylistic and ideological reasons as to why mondo films have been kept out of documentary film history and the 'distancing' effect engendered by this response is relevant to an understanding of how and why mondo films have been so wilfully ignored. Firstly, the trend in documentary film in the 1960s (especially in the UK/US) was for 'observational' or 'participatory' documentary film modes, the former constructed film documents out of blank record; the latter utilised interview and interaction between filmmaker and subject and use of archive and testimony. Clearly and immediately mondo films transgress these 'cardinal rules' offering a perversion, even, of these modes. The 'participatory' mode crucially assumes an 'anthropological' approach to the presentation of 'real' events. This sociological, academic approach leads the viewer to expect to "witness the historical world as represented by someone who actively engages with, rather than unobtrusively observes, poetically reconfigures, or argumentatively assembles the world."^{xi}

Although the mid-late mondo films of Angelo and Alfredo Castiglioni were constructed with the filmmakers participation in the cultures of the film, a "scientific approach", many examples of mondo film ignore the notion of empirical delivery, if not through the distance created by the edit process (where time/space/geography is collapsed) than by that most powerful and essential of mondo 'tools' the voice-over. Notwithstanding the patronising tone of many voice-overs the numerous attempts at convincing the viewer that the camera crew had been engaging intimately with the people they were capturing on film are often negated by the proliferation of 'secret' filming using 'hidden cameras', a peep-show mode of record. Mondo films further eschew participatory notions such as the notion of the filmmaker as a "social actor" or as leaving a "bodily presence"^{xii} with their insistence on aerial shots (the helicopter is a favourite methodology) and by use of acquired footage from outside sources. Similarly the notion of observational filmmaking was subverted in mondo films (this despite the ironic fact that the tools of the observational documentary film- lightweight Arriflex cameras, for example, were critical in the development of mondo films). Reviews of *Mondo Cane* lamented that if the film was not instead made by Jean Rouch.^{xiii} This and other reviews simply reflect the trend in film criticism of the time for an engagement with authenticity, realism and fidelity in documentary practice. Thus despite fulfilling Michael Renov's notion of documentary as "a discourse...of delirium"^{xiv} the mondo film continues to have a problematic if inextricable relationship with the notion of the documentary film.

Mondo and exploitation

It is noticeable how most of the meagre entries for mondo films in film indexes are indifferent to the genre, describing the style and approach of the mondo film as either “repellent” (*The Oxford Companion to Film*), “lurid” (*The Macmillan International Film Encyclopedia*), “emetic and glib” (*Halliwell’s Film Guide*). The conceptualisation of mondo films as exploitation films has been well established and is still the realm within which they are most frequently located (particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries). The engagement with mondo films in the underground press has emphasised the ‘shock’ value of the films, as these are the values most coherent with the ideologies of the various ‘paracinematic’ publishing exercises. Such fanzines tendency to present a sensationalist angle on the mondo aesthetic reflects the desire for such magazines to celebrate the transgressive, the weird and the taboo. Bill Landis’ *Sleazoid Express* has, for example, published a tabloid-style account of the work of Jacopetti and Prosperi in both magazine and book form; the Italian horror fanzines *Nocturno* and *Amarcord* have published articles devoted to the gore elements in mondo films (again linking mondo with snuff movies). One publication Charles Kilgore’s *Ecco* is structured around the ‘cinema of attractions’ and Kilgore’s love of mondo movies defines the ideology of the magazine. However it is perhaps not surprising that American engagement with mondo films is largely devoted to the field of exploitation; this after all is the place where the notion of film as spectacle and commercial tool has been refined most successfully. American producers were some of the quickest to capitalize on the success of *Mondo Cane* and are most responsible for creating the genre as an exploitation strand. Perhaps the most grotesque example of this was producer Jerry Gross’s re-launch of Jacopetti and Prosperi’s *Africa Addio* as *Africa Blood and Guts* where the techniques of exploitation reached new heights (or lows).

Mondo and art film

Links have been made already between mondo in general, and *Mondo Cane* in particular, as expressions of experimental art cinema. Perhaps rightly so, as to examine the identity and ideology of the ‘avant-garde film’ is to enter a cinematic arena where shock, confusion, sensory assault, contrast/juxtaposition, sex and violence are plentiful. In an interview with Nico Panigutti Jacopetti even defined in his own words the importance of the confrontational edit process (the “shock cut”^{xv}) to the language of the mondo film. Such ‘shock cuts’ appear regularly and most spectacularly in the films of Jacopetti and Prosperi and were applied in subsequent mondo films, a use of montage to create traumatic and critical meanings worthy of Eisenstein. Similarly the avant-garde technique of deconstruction is critical in the mondo aesthetic, where extensive use of freeze-frames, rapid zooms, and extreme close-ups drive the energy and breathlessness of the films (much to the abhorrence, as noted above, of documentary advocates). The more recent development of the ‘compilation tape’ (*AMOK Sensory Assault* and others) — a collage of disparate footage — can be seen as the result of the cut and paste methodology afforded by cheap VCR copying devices and clearly, if brutally, reworks mondo stylistics. It is this reflexive quality of the mondo film that creates the most transgressive moments which when refracted through a post-modern aesthetic continues to shock and surprise.

The most notable films of the avant-garde to be associated with *Mondo Cane* have been Georges Franju's *La Sange des Betes* (*Blood of the Beasts*) and Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*. Brakhage made his infamous autopsy film based on the doctrine of seeing, witnessing to better know, taken directly from the origins of the meaning of the word 'autopsis' ("an eyewitness observation", "any critical analysis"). Although Brakhage directly avoided loading his film with metaphor (despite earlier planning to weave other shots between the autopsy scenes) this definition of the word and action clearly lives on in the mondo aesthetic. Brakhage's "drive towards the creation of an aesthetic" through a desire to "keep it clean, go spare, go clear" is echoed in Jacopetti's conception of the "total film". Franju meanwhile conceived his abattoir film as a revealing of truth through the camera lens where even shocking images, "the heart of the atrocious", must not be spared the viewer in an attack on societal hypocrisy. In construction the film prefigures mondo aesthetics, not just in its nightmarish, disturbing imagery and use of the amoral metaphor but also in the way that Franju employs a light, popular song of the time (Charles Trenet's 'La Mer') as a jolting effect (critic Raymond Durnat called this "nihilistic anarchism" and labelled both Franju and Jacopetti "poet-tourists").

So mondo films engage with the notion of the avant-garde through the construction of the filmic image-sound. But they also engage with the notion of the avant-garde via a critique of the practices of high art. One of the most famous scenes from *Mondo Cane* involves a mocking representation of one of the French artist Yves Klein's. In *Mondo Cane No.2* a Greek avant-garde artist with a technique of paintings consisting of vomited-up pigments is also mocked. The film ends with a further parody of performance art: a concert where the tune is rendered via slaps across the performers faces. Vale and Juno have argued that 'incredibly strange films' (which they have indicated includes mondo film) anyway can be subversive and 'critical' in the way that is expected of most avant-garde filmmaking processes: "(Incredibly Strange Films) often present unpopular- even radical- views addressing social, political, racial or sexual inequalities, hypocrisy in religion or government; or in other ways they assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality, violence and other mores."^{xvi} British author J.G. Ballard was so enthralled by mondo films that he dedicated his novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* to the aesthetics and politics of mondo ("radical declensions of violence"^{xvii}); the notion of violent media as pleasurable entertainment is the key to the book. The situating of Godfrey Reggio's qatsi trilogy into an avant-garde context resonates with the mondo film too — both in the sense of filmic scenarios and the language of film aiding a spiritual awareness — a journey, but also with the presentation of the shock of the real (the first film of the trilogy *Koyaanisqatsi* has been labelled a 'modern-day mondo film'). Finally, questions of 'authorship' informing discussions of the filmmaker as a unique creator of a work of art, likening experimental filmmakers to the creators of books or paintings, are significant in any discussion of film as art. The presence of Jacopetti as producer, editor, director emphasising his role as an 'author' (an auteur) is an image that Jacopetti has cultivated somewhat over the years.

By paying close attention to a fine example of mondo cinema (*Des Morts*), where all of the above elements collide and collude, it can be demonstrated that the mondo film is a place where a truly transgressive cinema takes place and the only known Belgian example of mondo documentary one of cinema's most transgressive artefacts. The

makers of *Des Morts* were not sleaze-merchants, nor schlock-meisters with a string of trash cinema trailing in their wake. They emerged from the European avant-garde art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. Their work was ‘disgusting’ in many ways but was also immensely beautiful. The Belgian’s approach to documentary film and death addressed one of the last forbidden territories. Amos Vogel noted that documentary filmmakers have visited everywhere... except death...death is the “taboo in its purest form”.^{xviii} The groundwork for *Des Morts* was laid in a film made several years before, a film that generated Zéno’s reputation for art shock cinema.

Pig-Fucking in Namur: *Vase de Noces*

Thierry Zéno is the filmmaker behind *Des Morts*. Zéno is an auteur director who still owns and administers the rights to his astonishing films. Zéno is known by the Mexican tribespeople (the Tzotziles) he frequently visits and works with as “The man who makes pictures”.^{xix} The Belgian art traditions that inspired Zéno and his colleagues Ferbus and Garny incorporate hallucinogenic painting and writing, surrealism, outsider art, eroticism. The works of Henri Michaux, notably his concept of the *dessin cinématique*- visions of intensity and depth that may be ‘surreal’ yet offer an existential clarity and sense of fulfilment, are evident in Zéno’s films.^{xx} In presenting human fears and anxieties in such an inventive way we do indeed get a sense of “the Divine Comedy of the modern world”.^{xxi} The art of Felicien Rops, like Zeno from Namur, is filtered into Zéno’s films especially the flashes of the Flemish tendency for finding tenderness and beauty in the ugly and grotesque. These influences are accompanied by the spectre of anthropological and social theories and films of Henri Storck, Luc de Heusch (in *The Drunken King* a study of African ritual, de Heusch employs structuralist notions; Zéno uses these in the construction of his films). Belgian-born Claude Lévi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind*), French writers and artists impacting upon the French-speaking part of the country such as Philippe Aries (*The Hour of Our Death*) and Jean Dubuffet, Flemish luminaries such as Bosch, Breughel and Joris Ivens also appear in Zeno’s work (according to Johannes Fabian, Lévi-Strauss defined anthropology as being “nothing but the study of death”^{xxii}). Amos Vogel described Zéno as “a subversive of cinema”: Zéno’s shocks are always tempered by deep symbolism, mysticism and challenging dynamics of avant-garde aesthetics.

As Zéno notes: “Poetry and painting have fed into this film. It’s certainly true that in his 1974 debut feature, *Vase de Noces*, there are scenes where all of this comes together and sequences which are related to the imagery of Bosch. *Vase de Noces* (Wedding Trough) is a dreamlike tale of a man living out a poor medieval existence, alone on a farm with his animals, principally a sow and her offspring (born out of a union between the man and the pig). He passes the time by practicing alchemy and cooking vile foodstuffs before eventually slaughtering the animals then killing himself. There is no ‘clear’ narrative to the film; it is more a collage of crafted set-pieces, actions. These sequences are clearly indebted to Jung’s principles of alchemy.”^{xxiii} The film prefigures *Des Morts*: “The principle idea behind all of the sequences in *Vase de Noces* is death. The film is about an alchemist who is attempting to find the secret of immortality. In the film he is not trying to change material into gold but trying to change death into life. This is why he is more preoccupied with the ‘signs’ of his death that he wishes to transform into ‘signs’ of life.”^{xxiv}

Here too Henri Michaux's mescaline studies into "the mind through states of ecstasy"^{xxxv} is rendered in cinematic form. Zéno achieved through an audio-visual form Michaux's dream to see his ideas appear in film; it is a film of "nothing but signs".^{xxxvi} *Vase de Noces* manages, like Michaux's experiments, to "dare to equate this state of bliss with an anticipation of life after death".^{xxxvii} At the centre of *Vase de Noces* is one of these signs, the sow— a powerful symbol of transgression. According to Stallybrass and White the pig is a symbol of 'low' discourses reviled because of its specific habits. Its ability to eat it's on faeces and garbage is explored in the film through reversal: it is the human male character that we see carrying out there 'disgusting' acts.^{xxxviii} This is exactly the kind of reversal that Zéno employs; the carnivalesque writ onto the cinema screen. Exploring further though the ambiguous uses of the pig (in some cultures they are of course revered) can be found. In mondo films we have seen this reversal expressed very clearly.^{xxxix} Zéno draws on the etchings of Rops, in particular his works 'Experimental Medicine' and 'The Lady with the Pig or Pornokrates'; the latter depicts a naked blind-folded woman leading a pig on a leash; the former is a vicious critique of vivisection represented by a man in evening dress defiling a pig that is suspended from a bough.^{xxx}

With its mournful use the music of medieval composer Perotin in the opening sequence and the high-contrast monochrome images throughout, a tradition in Belgian cinema for the melancholic and the ambiguous saturates the film's atmosphere. As Mathijs notes: "the ambiguity and lack of clarity in Low Countries cinema actually allows for quite a few interesting demarcations and concepts."^{xxxxi} In Belgium art a "melancholic mood saturates...painting...writing...and cinema."^{xxxii}

Despite these serious intentions of the film it became a cause célèbre of the banning fraternity (a protracted legal case in Australia is the best known example). The *New York Times*, recalling *Porcile* described the film as "Pasolini at his worst".^{xxxiii} It is treated as an example of shocking and disgusting cinema (it appears in Kerekes and Slater's *Killing for Culture* and internet lists of banned films such as the 'Melon Farmers' pages). The artistic elements of the film were submerged under the hand of censorship and a bad reputation.

'Real Death': *Des Morts*

"For when we witness unstaged, real death in the cinema we are frightened, caught in the sweet and deadly trap of the voyeur; mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion take hold of us as we anxiously watch the actual end of another being"
(Amos Vogel)^{xxxiv}

Des Morts, as well as developing a link between medieval death and the modern world in *Vase de Noces*, picks up the trail of death film from luminaries such as Georges Franju (*The Blood of the Beasts*), Stan Brakhage (*The Act of Seeing with one's own Eyes*) and Ahmed Rachedi (*Twilight of the Damned*). Death in conventional fiction film exists as a spectacle to shock and disturb the viewer- a hyperreal fantasy. That is not the point of death in the above films, and certainly not of *Des Morts*. Zéno's film provides an 'ethnographic' examination of death, serious and methodical, albeit with tempered with occasional mondo tendencies. Both Zéno and Brakhage have spoken of the problems associated with the recording of autopsy scenes and how it is easier to film such material

as opposed to watching it later on screen: “In the autopsy and operation scenes, you are more preoccupied with technical matters surrounding the filming...it was very difficult part of filming as we had to be there present at some difficult scenes. All of the families allowed us to be there, and being there meant that we had to share the same sorrow.”^{xxxv} The Bakhtinian manifestation of the carnivalesque, with its emphasis on the “crucial moments of spasm” incorporates death as one of these moments.^{xxxvi} While this is normally associated with humour (and there is some of this evident in *Des Morts*) this conception of the grotesque body is evident in scenes of opened cadavers and the mesmerising array of bodily trauma that is portrayed in the film. These are not the almost ‘pornographically’ extreme close-ups of Brakhage; instead the bodies in *Des Morts* are actors in a psychodrama.

There is a specific Belgian style in evidence and an approach to the subject that draws, as noted above, on art traditions old and new (see for example the Flemish School’s paintings of death, Pierre Restany’s *Planète* magazine and the work of Michaël Borremans that is “saturated by the surrealist propensity to evade logical associations” and portrays a “deformed picture of reality”^{xxxvii}). At the same time Henri Michaux’s visual reworking of Egyptian funeral rites as interpretative surreal artwork is evident.^{xxxviii} One of the principle influences on the film was the writing of Phillippe Ariès especially his text *Western Attitudes to Death*. Ariès’s analysis of death through the ages defined human psychic reaction to the phenomenon as moving from synchronic to diachronic meanings. It seems that Zéno’s film echoes this ambiguity: *Des Morts* moves backwards and forwards through time and space (this is part of its ‘mondo’ aesthetic). Ariès advocated an approach to the study of death that drew on a sensibility based on “unconscious expression”.^{xxxix} As Léon Schwartzenberg said of the film: “this is not a film about death, nor a consideration of death; these are images of death recalled from many skies across many centuries”.^{xl}

The ‘mondo’ aspect of the film comes largely from its black humour and sardonic tone. In this aspect the film is in debt to non-European textual forms, especially Jessica Mitford’s notorious book *The American way of Death* which Zéno has identified as an important influence on the decision to film in the US. Mitford’s book, a critique of the increased commodification of death in the United States, employed a controversial prose-style that echoes the mondo film in both subject matter and in style. One section of the book in particular ‘The Story of Service’ is a grisly account of the practices and procedures of the undertaker’s bodily tasks (this chapter was rejected by the original publishers of the book). The language, when listing the things that the body is subjected to (it is “sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed, trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged and neatly dressed”^{xli}) lends itself to the mondo aesthetic.

Other sections of the book use mondo-like language; this description (from chapter 4) describing the display of a casket called the ‘Monaco’ has definite Jacopettian tendencies: “Set against a romantic background depicting a brilliant Riviera sky, its allure heightened by suggestions of tropical ferns and a golden harp, this model can be had for not much more than a first-class airfare to Monte Carlo.”^{xlii}

Given the propensity for combining a cold ethnographic style with garish shockumentary elements it is worth examining the particular ways that death appears in *Des Morts*. Death is the catalyst for the human condition, its poetry, spirituality and

absurdity. It is through the ways of death that we can try to comprehend “dreams in conscious life”.^{xliii}

The ‘ways of death’ in *Des Morts*

“We are arguing in the film that in countries where death is missing, human values are also missing”
(Thierry Zéno)^{xliv}

The transgressive aspect of *Des Morts*, the ways in which it bestrides both the arthouse and the grindhouse, are intriguing and complex. This transgression is reminiscent of Joan Hawkins’ concept of the “double niche” where a film occupies on the one hand a place of critical appreciation; on the other exists as a piece of sleazy horror.^{xlv}

There are links to be made between Brakhage’s infamous autopsy (letting the camera roll as “cleanly” and “sparely”) and *Des Morts*. However, Zéno’s cutting and shaping of the images in his film resorts to shock and surprise. The first such ‘shock cut’ of the film, the leap from Eastern to Western funerals, is read, at first viewing simply as defectively rendered montage.^{xlvi} But looking again we discover that Zéno actually uses the shock cut to accentuate the jarring differences between cultural attitudes to the act of death. The art of the film edit services the complex metaphysical. The powerful use of non-diegetic music is spare (as would be required of a textbook documentary portrait), yet the haunting theme created by Alain Pierre takes the already heart-wrenching images to another level. His application, particularly of electronic cues (as accompaniment for a sequence on an modern American cortege, and as eerie accompaniment to a frightening account of cryogenic facilities, where the surreal experiments in freezing corpses for an eventual cure for mortality is treated with electronic notes) is incongruous. ‘Lyrical’ shots, eerily beautiful, such as the twilight cemetery panorama at the end of the film add a gothic ambience to the mood and extra emotion to the already sombre subject of the film. The calm ethnographic dispatch of large portions of the film is also undermined by the cryogenics sequence. The use of still colour photographs to illustrate the controversial process is fairly conventional in terms of documentary process. But then the interviewee appears as a circular insert to these images. This special effect looks dated, although arguably fitting for the absurd nature of the subject matter. Zéno uses to some rapid mondo-style cutting when a bell tolls to herald a Mexican rite urging souls back from the dead. A man in a black hooded robe explains the significance of the ritual through a yellowing towel wrapped over his mouth.

Despite these mondo qualities in *Des Morts*, the film also conforms to certain aspects of high’ cinema: the documentary and, recalling *Vase de Noces*, the art film. In his book *Film as a Subversive Art*, Amos Vogel lamented the lack of filmed material concerned with one of the last visual taboos- “the ultimate secret”- real death. Vogel wrote “that this entire area... simply does not exist in contemporary cinema, reveals taboo in its purest form.”^{xlvii} Mostly the film is constructed with a deep sense of gravitas and articulates sensitively a vision of ‘real’ death in the modern world. As a serious documentary film it steadily progresses an account of what such death and dying are like ‘in reality’. Shots in the film are generally conceived in the manner of ethnographic/anthropological film studies: expositions are shot from a flat, square,

perspective and there are few 'special effects' such as the use of elliptical lenses or obtuse compositional devices. There is no narration in the film and almost the only sound we hear is that of the synchronised voices of interviewees, diegetic music, or natural sounds emanating from the *mis-en-scène*. Additional information is conveyed via block capital subtitles (as in famous ethnographic films such as Harris, Breidenbach and Gardner's *The Nuer*). This is a style that Zéno perfected elsewhere in his film career (a review, for example, of his 1987 film *Eugène Ionesco, Voix et Silences* in Belgium journal *La Libre Belgique* noting that "the director succeeds by playing down his own role" acts as a reminder of his observational approach).

A closer look at the ways in which death appears as a serious subject in *Des Morts* demonstrates the film's transgressive qualities. These images of death can be grouped into four themes labelled: 'The American way of Death'; 'Blood of the Beasts'; 'Back from the Dead'; 'Executions'. Zéno has edited the film in accordance with Lévi-Strauss's "radical structuralist"^{xlviii} conceptions of the 'savage mind'; Zéno, like Lévi-Strauss, does not conceive of this term in a derogatory way. Therefore contrasts are amplified, emphasised and celebrated. The opening scenes of the film illustrate this very well, where the 'American way of death' is contrasted, inverted with 'the savage way of death'.

The American Way of Death/The Savage Way of Death

Des Morts records cynically the numerous attempts to capture the "Beautiful Memory Picture"^{xlix} of the American death. It charts the modern American "refusal to accept death"^l; how "the certainty of death and the fragility of life are foreign to our existential pessimism"^{li}. The film begins simply and starkly with a medium shot of a young American mortician beginning to describe the post-mortem procedures common to 'civilized' funeral directorships, namely the pathological cleansing of dead bodies, in this case fingernails (here the tile of the film appears on the screen). The complex, expensive and lucrative way in which dead bodies are treated is returned to throughout the film via sequences on caskets, cremation (unique footage inside a cremation chamber of the body's reluctance to become completely immaterial) and a satire of cryogenics (largely based on Philip K. Dick's satire *Ubik*). An enterprising businessman describes how he now conducts the scattering of cremated ashes over the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco on a "volume basis" (i.e. more than one scattered at any one flight means higher profits).

The film then cuts to a long sequence on a funeral rite in Thailand (one of two such scenes bookending the film, the other is set in South Korea). A mother who has died is laid out and mourned; subjected to laments; is ritually fanned with palm leaves; praised with rifle and crossbow salutes. A feast is made from five slaughtered cattle (killed violently, if carefully, so that they fall onto their left side) before she is finally laid to rest in a coffin. These complex rituals ensure the souls of the dead will endure a happy existence and will in return assist those alive by not bringing sickness or sacrifice among the living. This sequence is shot in an ethnographic mode: unobtrusive fixed camerawork, simple titles locating place and date, location sound, even translations of the conversations taking place between the native peoples. The access given to the crew, in order to secure such powerful and intimate pictures (the rite takes place over several days) is also that of the ethnographic filmmaker, securing the trust of the people for scientific anthropological purposes and becoming profoundly ensnared in the ritual itself.

This sequence is intercut with shots of an American funeral where the actions are carried out quickly and efficiently, mainly by machines. The only music heard here is a loud and meaningless blast of nondescript rock emitting from the hearse driver's radio. The contrast is emphasised when we note that in opposition to the mechanistic lowering of the American coffin by crane, the hand-made Thai coffin has been made way too narrow and the corpse must be wedged in sideways. Further solemn documentary/ethnographic sequences appear to codify the misery of death in the west: the testimonies of terminal muscular dystrophy sufferers is harrowing but almost surreal; a woman who replays a tape of her dying (now dead) husband to bring him back to life. Zéno asks of these actions: "are these the demystification of a taboo or new forms of exorcism?"^{lii}

Blood of the Beasts

In *Des Morts*, the mondo predilection for animal slaughter is evident. Mondo cinema has profoundly used animal slaughter as a commentary device.^{liii} While the killing of animals through ritual an important shock device it is also something found in the art film. Notwithstanding the infamous opening sequence of Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, Franju's *Blood of the Beasts* is the classic example of this, a documentary with moments of surrealism and dark humour, a joyous song (Charles Trenet's 'La Mer'), avant-garde cutting juxtaposed with bloody violence. This is a film using "exceedingly cruel and violent images to assault the spectator."^{liv} Zéno's film offers a similar 'theatre of cruelty'. If Franju makes "Cruel documentaries" because he "shows the moment of real, violent death"^{lv} then *Des Morts*, a film of almost continuous fatality joins this band of outsiders. The closing bloody moments of a Mexican bullfight (the animal suffers multiple skewerings) is intercut with a shop butchering chickens and calves on-site (the severed calf's head is shown still convulsing). The familiar mondo fixation with Californian pet cemeteries (first seen in *Mondo Cane*) is revisited too. *Des Morts* continues the trend for using the death of animals to "make an existential point about the nature of life and death".^{lvi} Zéno acknowledges trying to show: "the differences that exist between the killing of animals for the pleasure of humans compared to the sacrifice of animals in traditions of cultural importance."^{lvii}

Back from the Dead

In brightly-lit emergency wards lie dying and critically wounded Mexican knife victims. The post-mortem footage of a man we have just witnessed dying on screen (Mario Sanchez Fernandez, according to the tape stuck across his chest), harsh, unflinching shots of his head and torso being wrenched open and then crudely sewn back up again, recall the blank, shocking images created by Brakhage *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*. The scene is intercut with the singing and playing of a Mariachi guitar song that laments death with a series of bizarre lyrics ("Come give me a kiss Baldlady, I'm the orphan of love"). There is however a specific power in the notion of *capturing on film the moment of death snatched away* as the man we see being interviewed has survived his ordeal and lives to tell the tale. The ability of the cinema to flash backwards and forwards, through editing techniques, makes this possible and haunting (some viewers find this bloody sequence, especially the emergency operation to secure near-fatal wounds, more difficult to watch than the images of 'real' death). As ambulance sirens blare and the operation to save his life commences, intercut with the story of his wounding so the drama of this

testimony increases. What should come as narrative relief remains oppressive and ominous:

“One no longer dies at home in the bosom of one’s family, but in the hospital, alone”^{lviii}

Executions

Near the end of *Des Morts* a sequence identified as a “television archive document” shows the execution of a Philippine rebel informant by his ‘comrades’. He is said to have “betrayed the revolution”. His body, still-twitching, is dumped in to a shallow grave (predating a similar sequence in the British 1990s ‘mondo’ film *Executions*). With its sudden appearance in the film’s narrative, and introduction via an oddly contrived radio report heard over the previous sequence of feeding of the muscular dystrophy sufferers, this section of the film is arguably the most ‘mondo-like’. The execution as entertainment has been used in fictional films and pseudo-documentaries alike (Ruggero Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust* for example). The infamous *Faces of Death* depicts the results of an electric chair execution which is unpleasant put patently false. Sensing the sensationalist and exploitative aspects of this device, Zéno has since repudiated this sequence and it is excised from is cut of the film. I once asked him why he had taken this sequence out and his response was that of a filmmaker acutely aware of exploitation:

“We cut nine minutes from the film- equivalent to two sequences- the execution and some scenes of ritual sacrifice of animals. We initially decided to leave the execution in the film because we wanted to talk about the death penalty. In France at that time there was a debate on capital punishment and we thought it was very appropriate to show the real significance of the ‘death penalty’. As the debate ended it seemed that the sequence would be now out of place in the movie.”^{lix}

Conclusion

Des Morts is a documentary film made by artists using garish shock tactics and avant-garde sensibilities that operates within and across notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. The film represents death as a “transgression...plunging man into an irrational, violent and beautiful world”^{lx}. The route to this most profound record of death and dying began with experimental art cinema and incorporated documentary, ethnography, surrealism and shock along the way. The documentary filmmaker can only ever present a subjective experience of a lived reality. At the end of the film Zéno provides a reminder of the scenes we have just viewed. This curious and strange device- a flashback of the narrative of death as we have witnessed it reminds us that we have watched a construction that is as always contradictory, confusing, dishonest and truthful. The horror that we witness springs from the unconscious fear of death and the mondo documentary, a blend of fact and fiction and high and low art, presents that terror in a way that is far more disturbing than the most explicit gore film or the ‘television death’ that is theatrical and false. “A documentary about death is obviously violent, death itself is violent” Zeno himself observed. A footnote to this is the soundtrack (sadly, sound is always a footnote). Alain Pierre’s soundscape for the film combing actuality audio with eerie electronic ambient score confuse the films ingredients and meaning further. Ultimately, the fact that *Des Morts* was admired by both cinema aesthete Amos Vogel (he called it “horrifying and liberating”^{lxi}) and sleaze fanzine editor Charles Kilgore (“required viewing for those

brave enough to face the cold, sober reality of our inevitable fate”^{lxiii}) demonstrates the brilliant way in which this haunting transgressive film defies all ‘respectable’ boundaries. The quiet elegance of *Des Morts* (Vogel once worried, correctly, that Zéno would be “written out of official film history”) ensured that the film troubled society’s moral guardians significantly less than *Vase de Noces*. The film seeks not to “evacuate” death but to “humanize” it.^{lxiii} Zéno’s team did not work together again (recalling another Belgian cult film *Man Bites Dog*, whose crew did not work again after its completion^{lxiv}). Yet its impact on individual viewers, like that of the subjective avant-garde art film is immense.

Death on screen is now more common than ever (especially via the ever smaller screen of modern mobile communications) - a ‘pornography of death’ almost.^{lxv} Yet it is still, when confronted with the subject in an intelligent and ambiguous way- as a ‘tradition of art’ (Michaux) - a profound and disturbing taboo.

Mark Goodall, June 2008

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ⁱ *Des Morts* Pressbook

ⁱⁱ Mark Goodall. Interview with Thierry Zéno, Bradford International Film Festival, March 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri Michaux, *Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 17.

^{iv} John Grierson quoted in Paul Rotha, *Documentary film: the use of the film medium to interpret creatively and in social terms the life of the people as it exists in reality*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1963),

^v Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: art horror and the horrific avant-garde*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3-32.

^{vi} Jonathan Ross, *The Incredibly Strange Film Book*. (London: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

^{vii} Mark Goodall, *Sweet and Savage: the world through the shockumentary film lens*. (London: Headpress, 2006)

^{viii} Gualtiero Jacopetti. "Considerations on the documentary film", in Goodall (2006), 146-153.

^{ix} *Mondo Cane* pressbook.

^x Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 87.

^{xi} Nichols, *Ibid.*, 116.

^{xii} Nichols, *Ibid.*

^{xiii} J.G. "Mondo Cane (a dog's life)" (review). *Monthly Film Bulletin* (348), 1963: 3-4.

^{xiv} Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 100.

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^{xvii} J.G. Ballard, *Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Panther, 1970),

^{xviii} Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (London: C.T. Editions, 2005), 263.

^{xix} Thierry Zeno, *Tzotziles: psalms, stories and music* (music CD) (Brussels: Sub Rosa, 2000).

^{xx} Kurt Leonhard, *Henri Michaux*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 17.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 18

^{xxii} Johannes Fabian, "How others die: reflections on the anthropology of death", in Robben, C.G.M. *Death, mourning and Burial: a cross-cultural reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 56.

^{xxiii} Goodall, Interview with Thierry Zeno, March 2006

^{xxiv} Goodall, Interview with Thierry Zeno, March 2006

^{xxv} Maurice Bessey, *Magic and the Supernatural* (London: Spring Books, 1961), 243.

^{xxvi} Leonhard., .5

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, 11

^{xxviii} Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 44-45.

^{xxix} See *Mondo Cane* for example.

^{xxx} The Belgian horror director Fabrice du Welz has noted the influence of Zéno to his work. His film *Calvaire* employs the squealing pig as in image of abuse and violence.

^{xxxi} Ernest Mathijs, ed. *The Cinema of the Low Countries* (London: Wallflower, 2004), 5.

^{xxxii} Pete Toombs, "Crazy Love" in Mathijs, 167.

^{xxxiii} *New York Times*, April 12, 1975.

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- ^{xxxiv} Vogel (2005), 263
- ^{xxxv} Goodall, Interview with Thierry Zeno, March 2006
- ^{xxxvi} Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, cultural criticism and film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 159.
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- ^{xxxviii} Bessey p.131
- ^{xxxix} Phillipe Ariès. *The Hour of Our Death* (London: Allen Lane, 1981), xvii.
- ^{xl} Léon Schwartzberg. Thierry Zéno website. <http://users.skynet.be/fa230707/desmorts.htm>
- ^{xli} Jessica Mitford, *The American way of Death Revisited* (London: Virago Press, 2000), 43.
- ^{xlii} *Ibid.*, p.35
- ^{xliii} Antonin Artaud, "Sorcery and Cinema", in Paul Hammond, ed. *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist writings on the cinema* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2000), 104.
- ^{xliiv} Goodall, Interview with Thierry Zeno, March 2006
- ^{xlv} Hawkins, *Cutting Edge*, p.72. Hawkins applies this concept to Franju's *Les Yeux Sans Visage*. Hawkins also discusses the placement and categorisation of art and grindhouse films and the effect this has on the complex status of films that oscillate between the two spheres (*Ibid.*, p.3-32).
- ^{xlvi} Neil Young, "DON'T FEAR THE REAPER : Zeno, Garny & Ferbus's 'Des Morts'". <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/content/view/374/1/> (Accessed June 19 2008).
- ^{xlvii} Vogel (2005), 263.
- ^{xlviii} Johannes Fabian (2004) *Death , Mourning, and Burial*, 55.
- ^{xlix} Mitford, p.16
- ^l Phillipe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 44.
- ^{li} *Ibid.*, 82.
- ^{lii} *Des Morts* pressbook
- ^{liii} See chapter 6 in Goodall, *Sweet and Savage*
- ^{liv} Jeanette Sloniowski, "It was an Atrocious Film: Georges Franju's *Blood of the Beasts*", in Barry Keith Grant and Jeanette Sloniowski, eds. *Documenting the Documentary: close readings of documentary film and video* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 171.
- ^{lv} Sloniowski, p.185
- ^{lvi} Sloniowski, p.186
- ^{lvii} Goodall, Interview with Thierry Zéno, March 2006
- ^{lviii} Ariès (1974), 87.
- ^{lix} *Ibid.*
- ^{lx} Ariès (1974), 57.
- ^{lxi} Amos Vogel, "Grim Death", *Film Comment* 16 (1980): 78.
- ^{lxii} Charles Kilgore, "Of the Dead". *Ecco* 1(2) (1988): 7.
- ^{lxiii} Ariès (1981), 614.
- ^{lxiv} Frank Lafond, "C'est Arrivé Près de Chez Vous", in Mathijs (2004), 221.
- ^{lxv} Ariès (1974), 93.