[8]

Whatever happens,
keep your cameras rolling!

DEATH IN THE MEDIA

A man's death was inadvertently filmed and broadcast on television in March 1984. Tommy Cooper, a British comedian, was just one of the acts performing at Her Majesty's Theatre in London, a variety show aired live nationally. As the Sunday peak viewing figures closed in on the twenty million mark, Cooper was onstage going through his routine of magic tricks that invariably go wrong. He was on good form. Partway through one gag his assistant came onstage bringing a flamboyant gown. She fitted his garment and Cooper reacted in a typically humorous manner as she fastened the lower buttons. Before she left the stage the comedian slumped into the backdrop curtain and started to slowly slide down. The audience roared with laughter, the assistant grinned, too. Cooper's face reflected considerable distress, however. Cooper sank to the floor gasping for breath before slumping deeper into the curtain, his trademark fez pushed over his face. With the audience still laughing, the show cut abruptly to a commercial break. When it returned, Cooper was gone and another act had taken his place. Only afterwards, during the end credits, was there an announcement that the comedian was dead. He had suffered a heart attack onstage. In the subsequent news reports and programmes celebrating Cooper's work, still photographs of the fated act were used, or footage which sensitively stopped just short of the comedian's collapse.

This event helps to illuminate the diverse changes that have taken place in media. Over a relatively short space of time, the notion of death — indeed, the public *consumption* of death — has been dramatically altered because of developments in consumer technology. Television here is the primary focus. Whether an unforeseen circumstance beyond the control of the network — as in Tommy Cooper — or purely a mercenary decision in pursuit of ratings, death in the comfort zone of the living room is different to death online. It's a more personalized sort of death, and has a particularly debilitating effect on its audience. Earlier editions of *Killing for Culture* didn't travel much beyond this point in terms of death and media. There is no reference to the Internet in those editions. Now, however, we can almost consider television in terms of 'old' media.

This chapter represents an era that might is a stepping stone for media in transition. Before arriving at an age suited to acronyms like LCD and WiFi and WWW, we have the cathode ray tube and a very analogue sort of death.

The live transmission of the death of Tommy Cooper, by way of an example, was not followed by any action replay, nor was the incident ever screened again in its entirety on British television. The event was very much of the moment; one saw it then or not at all. Recalling the incident as it played out that night in 1984, in the company of family and friends, one author of this book is struck by the curious attitude of the comedian slipping to the stage in the middle of his act. *Something is amiss, a fact corroborated when the show snaps unexpectedly to a commercial break with Cooper still crumpled on the floor amid howls of laughter. No one else in the living room has been paying much heed to what we later learn is a celebrity death. They saw it but didn't see.* Cooper had died under the gaze of millions. That sort of thing didn't happen very often, and in this instance it literally wouldn't happen again — not for many years anyway, when the beloved comedian's death song eventually surfaced on the Internet. Twenty-five years after the fact, in 2009, Cooper's final performance was posted to YouTube. Speaking for the action group Mediawatch UK, John Beyer spoke for many when he said: "This is very poor taste. That the broadcasters have not repeated the incident shows they have a respect for him and I think that ought to apply also on YouTube."[1]

WIDE WORLD SPECIAL

Product	J.F.K. Assassination
Price	£49.99
Supplier	Gem Distribution
Tel	0279 442842
✓	Information rich insight into a fascinating subject
✗	Not broad enough for those with a limited interest
PCH Verdict	★★★★☆

Top: The Zapruder film is shown to the public for the first time, care of Geraldo Rivera's Wide World Special *Good Night America* in 1975.
Above: 'It's all very well publishing a book or releasing a video, but the amount of information you can practically transfer to people is peanuts compared to a CD-Rom.' So stated *PC Home* magazine (May 1994) in its review of the multimedia CD-Rom, *J.F.K. Assassination*.

BLOOD AND GUTS AND IN LIVING COLOUR

The first genuine television mortality — a fate 'delivered' to the cameras — was broadcast under a very different set of circumstances. Shortly after midday on November 24, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald, the man accused of assassinating President John F. Kennedy, was himself shot down. Under police escort to more secure holdings, surrounded by members of the press and other persons, Oswald was felled in the basement of Dallas police headquarters by a single bullet from the gun of Jack Ruby, a nightclub owner. Two NBC cameras recorded the event, which was relayed live to audiences across America. Oswald was rushed to hospital, the same hospital in which Kennedy expired; both victims slayed within a forty-eight hour period and dying in the same building. Another synchronous fact is that Kennedy, like Oswald, had been assassinated on camera.

Probably the most prominent death footage of all time is that depicting the death

1 *Daily Telegraph*. May 9, 2009.

SCORPION WINS

FATALITY

APPENDIX

KILLING FOR CULTURE
APPENDIX

the comparatively clunky architecture of the first Lara Croft. So too nude patches. A number of different sexy skin variants for the more advanced model of Lara Croft are now available online, as well as the avatars of many other games, created by fans and free to download. A one-stop site for this sort of thing is the Nude Patch website, whose pidgin remit is as follows:

With the advent of computer games new art named briefly as a nude patch was born. To change textures and skins of heroes of game, transforming the boring dressed heroines into naked beauties, to change registration wall-paper in game for a pornographic skin, or to think out new erotic clothes for the characters.

It is the female characters of high end action adventure games that are favoured for this type of hack. Be it Lara Croft, or the comparatively less known entities of a multitude of other games, such as *Prince of Persia*, *Fallout*, *Half Life*, *Silent Hill*, *Aliens versus Predator*, *Resident Evil*, and so on. Clothing and uniforms are dispensed with, or replaced by something sexier, thanks to these patches, feeding into adolescent male fantasy. But the mortal danger the characters must face doesn't change, which creates a sexual dynamic different to the traditional interaction of player and game. In this context, 'winning' — reaching the next level and ultimately the end of the game, hitherto the 'point' of the game — becomes a somewhat secondary if not wholly irrelevant pursuit.

The term that describes this new arena is *ryona*. It refers not to the game in general but the violence upon a sexualized female humanoid, as perpetrated by another character or group of characters (male or female), or monsters. Game developers are not ignorant to it. A commentator on YouTube, in reference to the death scenes in *Resident Evil Zero*, suggested that publishers Capcom 'have tried as hard as they could to make these deaths sexual'. In the case of Warner Bros.' *Lollipop Chainsaw*, a game about a cheerleader who kills zombies with a chainsaw, mods hardly seem necessary (although they are available nonetheless). Here is a sort of Lara Croft for a new generation: cynical, brightly coloured and flashing her knickers. 'Sex, blood and rock'n'roll' announced the *Lollipop Chainsaw* teaser trailer.

The first game specifically devised as a ryona game is called *Demonophobia*. It dates from around 2008 and, from all accounts, is a fan made effort that appeared online with no indication as to who had authored it. It would seem to be of Japanese origin, or possibly Korean. The 2D gameplay is basic and without sound. It involves steering a young female avatar called Sakura through a nightmare world of booby traps, monsters and demons. When death comes, as it does at every turn, it is gruesome and protracted. Sakura may be impaled upon spikes, pummelled mercilessly in the face and stomach by a giant fist, impregnated by parasites, poisoned by spores, melted, dismembered, flayed alive... She is sometimes nude, and sometimes wetting herself in fear, and puking.

Content notwithstanding, *Demonophobia* resembles an arcade game of the 1980s. The simple interface takes on a decidedly surreal quality in its later stages, when the game adopts the look of a cut-price *Yellow Submarine*. The anonymous individual behind its production is said to be responsible for the similar, but comparatively higher quality follow-up, *Xenophobia*. This has sound and a heroine/victim who appears to be age ten.

Fan-made ryona is becoming more common. One example of a fan game that doesn't appear to be of Asian origin is *Another Dimension*, by someone called AD_Dev. It is a very competent and addictive platform game that has sound and English dialogue. It follows a young female into the fourth dimension (a subterranean lair), who must

face death and violation at every turn in her search for a way back home. She's called Allie and her clothes are torn off as the game progresses.[16] *Another Dimension* was until recently a working demo, with updates and new levels posted on the developer's website and fan forums. Feedback and suggestions were encouraged. But not all fan developers share such a relationship with their fans. Another developer, who goes by the name Vosmug, doesn't intend his *Prisonkage* to be a community effort. (Nor is he any longer comfortable with explicit torture and porn, closing any debate on the matter on his website.) Both AD_Dev and Vosmug acknowledge *Demonophobia* as an inspiration.[17]

One of the many inevitable deaths in *Demonophobia*, and (bottom) floorplan of level two.

痛い痛いぃ！
ちぎれちゃうよおおおお！！！

There are many examples of ryona to chose from. Some of it comprises walkthroughs and clips from dedicated ryona games, such as *Demonophobia* and its progeny. Plenty more is taken from mainstream games. These latter clips show games that have been enhanced with mods, or they simply depict the gory deaths and violence found in regular game play. The short selection below is compiled from a brief search for ryona on YouTube. (The titles are those under which the clips are posted.)

SKYRIM - DECAPITATION OF SEXY THRONE BITCH - RYONA: This clip opens in a cavern, where a scantily clad female is seated on a throne. You, the player, approach and chop off her head with an axe. Multiple angles of the scene follow, some in slow motion. Then you hack at the headless body with the axe, before pushing the body aside and claiming the throne. The clip is taken from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (developed and published by Bethesda), an open world game series set within a fantasy land of dragons. In open world play, characters are assigned tasks but there is no linear narrative and players are

16 The text that accompanies each fatality leaves little to the imagination. Here is one such text, relating to Allie's unfortunate encounter with a giant rat: 'Allie screamed and struggled, tried to fight, throbbed and scratched, but it only further aroused the huge, nasty rat. The rat cruelly tormented and tore the most tender part of Allie, spraying smelly saliva onto her head. After a while, the rat injected its smelly sperm directly into the destroyed womb, and, satisfied, released the victim. Allie laid [sic] unable to move or scream, suffering from terrible pain and humiliation, until life left her.'
17 AD_Dev chooses anonymity because of his day job in games. 'You see, I don't want to be identified,' he replies to one post on his website. 'I'm not from Blizzard or Valve or something THAT big and famous, but my games are popular, and you at least heard of them.'

INTRODUCTION
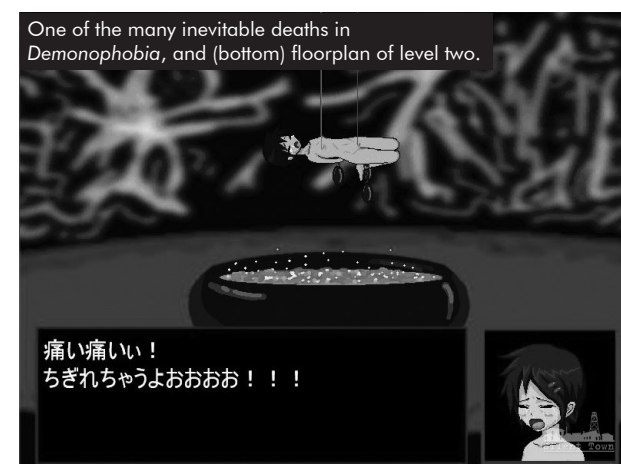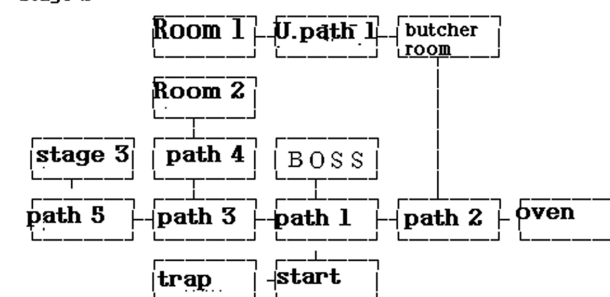
Throughout the history of film, a prurient imbalance has existed between observer and observed, driving the spools in the shadowy projection box. Since the dawn of cinema, images of death and destruction have run alongside the underground trade in explicit sex. At the turn of the nineteenth century, viewing boxes, such as the Kinetoscope, were found in penny arcades and dime museums, and any other place of leisure where crowds might gather.[1] Popular testimony presents these peepshows as a form of vice, much as it would cinema that followed (and any form of popular entertainment after that). A crank of the handle provides the lone spectator with a saucy diorama, a woman dancing, perhaps. But it might also offer scenes depicting calamity or a public execution. Cecil M. Hepworth's *Explosion of a Motor Car* (1900), for instance, is a blackly comic film in which the passengers of the titular vehicle are blown sky-high. A police officer assesses the damage and collects body parts when eventually they return to Earth. There is nothing comic about *Execution of a Chinese Bandit* (1904), however, a scene showing the actual beheading of a criminal outside Mukden, China.

There was also a vogue for period drama and the re-enactment of historic executions, with scenes of female subjects put to death among them. In *Joan of Arc* (1895) and *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1895) we witness a grave comeuppance for two women of strength and character, perhaps indicative of attitudes toward the fledgling women's suffrage movement at the time of their production.[2]

Both these films were made by Thomas Edison and his Edison Manufacturing Company. *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots,* at approximately eighteen seconds, is presented in the manner of a stage drama. The deposed monarch is brought to kneel at a chopping block in front of a small crowd (we have prime position) and her head unceremoniously lopped off with a swift blow of the executioner's axe. The head (replaced by a facsimile) bounces to the floor, before being retrieved by the executioner and held aloft for the audience to see.

The ruthlessly entrepreneurial Edison, who has taken much credit for early cinema, produced many films of this stripe (essentially exploitation films). Like a proto-Andy Warhol, he didn't do an awful lot of filming himself. But it was his name on the flag. *The Cock Fight* (1894), which depicts two gamecocks fighting, proved so popular the film prints were all but ruined — not uncommon for the time. In their place came *Cock Fight no.2* (1894), effectively the same film with some elaboration: Two men goad each other and exchange bets behind the fighting birds, a white backdrop amplifying the action. 'Blood sports, including rat baiting,' concedes historian Charles Musser, 'were popular early subjects for Edison's camera.'[3]

Another popular subject was electricity. Edison, the inventor of the lightbulb, worked competitively on methods of electric power distribution for many years. One result was the electric chair, created to demonstrate the potentially lethal nature of

rival AC power compared to Edison's own DC supply. A film from 1901 covers a number of Edison's bases, *The Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison*. Leon Czolgosz was the assassin of US President William McKinley, shooting him twice with a pistol in Buffalo, New York, in September 1901. Czolgosz was tried, found guilty and sentenced to death, frying in the electric chair at Auburn prison the following month.

The three-minute film opens with slow panning shots of the concrete façade of the Auburn prison complex. Fabrication takes over when next we see an interior that represents the confines of the prison itself, with an actor playing the condemned man led to his death by guards. The actor is secured to the electric chair and surrounded by functionaries giving (silent) instructions. The switch is thrown, the man jerks several times and a doctor pronounces him dead.

Edison famously recorded the execution of a much larger mammal in *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903), a further effort to promote his joint ventures of film and electricity. Topsy was a circus elephant that had grown tired of the life, killing three trainers and running amok. She was tried and sentenced to death. Edison, who often gave public demonstrations highlighting the ills of alternate current by killing small animals with it, now stepped in with a death apparatus that offered a greater marketing opportunity.

Electrocuting an Elephant is a film decayed with time, having the quality of a bad dream. It begins in an outdoor space with men leading the doomed animal toward the camera. Tethered, it then kicks a free foot in anger or fear. Plumes of smoke envelop the beast and finally it topples.[4] A reported crowd of 1,500 people gathered to watch Topsy drop dead that cold Sunday morning on Coney Island. Many more would soon have the chance. 'As with the Czolgosz film,' writes Mark Essic, '*Electrocuting an Elephant* was distributed across the country and watched by thousands of viewers eager to see the killing power of electricity.'[5] Edison had wanted to film the genuine execution of Czolgosz at Auburn, but the authorities declined. Topsy is the alternative, the next-best shot. Had his request been successfully met, Edison would undoubtedly have had a tidy package on his hands. He toured *The Execution of Czolgosz* as part of a series of films spanning President McKinley's career in office, culminating with his funeral cortege to Canton, Ohio. How might footage of Czolgosz's *actual* execution have impacted on such a package? its exploitation? the people drawn to it? After all, this was the hand of Thomas Edison, father of the modern age.

Jump cut to February 2015. Currently making news headlines are a series of atrocities committed in Syria and neighbouring Iraq. The murders of Western and Japanese hostages, documented on camera and shared online, are public executions for the modern age committed by a militant extremist group known as Islamic State. The latest of these films depicts lone figures in a barren desert landscape and has a queasy familiarity to it. When the film ends, the fate of the kneeling figure dressed in a prisonlike jumpsuit has come to bear with callous inevitability. The head of the victim is detached and the executioner stands gloating.

This image and its digital dissemination were inconceivable a few years ago. The film and intent are a synthesis, one-part obscene publicity junket, one-part snuff film made flesh. This book looks at how we arrived at this place. It explores images of death

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1 These machines were still in commercial use in some capacity through to the mid 1970s, maybe beyond. One author of this book used one at a funfair decamped in North Manchester, UK. The film here was a few seconds of vintage striptease before the money ran out.
2 There is an unfortunate irony in that the suffrage movement features among the earliest factual shock scenes caught on camera. Newsreel footage shows activist Emily Davison throwing herself, for the cause, in front of the King's horse during the Epsom Derby, June 4, 1913. She later died from her injuries.
3 Charles Musser, film notes for the DVD box set, *Edison: The Invention of the Movies* (Kino 2005).

4 Some years later another elephant was publicly executed. The place was Erwin, Tennessee, 1916. Reasons for the incident are no longer clear. Mary the elephant had supposedly killed a man (or men), but equally likely the execution was nothing more than a publicity stunt for an ailing circus. Mary was hanged and the event immortalized in a surreal photograph.
5 Mark Essic, *Edison and the Electric Chair: A Story of Light and Death*.

and violence, specifically moving images, and the human obsession with looking (and not looking) at them. Locked into this obsession is the so-called "snuff" film, a human sacrifice before the camera sold as entertainment.

Violent spectacle has been a constant in society since the days of ancient Rome, whether the gilded actualities of Edison at the turn of the last century or the more recent vogue for 'torture porn'.[6] Camera phones and the Internet afford the spectacle limitless and effortless reach: our homes and offices, our news and entertainment, have become the Coliseum. Rules have changed. Film is no longer an exclusive domain, and the shadow of the snuff film has become a reality freely available at the click of a button. In 2012, Luka Rocco Magnotta posted videos of himself online torturing animals, which he followed with greater atrocities in a clip entitled *1 Lunatic 1 Ice Pick* that eventually led to his conviction for murder.

Beginning with feature films, section one of *Killing for Culture* (FEATURE FILM) goes back to the 1970s and the release of a cheap exploitation movie. *Snuff* touted the idea that a genuine murder had taken place onscreen. Its distributor, Allan Shackleton, devised a publicity campaign that played on rumour and public gullibility to help create a modern urban myth. Several movies that followed *Snuff* expanded on its basic tenet. One of these, *Cannibal Holocaust*, spurred countless directors to make 'found footage' films, a genre defined by shakycam death frames. This section also comments on film as ritual, and closes with some Serbian feature films, where images of death are a catechism for a new generation of filmmaker.

Section two (MONDO FILM) is about documentary and shockumentary film. Gualtiero Jacopetti's travelogue of cultural habits and customs, *Mondo Cane*, was the model for a curious cinematic lineage that emerged in the early sixties. The mondo film, as it became known, fudged fact and fiction while relying on greater shocks as it progressed through the decades. Themes of death and carnage took precedence in the Japan-America co-production, *Faces of Death*, in the late seventies, and became the norm in subsequent video barrage tapes.

The market that Allan Shackleton anticipated with *Snuff* re-emerged with nascent video technology in the eighties. Companies like Vidimax and Wave exploited the freedom that video offered with raw, anything goes horror movies produced on a shoestring. Made to order custom tapes soon followed, providing a growing audience with faux snuff. Section three (DEATH FILM) details these custom tapes, their manufacture and consumption, while communities such as the online forum Necrobabes are symptomatic of shifting attitudes toward images of death.

Section four (DEATH MEDIA) details the transmission of violent images, from JFK's assassination and the thrill of death defiers like Evel Knievel on live television, through to camera phones and beheading videos. This evolution is split between 'old' and 'new' media, effectively the ages of television and the Internet. The book comes full circle with the chapter Ways of Seeing, which considers online atrocities as a mnemonic for the snuff film rumours of yesteryear and asks where such imagery will take us next. While terrorist groups kill on camera and upload their footage with intent to subjugate and create fear, in the case of Luka Magnotta and others the reasons for death on film are less clear.

What we see as spectacle is in fact a ceremony.

LOUIS MALLE

But what you have seen you must believe, if you can.

THE MONKEES (CIRCLE SKY)

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6 A popular strand of feature film overflowing with effusive depictions of sadism and cruelty.