With the success of his first English language feature *The Others* (2001), a psychological thriller set in a post-Second World War English house, the Spanish wunderkind Alejandro Amenábar has become an important horror director in the US. Though Amenábar is known primarily for his second film, *Abre los ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*, 1998), the successful thriller of which the big-budget Hollywood film *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001) is a remake, Amenábar’s feature debut, *Tesis* (*Thesis*, Spain, 1996) has been somewhat overlooked in the US, despite winning seven Goya awards (the Spanish Oscar).1 *Tesis* tells the story of Ángela (Ana Torrent), a Madrid grad student writing her thesis on violence in the media. When she accidentally comes across a snuff movie made by a fellow student, her academic interest in her subject matter is somewhat compromised. As the film progresses, her morbid fascination with graphic violence and her growing sexual interest in Bosco (Eduardo Noriega), the snuff killer suspect, make it harder for her to maintain a cerebral distance.

*Tesis*, with its use of snuff and mondo as authentic representations of actual death, mobilizes a fascination with (and a desire for) the real, pulling together a number of different strands of gore, death, and horror cinema, exploring the tensions between them. This exploration of the tension between real and false images of life (and death) crystallizes diffuse postmodern anxieties as to whether the real can be accessed at all through media/ted images.2 The snuff and mondo modes deployed in *Tesis*, because of their privileged relation to reality, engage in a process akin to Jean Baudrillard’s breakdown of ontological categories, referred to in *Simulation and Simulacra* (1981). Baudrillard argues the simulacra’s counterfeiting of the real effectively abolishes any distinction between the two. He illustrates this by asking how one might simulate an armed robbery, effectively convincing the police that it is not real, just a perfect simulation. He argues that such a simulation would be impossible because “the network of artificial signs [the fake gun, the
feigned intention to harm] will become inextricably mixed up with real elements (a policeman will really fire on sight).” Simulation produces real effects. The question with snuff, as portrayed in Tesis, becomes—if you cannot distinguish faked footage from real footage, would not the perfect simulacrum of death/murder be produced, where the spectacle of death becomes “inextricably mixed up with” real death?

In what follows I seek to address this question by exploring Tesis’s self-conscious staging of snuff, examining how it draws on the network of artificial signs (codes of screen violence and cinematic realism). After contextualizing Tesis within global and national trajectories of screen violence, I map how the critical field has often abstracted screen violence into a number of different issues, suggesting that Tesis’s self-conscious exploration of violence encourages a deabstraction, or a return to the “body” of the text. I argue that Tesis attempts to convince us of its realism by pitting snuff against special-effects violence and by drawing on codes of realism in pornography and early cinema.

**Violent Traditions**

Tesis builds on three related but distinct traditions of film violence—the snuff, mondo and gore films—each of which has its own peculiar conventions in articulating the real and (especially) embodied violence. A brief account of the historical and geographical emergence of these three traditions will be necessary to understand their particular use in Tesis, as well as the intervention they represent in popular culture’s staging of postmodern concerns about (the disappearance of) the real.

The snuff film first emerged in film discourse in the late 1960s early 1970s. Snuff films are rumored to have originated in Latin America, “where life is cheap,” as declared publicity for the feature film Snuff (which did much to stoke the fires of the myths of snuff). An acknowledged urban legend with curiously lasting mythic power, the snuff film inhabits the tenebrous interstitial and illegal space between the real and the imaginary: many seem to know what it is (the kidnapping and then profilmic beating, torturing and murder of a random victim), and yet no would (has) admit(ted) to having (“really”) seen a snuff film. Of interest to my investigation of relations between simulacra and the real in horror film violence is that although “snuff” effectively refers to nothing (it has no “real” referent), there are a substantial number of fictional representations of it. In addition to Tesis, the films Hardcore (Paul Schrader, 1979), Videodrome (David Cronenberg, 1983), Cannibal Holocaust (Ruggero Deodato, 1979) and 8mm (Joel Schumacher, 1999) all feature a snuff film or an underground collaborative of snuff filmmakers which propel the plot. Furthermore, these narrative films’ understanding of what snuff “is” and what it ought to look like are strikingly similar: “no frills, no POV shots, […] just one room, […] an impersonal setting, […] one camera, […] silent, […] grainy, […] bad editing.”

The mondo film, which is often described as the closest legal equivalent to snuff, is dedicated to displays of spontaneous and genuine death. Its spontaneity or “happening across” the strange, bizarre or morbid is often signaled through a mobile, shaky, verité camera, a convention which is aped in Tesis’s fictional mondo film Fresh Blood (figure 3). Although mondo-style films (such as the “atrocity” film) were made before and numerous ethnographic travelogues share similarities with mondo’s raison d’être, Mondo Cane (Gualtiero Jacopetti & Franco Prosperi, 1963) was the first big mondo hit. Subsequent films have strayed little from its basic format: a globe-hopping compilation film comprised of short sensationalist sequences (suicides, alligator attacks and executions) with a loosely anthropological focus, all of which are presided over by a morally superior narrator. The notable distinction between later mondo films and Mondo Cane is a shift from the weird and wonderful towards an exclusive focus on death, such as in the Faces of Death series (Conan Le Cilaire, 1978-1996).
The gore film first emerged in the 1960s with the exploitation classic Blood Feast (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1963). It has consistently occupied the margins of mainstream filmmaking, showing up in such diverse geographic areas as Brazil (horror master José Mojica Marins [At Midnight I Will Take Your Soul, 1963]), the US (independent filmmaker George A. Romero [Night of the Living Dead, 1969]) and Italy (gore auteur Dario Argento with his operatic grand guignol style and outrageous, visually flamboyant plots [Suspiria 1977, Deep Red 1975] and Lucio Fulci, a favorite among gore fans [The New York Ripper, 1982]).

As well as emerging out of a dialogue with these different traditions of cinematic violence, Tesis also must be positioned within a certain tendency of Spanish national cinema where, as Marsha Kinder argues, representations of violence have functioned both as covert political critique (the oppositional cinema of the 1960s) and as a symbol of artistic freedom (the post-Franco culture of la movida). More recently, the representation of violence in Spanish cinema has moved toward self-reflexive parody, such as seen in Pedro Almodóvar’s Kika (1993), which like Tesis, displays a desire for an always elusive real. In Kika, an exploitive real-life crime show Lo peor del día (The Worst of the Day) broadcasts images of daily violence in Madrid. Kika is but one of a number of Spanish films in the 1990s which seek to explore the aesthetics of ultra-violence as well as its manipulation in the media; others include the international cult hits Acción mutante (Mutant Action, 1993) and El día de la bestia (The Day of the Beast, 1995), both by Basque filmmaker Alex de la Iglesia.

With its narrative focus on the detection of a snuff ring and the media scandal it creates, Tesis actively enters this Spanish trend in self-reflexive violence. However, as Tesis aptly articulates, Spanish cinema’s recourse to violence in the 1990s is less a political critique than an explicit commercial strategy for combating decreased box office and challenging Hollywood product. Tesis makes a nod to this overt commerciality in the metacinematic final sequence of the film, as Christina Buckley has observed. A television newscaster announces the broadcast of the snuff footage (now in the hands of the police) while the camera tracks along a hospital ward of patients whose mouths hang open in eager anticipation of the violent images they are about to see. Tesis links the diegetic spectator’s morbid fascination with violent images to that of the contemporary Spanish audience by cutting from the side-on tracking shot to a POV shot—the diegetic audience and the film audience’s perspective becomes one and the same.

Interrogating violent representation itself, Spanish films like Tesis and Kika also reflect a larger trend in the modern horror film towards self-mimicry, culminating in paradoxically reflexive films such as the Scream trilogy (Wes Craven, 1996, 1997, 2000) as well as films which self-consciously narrativize and question the
processes of representation of violence such as *Man Bites Dog* (Rémy Belvaux, 1992). This turn towards self-reflexivity in the representation of violence and the textual overdetermination that it produces in both Spanish cinema and the modern horror film, however, has not been mirrored in the critical field engaged with violent films. Instead, critical discourse continues to displace its study of violent cinema away from the textual presentation of violence per se onto other issues such as philosophy, politics, sexuality and morality. Furthermore, in the study of violent horror, the critic often locates his/her analysis outside the *mise-en-scène* and the actual violence on which the genre turns—as if the critics are shying away from the visually unacceptable. For example, Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan Tamosunas deflect attention away from *Tesis’s* gory text and toward its psychological ramifications, seeking to distance the film from its horrific traditions by classifying it a “‘serial killer’ film” [that] attempt[s] to *transcend the sensationalist spectacle of cine gore* in order to explore the dark side of humanity and the background and motivations for this indescribably evil behavior.”

This attitude that textual violence must be “transcended” is typical of a larger discursive hierarchy that places the cerebral (in this case, the psychoanalytical) over the corporeal (here, the body’s dramatic destruction shown in *Tesis’s* graphic snuff clips). Critical privileging of the intellectual or psychological response over the embodied one is reproduced in one of the central texts of modern horror film analysis, Carol Clover’s *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (1992), which despite its promising title focuses not on the text’s representation of what chain saws do to men and women, but rather on spectator-screen relations.

But the horrific—especially gore, mondo and snuff inflections of it—depends on sacrifices of flesh; blood, guts, death, severed limbs and gaping wounds are their *sine qua non* (particularly since the late 1970s). Therefore, a critical re-alignment away from abstractions and back toward the body seems in order. *Tesis’s* focus on the technology of horror filmmaking warrants a specifically textual reading and an examination of its “horrality”—its
Snuff/Mondo vs. SFX

This section turns to a consideration of the differences between representations of “real” violence (snuff and mondo) and special effects violence as a means of coming nearer to a sense of why snuff is a genre with such power over cultural imaginations. While Thomas Landess has suggested the special effect violence of slasher or gore films is essentially a fabrication of the same visual and auditory effects of the snuff film, I would assert that slasher films—and other horror gory subgenres—are rather more concerned with visual excess rather than the realism which is the central concern of snuff. Indeed, Tesis’ juxtaposition of (fictional) snuff versus more spectacularly rendered special effect violence works to convince us of the former’s realism.

In arguing these points, I take issue with Baudrillard’s assertion that there is no effective difference between the real and the simulation, and take a cue from Lawrence Grossberg, who criticizes Baudrillard and postmodern theory generally for confusing the collapse of the ideology of the real, with the collapse of the real itself.

The most important difference between special effects horror and real horror is one of context, which turns as much—if not more so—on facts and conditions outside of the film text as it does on a film’s narrative and visual organization itself. In a legally distributed horror movie we know that we are watching special effects as opposed to a mechanically reproduced real event. Codified systems of distribution and exhibition collude to signify the essential artificiality of the violence rendered on screen, no matter how convincing the special effects. Thus, as with pornography, it is the very illegality of snuff, its separateness from norms of distribution and exhibition, that convinces us of its realism. Furthermore we can usually tell when we are watching special effects, often because they give themselves away. For example, the flesh might look false—consider the chicken-breast-as-shoulder in Dawn of the Dead (George Romero, 1978). Or, as in Tesis’s mondo movie Fresh Blood, a bad actor might make a clumsy job of falling down dead (figure 5).

Tesis makes a point of emphasizing the aesthetics of snuff—or rather what it imagines the aesthetics of snuff to be—through a number of self-reflexive moments. Out of absolute reverence for the ontological “wholeness” of the real’s unfolding in space/time, one of the essential aesthetic prescriptions of snuff is that it be shot in one, long continuous take. This Bazinian real-time requirement of the snuff film is pointed out within Tesis’s diegesis by Chema, who notes that, contrary to his expectations, there is in fact editing throughout the film. He remarks, “In these kinds of films what’s most important is seeing everything.”

The ontological imperative for the single take in snuff film is to convince of its reality, that the violence is not a special effect. An effect which would allow a live person to be fictionally killed and hacked to death in one take is not physically possible. Mechanical special effects can only go so far before a cut has to occur to allow the effect to enter the next stage of progression. Hence, as Kerekes and Slater observe, Cannibal Holocaust which pretends to be raw, uncut footage, actually reveals itself to be unreal. The jumps and pops that are supposed a result of damage to the negative which fracture the image are in fact the cuts which allow the next stage of the mechanical effect to be introduced, such as when Faye’s head is lifted from her body. Hence despite performing as damage to the negative, the film’s fragmentation textually telegraphs its status as special effect violence as opposed to the ontological violence it purports to be.

The second difference between “real” violence as represented in Tesis and special effect violence is the texture and quality of the image. In Tesis, the nature of the image of snuff/authentic violence is very different...
from the violence in the rest of the film. While the film proper has glossy production values, the snuff footage itself is low-definition, and as a whole constitutes a less excessive (in terms of color, editing, shot length and music) image of violence than any instances of violence unfolding within the diegesis proper. Most of the snuff footage that Tesis’s viewing audience sees is mediated through Ángela’s point of view and limited to those moments when she can bear to look at the screen.¹⁹ Because of her aversion to the image, then, we only sensorially experience Tesis’s snuff film in fragments. Most of the time we hear the sounds of screaming, cutting and slapping. But we only see a bruised and bleeding victim, not the actions that reduced the body to that final state.

The difficulty in making a fiction film about supposedly “real” snuff, of course, is that the different signifying registers must be made to work together—or, rather, the aesthetic demands for the real in snuff must be rendered in the more evasive semantics of fiction film’s special effects. Amenábar carefully maneuvers his representation of the snuff film so that his snuff footage can appear to be in one long take by cutting away to reaction shots of the characters’ watching faces or diegetically motivating the cut by having characters shield their eyes or focus on one part of the screen.²⁰ For example, when according to Chema’s narration the victim’s hand is being severed, Ángela’s gaze—and thus, ours, which is married to hers—remains fixated on the victim’s wide-eyed stare of terror. To maintain the snuff footage’s privileged relation to the real, it is important that we understand that this close-up on the victim’s eyes represents editing within the story world of Ángela and Chema, rather than within the snuff footage. We are supposed to presume, without actually seeing it, that the snuff film is showing the whole of the image, suggesting a limitation on the valence of reality implied by the image. When the body is cut up by a chainsaw (the bloodiest moment of snuff footage) the image we see is only the top half of the bloody, limp body shaking gently. Just out of the diegetic frame (but within the snuff frame), it is implied, the killer is sawing off her legs. The video image on the television monitor is obscured by Amenábar’s—not the snuff videographer’s—careful composition.

Through auditory and visual cues of screams, slaps and blood, the snuff sequences in the film are implied to be much more violent than any scenes of violence in the rest of the diegesis. However, their visual presentation as snuff footage, with its grainy, verité, color-drained look, is very ordinary and even banal—to the extent that Tesis does not merit the description of a “gory film”²¹ at all. The “authentic” violence of a snuff-aesthetic is much less spectacular than the special effects simulacrum of the slasher film, much as Mikita Brottman notes of death aesthetics in mondo, where “these live deaths are generally much less vivid and drawn out that the graphic Technicolor axings and knifings of the slasher movie.”²² These contradictory registers of aesthetic spectacularity are quite consciously mobilized in Tesis. When Ángela dreams of having her throat cut by Bosco, the special-effects blood trickling from her neck is red and shiny (figure 1). Yet, seconds later, just before Bosco stabs her, a cut to her image as seen through his video camera is colorless and dull in comparison to Ángela’s fantasy of what bloody violence would look like. Still—and this is part of the brilliance of Amenábar’s complex topography of kinds of horrific violence in Tesis—the dull and colorless video image carries an even greater horrific charge than the shiny red blood, because, by framing her within the snuff image it signals her (imaginary) imminent demise. In this manner of contrasting opposing registers of violence and their conventions of aesthetic renderings, the special effect violence in Tesis makes the snuff seem all the more real—much in the same way Baudrillard suggests Disneyland in Los Angeles is there to make Los Angeles and America seem more real, when in reality both are equally fake.²³
It is a curiosity of *Tesis* that in spite of the attention it pays to recreating the genres of mondo and snuff, it does not dwell for long on these moments of violence. The moments of mondo or snuff footage in *Tesis* is kept to a minimum, likely because of the technical difficulty of fictionally reproducing snuff death using real persons/actors. While it has been suggested that this sparing use of the snuff footage was motivated by a desire to avoid complicity with the public’s fascination of violent images, Amenábar himself relates it to the fact that its repetitiveness and relentlessness actually made it seem quite “boring.” The idea that snuff is comparatively less interesting visually than other elements within the film will become central to the later arguments around the banality of the snuff image and how this banality ultimately plays a part in constructing a sense of realism in the film. But first let us look at how the film breaks down the process of “making a snuff film.”

How Might One Make a Snuff Film?

This section further explores how *Tesis* self-consciously presents the aesthetics of snuff, in order to facilitate an understanding of how snuff convinces us of its realism—or, to put it more directly, how the aesthetic of snuff is a logical extrapolation of the circumstances of its outlaw production. To this end I will examine aspects of snuff *mise-en-scène*, and consider how the snuff image is produced, including the selection of video as the privileged medium for manufacturing snuff. Throughout, my analysis will be informed by André Bazin’s theories of the intrinsic realism of the cinematic apparatus as an extension of the photographic camera.

Towards the end *Tesis*, Bosco prepares to make Ángela, who has been inexorably drawn to the violence he has videographically manufactured, another one of his snuff victims. By this point in the film, viewers have been trained in the quality of the snuff image, and this scene of Ángela’s capture and imminent death illustrates precisely how it is constructed. As Bosco sets up his equipment, he first takes out an arc light and places it behind and to the left of the camera (figure 6), corresponding to the overly lit snuff image as rendered in *Tesis*. This crude lighting design affords a *mise-en-scène* where everything is on display and visible, constructing a sense of authenticity and realism. When Bosco sets up the camera on a tripod, this corresponds with the static shot of the snuff film. The employment of this kind of a stationary master shot stresses the “home-made,” no-budget nature of the snuff footage, again implying certain realism.

The pointed use of video, as opposed to celluloid, for the snuff sequences is another factor of Amenábar’s construction of the snuff elements’ realism. Video is the medium most suited to snuff for a number of reasons. For one thing, video does not require laboratory processing, minimizing cost and ensuring an anonymity by curtailing outside involvement in the recording the illegal snuff images. More important to my larger concerns of the
real and simulacra, video poses a set of provocative issues in relation to “presence” and ontology correlating with both the snuff and the pornography aesthetic, which André Bazin has discussed as if they were interchangeable. Indeed, the realist principle behind snuff and porn—to record and replay actual events (whether on celluloid or video), be they real sexual acts or murder—is the same. Linda Williams extends this idea of the reality/presence principle to suggest that video is a highly tactile medium: the body in pornography seems it can almost be touched and felt, a tactility which she suggests is in part a result of the apparatus of video itself.

Throughout Tesis, Amenábar emphasizes this tactility of the image, which corresponds to an index of its “realness,” by staging privileged moments of the union of image and flesh. Chema touches the screen as it plays the snuff movie: Ángela kisses the image of Bosco on a television screen (figures 7). Chema’s touch affords him further knowledge of the ontological status of the “snuff” image (he notices the use of the digital zoom), which helps them track the snuff to its source. He freezes the frame of the saw slicing through flesh, a moment which underscores snuff’s relation to the visibility of the body.

The pointed use of video further serves the demands of snuff realism, by facilitating a central element of its aesthetic that we have already discussed—the long take. Different from classical narrative cinema, based on continuous editing, snuff’s thrill is precisely that there are no cuts, no make-up and no camera movement, just the ontology of the long take. The long take in snuff thus appears to have a similar function to that in hardcore porn, facilitating uninterrupted recording of an actual event as a guarantor of reality. Video allows for uninterrupted recording of up to ten hours, whereas film requires a reel-change after ten minutes, compromising the continuous nature of the footage. Also serving the need for continuous footage and realist depiction is the choice to frame and stage the murder in static medium long shot, which allows all the action to unfold in one take without camera movement. The fixed camera and continuous master shot present visual constancy of surrounding elements, allowing attention to focus on the killing (figure 2). Thus, Bazinian and cinema-verité ideas of realism both share with snuff a privileging of the long take.

The aesthetics of this shot pattern also, however, imply the “realism” of closed-circuit television, suggesting that the uninterrupted observation of the event is more important than any other aspect of (Bazinian) realist representation. The setting for Tesis’s snuff movie, in particular the frontality of the framing and the flatness of the image, further implies uninterrupted observation as having the greatest importance. The framing positions the camera perpendicular to a wall immediately behind the victim, which again seems to be the appropriate set for a snuff film. It places
the killing as the only point of interest, requires less lighting, and reduces the number of clues as to who made the film (figure 8). It could be a brick wall anywhere, but in Tesis it becomes proof that Bosco is the snuff filmmaker/killer. The setting also eliminates the social from its realism (a shift from Bazinian paradigms), decontextualizing the image from the surrounding world and its signifiers, just as the films themselves seem to exist somewhere outside of society.

The “Attractions” of Snuff

What emerges from this textual analysis of the demands of rigorous realism and its effects on the resulting aesthetics of snuff is how these aesthetics bear a striking resemblance to early cinema’s primitive mode of representation, characterized by a fascination with cinematic movement and “showing.” Indeed, Linda Williams has already drawn parallels between pornography and the primitive mode, particularly in relation to snuff’s close cousin, the stag film, which retained its primitive quality long after cinema had developed beyond this stage. The stag film organizes its hardcore sequences to illustrate its primary concern not for narrative, but rather for presentation.

Applying this stag observation to snuff (where kill sequences substitute for hardcore sex), we can argue that snuff films resemble Tom Gunning’s “cinema of attractions,” the dominant cinematic mode until 1906-7, after which cinema was increasingly organized around narrative. Rather than the idea that cinema’s object is the “classical” unfolding of “realist” narrative, in the paradigm of the “cinema of attractions,” cinema itself and what it shows are themselves objects of fascination—an “attraction.” This notion of “attractions” or “showing things” allows snuff’s violence to be conceptualized as simultaneously spectacular and within a tradition of realism. Amenábar’s snuff further resembles the primitive aesthetic of early cinema and its attendant notions of attractions and presentation in its use of frontality and narrow plane of action (like a tableau), its use of static medium-long shot and the long take without cutting and even its use of “amateurs.”

It is important to note the correspondence between snuff and early cinema/the cinema of attractions, because the awareness helps explain snuff’s cultural power as well as illuminate reasons why we become convinced of its realism. For instance, the close-up in the cinema of attractions is not about suture (entering into the story) but about showing—getting a closer look. This in turn incorporates spectacle as an index of authenticity: cinema is re-integrated into a tradition of showmanship (which includes horror’s close cousin, the circus freak show), re-emphasizing cinema’s ability to present and document reality.

In Tesis, the actualité-like realism of the cinema of attractions further accounts for the appeal of its real, particularly when Fresh Blood hyperbolizes certain features of amateurism/naturalism, making the images of death seem drab and unstaged. Within a system that ascribes “constructedness” or “artificiality” to spectacle, it is this very banality and actuality which makes the death sequences of mondo and snuff in Tesis seem spontaneous and unconstructed and therefore more authentic. Thus, the “attraction” in the snuff or mondo film—death—derives its charge from the banality of the aesthetics.

Mikita Brottman argues that while mondo is less spectacular, the mondo’s ability to frighten lies in “the frisson of horror in the realization that what is being shown, […] is really happening ‘in the flesh.’” I would argue, however, that by stressing the authenticity and banality of a special effect, and by cleverly playing off the cinema of attractions, the image of snuff violence can potentially create an ontological instability akin to Baudrillard’s simulacra; this counters Brottman’s argument that it is a physical reality (ontology) in mondo which scares. That is, as unsophisticated spectators we are socialized by the presentational ethos of early cinema and also the banality of the closed-circuit television image that snuff resembles to believe we are watching something that really happened (whether workers coming out of
the factory or a bank robbery). Snuff derives its authority and authenticity and convinces us of realism through its textual resemblance to other images believed to be real, rather than any knowledge on the part of the spectator that this actually happened. There is no ontology in the image itself. We are convinced, and yet we cannot know.

**Conclusion**

With the introduction of the sophisticated digital production of cinematic-quality images, we have reached the point where any image can be faked to the degree that Jean Baudrillard would say everything is now simulacra. What genuine snuff (and pornography too) seems to offer is a form of confirmation of the real (both, interestingly, are focused on the body). However, what this essay has argued is that while the snuff aesthetic as it has developed out of movies like *Tesis*, *Videodrome*, *Hardcore* and *Cannibal Holocaust* may be a logical extrapolation of the imagined conditions of its production, ultimately neither confirms the real nor escapes the postmodern simulacra. Because we have no access to genuine snuff, what has come to be the snuff aesthetic lacks any real referent; despite its attempts at “realism,” *Tesis* is just as fake in cinematic terms as any other gore movie, equally as constructed and contrived. What this essay has tried to show is how the snuff images in these films do not actually confirm the real, rather they just conform to patterns of “realism” or to the “cinema of attractions” that have long been a part of film history. These patterns of “realism” are not the real, but what Baudrillard would refer to as models of the real that in turn generate a real without origin. In *Tesis*, snuff footage is thus produced as the ultimate hyperreal.

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Dolores Tierney is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Communication Department at Tulane University. She teaches courses in film analysis and Latin American cinema. She recently completed her dissertation on Emilio Fernández, an auteur from Mexico’s classical cinema. She has published on horror, classical Mexican cinema and Mexican exploitation cinema.

**NOTES**

1. *Tesis* won Goyas for Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best New Director and Best Newcomer (for Fele Martinez who plays the role of Chema) among others.
2. To a certain extent this also applies to Amenábar’s later films *Abre los ojos* and *The Others*.
5. Ángela is initially shown *Fresh Blood* by Chema, a loner from her class and thus a typical fan of these films. Although by showing her such graphic material his intention is to dissuade her from her thesis topic (violence in the media), they end up joining forces to track down the makers of the snuff films.


15 *8mm* (Joel Schumacher, 1999) explores this line between fiction and reality. When a film in which a woman is raped and murdered is found in a dead man’s safe the detective initially believes that “snuff” is only an urban myth—the movies that do exist are all “phony.” But when he watches the film he cannot tell whether it is real or reproduced.

16 This is also dramatized in *Hardcore*, where Jake Van Dorn, looking for his daughter can only get access to snuff through a criminal underworld.

17 While digital technologies have made it more and more feasible to (artificially) represent a murder in one continuous take, this would be economically unfeasible for the hypothetical snuff dealer.

18 *Cannibal Holocaust* recounts the story of four documentary filmmakers gone missing in the Amazonian jungles. The footage that they shot is found, but they are not. The footage reveals that they were killed and eaten by a tribe of cannibals.

19 In fact, Ángela listens obsessively to the snuff film before she can pluck up the courage to watch it.

20 Victor Perkins says of the rapid cutting of *Psycho*’s shower scene that the sequence would have been obscene had Alfred Hitchcock presented it in one take (*Film as Film* [London: Penguin Books, 1991] 108).

21 Where gore is defined as having the full color, rapidly edited, polished look of the slasher film.

22 Brottman, 29.

23 Ibid., 13.

24 National Film Theatre (U.K.) viewing notes (August, 1998).

25 *Tesis* emphasizes this through Professor Castro’s involvement. *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1989) and a slew of other films in the 1980s emphasize how the advancement of video technology makes video a handler, more accessible alternative to the cine-camera for snuff killers (Kerekes and Slater, 55).


28 This kind of detection using photographic images is of course not new: see also *Blowup* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), *Blow Out* (Brian De Palma, 1981) and, using sound, *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974).

29 This is also emphasized in *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1997).

30 In many ways the anonymous setting resembles *Videodrome*’s (David Cronenberg, 1983) set for its “snuff” footage. This wall could also be anywhere. Indeed, because he gets no visual clues from the image itself Max (James Wood), like Chema, tries to locate it by tracking the videodrome signal.

31 As noted by Robert Stam, Bazin’s faith in the cinematic apparatus to produce indexical realism emerges in the context of the post-Second World War era, and was “partly inspired by the anti-fascist achievements of Italian neo-realism.” In this context, cinematic realism becomes the cornerstone of a democratic and egalitarian aesthetic. This is cruelly inverted in snuff, with its minimalist *mise-en-scène*, cut off from the social sphere (*Film Theory: An Introduction* [Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2000] 74).

32 Williams, 60.

33 The exhibitionistic elements of “attractions” did not disappear; rather they went underground, resurfacing in avant-garde film and other genres, particularly the exploitation film where “attractions” was very much an organizing and unifying principle (Schaefer, 79).


35 This is in contrast to the conventional assumptions in film studies that only special effect violence is spectacular and by being so it is immediately discounted as always somehow outside of “realism.”

36 Brottman, 29.

37 Baudrillard, 1.