

A SHORT HISTORY OF CANNIBAL FILMS

FLORIAN CRAMER

IL PAESE DEL SESSO SELVAGGIO / MONDO CANNIBALE 1

Umberto Lenzi, 1972

Story: Reporter flees to an outback area in Thailand, first gets taken prisoner and tortured by the village tribe, then becomes a member of it, marries a tribal woman and ends up as the chief of the tribe.

Riff on adventure movies, Robinson Crusoe topic

Not yet a cannibal film in the strict sense.

Elements of every cannibal movie:

- fake authenticity
(German dubbing and text contradict each other)
- white people come to a tribal area
- ritual rape
- tribal female nudity
- animal slaughter
- eating guts

White male character as the observer, camera, alter ego of the audience: Duplication of camera perspective and character perspective.

Only the enemy tribe consists of cannibals. Racism: Cannibals have darker skin. His wife is the most Western-looking woman in the village.

Sex touristic fantasy, man on the search for an obedient wife – as evident in the title “the country of savage sex”.

Me Me Lai: TV game show host in England, later actress in Lars von Trier’s “Element of Crime”

Classical “exploitation movie”

Date: January 23, 2006.

MONDO CANE, 1962

Shock documentary film, the first of its kind. Juxtaposition of strange or disgusting cultural habits both in Western and in indigenous cultures, combined with a dark sarcastic commentary and a sweet Muzak-like film score (by Riz Ortolani). Most of the footage was staged.

Catholic “vanity” mood of the film: “It’s a dog’s world”.

Its formula has been used by countless other shock documentaries – like Faces of Death –

Precursor of the cannibal movies in several respects:

- (1) branding: movies were marketed as “Mondo Cannibale” in most of Europe.
- (2) topic of savage rites and cruelty, both in Western and tribal culture
- (3) common themes: animal slaughter, disgusting food, tribal nudity, indigenous “savage” cultures

Cannibal movies replace outward perspective with an inward (character-based) perspective. Relation between “document” and “fiction” becomes more openly doubtful and speculative.

MONDO MOVIES

“Mondo” title gets synonymous with taboo-breaking films, including underground movies and porn.

ULTIMO MONDO CANNIBALE, 1977

Second cannibal film by Ruggero Deodato. A man has an airplane crash in the jungle, ends up as a prisoner of a cannibal tribe and in the end manages to flee.

Mindanao: Island of the Philippines. Anthropological literature says that cannibalism does exist there, but only as ritual cannibalism performed by the priest-leader of a tribe who has to eat killed enemies. Depiction of cannibalism in the film is therefore entirely fictitious and a Western fantasy.

In first Mondo Cannibale film: Ripping out tongues: ripping out language

Second Mondo Cannibale film by Ruggero Deodato: Almost a silent movie

First: Classical iconography of the white man voyeuristically observing cannibals, and being both fascinated and disgusted.

Same topic of captivity and exotic sex attraction. Same actress Me Me Lai.

Role of the observer and the observed do switch: The cannibals observe the white man.

Flying: Allusion to cargo cults – as depicted in Mondo Cane.

Stereotype of animal cruelty.

Crocodile “abortion”. Tenor: It’s a cruel and savage world.

But: Westerner turns into the rapist.

The Westerner doesn’t turn into savage chief like in Umberto Lenzi’s film (who rips out tongues), but actually into a cannibal himself.

Similarity to Icarus and Goya: Mythology inscribed into cannibal movies.

Ambivalence of the film: Is the rape scene pornographic and voyeuristic, or is it an unembellished depiction of colonialism, or both?

EMANUELLE AND THE LAST CANNIBALS

Cross-over of cannibal and softporn movie.

Joe d’Amato, director of horror, softporn and hardcore porn movies such as “Man-Eater”. Creator of the “Black Emanuelle” series, a rip-off of the French “Emanuelle” softporn movies. This film is part of the series and combines it with the cannibal genre.

Cannibals move from the tribal into the Western urban space

But the roots of cannibalism are still in the outbacks and have to be “investigated” there.

Topic of diamond smuggling: Recurs in Jess Franco’s Mondo Cannibale 4. Punishment of the white perpetrators: The jungle/cannibals as a purgatory, catholic themes. Cannibalism as exorcism and punishment of sins.

In fact, the woman who gets rescued in the end is a virgin who grew up in a catholic mission in the jungle.

None of the cannibal movies tell of expeditions to *fight cannibalism*, but they always are “research”, “journalism”, filmmaking: *Duplication of the cannibal movie watching into the cannibal movies themselves, self-referential voyeurism.*

CANNIBAL APOCALYPSE

Cross-over of action and cannibal film.

Rip-off of Coppola’s “Apocalypse Now”: “Apocalypse domani”, “apocalypse tomorrow”. Contains elements of Romero’s zombie movies, too.

U.S. prisoners of war in Vietnam catch a virus that turns them into cannibals. Back in the U.S., they infect the whole population.

Revenge movie: Napalm bombing of Vietnam results in cannibal bombing of New York. Revenge of cruel nature against cruel culture.

Cannibal movies: Sleaze version of the “dialectics of enlightenment”.

Cannibal moves almost entirely into the Western urban space.

Self-referentiality of the moviegoer: The moviegoers is not metaphorical any more, but literal. And he even watches his own film, i.e. a war action movie just like “Cannibal Apocalypse”.

Repetition of the theme of ripping out one’s tongue.

New York: mythical city of Cannibal movies, as the “other” of the tribal outbacks. Almost all Italian cannibal movies start from New York. Here, NY turns into the jungle. Jungle as self-image of Western civilization.

Dialectics is perfectly reversed here: Cannibals move from the outbacks into the urban space and take over civilization. There is still the exotic and primitive “other” of the virus.

ZOMBI HOLOCAUST

Tasteless – for sure.

Genre of Italian “Holocaust” movies in the late 1970s/early 1980s (Released under different titles in Germany.)

Cross-over of zombie and cannibal film.

Classical horror b movie plot: Mad scientist operates people into zombies on an island that is populated by cannibals. In the end, the cannibals overthrow the mad scientist.

PORNO HOLOCAUST

Zombie / porn movie cross-over by Joe d'Amato, director of "Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals".

Rhetoric of sensationalism and taboo-breaking. B cinema of transgression.

CANNIBAL HOLOCAUST

"Holocaust" title becomes ambivalent: (a) sensationalist like in "Zombi Holocaust" and "Porno Holocaust", (b) subversion of that sensationalism because it actually turns out that it is a film about a genocide – but it's a genocide of Westerners against indigenous tribes.

Ambivalence visible in the opening credits: Combination of film title and music. Title gets even more obscene through the sweet music. Music is by Riz Ortolani, composer of the Mondo Cane score. Film uses it as a citation: And it turns out that it is actually a reflection of Mondo movies. It manages to be a Mondo-style sensationalist exploitation movie and a critical reflection of Mondo movies at the same time.

"Citizen Kane of the cannibal movies". Complex, multilayered film-in-film plot, excellent camera work, excellent realism in the acting

Film was cast with porn actors.

"Blair Witch Project" is a rip-off of Cannibal Holocaust.

Narrative layers:

- TV reporter
 - Alan Yates' camera team
- TV reporter
 - Anthropologist
 - * Footage found in Yates' camera
 - Anthropologist

Includes all themes of a cannibal film. Even tops them all: Three rapes, one impaling, cannibal orgies. One of the most violent films ever made.

Ambivalent depiction of both Westerners and cannibals, with the exception of the anthropologist as the audience alter ego/observer.

Massacre in the village: Probably influenced by "Apocalypse now".

Exploitation movies about exploitation movies, addressing the topic of exploitation on multiple layers – both performative and reflexive

Manages to be both sleaze and reflection of sleaze

Cannibal Holocaust – Pasolini, Salo. I personally prefer it to Salo because it's not an "art" movie and thus doesn't provide a reassurance that it's all just a critical reflection.

Destruction of the film material: Another self-reflexive point. Anticipates censorship of the film itself. Film was banned in almost 60 countries, according to IMDB the world record.

MONDO CANNIBALE 3

Last official film of the Mondo Cannibale series. Shot by Spanish trash cult director Jess Franco, with Italian actors.

Story: A researcher and his family make an expedition to cannibal territory. The mother gets killed, the father escapes with an arm chopped off, but the daughter is made the new goddess and queen of the cannibal tribe.

Picked two longer scenes: The family being attacked on its boat, and a speech of the tribal chief.

Cannibal genre turns into camp. Cannibals are white Italian actors in fantasy makeup.

Psychedelic/experimental gore scene.

Compare to Kurt Kren's 1964 experimental film of a performance by Vienna Actionist Otto Muehl.

Speech of the tribal chief: Dada Sound poetry.

Remarkable in two respects: Cannibal film as the heir of transgressive underground aesthetics, experimentalism and weirdness in a genre film.

On the other hand: Demasks the colonial stereotyping in the experimental arts. I.e. sound poetry and body art as colonial projections of a primitive other, liberation from Western civilization through approaching one's one exoticist stereotype. Common pattern of both transgressive art and cannibal movies.

The film shows that you end up always being yourself: There are Italians, and Italians with paint in their faces. Franco's film, in its trashiness, exposes the full stereotypical logic of the genre.

THE TREASURE OF THE WHITE GODDESS

Marketed as “Mondo Cannibale 4”, this film is not a cannibal film strictly speaking. There are no cannibals and no cannibalism in it. But at the same time, it’s like a sequel to the previous film which shoes what happened after the arrival of the white goddess of the non-white tribe.

Story: Liana and her father live in the djungle as gods of a local tribe. The tribe hoards a big diamond treasure. This is why they have to repeatedly fight off Westerners who invade their territory in search of the diamonds. One expedition is sent by Liana’s mother, and she falls in love with one the expedition members. This creates troubles with the tribe, but in the end, the whites get expelled.

(Very tame) soft sex movie, with nude Katja Bienert as its main attraction. Riff on Tarzan movies, too.

Comparison: German “Liane” soft sex movies from the 1950s.

Interesting plot twist in the end: Film subverts the whole colonialist pattern of the white goddess.

Jess Franco Schlussdialog: Cargo-Kult.