OF BUSINESS AND PLEASURE: AN ESSAY

New York, 2002

After an introductory title, a low-resolution video stain resolves into a jungle landscape. The image, near colorless, is an obvious victim of VHS transfer, at least a copy of a copy of a copy. On the soundtrack, static.

The camera points out of the open door of an airborne helicopter. Below, trees and brush blur from right to left. Maybe this is the Amazon. A rifle barrel on the upper right of the frame points to three or four indigenous men running, their bodies kinetic across the jungle floor.

The rifle recoils, shooter unseen, round unheard. The second indigenous man in the column falls.

A camera zoom. Again a soundless rifle discharge. Aim-fire-reload, and now the first indigenous man in the column falls.

The image erupts into static, then silent-film vignettes to reveal the remaining living indigenous man. This time we see him very clearly: face, loincloth, tattoos. With the helicopter closer to the ground, maybe ten feet above, the brush is waving in geometric patterns rolling outward.

Cut: Now the helicopter is alongside the human target, the camera over the shoulder of the rifleman, camera aiming with rifle, the two machines momentarily conspired. A few seconds of running, another soundless shot, the indigenous man collapses.

Then a new angle from above, still only static on the soundtrack, two more indigenous men running, this time we don't see the rifle.

Another fall. Another new angle. Another dead man.

Flicker, focus, new shot.

Several mercenaries are dragging an indigenous man, dead, with circular tattoos on his face, a loincloth around his waist.

Better color.

In a jigsaw of pixels, a mercenary carves off an ear, a scalp. The camera pulls out, solving the jigsaw: the mercenaries are standing over a row of bodies. Eighteen or more by my count, mass-grave layout, dusted with quicklime.

Then the image is swallowed by static, the introductory title reappears, and the low-resolution video stain again resolves into a jungle landscape.

Holland Cotter, "Art Review: A Mexican Anti-fiesta Full of Uneasy Realities," *New York Times*, July 5, 2002

What do you do with such an obscene document, if it is indeed a document? Like the photographs of lynched African Americans exhibited in a New York gallery two years ago, it belongs in a museum of atrocities, not in a group show in an art space. But to direct outrage at the artist—censuring him for telling us things we don't want to know in the only language he has—is misguided. The focus should be on the realities he's revealed: crimes against humanity, and a society, still in place, that permits them.

But what happens if or when this piece, which is an outtake from a mass snuff film, goes on sale, moves from the black market to the art market, is used to enhance a career, enrich a gallery, burnish a collection as it gains value from notoriety? Apart from the stunning insult to the film's victims, it becomes an operative part of the very system—why do we keep pretending that everything's not connected?—that produced the original film and permitted the murders to take place.

Mexico City, 2010

The previous year, 2009, my wife and I sublease our one-bedroom New York City apartment and move to Mexico City. She is there for a job; I think Mexico will be a jump cut away from my fifteen years in New York. For many reasons, it isn't. Partially this is because I don't learn Spanish: despite four years of high school Spanish and months of daily classes at my apartment in Mexico, I speak Spanish like a child. Most of my friendships are with Mexicans who can speak English very well and American and European expats. In New York, I anticipated an expanding social circle in Mexico. Instead, my world shrinks. Unexpectedly, isolation makes the friendships more intense: people I would have seen only once or twice a month in New York, I see in Mexico on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. Friendships become aimless and unscheduled, taking up entire afternoons, evenings, nights, mornings. I meet with one friend—a French graphic novelist—every Friday to play chess. In May 2010, this friend and I meet at a café in Condesa, an upscale neighborhood home to an alarming number of dog owners. As usual, he quickly wins the game—in fewer than ten moves, probably—so with chess out of the way, we sit and chain-drink espressos. Overcaffeinated and jumpy with digression, the conversation moves to tall tales: things heard from friends of friends about noirish murders, urine-soaked sex clubs, body alterations, impossible fetishism. It's friendly competition, the-worst-things-I've-ever-heard kind of stories. Most of my friend's stories revolve around bizarre sex escapades, and finishing his last story—he's won, I decide—he stops, clears the tears of laughter from his eyes, and drops his smile. We pause, watching the dog owners, none using leashes due to how surprisingly well trained dogs seem to be here. He begins telling me about a wealthy dinner party a friend of his attended in Beaubourg, Paris. His tone

changes, becoming more serious, blue irises moving left to right following a dog and its owner crossing to the park. The attendees, he says, art-world people, were seated around a table talking to one another. One man at the dinner—not my friend's friend, someone else—had just returned from Mexico, from a hunting expedition, except the hunted weren't animals, they were people, indigenous people. My friend says that the admission (Boasting? Provocation? A lie?) did not go over well with the fellow partygoers. My friend doesn't know if the man was asked to leave, or if this man gave any details, or if people refused to speak to him. My friend wasn't there. He asks me if I have heard of anything like these hunting expeditions. I tell him I have.

Mexico City, 2010

I don't look for Ivan Edeza. Not in any systematic way. Not like a good detective would.

A good detective would find Edeza before finishing the morning's coffee. I'm a bad detective, a nondetective. My search takes one month, maybe two. And search, quote-unquote, is an exaggeration. More a tendency, not entirely conscious, to bring up Edeza in conversation. Hey-did-you-see questions. You-don't-happen-to-know-who questions. The favorite non sequitur. I usually get shaking heads and shrugging shoulders. The art world is small here, but no one knows Edeza personally. Or they never met him. Or they met him a long time ago. Most people know someone who knows him, and that person is always a little out of reach. There's nothing mysterious about this, really. We seem to move in two different groups, and like I said, this is not a detective story.

A curator tells me the title of the work: *de negocios y placer* (*of business and pleasure*). Edeza didn't make much art, she—

the curator—says. Edeza himself was a curator for a brief time in Puebla, and he ran an independent gallery in Mexico City. He made a series of works about pornography, the curator thinks. Tough stuff. She describes him to me: medium height, heavyset, green eyes. Says he doesn't talk about the origins of the video. Won't say. Won't say whether it's real or not. The curator tells me she thinks she knows the guy who sold Edeza the original video. She'll see if this guy (always *guy*, never *salesman* or *person*), a video pirate specializing in pornography, can meet me. *Sure, ask him if he can meet me,* I tell her.

Weeks later, she emails me: the guy has gone out of business. How can someone who sells porn go out of business? Can't be that, I speculate. Has to be something else: probably got pinched. Moved on. Maybe never existed in the first place.

VHS

Our meeting is near the Gayosso funeral home in Colonia de Valle. I'm early so I decide to give Gayosso a look. It's a large building, a giant patterned tissue box taking up the entire block; its windowless exterior makes it feel more like a 1970s department store than a funeral home. A nun, head down, walks past the security guard at the entrance. I look inside, past the guard, and see a few more men pacing around. Since I'm new to the city I've never heard of the Gayosso funeral home, but several people called it *famous.* The taxi driver knows exactly where I'm going even though I told him in terrible Spanish *cerca de Gayosso.* I'm not sure how a funeral home can be famous, but this one is. The nun disappears into the building and I cross the street and go to the meeting.

A quarter of an hour later, Ivan Edeza and I sit in front of his laptop in his home office. He's showing me his work

from the past ten years. Contrary to what I've heard, Edeza has produced a lot of video work. (Also contrary to what I've heard, he doesn't have green eyes.) He has exhibited his work internationally before and after the P.S.1 show. His work is in major collections. We talk, pausing to watch a video, and then talk more. Most of the work he shows me is related in form to the P.S.1 video: short clips lasting five minutes or thereabouts, each video using footage from other videos or very simple footage shot by Edeza.

If forced, I could say the work has to do with death and Latin American politics, but that would be too simple.

One video includes material shot in 2001 by a CIA surveillance aircraft. The aerial, low-resolution video shows a small plane being stalked by a Peruvian fighter jet. The jet, on orders from the CIA, who mistakenly believe the plane belongs to narcotraffickers, shoots down its target. On the soundtrack, we can hear the occupants of the plane—missionaries, not narcos—pleading for help. *They're killing us!* they scream. Edeza says he saw the video on TV one night while on a residency in Colombia. Another video Edeza shows me he shot while on a tour of a Nazi concentration camp turned into a museum. The video is shot from Edeza's POV as he wanders tiled halls and rooms that were once gas chambers and holding cells; the soundtrack is from the footsteps and ambient noise of the museum. A third video shows the poorly executed demolition of a car in a Mexican junkyard. We see a small truck-mounted crane try to grab a car and lift it. It fails, and then the mouth of the crane tears from the supporting winch and crashes to the ground. Edeza tells me that the car, a former police car, was poorly demolished so that middlemen could illegally sell the parts.

I ask him about the video I saw eight years ago: *of business and pleasure*. Edeza explains to me that in the late nineties he and a group of friends would meet on a regular basis and

watch films. They watched mostly classic films and art films. A lot of the films were on VHS then, and a lot of the VHS tapes came from the black market, a place called Tepito, a neighborhood in Mexico City with a large market dealing in pirated material. Today you can rent international art films from a few video stores in Mexico City, but in the nineties, this was harder to do. Or it was more fun to plunder markets than it was to exhaust the diminutive foreign section of the local Blockbuster. And who wouldn't rather pay the Tepito pirate than the Blockbuster CEO? At Tepito, alongside the Fellini and Hitchcock were porn and exploitation: some of it local, some international, homemade, most of it nothing special. Then there were violence-compilation tapes, again local and international, videos compiling news footage and supposed snuff clips. It was here that Edeza found the video and decided to excerpt it into a work. Edeza reedited the footage, cutting it down to just a few short shots. Along with the edits, Edeza censored the footage with digitally created video static. He removed the original soundtrack, a voice-over commenting on the footage.

I ask Edeza if he remembers the title of the source video. He doesn't remember. It was on VHS, he says. He doesn't have it anymore. I ask him if he thinks the source video is real. He's tells me he's not concerned if the footage is real or fake. It doesn't matter, he says. This sort of thing happens in America, he says. And by *America* he means *the Americas*, he clarifies. I wonder if he means the video should be understood as a metaphor for imperialism and that these hunting expeditions do not actually happen. Or perhaps he means these hunting expeditions do exist, even though this video might be staged. I ask him if it is staged and he says he has heard of similar things in Chiapas, but, no, he doesn't have any proof.

Snuff

Snopes, a website devoted to investigating urban legends, labels each of the urban legends it investigates with bullet points representing different levels of truth or falsehood: *white* for legends that *could have happened to someone, somewhere, at some time*, but are ultimately hard to verify; *green* for true claims; *red* for false claims; *yellow* for claims that *available evidence is too contradictory or insufficient to establish as either true or false*; and *multicolored* for stories *mixing truth and falsehood.* All kinds of rumors are on the site; there are claims involving automobile erotica and former presidents, natural disasters, chain emails, environmental toxins, and the Vatican's supposed pornography stash. David and Barbara Mikkelson began Snopes in 1996, and although they claim no expertise in the topics they investigate, their online writings have become a source for many people looking to debunk urban legends. Seven to eight million people visit Snopes each month, thus generating enough advertising dollars to allow the California couple to earn a living off of their amateur sleuthing. For Snopes, snuff films are urban legend. For Snopes, snuff films do not exist. The site claims no snuff films have surfaced; in Snopes' logic, since none have surfaced, none exist. One would think that technically no snuff films surfacing—but their existence still being possible—would earn the entry a white, yellow, or multicolored bullet. But their existence is not possible for Snopes, even hypothetically, so snuff gets a red bullet, *false.* Snuff, for Snopes, is a yeti, rather than, say, an extremely rare species of bird. For Snopes, snuff is unthinkable as a category of existence.

Among its reasons, Snopes claims it is unthinkable that a criminal would record his own crimes. *Capturing a murder on film would be foolhardy at best. Only the most deranged would consider preserving for a jury a perfect video record of a crime he could go to the executioner for.* But when dealing with snuff

are we not dealing with *the most deranged?* More believable is Snopes' assertion that if an underground market in snuff films exists, law enforcement and the general public would have discovered it. The problem with the Snopes definition of snuff is the emphasis on the size of the market. For Snopes, snuff films are *routinely made for entertainment purposes in which participants are murdered on camera.* By planting the vague and malleable adverb *routinely* in the sentence, Snopes can set the standard for snuff's existence impossibly high. What is *routine*? Two videos per year? One hundred? What Snopes wishes to debunk is the existence of an *industry*, a perverse underground of videotaped death. True, no such industry seems to exist, because if it did exist in any size, it would probably come to light. But that does not mean that snuff films do not exist. It casts doubt on snuff as an industry, but it casts little doubt on snuff itself.

Some Questions

If a murderer films a death for his private viewing—is it a snuff film? If the murderer shows the video to his partners in crime or to his cult? What then? Has the murderer *now* produced a snuff film? Is an audience of, say, five the number we need for snuff to exist? What if that film then leaks to the Internet or is pirated and sold on the black market? Now we have an audience of hundreds, perhaps—is this the right number? Suppose the videotaping of the death is not staged, but unintentionally captured? Can you make a snuff film by accident? Or, more troublingly, suppose the photographer set himself up in a place where he knew a death would occur, say, across from a sniper's nest? Is this snuff? If intentionality can't be resolved, can we agree that reception is a better object for study? If the death was captured in all innocence,

if there is such innocence, and one small part of the overall audience takes the footage of this death as entertainment or as sexual stimulation, is it snuff then? Is a videotape of bodies falling from the burning World Trade Center snuff? Is it snuff for you? Is it snuff for a Republican family of four living in Southern California? Is it snuff for Islamic militants? Or are these militants repulsed, too? Did the footage make them reconsider their deeds or did it propel them forward in their mission? Were their tears those of horror or of joy? Did the television executives in New York, who censored the footage of falling bodies, think the footage snuff? Did they fear that someone somewhere might think of it as snuff? Did they fear that someone somewhere would find it pleasurable? Is it pleasurable to someone somewhere? Is the possible existence of pleasure enough to make it snuff? And the videotapes showing the beheadings of Daniel Pearl and Nick Berg? Weren't these videos distributed, not only to prove a point but, for a murderous and perverse sliver of the viewing public, to produce a pleasure? Is masturbatory pleasure what we are discussing? Or is the pleasure more political, intellectual? Are we overvaluing pleasure? Or is what is at stake when we try to define snuff not masturbatory pleasure but monetary profit? Can we rely on dictionaries—Oxford, Webster's, Cambridge—that define snuff purely along pornographic and monetary lines? Is snuff necessarily *an industry*? Do all snuff films need a girl who is raped and then killed at the end? Is this the kind of film we are talking about? Have you ever seen one of these films? Do they exist?

Tepito, 2010

Soon after visiting Edeza's studio, I'm due to fly to New York. While there, the nondetective can continue his

noninvestigation. In the meantime, I visit Tepito, the giant outdoor-market neighborhood where Edeza purchased the original video. Again: this is no Marlow descending into the underworld. I'm not so naive. I'll come back from Tepito empty-handed. That much I know. No one sells snuff films just like that, out there in the open. I won't go alone, either. I'm not so stupid.

I always visit Tepito with a friend, a different friend every time, each friend bringing me to different vendors. With each friend I quickly learn that there are many Tepitos. Many of these Tepitos can be found in print, too: commonly enough, in the mainstream press, Tepito is written about as a stain on the city's reputation, an obstruction to urban development. The authors who believe this write in poorly lit government offices and know that whatever they say has no effect on the neighborhood. They are, unintentionally, comedians. There is also Tepito as a great blockade of resistance, a Southern utopia pitched against Northern development schemes. (In a public talk here, recently, a European online pirate, someone who formerly ran one of the biggest file-sharing services in the world, compared her site to Tepito.) These utopian authors are mostly sociologists and journalists and artists; they live and preach on the left, but they mostly don't live in Tepito, either, and they perhaps see too much (or too little) in Tepito's mafia-controlled underworld. Then there is Tepito, place of wonder, a free zone of limitless cheap goods, all pirated, some adulterated, some downright harmful, a whirlpool of counterfeiting drawing in every resident of this city. We can read about this Tepito in tour guides, sometimes travel magazines and blogs, articles written by tourist-romantics and passersby, people looking for a cheap sell. Tepito can also be the source of a variation on every great noir story ever invented: gangland exploits, con-artist kingpins, narco deals gone bad, Robin Hood black marketeers. And there is Tepito, the engine of rags-to-riches fame,

producer of the greatest actors, soccer players, boxers, and artists. Their stories are told by sports commentators, historians, men and women who want to believe that in some way poverty can be *productive*, that it can contribute to fame and sport in a way that is both pure and honest.

All of these positions are not mutually exclusive, and most agree on one point: Tepito is a city unto itself. It's a kind of knotted autonomy, unable to diagram easily, a form literalized in Tepito's narrow passageways formed by the lines of vendors' stalls on either side, spaces usually only three or four paces wide. The stalls are about as wide as deep, and some fit only a single occupant, usually the vendor himself bunkered in by structurally unsound piles of goods. Each of the stalls is walled with plastic tarp in primary colors, tarp that extends over the passageways to form a ceiling split down the middle by a continuous one- or two-foot gap of sky. Like most days in Mexico City, it's perfectly clear and bright when I first visit, but the darkness created by the plastic tarp forces some of the vendors to illuminate their stalls with bare tungsten bulbs, burning hot, suspended from black wires running out and above the tarp ceiling into a system of wiring illegally tapped into a nearby electrical pole. Everything under the tarps is clogged with families, stoned teenagers, very mean-looking men, families out shopping, distracted elderly women, fathers looking for gifts, and near infants who look both abandoned and barely old enough to walk. No one is especially patient or polite. Not many people congregate or talk or seem to look at much. It's heads down and shoulders forward. Most seem to know where they are going—this is not idle U.S. flea-market shopping—people are here to get in, make a purchase, and get out. They're here to buy Adidas jerseys, Dolce & Gabbana accessories, striped ties, gangbang videos, *Lost* box sets, CRT televisions, netbooks, bolero compilations, Xbox games, Calvin Klein perfume. The only local bits of culture

I see are DVD compilations of fights by Tepito boxers and statues of Santa Muerte—a death cult whose icon, a skeleton dressed in a wedding gown, has been called *satanic* by the Catholic Church. Aside from the boxing videos and skeleton figurines, the international brand names give Tepito an unexpected uniformity: you can walk for several minutes and see the same products over and over again. Nearly adjacent stands sell the same goods for exactly the same prices, and I wonder if there is any qualitative difference between the vendors—if, for example, one Xbox game vendor is more reliable than another Xbox game vendor. Unlike most Mexican merchants, the Tepito vendors don't vie for your business; many look listless and absent. Only one tried to get my friend and me over to his booth. It is easy to see why: even at 11 in the morning on a Thursday most vendors are moving product without having to try, and that product, of course, is all pirated.

The piracy can be divided into two general categories. The first is silent concerning its simulation, while the second announces itself as such. The DVD vendors participate in the latter form: the plastic slipcases and laser-printed covers fool no one. They aren't meant to. Some covers are bad scans of the original DVD boxes; others are homemade, advertising three or four related movies on a single cover. (One DVD supposedly contained all of the Indiana Jones series; another contained a collection of Steven Seagal movies.) There is no trickery behind this. Pirated DVDs at Tepito are simply cheaper, more ephemeral versions of the original product. A DVD might sell for twenty-five dollars in the U.S., but here they can sell for less than fifty cents. But when it comes to perfume or jeans, the relation is different. One would have to know an unusual amount about either product in order to spot a difference, and as with any form of fakery—art forgeries, con artistry—the existence of simulated piracy throws the whole market into doubt. You think: these soccer jerseys

cannot possibly be real. They are too cheap. The typography is wrong. Are those TVs pirated, too? How exactly do you pirate a television?

As my friend and I walk through a section of the market populated by television salesmen (a lot of CRTs, some flat-screens), my friend tells me about a relative who bought a television at Tepito. The vendors delivered the TV to her apartment; only a day later the apartment was broken into and the TV was stolen. She suspected the criminals to be the vendors who sold it to her in the first place.

Several friends mentioned a brand of pornography available only in Mexico in which hidden spy cameras capture unwitting hotel residents in various forms of adulterous sex. Improbably, the videos are classified by neighborhood: El Centro hotels, Condesa hotels, etc. It takes no time to find a few examples; but after looking at the stills on the back of the package, I realize that this is probably not the real thing, either. The photos look like ordinary porn with clear images and multiple angles and above-average-looking actors. This can't be what is advertised. It must be an imitation of the genre. But this is what happens at Tepito: everything becomes a simulation. Even rumors.

"The film that could only be made in South America . . . where life is CHEAP"

Much of the background on snuff in the Snopes article comes from a single book, what the authors call *the bible on the snuff film rumor*: David Kerekes and David Slater's 1995 book, *Killing for Culture: Death Film from Mondo to Snuff*. Yes, here seems to be the beginning and end of the story. From Edison's filmed executions to a TV suicide involving a .357 Magnum, we come to know how many times death

has been stored in artificial memory. But let's skip the early history, leave Edison and the newsreels of dead bandits, and move up to the authors' account of *Snuff* (1976), a film without credits, which was in fact directed, if that's the right word, by future pornographer Roberta Findlay and her husband, Michael. The Findlays first made a fiction film called *Slaughter* in 1971 in Argentina—a film so very bad that it couldn't even find grindhouse distribution. *Slaughter* was shelved stillborn. But making a cinematic atrocity is as rigorous and precise an activity as making a masterpiece. *Snuff* may be, in fact, a work of genius, in the literal sense of that burdened phrase, i.e., it is a work that engenders a culture. On the shelf, *Slaughter* involved biker girls and drugs and easy sex and murder and narrative nothingness. It was incoherent. It was a botched entertainment. And what it needed, according to producer Alan Shackleton, one of the few human beings to ever see *Slaughter*, was a new ending. Shackleton guessed that what would make *Slaughter* into *Snuff* would be a short sequence, created by Shackleton and added to the end of the picture after the Argentine footage, showing a film crew wrapping the shoot, a fictional film crew acting as the authors of *Slaughter*, a crew headed by a sleazy director who comes on to the lead actress, asks her if the scene *turned her on,* gets her to undress, jumps on her, and, while the camera crew continues to film, murders her. The sequence is staged, of course, with the wrong-colored blood and bad prosthetic props, but that's not what gave it its reality. Shackleton knew, probably unconsciously, that a failed film unintentionally fulfills many of Brecht's mandates. It says: *this is a film, these are actors, and you are watching a fiction.* The new ending transformed the first part of the film; amateurish shooting and acting became the byproducts of a deranged mind instead of mind-boggling incompetence. But the ending would be against everything for which Brecht had hoped: by showing the production, albeit also staged

and poorly acted, Shackleton would transform the film into a vertiginous near reality.

There would be another change as well. Shackleton removed *Slaughter*'s credits from the film's beginning and appended none to the film's end. For as heavy-handed as the new ending is, the change to the credits is sneaky and subtle. Without credits, *Snuff* would be authorless. Perhaps the authors were dead, too, it suggests. Before *Slaughter* became *Snuff*, no one would sign the film because it was so terrible, and now no one associated himself with *Snuff* because it was so terrifying, perhaps even criminal.

Then there was the final touch, a tagline capitalizing on the film's Argentine origins: *The film that could only be made in South America . . . where life is CHEAP.* (Where too, perhaps, the rich hunt the poor.)

What gave the film its terrifying reality was not so much what was in the frame, but its *context*, a paranoid context, a paranoid time, politically skinless, one from which Shackleton would strip another protective layer. With the film's release, audiences heard the rumor that *Snuff* was snuff, the press reported on the rumor, and feminists (NOW, WAVAW) protested the film because of the rumors—rumors, of course, created by Shackleton himself. As the producer put it: *Pickets sell tickets.* At first, the protests were probably staged, but the real feminists fell for it. As the film crept across the country, showing at every Z-grade theater imaginable, the feminists followed with placards and pamphlets. Almost immediately, Denver, Colorado, district attorney Emanuel Gellman charged the film with obscenity, and *New York Times* reviewer Richard Eder wrote: *There is a patch of anti-matter on Times Square into which not only public decency disappears, but reality as well.* Richard Eder was right: reality disappeared, and perhaps this was *Snuff*'s greatest indecency.

Savage Zone

When I open the lone copy of *Killing for Culture* in the New York Public Library—a book that, for some reason, is kept in the Performing Arts Library's special collections along with rare original documents, a choice on the part of the librarians that only makes the book feel more illicit—I happen to turn to a page with a black-and-white film still, and there, in the still, are the mercenaries overlooking the column of bodies from Edeza's video.

The picture's caption and the short summary of the film tell me everything I need to know: the still was from a 1984 film called *Dimensione violenza* (*Savage Zone*), a rare exploitation film directed by Mario Morra. Morra is one of the fathers of so-called Mondo Cinema, a pseudo-documentary film genre that began with an Italian 1962 film, *Mondo Cane* ("A Dog's World"). Mondo is exploitation cinema applied to the documentary: violent rituals, the sexual underworld, freak accidents, and tribal nudity—both staged and not—are offered up to audiences for sheer titillation. In their book, Kerekes and Slater declare *Savage Zone* more or less among the worst examples of Mondo and explain that, like much of Mondo, the hunting footage is staged. Their conjecture is based on evidence internal to the image—bad special effects, convenient cuts, etc.—as well as its similarity to other Mondo films. That night, I Google the film, finding less than what is available in the book. I search for a copy of the film on Amazon.com, several BitTorrent sites, and specialty video sites. They all turn up nothing. I find David Kerekes on Facebook and write him, asking if he had actually watched *Savage Zone* in preparation for his book, and, if so, where did he get a copy? I also ask him if Morra had ever publicly commented on the footage's veracity. Finally, if the footage was staged, then what were the conditions of production? Were these Italians dressed up as Indians? Was it

shot in Brazil or somewhere else? He quickly responds:

> *1) Yes, both David Slater and myself watched* Savage Zone *in preparing our book,* Killing for Culture. *I'm not sure what the availability of the film is at present, but I last recall that a Dutch label put it out on video some years ago and I would suspect it's still floating around. Most everything seems to be these days.*
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> *2) I don't know if Morra has since acknowledged the footage is fake, but at the time of writing the book our judgment was based on the "attitude" of the footage and certain ambiguities common to these types of films—the way it is edited and presented, its drive to sensationalism, etc. The footage also corresponds with Morra's other work, notably fiction work such as* Wild Beasts, *as well as the work of shockumentary filmmakers in general.*
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> *3) I don't know if Morra has commented on the production of the scene since we originally wrote our book, but as far as I can remember there is no one listed in the credits with special effects work, or a reference to location. It's also not possible to accept the commentary in this or many other shockumentary films as being entirely accurate.*

From the first meeting with Edeza, there were several suggestive clues the footage was staged: Edeza manipulated the video heavily by reediting the footage; he degraded the image quality, as he told me; and he removed a voice-over. He might have degraded the image to tone down the violence, but what snuff film has a voice-over? My original memory of the video shifts again; instead of a direct and violent statement, the video is a feint, a provocation to a false emotion.

Savage Cinema

Mondo dresses in documentary's clothes; it imitates documentary's movements, its mannerisms, mimics its fascination with the exotic and the tribal. A Mondo film's quasi-scientific voice-over is a dead-on imitation of documentary's serious monologues, complete with objective posturing and detached irony. The forms and tones are similar, but Mondo submerges itself in the exotic like an undersexed adolescent. Mondo avoids the accuracy and truthfulness monopolized by documentary with an enthusiasm verging on parody. For Mondo, glimpses of tribal nudity are hypnotically erotic; animal violence provides cheap lessons in brutality. Unlike documentary's viewers, Mondo's audience is one of masturbatory oglers. It presents no truths, only sensations. It aims solely for titillation. For all of these reasons, Mondo is documentary's unwelcome imitator. Nowhere in the documentary literature will you find more than a formal reference to Mondo. Mondo directors will never be enshrined alongside Flaherty and Rouch. At least this is how documentarians would like to see it. Maybe this banishment has less to do with Mondo's own degraded aims than with the possibility that a viewer may think, if the two genres were put side by side, that documentary is not as elevated as it would like to be perceived. Can we be sure that Mondo and documentary are really that different? Are we speaking only about a similarity of form, or is there some more fundamental connection to be made? Mondo invents ethnographic ideas out of thin air, but when we look at the reactions to, say, Jean Rouch's films, we can find the same objections, the same awkwardness, the same haunting possibility that Rouch may be more low-minded than he lets on. None of Rouch's ethnographic films were free from charges of exploitation. Rouch's portrayals of African culture were often considered racist, sensationalist, fixated on the rare

violent incident instead of the more representative whole. For example, *Les Maîtres Fous* (1955), a classic of the ethnographic genre, has all of the makings of a Mondo film: it is violent and shocking; it contains a lesson in anticolonialism through what many saw as a colonial lens. One could imagine a Mondo director seated in a darkened theater watching Rouch and thinking, *If only the filmmaker would drop his high-minded pretensions;* then *this film would do some business.*

"If it is a document"

While Edeza confused Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* with *of business and pleasure*, as the producer Shackleton confused some feminists with *Snuff*, any comparison between Edeza and Shackleton stops there. *Snuff*'s producer was a huckster, a near pornographer. His interest in exposing atrocity was nil, and his bravura would have embarrassed Barnum. Edeza's video can't be said to have any of these faults, at least to Shackleton's degree. Regardless of criticisms that might be leveled at his video, Edeza's work has been a steady critique of violence. His career was built in the arts, and if a term as pretentious as *the arts* sounds like a cover for exploitation, then so be it. However, it's hard to avoid Cotter's charge of careerism—there is a career to be made in the arts, after all. It's here where Cotter's accusation of Edeza's mishandling his own combustible footage is the only argument worth considering. True, Edeza inserted this video into the art market, and to most viewers, the video could quite possibly be taken as a snuff film. If one believes Edeza's video to be a snuff film, then one will protest the video's apparent misplacement, even its very existence.

But what if a different violent video were shown at P.S.1? Suppose we were to take any footage of real violence and

show it in a museum, and for the sake of argument, let's say it's a video of American rockets killing Iraqi civilians. Perhaps it's the WikiLeaks footage that was released in the spring of 2010. Would this footage be obscenity in a museum? Would it be insensitive to the victims? Could we charge the author with careerism? Probably not. The work might be flat-footed, it might preach to the choir—use whatever cliché you can against leftist art—but I hope you would agree that the critical response would be less strident than Cotter's. What is the difference, then, between the two videos? A possible answer: videos like the hypothetical Iraq video depict a normalized violence; videos like Edeza's do not. Despite government censorship, Americans who care to know see some brand of violence from Iraq on a monthly or weekly basis. We know these things happen; the violence is routine. But the rich hunting the indigenous? It's unthinkable. And it's unthinkable because we have never seen it. Our reaction to humans hunting humans taken out of one context, Iraq, and dropped into another context, the Americas, causes a moral dissonance. Edeza's video has the quality of revealing a terrible secret, something truly secret and truly terrible, something that ultimately is not there.

Rehearsal

One: We are watching a documentary broadcast from the heart of darkness, complete with static interference. Live from the jungle: inhuman reality, imperial violence. Genocide made visible in a one-minute art video.

Two: We are watching a documentary broadcast from the heart of darkness, complete with static interference. It is an indictment of nothing, it depicts nothing—it itself is the monstrosity. The video should not be shown in a museum or

an art gallery or on the Internet or under any circumstances whatsoever.

Three: There is no document, no documentary, no heart of darkness. The video is a deception. Edeza is a huckster, no different from Shackleton, no better than Mondo. Attention is the work's air: deprive it of attention and it dies.

Four: The video's relation to reality is irrelevant. Edeza is addressing violence and representation. These things happen all the time, but we have no language in which to represent them. The video is both an indictment of genocide and our inability to represent that genocide.

Five: An artist excerpts what began as crude sensationalism—a Mondo film—and as long as one believes it to be snuff, the material is reinvigorated, politicized, reclaimed, perhaps even redeemed.

Six: Edeza's video is its own terrible object, its own antimatter. It is *abject*, unable to fit a symbolic order. Make lists of interpretations, try to order its existence—it'll do no good.

Seven: The work exists, simultaneously, as all of the previous readings, no matter how contradictory. This is not an operation of logic, but a spread of possible subjectivities.

Antimatter

During the two years I live in Mexico, a few people become aware of the project, talk to me about it, read drafts. I have conversations with the curator who told me Edeza has green eyes, for example, and the French friend who told me about the dinner party.

When we speak, they say: *Wow* and *Intense* and *Is it staged?* I say: *Yes* and *Intense* and *It is. Too violent*, someone says. *Too sensational*, someone says.

Mostly, though, people don't ask about Edeza and his

video. They ask about me. *Where are you in all of this?* they ask. I'm not sure what people want. Are they asking for a moral, my moral? Do they want me to level a judgment, take a position?

And if they want me to take a position, then what about, exactly? Edeza's video, the alleged snuff film, is not a snuff film. Am I being asked to condemn a deceptive artist?

And the subject matter, if there is a subject matter? In other words: do these human hunting expeditions exist? They seem improbable, so inhuman, so not of this world, that I hesitate before I invent a term for them: *human hunting expeditions*. But that's not the right term. Maybe: *hunting expeditions where humans hunt humans* or *human-on-human hunting expeditions*. That's not right, either. Too long. The alliteration makes it difficult to say. Who would want to use a nonterm about a nonevent? If we use Snopes' logic regarding snuff—i.e., a hidden industry will inevitably be discovered—then we can say, most likely, that these expeditions don't exist. Or we can say, preserving our sanity, our good taste, that just about anything appearing in a Mondo film is untrue. It's possible the Parisian dinner-party guest made his story up or was repeating a rumor, or my friend's friend invented it, or my friend invented the story. At the very least, I didn't invent it. And it's possible that this person saw Edeza's video, then attended the party, and told the guests about what he saw in the video, and like a message passed between children playing telephone, the story distorted into this man actually attending the expedition himself.

Sanity, good taste. It's as if the existence of a project like this—research into a snuff film, or a possible snuff film—casts doubt on my own motives, my own well-being, not just Edeza's. If the video is madness, then the maker, too, must be mad; as are all of those who gather around the video, ask questions of it, watch it, exhibit it, speak of it, write of it.

Maybe because of this madness I list the possible interpretations of the video, several thousand words long. A litany, an interrogation, an exorcism, and a mea culpa all at once. But after making the list—ten, fifteen points long—I choose none of the interpretations as my own. They all seem too narrow, too pedantic. Contradictorily, they also all seem valid—perfectly reasonable. The essay aggregates wordage, bloats and thins, binges and purges. It's always ready for another section, needing more research, clarifying a point, appending another example. Forty-something drafts and tens of thousands of words later it becomes a book-length project, easily. Metastasized, the essay resembles the eccentric builders whom Surrealism treasured so fondly—just another rhetorical turret here, another autobiographical mosaic there, and the masterwork will be done. Like those builders, the work must be abandoned, a casualty of its own ambitions. But this is the fear: theirs is an obsession, these builders. I'm just a part-timer, a hobbyist. Don't confuse me with them, I protest.

So I abandon the piece, deciding not to publish it, deleting all of the drafts and ridding myself of the work, a patch of antimatter into which reality disappears.

And Yet

Yesterday an Argentine friend calls me and during our conversation talks about films shot by the dictatorship, films showing the paramilitary gutting political prisoners and throwing them out of airplanes. She tells me gutting the prisoners wouldn't kill them instantly; it would guarantee that the prisoners' bodies would sink when their bodies hit the ocean. I ask her if she has seen the film. She hasn't. She says a friend of hers has copies. He could send them to me, FedEx. I decide not to follow up.