

Mondo Mysterium #2 (December 2021)

Investigations into mondo cinema



{ Il piacere e il mistero (1964)
The Underbelly of America (1998)
Death Fest (ca. 1996) }

Welcome to Mondo Mysterium #2

Hello and welcome to the second release of *Mondo Mysterium*, a video zine dedicated to obscure mondo, shockumentary, and related cinema. This is a zine meant to spotlight films which are overlooked not only by the public at large, but at times even by devoted fans, oftentimes owing to the films' unavailability. The aim of this zine is to change that by not just writing about films, but actually sharing them with a loving and curious audience.

Starting with the next issue, there will be two changes to *Mondo Mysterium*: first, the video zine will no longer be coming out monthly, but instead every few months. The good news, however, is that this increasingly sporadic release schedule will be, hopefully, worth the wait owing to the fact that the zine will also be expanding to now include not only three films and pieces about them, but additional articles, interviews, profiles, and other content as well. One of the new features to be added will be a Letters sections, so send in any questions or mondo musings you want printed in the next issue. There will also be a Classifieds section, so feel free to submit a listing for any mondo or shocku-related wares you're either looking for, or looking to get rid of. If there is a topic or a film you'd like to see discussed in an article, do let me know as well.

This month we have a very special triptych of mondos and shockumentaries lined up. *Il piacere e il mistero* (1964) is a classic mondo film like no other. Focusing on various ritualistic and ceremonial arcana, *Il piacere* strikes a downright ambrosial tone in the mondo arena. Avoiding one of the pitfalls that befall many a mondo film—the glibness which is at times intentional and at other times is a mere byproduct of the steady shock cut onslaught of singular and striking footage—*Il piacere* manages to preserve a serene sense of wonder without sacrificing the sheer quantity of visual delights on offer.

The Underbelly of America (1998) stands out from the hundreds of other US shockumentary tapes due to its obscurity, which is

unfortunate as it indeed offers a solid contribution to the genre consisting of original footage of dozens of homicide crime scenes.

Which finally brings us to something truly unique: *Death Fest* (ca. 1996) is a homemade shockumentary mixtape clocking in at 4-½ hours of appropriated mondo and shocku footage lovingly spliced together on someone's home VCR, long forgotten until now.

Enjoy this delectable delight of mondo and shockumentary offerings, happy viewing!

—Al

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Il piacere e il mistero (1964)

Dir. Enzo Peri

81 min.

Il piacere e il mistero (*The Pleasure and the Mystery*) (1964) is a serenely sublime mondo production which exudes a certain erudite mysticism, offering viewers a transcendental experience of cinematic wanderlust. The film appropriates the normative mondo



aesthetic of wild and dizzying shock cuts, as popularized by the genre-setting *Mondo cane* (1962), albeit molding the form to instead create hypnotic states of awe transcending from one wondrous experience to another, ultimately resulting in a kaleidoscopic presentation of around 50 different wonders across at least seven Asiatic countries and leaving lasting imprints in the mind's eye long

after one scene has faded into the next. Given that the film's runtime is around 80 minutes, this then amounts to an average of a new destination, a newly occurring ceremonious happening, approximately every 90 seconds. *Il piacere* is a mondo preoccupied not with flashbang shock clips, but with offering up

endless exploratory routes into remote ritual practice, enacting a myriad of enchantments. It's a genuine treat, or pleasure if you will, to attempt to unpack the mysteries shown in the film by highlighting a few of the discernable wonders depicted therein.

Il piacere starts off in the depths of hell at the Haw Par Villa in Singapore (redolent of Thai hell gardens like Wang Saen Suk; see also Stephen Bessac's photobook *NAROK: Visions of Hell in the Kingdom of Siam*

(2019) for a thorough exploration of Thai hell gardens), and ends on the top of the world on the Sri Pada mountain peak in Sri Lanka. In between, we are treated to a dizzying array of the sight and sound of ceremony and ritual. The overarching focus of *Il piacere* is places of worship and reverence, as well as the people (occasionally

interviewed) who inhabit them. Personages ranging from a *kumari* (an anointed prepubescent goddess) in Nepal to an ascetic in India float in and just as quickly drift away, albeit leaving the viewer with long-lingering impressions.

In India, viewers are treated to a number of festivals, alongside street flagellants and fakirs. The erotic stone carvings at the Jagadambika temple are highlighted, while copious monkeys are



seen darting around the Durga temple. A *dakhma*, a so-called ‘Tower of Silence’ which functions as a site for Zoroastrian sky burials, is seen in the distance.

In Thailand, we visit a number of temples or *wats*, like the Wat Pho, which features a phallic shrine and a giant reclining Buddha, while the Luang Pho To giant Buddha statue is seen in Bangkok, as various memorial rites are performed throughout. A segment on Muay Thai seems vaguely out of place, in contrast to more fitting scenes like an exhibition of miniature spirit houses.

In Singapore, a number of funeral and mourning rites are shown, such as the burning of joss paper houses. There are yet more rituals in Malaysia and Vietnam, with a woman at one point going into a heavy trance, topless and foaming at the mouth, while in Sri Lanka viewers bear witness to what appears to be a nocturnal exorcism ritual (or *tovil*), perhaps being the Sanni Yakuma rite.

The segments filmed in Nepal, however, are the ones that stand out the most, being some of the most abstruse in their unbridled esotericism. For instance, one scene appears to depict a ‘cult of love’ worshipping a mermaid statue erected in a river in Kathmandu, which try as I might, I couldn’t unearth any information about, while another scene depicts a ceremony for young girls. Other scenes, such as the Holi festival being observed outside the Nyatapola temple in Bhaktapur or Buddha’s eyes on the Swayambhu complex in Kathmandu Valley, are ever so slightly more approachable.

The film’s unique blending of mondo elements with the mystical may be owing to its director, Enzo Peri, being a newcomer to the mondo cannon, having helmed only one other feature after *Il piacere*, the spaghetti western *3 pistole contro Cesare* (aka *Death Walks in Laredo*) (1966); and thusly not being too mired in the mondo form, approached the genre with a genuinely fresh perspective. Though obligatory mondo tropes do certainly appear throughout the film in the forms of vultures pecking at a bloated corpse in the Ganges, a water buffalo being sacrificed in Nepal, a

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visit to a Thai massage parlor, and a tantric *yoni puja*, amongst a cavalcade of additional scenes, all serving to solidify *Il piacere* as essential and vastly underrated viewing for mondo-oriented cineastes.

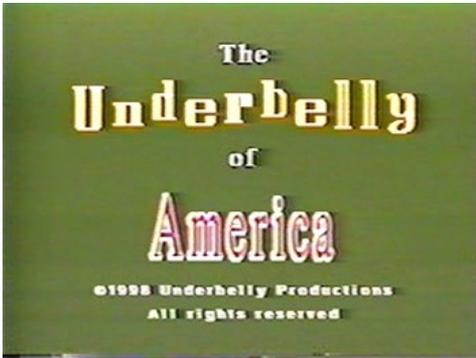
Il piacere had theatrical releases in, at least, Italy and Japan, though the only known home video release appears to be an Italian VHS, released by Domovideo in 1985. Park Circus, a UK film distributor, appears to have an English print of the film, allowing for the optimistic possibility that this beautiful mondo may yet receive broader home video distribution.



The Underbelly of America (1998)

Dir. [Unknown]

66 min.



Perhaps owing to a small production run and limited distribution, *The Underbelly of America* (1998) is one of the more obscure American shockumentaries. Which is a shame, as in a sea of shockumentaries composed of endlessly re-used footage, *Underbelly* for the most part

appears to consist of original content. The caveat ‘for the most part’ being necessary owing to the fact that the last seven minutes of the film are indeed composed of stock clips taken from other sources. For instance, the last six minutes of *Underbelly* consist of the opening scene from *Snuff* (1976), depicting the group torture of a young woman. Notably, *Dying: Last Seconds of Life, Part II* (1988) had, ten years earlier, used this same exact scene, thus suggesting the possibility that the creator of *Underbelly* simply saw the scene in the earlier shockumentary, as opposed to seeing it in the original *Snuff* itself, thereby continuing the tried and true shockumentary tradition of pilfering already-pilfered footage.

The front cover of the tape promises such seedy and sordid ‘underbelly’ topics as “Tattoo”, “Piercing”, “Sex”, and “Drugs”, and also displays a number of still frames, many of which aren’t actually in the video.



In fact, all of the aforementioned topics are crammed into the last seven minutes of the tape, using footage clearly taken from other sources (for

instance, the aforementioned *Snuff* clip is meant to be the ‘drugs’ scene). Instead, the bulk of the footage in *Underbelly* consists of ambulance chaser fodder, such as that taken by a crime scene videographer—a vocation popularized by Jake Gyllenhaal’s Louis Bloom character in *Nightcrawler* (2014). To wit, the *Underbelly* video is predominantly made up of various crime scenes, including the bloody aftermaths of gang shootouts, drive-bys, robberies, and miscellaneous homicides.

There is no narration, though brief explanatory on-screen text informing us that we’re watching “another senseless killing” or “another gang war tragedy” appears at the start of each segment.



Each new scene is also irritatingly preceded by the shockumentary’s title card, lest viewers forget they are watching *The Underbelly of America*. The soundtrack is mercifully relatively quiet,

with some scenes having stock low-key library music, while others simply have the raw scene sound without any added score. In scenes where the location can be discerned based on identifiable elements like landmarks, business names, license plates, and miscellaneous wording and other in-frame clues, most of the footage appears to have been shot in and around Los Angeles (a couple times, footage from Miami and San Diego is also shown, though it is clearly labeled as such).

The shockumentary concept of following around paramedics was



certainly not novel by 1998, either in the US—where the prior year had seen the release of the aptly-titled *Paramedics* (1997) films—or abroad, with numerous titles such as *Bresil insolite* (1990) employing a similar formula of chasing behind police and ambulance services and recording the

ensuing crime scenes; a practice whose outcome was also popularized earlier in print, for instance in Mexico’s various *nota roja* periodicals such as *Alarma!* and its countless knock offs like *Peligro!*, which printed up copious photos of fresh crime scene victims. Even the practice of following around paramedics specifically in Los Angeles itself had been done before, in the shockumentary *L.A. Gang Violence* (1992), which even saw international distribution—being released Australia, alongside in the US. Some of the same events seen in *Underbelly*, such as

infamous footage of truck driver Reginald Denny being pulled out of his truck and beaten during the 1992 LA riots, had likewise previously been documented in shockumentaries like the Nick Bougas film *Burn Baby Burn: Riots and Violence in the Modern World* (1993).





Yet despite the concept not being novel in the least, the bulk of the crime scene footage in *Underbelly* does appear to be original, not appearing in a shockumentary prior to *Underbelly*'s release—at least, as far as can be

discerned. This likely points to the creator of the film either procuring a radio scanner or otherwise following around ambulances for a while, or someone selling footage that they had recorded whilst doing the same. There are more than 30 different scenes of various crime scenes, predominantly focusing on various homicides, all shot in the same style and, judging based on the paramedic attire and surroundings, all shot within relatively the same timeframe.

Though the on-screen copyright is attributed to “Underbelly Productions” (and to just ‘Underbelly’ on the box itself), the video doesn't appear to have an entry in the US Copyright Office's public copyright catalog; nor does there appear to be a business entitled Underbelly Productions listed on-file with the California Secretary of State from that date (there are more recent ‘Underbelly’ ventures, registered long after 1998). Which all serves to make *Underbelly*'s production, like so many shockumentary tapes, a mystery.

***Death Fest* (ca. 1996)**

Dir. [Unknown]

273 min.

The proliferation of VCRs, coupled with a seemingly endless outpouring of shockumentary releases throughout the 1990s, inspired a number of shocku fans to wrap up their sleeves and bloody their hands by hacking together their very own shockumentary mixtapes. Though lacking glossy cover art and distribution deals which kept them off rental store video shelves (that is, unless the rental place happened to be run by a friend), the amateur mixtapes were nonetheless comparable to commercial shockumentary releases in terms of content, albeit with the requisite rougher edges—the chief editing tool employed throughout the editing process being the Pause button on the VCR.

Not to be confused with most modern gore mixtapes—which are typically nothing more than soulless dumps of video clips ripped from shock video websites into a movie editor—older ‘90s and ‘00s tapes were painstakingly curated,



including clips you wanted to share with your friends or pass around on the video trading circuit. Which isn't to say that they were high, or even low, art, but only to point out that amateur shocku mixes were passion projects for and by fans of the form, not crass and talentless cash grabs like modern mixtapes.

Owing to the forementioned fact that amateur tapes never received any wide distribution outside of being traded around the bootleg circuit, save for the occasional tape chancing upon being sold at horror conventions, many of them have all but vanished, perhaps languishing in a long-forgotten box o' tapes in a dusty attic.

One such unearthed homemade shockumentary mixtape that we can now brush the dust off of is *Death Fest*. As is typical with these productions (it's not as if they came with intricate liner notes), there is precisely nothing known about it, lest its mysterious compiler ever decides to come forward. In lieu of a formal background, however, a vague assessment regarding the tape's genesis may be cobbled together based on faint hints in the video itself.

The tape's date of creation may be estimated based on the fact that the latter portion of the tape includes a variety of clips from various commercials, trailers, music videos, and television specials, all being from 1996. No footage on the tape appears to be from any later date, which all points to the year of production



being no earlier than '96. Though it is certainly possible that the video was put together at a later time, this wouldn't explain the sheer preponderance of disparate footage clustered around 1996, as opposed to

footage from different later years present throughout (other than perhaps its originator just chanced to have a tape of zany clips from that year).

Thusly we can estimate the video's origin to have been no earlier than 1996, and likely somewhere around that year. With regard to where the video was made, a hint comes during a split-second when the shockumentary footage on-screen is interrupted by a few frames of a television commercial for a car dealership, Ole Chevrolet, located on "Montana across from Bassett Center".

There is indeed a Chevrolet car dealership off of Montana Avenue

in El Paso, Texas (the shopping mall Bassett Center was renamed to Bassett Place in 2004). We can thus tentatively say that *Death Fest* appears to have originated out of El Paso somewhere around '96. Though once again this inference comes with the caveat that the commercial may just have been in a tape the *Death Fest* creator in turn merely received from someone else.

Though now that we nonetheless have some vague idea about the potential *when* and *where* the tape may have been composed, let's take a look-see at *what* is actually on this thing. *Death Fest* clocks in at an astounding 4-½ hours of footage, subsuming entire shockumentaries into its monstrous runtime, and consists of the following, in order of appearance:

- ✕ *Death Faces* (aka *Death Faces IV* aka *Dying: Last Seconds of Life*) (1988)
- ✕ *Inhumanities* (1989) (first half of the film)
- ✕ *Faces of Death* (1978)
- ✕ *Inhumanities* (1989) (second half of the film)
- ✕ Rodney Dangerfield *Descent* video game commercial (1996)
- ✕ Marilyn Manson – “Sweet Dreams” music video (1996)
- ✕ Marilyn Manson and Pogo *Alternative Nation* interview (1996)
- ✕ *DragonHeart* teaser trailer (1996)
- ✕ Ice T – “I Must Stand” music video (1996)
- ✕ *When Animals Attack* (1996) (various clips from the special)
- ✕ *Cops* (clip of dead convenience store robber)

Death Fest starts off with a nearly-complete presentation of *Death Faces* (1988), only clipping out the opening credits and first few minutes of the shockumentary. The compilation then immediately transitions to *Inhumanities* (1989), before it is in turn interrupted halfway through only to have *Faces of Death* (1975) spliced in, in its entirety. Once *FOD* is over, *Inhumanities* resumes until its end.

Finally, the last half-hour of the tape consists of a variety of television footage from 1996, including a commercial starring Rodney Dangerfield for the *Descent* video game, Marilyn Manson's "Sweet Dreams" music video as well as an interview with Manson and Pogo on MTV's *Alternative Nation* program, a teaser trailer for *DragonHeart* (1996), Ice T's "I Must Stand" music video, and finally clips from the FOX *When Animals Attack* (1996) shockumentary special, before closing out with a clip from FOX's *Cops* show, which shows the aftermath of a failed convenience store robbery.

The immediate objection or dismissal of *Death Fest* may then be that it's mostly just an assemblage of existing shockumentaries. In the case of *Death Faces* and *Inhumanities*, however, this very same critique could then

be extended to these shockumentaries themselves. *Death Faces*, for instance, is in fact composed largely of footage taken from the classic mondo film *Nuova Guinea, l'isola dei*



cannibali (aka *Guinea Ama*) (1974), alongside other vintage stock atrocity footage such as the short *Chinese Justice* (1937).

Inhumanities, in turn, splices in copious scenes from the Africa-themed mondo *Kwaheri* (1964), with a sprinkling of additional footage pilfered from the hilarious mondo *Brutes and Savages* (1970). The '90s *Death Fest* therefore merely extends the same courtesies to these '80s shockumentaries that they themselves extended to the earlier '70s and '60s mondos.

Constantly reusing and ripping off existing footage is a problem which has continuously plagued the shockumentary scene (and is currently woefully exacerbated by the onslaught of gore mixtapes, with their *ad nauseum* recycling web clips), with shockus which are unjustly held in high esteem like *Traces of Death* (1993) merely being composed entirely of footage from earlier mondo films, and ultimately contributing nothing new to the scene. Genre classics like *Faces of Death* and *Mondo cane* (1962) are oft maligned and dismissed by so-called shockumentary fans for intertwining staged footage alongside actual scenes (these critiques apparently not fully grasping that the masterful blurring of the real with the unreal is precisely one of pivotal cornerstones of mondo cinema), but the key difference is that these films were generally composed of original footage, with camera crews going out to record and create, not made out of tired, recycled clips that any dedicated fan would have already seen before.

At least *Death Fest* made available a few of these rip-off shockumentary compilations to gorehounds without having waste time tracking them down individually.



