

# The Troubling Lure of 'Death' Films

## Grisly Movies of Real Killings Prove Popular at Video Stores

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Two films that depict actual killings of humans and animals have become popular items in some video rental stores, owners and distributors say.

"Faces of Death" and its sequel, "Faces of Death, Part II," have racked up steady sales nationally and in the Washington area, although several top local chains refuse to carry them.

"It's garbage," said Elmer Cooper, general manager of Videosupermarket, which spurned the films. "If I had to list the 10 junk films, that would be on the list." He said no one at his Dupont Circle location had asked for the films.

Sales are robust on Georgia Avenue NW, however, where Feature Vision owner Howard Henderson reported that his tapes are consistently rented. "I think people are curious," he said.

None of the video store owners who own them offered praise for the films, which they categorized as "gross," "gory" and "graphic." But they asserted that consumers should have the opportunity to decide whether to view them.

The films depict the following:

- An autopsy in which a tumor is removed from a man's abdominal area.
- Open heart surgery.

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# Video Movies Show Real Killing

## FILMS, From E1

- The koshering of a steer, in which a man, wielding a large knife, slits the animal's throat.
- An Amazon tribal chief slaying a monkey with a poisoned blow dart.
- The remains of Auschwitz victims after they had been sent to the gas chambers.
- A man jumping to his death from a six-story building.
- Seal hunting in Alaska, in which the animals are clubbed on the head and skinned.
- A man being electrocuted.

"I'd like to meet the person who rents this film the second time, because that person should be locked up," said Jim Hintze, a video buyer for Schwartz Bros., a Maryland company that distributes tapes in the mid-Atlantic region.

"What's objectionable?" asked Jaffer Ali, sales director for the films' distributor, Maljack Productions in Oak Forest, Ill. "It is graph-

ic, yes. But it is not objectionable to show it. It's objectionable that it ever occurred."

"This is not a snuff film," he continued. "It's a documentary."

So far, Maljack has sold 35,000 copies of the original film and the sequel combined, and 5,000 of those purchases have come in the past two weeks. A spate of TV and newspaper stories has piqued viewer interest, Ali said.

A distributor sells about 125,000 units of a blockbuster video, but for a film that never played in theaters and received no advertising budget, "Faces of Death" posts unusually strong numbers.

Schwartz Bros. has sold more than 600 units. Hintze said 7,000 units is considered a bonanza for average-sized distributors, but noted that his company has sold as few as 40 copies of some movies, mostly black and white films or TV movies, in its market. Horror films and comedies are the industry's most popular genres.

Ali said he didn't know who made the films. The first, which he said is more popular, was produced in 1978 and distributed for home video in October 1983. The sequel hit the video stores in May 1985 and is 5,000 copies behind its precursor in sales.

Although most of the scenes in the films are real, some were reenacted. Ali speculated that the films' popularity may be due in part to viewers who scrutinize the films to determine which scenes are genuine.

He compared interest in the films to widespread fascination with front-page disaster stories. "It's the same reason people want to read the news when the headline says 'Earthquake in Tibet Kills 16,000.' Now, that's not going to do anything, unless you're planning a vacation to Tibet."

"We really honestly and truthfully don't believe this will be harmful to people," Ali said. "Most of it can be seen on PBS." He suggested the unadorned truth about killings may sensitize people. "After seeing the seal hunt, I became firmly convinced that I would never wear an animal skin on my back."

Whether or not the film has social value as a sensitizing agent, as Ali suggests, several video store owners said consumers rented the film for its shock value.

"They're the same people who would be attracted to a horror movie—the scariness and excitement of it," said Rick Grinberg, general manager of two Video Nook work stores, which stock the movies. "Knowing that it's real grosses people out more," he said, noting that the most customers rented "Faces of Death" said they didn't enjoy it.

But "Faces of Death" is "a hit," Hintze said. "This is really gushing stuff," he added.

Several area stores agreed. Erol's, a major local video chain, refused to buy the film after receiving complaints about the "Faces of Death" trailer, which was attached to another horror movie.

Of 13 area stores contacted, five rent the movie, three reject it and six had not heard of it.

Ali expects that to change thanks to media coverage, and projects sales of 100,000.

But that figure may be a steep, according to Tony Seiden, video editor of Billboard magazine.

Maljack does not have a reputation for distributing scandalous titles. Its biggest seller, prior to "Faces of Death" films, was Beatles' "A Hard Day's Night."

Ali said the company recently invested \$60,000 to promote "Beetles," an Academy Award-winning film starring Peter Onorati and Richard Burton.

"Faces of Death," with no advertising budget, sold six times as many copies.