



OFFICIAL SELECTION 2010

THE GAME OF DEATH

A film by Christophe Nick & Thomas Bornot

France, 2010

Original Language : French

Format : 1:85 – Dolby Digital

Running time : 95'

SCREENINGS IN TORONTO

Sunday 12 at 09.30, NFB (P&I)

Monday 13 at 18.30, Scotiabank 4 (Public)

Tuesday 14 at 14.15, AMC 2 (Public)

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SYNOPSIS

What if death live on TV became entertainment?

Back in the 60s, a scientific experiment demonstrated that a large majority of people were ready to administer unbearable electric shocks to another man, when encouraged to do so by an authority. This experiment is re-enacted in the form of a TV game show, where 80 participants are asked to follow its despicable rules : despite the candidate's strong yelling complaints, will they obey the TV host's orders and inflict him massive electric shocks? Or will they stop before it's too late?

BACKGROUND

It's cheap, it attracts millions of viewers, and has made millions for television stations. Since its appearance in the early 90s, reality television has become one of the most extraordinary phenomena of modern life. Every year sees the arrival of a plethora of new shows, each more daring and innovative, each driven by ever more extreme ways to lure and 'entertain' audiences. Sex, violence, conflict and the lure of money are their staple diet. And it works!

One by one TV stations across the globe swore they would not transmit reality shows. One by one they capitulated. One by one they saw their ratings and market share rocket skywards.

The cult and culture of reality television has now extended far beyond the small screen. Sex, violence, torture and even deaths can easily be accessed on Youtube, internet postings, blogs and countless websites.

WHY?

What is that drives us to watch with such glee the suffering and tribulations of others from the comfort of the sofa? Mere 'entertainment'? Or something else, something more insidious?

WHO?

Is it the TV stations who have created this phenomenon? Or the audience? Can we dismiss the phenomenon of reality TV as simply the natural result of market forces?

WHAT NOW?

Are there limits to what channels will commission in the desperate quest for ratings? Is it absurd to imagine that we won't have to wait long before we turn on our TVs to find ourselves watching death itself?

No one can deny the impact of reality TV in our lives. All but the most short-sighted would agree that these questions are of paramount importance and need to be addressed. Not just by society in general, but by those who are to a large degree responsible, namely television content makers themselves.

THE XTREME ZONE EXPERIMENT

Overview

The film is an experiment, which takes the form of a reality game show, *The Xtreme Zone*. 80 candidates and 2000 members of the general public come together in a television studio over a two-week period to participate.

The show features two contestants, one of whom must administer a series of increasingly powerful electric shocks to another contestant (played by an actor).

They have nothing to gain. It is a pilot.

How many of them will go as far as administering a fatal electric shock?

How will the audience react?

How is it possible that broadcasters could transmit such images?

What is it that drives viewers to take such pleasure in the suffering of others?

The Experiment

The game involves two contestants and the TV host. Both contestants are told by the TV host that they are participating in a pilot for a new game show. It is made clear to them that there is no financial reward for participating.

Contestant A and the TV host are both actors and aware of the nature of the game. Contestant B is an 'ordinary person'.

To a fanfare of lights and music and with a live audience egging them on, the TV host leads the two Contestants on to the stage. Let the show begin...

Contestant A is placed inside an enclosed cage.

Contestant B remains on the stage with the presenter in front of the audience.

The two Contestants cannot see each other but are linked by an audio feed.

Contestant A is given a list of pairs of words, which go together (e.g. 'summer/holiday', 'heavy/traffic', 'window/sill'). He or she has one minute in which to memorise the pairs of words.

Contestant B is given an extended list of possible word-pairings, all of which include the original key word ('summer', 'heavy', 'window' etc), but only one of which is the

correct one.

Contestant B reads out the extended list of pairings to Contestant A, who in turn has to identify correctly the original correct pairing.

If Contestant A answers incorrectly (e.g. 'summer romance', 'heavy cold', 'window seat'), Contestant B may administer an electric shock to Contestant A by means of a lever.

With each false answer, the power of the electrical shock is increased. The electrical shock starts at just a few volts, and can go up as far as 460 volts (= 'extreme danger').

By means of the audio feed, Contestant B can hear what they believe to be Contestant A's reaction to the electric shock. What they do not know is that Contestant A has been instructed to give incorrect answers more often than not and to make it clear that they are in pain and that they would like their Candidate B to stop.

The TV host, aided by the enthusiastic audience, encourages Contestant B to continue, despite the screams and pleas of Contestant A, while at the same time making it clear to them that they can stop if and when they want to.

The game continues either until Contestant B is no longer willing to continue, or until they have reached the maximum level of electric shock.

At the end of the game, Contestant A and the audience are told the truth by the producer.

The show « The Xtreme Zone » was filmed over ten days in April 2009 with twenty cameras, in front of a live audience and transmitted live to a group of 50 people watching on télévision.

Eighty contestants took part, all of them chosen by a professional market research company, in order to ensure that were representative of the general population.

The results were terrifying: 82% of the contestants were willing to inflict the maximum electrical shock.

AN OVERVIEW OF MILGRAM'S EXPERIMENT

The show is based on the experiments of Stanley Milgram, which explored the extent to which people were willing inflict pain on others, when encouraged to do so by 'people in authority', in that case people dressed in white coats and posing as scientists.

Milgram started his experiments in 1961, shortly after the trial of the World War II criminal Adolph Eichmann had begun. Eichmann's defense that he was simply following orders when he ordered the deaths of millions of Jews roused Milgram's interest.

Method used in the Milgram Experiment

The participants in the Milgram experiment were 40 men recruited using newspaper ads.

Milgram developed an intimidating electric shock generator, with shock levels starting at 30 volts and increasing all the way up to 450 volts. The many switches were labeled with terms including «slight shock», «moderate shock» and «danger: severe shock». The final two switches were labeled simply with an ominous «XXX».

Each participant took the role of a «teacher» who would ask questions to the «student» & then deliver a shock to the «student» every time an incorrect answer was produced. While the participant believed that he was delivering real shocks to the student, the student was actually a confederate in the experiment who would pretend to be shocked.

As the experiment progressed, the participant would hear the learner plead to be released or even complain about a heart condition. Beyond the 300-volt level, the learner became completely silent and refused to answer any more questions. The experimenter then instructed the participant to treat this silence as an incorrect response and deliver a further shock.

Results of the Milgram Experiment

How far do you think that most participants were willing to go?

When Milgram posed this question to a group of Yale University students, it was predicted that no more than 3 out of 100 participants would deliver the maximum shock.

In reality, 65% (26 of 40) of experiment participants went to administer the experiment's final massive 450-volt shock, though many were very uncomfortable doing so. At some point, every participant paused and questioned the experiment but only one participant steadfastly refused to administer shocks below the 300-volt level.

THE DIRECTORS

CHRISTOPHE NICK

A French Journalist, author and director of many well-known documentaries (*L’Affaire des Irlandais de Vincennes, Chroniques de la violence ordinaire, École(s) en France...*), Christophe Nick is also a producer (*Quand la France s’embrase, Racines, Résistance, La Mise à mort du travail...*). He founded his production company Yami 2 in 2006.

He also wrote many books on various topics from politics to the power of medias (*TF1, un pouvoir, Les Trotskystes*).

He is a also founding member of the "Stop the Violence" movement in 1999.

THOMAS BORNOT

Born in 1973, Thomas Bornot has directed many documentaries for Canal Plus France. He has also been working as executive producer on several Yami 2 productions since 2006.