Film history terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies

BARBARA KLINGER

In the early 1980s, Tony Bennett called for a revolution in literary study, in which one would no longer just study the text, but 'everything which has been written *about* it, everything which has been collected on it, becomes attached to it – like shells on a rock by the seashore forming a whole incrustation'.[1] In these oceanic terms, the text's meaning would not be a function of its own internal system, but a function of what John Frow would later refer to as the text's 'multiple historicities': 'the contradictory modes of its social inscription' synchronically, as well as its 'serial reinscriptions' diachronically.[2] Not all scholars, however, have shared this enthusiasm for radically historicizing literary enterprise by taking extended voyages through textual pasts. Antony Easthope, for example, has questioned the very feasibility of achieving such a grand materialist vision of literary production. He argues that 'texts cannot be adequately analysed in relation to a definition of a particular social and historical context' because they 'exceed that context not only diachronically, always temporally going beyond a given reading, but also synchronically, always available to *another* reading at the same time, even in the supposedly "original" moment when they were first produced'.[3] There is, then, something so elusively excessive about the historical that we can never sufficiently grasp its relation to textuality.

Implicated within this scholarly disagreement is an area of research in media studies particularly devoted to the historical excavation of

1 Tony Bennett, quoting Pierre Macherey, in 'Text and social process: the case of James Bond', *Screen Education*, no. 41 (1982), p. 3.

2 John Frow, *Marxism and Literary History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 187–8.

3 Antony Easthope, *Literary Into Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 113.

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meaning. As Bennett and others redefined the object of literary analysis from the text to the intertext – the network of discourses, social institutions, and historical conditions surrounding a work – they helped inspire the development of historical reception studies in film. Those engaged in reception studies typically examine a network of relationships between a film or filmic element (such as a star), adjacent intertextual fields such as censorship, exhibition practices, star publicity and reviews, and the dominant or alternative ideologies of society at a particular time. Such contextual analysis hopes to reveal the intimate impact of discursive and social situations on cinematic meaning, while elaborating the particularities of cinema's existence under different historical regimes from the silent era to the present.

I would like to contemplate an issue raised by Bennett's and Easthope's polarized views of the text/history couplet, specifically as it applies to this kind of film research. The issue has to do with the potential for reception studies to recover adequately a film's past, to reconstruct fully a film's relation to social and historical processes. Can researchers uncover 'everything' which has been written about a film? Can they exhaust the factors involved in the relation between film and history, providing a comprehensive view of the rich contexts that once brought a film to life and gave it meaning for a variety of spectators? Can they, as one scholar exhorts them to do, ask how mass media events 'correspond to the massive data of their origin', so that these events can be 'seized' in their 'totality'?[4] If not, is the entire enterprise of historical research into film meaning jeopardized, because it can only ever offer partial and therefore historically inadequate views of textual pasts? Totality is of course the utopian goal of those critics seeking 'multiple historicities', and a target of those who advocate doubt. In this sense, the issue of comprehensiveness lingers at the borders of historical reception studies as both a promise and a threat.

In addition, many philosophers of history would have grave suspicions about any historian claiming comprehensiveness, seeing it as a failure to exercise what Paul Ricoeur refers to as 'epistemological prudence' in historical explanation.[5] This prudence is made necessary, at the very least, by the scholar's recognition of the interpretive element present in all historical writing and of the always fragmentary and incomplete nature of the historical record itself. Even so, as I will argue, exhaustiveness, while impossible to achieve, is necessary as an ideal goal for historical research. Its impossibility should not lead, as in the case of Easthope, to its dismissal: that would be the rough equivalent of saying because we cannot know all of outer space we should stop our investigations. Rather more in the spirit of Fernand Braudel's concept of *histoire totale*, we can acknowledge both the unattainability of such a history and the benefits of its pursuit.[6]

In a total history, the analyst studies complex interactive

4 Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: the Annales Paradigm* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 216.

5 Paul Ricoeur, *The Contribution of French Historiography to the Theory of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 19.

6 Braudel writes that his work covering the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries 'does not claim to have depicted all material life throughout the whole complex world. . . . What it offers is an attempt to see all these scenes as a whole . . . . If not to see everything, at least to locate everything, and on the requisite grand scale'. Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, trans. Miriam Kochan (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), pp. 441–2.

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environments or levels of society involved in the production of a particular event, effecting a historical synthesis, an integrated picture of synchronic as well as diachronic change. In Foucauldian terms, total history appears as the general episteme of an archaeological stratum which would include the system of relations between heterogeneous forms of discourse in that stratum. A Marxist gloss defines total history as a 'dialectical history of ceaseless interaction among the political, economic, and cultural, as a result of which the whole society is ultimately transformed'.[7] Whatever the specific permutation, the grand view behind a *histoire totale* has several valuable functions for film history. Embodying a scholarly aim rather than an absolutely achievable reality, the concept promises to press historians' enquiries beyond established frontiers, broadening the scope of their enterprise, and continually refining their historical methods and perspectives. What David Bordwell refers to in other contexts as a 'a totalized view' of history suggests that recovering the past is eminently tied not only to the discovery of documents of yore, but to reflection upon how best to engage thoroughly with that past.[8] In addition, pursuing this idea in the context of film studies provides the occasion for imagining what a cinematic version of *histoire totale* might comprise, creating a panaromic view of the contexts most associated with cinema's social and historical conditions of existence, and returning us to the question of what exactly is at stake in materialist approaches to textuality.

Before considering the details of a cinematic *histoire totale* for a dominant kind of filmmaking – the classical Hollywood cinema – I would like to examine briefly how such an enterprise necessarily reorients some existing tendencies of research in reception studies. Keeping in mind that the historians I mention never set out to produce a synthetic social picture, a more global view of a film's reception history raises several questions about the parameters of contemporary contextual research.

The first question pertains to the selection and use of the external discourses the researcher includes in a case study. Some scholars, such as Mike Budd and Maria LaPlace, mobilize a number of different extrafilmic fields to interrogate cinema's relation to its historical context – respectively advertising, censorship, and reviews for *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919); and star discourse, conventions of women's fiction, and consumerism for *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942).[9] The hermeneutic importance of this position becomes clear when we weigh the implications of the 'single discourse' approach to reception. Studying a film's connection to a single external field, such as reviews, is obviously not enough to portray exhaustively the elements involved in a film's social circulation. Such a study can tell us how that field produced meaning for the film and give us a partial view of its discursive surround.[10] But

7 Robert Mandrou, quoted in Stoianovich, *French Historical Method*, p. 112.

8 David Bordwell, 'Our dream cinema: western historiography and the Japanese film', *Film Reader*, no. 4 (1979), p. 58. I use Bordwell's phrase 'totalized view' because of its suggestiveness for my analysis, while acknowledging that our perspectives on the relations between film and culture differ.

9 Mike Budd, 'The moments of Caligari', in Mike Budd (ed.), *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 7–119; Maria LaPlace, 'Producing and consuming the woman's film: discursive struggle in *Now, Voyager*', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), pp. 138–66.

10 I am indebted to Dana Polan for coining the apt phrase 'discursive surround' as a means of describing film's contextual situation.

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at the same time, and perhaps less obviously, it can result in an insufficient depiction of film's relationship to its social context, with consequences for how we hypothesize cinema's historical and ideological meaning.

This point finds illustration in Mary Beth Haralovich's commentary on *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) in which she initially speculates that its mise-en-scene be understood against the 'external social fact of suburbia in the 1950s'. She sees the film as participating in social consciousness about housing and its role in the social order, particularly in its expressive mise-en-scene, which acts potentially to resist 'idealist discourses about the qualities of suburban liveability'. But aware that a single historical frame is insufficient, she suggests further investigating the film's production, the state of domestic architecture, consumerism at the time, and other factors necessary to a more complete social history.[11] And, indeed, if one were to look at the industry's production strategies for the style of the film, and reviewers' reception of it against consumerism and other historical tides, one would find that *All That Heaven Allows* was planned and received largely as a support for consumer culture and the affluent climate of the 1950s. The point here is that if the researcher rests with discussing a film's connection to a particular contextual frame, she/he may assess its historical role and ideology too hastily. In this case, such haste might produce a monolithic view of *All That Heaven Allows* as subversive of 1950s domestic ideology by focusing too narrowly on the relation of its self-reflexive mise-en-scene to discourses on housing at the time. By neglecting to consider how the mise-en-scene is situated within broader discursive activities, the researcher's assessment of the film's ideology would be premature.

By contrast, a totalized view provides a sense, not of *the* ideology the text had in historical context, but its *many* ideologies. By placing a film within multifarious intertextual and historical frames – the elements that define its situation in a complex discursive and social milieu – the film's variable, even contradictory, ideological meanings come into focus. There is then a desired *Rashomon*-like effect in totalized reception studies, where the researcher uncovers different historical 'truths' about a film as she/he analyses how it has been deployed within past social relations. A totalized view necessarily addresses the competing voices involved in a particular film's public signification as a means of attempting to describe its full historicity. It thus avoids arriving at premature, partial, ideological identities for films, that result from imposing a unity between a film and its historical moment at the expense of considering the intricate untidiness of this relationship.

Another tendency in historical reception studies forecloses the impulse towards a cinematic *histoire totale* in a different way. Here, the researcher stays too close to home. 'Home' happens to be the film industry, the environment with the closest ties to the film text and the

11 Mary Beth Haralovich, 'Film history and social history', *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1986), pp. 12–13.

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one that has long been of interest to historians. On occasion, reception studies focused on the industry fail to raise the question of how the industrial context connects to surrounding social and historical processes. Part of this provincialism results from the debt reception studies owes to the 'new' revisionist film history: the former has been revolutionized by the latter's interest in displacing secondary and anecdotal forms of history with primary documentation, archival research and other historiographical tools of evidence and verification. The new film history has concentrated particularly on industry practices, including modes of production and exhibition, film style and technology. But, as Miriam Hansen has pointed out, this concentration has led at times to a 'self-imposed abstinency . . . with regard to the social and cultural dynamics of cinematic consumption, with discourses of experience and ideology'.[12]

We can see a distinction between historical accounts emphasizing the industrial and those exploring connections to external social and historical discourses in Lea Jacobs's and Annette Kuhn's respective works on film censorship. Jacobs analyses how the operation of censorship affected the style and narrative of the 'fallen woman' cycle of the woman's film from the late 1920s and the 1940s. She illuminates the intricate business of censorship as it attempts to regulate sexual difference in this significant subgenre, but does not extend her analysis to consider its positioning within larger social processes. Kuhn, taking a different tack, contextualizes her discussion of censorship of early British cinema by discussing the eugenics movement, sexology, wartime Britain, and broader conceptions of cinema in the public sphere.[13] The two authors clearly have different objectives. But for a totalized view, questions of history must extend beyond the industry to engage in a potentially vast system of interconnections, from the film and its immediate industrial context to social and historical developments.

Besides addressing the problems of single discourses and industrial preoccupations, this view demands a diachronic dimension. Almost all film historians are 'stuck in synchrony', focusing on the conjuncture in which films initially appeared to reveal their original circumstances of production, exhibition and reception. Reception studies scholars almost exclusively come to terms with a film's meaning by considering the impact that its original conditions had on its social significance. Research into origins, while all-consuming, can ultimately lapse into a kind of historicism that sidesteps the big meaning question: that is, the radical flux of meaning brought on by changing social and historical horizons over time. Studies of reception can synchronically excavate texts without necessarily speculating on how this context helps reconceive the process of meaning-production – how the act of historicizing challenges notions about the stability of textual meaning. At an extreme, textual exegesis is replaced by historical exegesis. *Now, Voyager* is no longer, via psychoanalytic close readings, a visual

12 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 5.

13 Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928–1942* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality, 1909–1925* (London: Routledge, 1988).

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essay on sexual difference figuring the potentially liberatory enunciation of woman's desire, but, via historical analysis, a reappropriation of discourses of consumerism as liberatory for women in the 1940s.[14]

Without question, historical reception studies has a strong interpretive dimension: the chief arena for the discovery of meaning and significance has in a sense been displaced from text to context.[15] But, as Janet Staiger writes, the prime objective of materialist approaches is not simply to secure new contextualized meanings for texts, but to attempt a 'historical *explanation* of the event of interpreting a text' by tracing the 'range of [interpretive] strategies available in particular social formations'.[16] Once one makes this meta-interpretive move, questions of value, continuously at the heart of interpretive enterprise, become themselves contextualized. That is, the aesthetic or political value of a film is no longer a matter of its intrinsic characteristics, but of the way those characteristics are deployed by various intertextual and historical forces. A danger of synchronic research is that researchers can find themselves attempting to settle a film's historical meaning, much like a standard interpretation would fix its textual meaning. Ideally, reception theory influenced by cultural and historical materialism analyses, rather, the discontinuities and differences characterizing the uses of a particular film within and beyond its initial appearance. This is not to say that the film in question has no definite historical meanings; simply that what appears to be definite at one moment will be subject to penetrating alterations with the ascendancy of new cultural eras.

Diachronic research is especially important to reception studies, then, because it forces consideration of a film's fluid, changeable and volatile relation to history. These qualifiers are essential for realizing the historicity of meaning beyond origins, and for giving authority to all of the semiotic intrigues surrounding films during the course of their social and historical circulation. The issue of diachrony thus advances the film/culture relation well beyond even 'the massive data of its origins', addressing how that relation is remade continuously through diverse institutions and historical circumstances over the decades subsequent to initial release dates.

The diachronic dimension of Charles Maland's work on Charlie Chaplin, for example, explains how conditions upon the rerelease of this director's films in the 1960s and 1970s helped restore his artistic reputation and star persona, after all of the previous negative publicity stemming from his controversial radicalism and marital mishaps. The changing, more self-critical, political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, combined with auteurism and other transformations in film reviewing and criticism, helped rewrite Chaplin and his films, emphasizing his victimization by Cold War zealots, his artistic genius and his comic persona over his 'Communism' and disastrous relationships. These

14 Lea Jacobs, '*Now, Voyager*: some problems of enunciation and sexual difference', *Camera Obscura*, no. 7 (1981), pp. 89–104; LaPlace, 'Producing and consuming the woman's film'.

15 See Jonathan Culler on this point in *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), p. 148.

16 Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 80–81.

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combined historical factors thus resulted in a new canonization of his works.[17]

A cinematic *histoire totale* thus presses against the boundaries of historical reception study by asking at least that researchers analyse public combat over film meaning rather than unities, historicize their enquiries beyond industrial practices, and pursue diachronic meanings not only to better represent the text's social circulation, but to engage fully with the impact historical context has on meaning. It now remains to ask: what might a cinematic version of *histoire totale* look like?

Before getting to the heart of the matter, a few words about the parameters of this account are in order. Because classical Hollywood cinema has been centre stage for a great deal of work in historical reception studies, my discussion here will pertain primarily to this kind of film. I will address the contextual factors involved in negotiating the meaning of films made in Hollywood roughly between 1917 and 1960 – the so-called classical period in US filmmaking. Though the model I propose may have application to other modes of production (such as documentary and avant-garde film), other national cinemas and visual communications media (such as television), I do not suggest that a total history for one particular kind of filmmaking, no matter how dominant, somehow comprehensively represents others.[18]

I have divided a total history for this kind of film into two large categories: the synchronic and diachronic. The more specific subdivisions under the synchronic are organized in a progressively outward-bound direction, beginning with those areas most closely associated with the production of a film ('cinematic practices'), moving to those technically outside the industry, but closely affiliated with a film's appearance ('intertextual zones'), and ending with social and historical contexts circulating through and around its borders. As we shall see, while each of these areas still apply, the peculiarities of the diachronic dimension dictate a slightly different organization.

These subdivisions are so labelled to maintain familiar distinctions between contextual areas typically explored by researchers. I do not mean to deny the intertextuality and discursivity of all that surrounds the film, as well as the film itself: but for the purposes of clarity in discussion, I wish to avoid collapsing everything contextual into a single, chaotic identity. These three subdivisions – cinematic practices, intertextual zones, and social and historical contexts – depict a geographic space which suggests the intricate situations in which cinema exists historically. Of course, not all of these regions may be equally important to each film analysed. The researcher attempts to discover which regions seem particularly applicable to reconstructing the vital relations which comprise the contexts in which particular films are produced and received.

17 Charles Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: the Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), especially pp. 317–60. See also Robert Kapsis's evolutionary treatment of Hitchcock in *Hitchcock: the Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

18 Some examples of work in reception studies on other modes of production include: Juan Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); and Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–1971* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). In the area of other national cinemas, see Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality*; Kyoko Hirano, *Mr Smith Goes to Tokyo Under the American Occupation, 1945–1952* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); and Jostein Gripsrud and Kathrine Skretting (eds), *History of Moving Images: Reports from a Norwegian Project* (Oslo: Research Council of Norway, 1994). Since television and film are such different media, I could not simply equate the two. However, reception studies in film have much to learn from similar enquiries in television studies.

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In addition, the nature of interrelations between various areas is deeply interactive. The film in question, for example, is not just *acted upon* by external forces, it in turn can affect and transform the contextual activities which surround it – as, for example, when controversy over a film's censorship results in changes in censorship codes or public debate about the regulation of media content. Similarly, the relations between an aspect of cinematic practice, such as film style or exhibition, to intertextual zones and historical contexts are not to be understood as ultimately separable, but as fluid and reciprocal: for example, the lushness of 1950s Technicolor melodramatic mise-en-scene in Hollywood is linked intertextually to decors shown in *Better Homes and Gardens* within the overall spectacle of postwar consumer culture.[19] In this example, intertexts and history penetrate the films' visuals at the same time as those visuals continue to construct a utopian vision of consumption. By imagining such reciprocity between areas, we can see historically how film and its contexts act as participants in the discursive fray of which they are a part.

A reception history aimed at a totalized view, then, would ask how the factors within these general areas helped reconstruct the historical conditions of existence for a film at the moment of its first and subsequent releases. However, researchers in reception are not primarily interested in these conditions *per se*, as some film historians might be. Rather, those pursuing issues of reception interrogate such contextual elements to understand how they helped negotiate the film's social meanings and public reception, attempting to pinpoint the meanings in circulation at a given historical moment.

It is important to point out that the viewer in this semantic geography is everywhere and nowhere, neither the product nor the subject of one particular discourse.[20] The viewer does not exist in one stable location in relation to the flux of historical meanings around a film, and therefore cannot be placed conveniently at the centre, the periphery or some other 'niche' within this interaction. Thus, a total history does not tell us (except in the case of empirical research on fans and spectators) how specific individuals responded to films: it cannot generally 'pin' the viewer down as subject to a series of discursive manoeuvres. Instead, it provides a sense of what the historical prospects were for viewing at a given time by illuminating the meanings made available within that moment. A totalized perspective thus depicts how social forces invite viewers to assume positions, giving us a range of possible influences on spectatorship, without securing an embodied viewer. As a result, this depiction is not 'subject free', but underpinned by the assumption that social discourses recruit and depend on social subjects to support them.

Below is a schematic account of the more specific factors that enter into a total history for the classical Hollywood cinema. Many of these have been individually identified as relevant to understanding the

19 Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 57–68.

20 See Michel Foucault's discussion of subjectivity in relation to discursivity in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 200. Foucault does not wish to exclude the problem of the subject, but to 'define the positions and functions that the subject could occupy in the diversity of discourse'.

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historicity of the cinema. Taken together, they begin to provide a sense of the magnitude of a total reception history of a film.

Synchronic areas of study

Cinematic practices

These are primarily all of the practices associated with film production, distribution and exhibition that shape the film the audience finally sees. At the same time, they generate all sorts of materials, from studio memos to posters, that allow the historian to grasp their struggles over how the film should ultimately signify to audiences to make a profit. As a 'meaning-making' institution generally responsible for first introducing the film to the public, the industry represents a powerful source with which to historicize the impact one contextual arena had on creating 'preferred' readings for films.

Film Production What factors within this arena affected the ultimate constitution of the film(s) in question? Research here might focus on how the economic structure and production practices of a studio during a specific historical period helped shape the film product. How did that studio's house style govern the selection of producers, directors, stars, scriptwriters and other personnel? How did it influence the genre, narrative and style of its product (for example, as the post-sound expansion, Depression-era thrift of Warner Bros contributed to the 'direct from the headlines' stories, sparse mise-en-scene and similarly functional cinematography, editing, sound, scriptwriting, and so on, of their cycle of 'realist' gangster and social problem films in the early 1930s)? Research would in addition consider technological developments in so far as they affect film style (arc lights, Technicolor, widescreen formats, and so on). Also fundamentally involved in the production process is film censorship, specifically the negotiations between studios, state and/or film industry censors and special interest groups over the content and form of motion pictures. These negotiations, as historians have shown, result in battles over, and potential changes in, virtually any aspect of a film from its dialogue to its ending.

The analyst, then, provides a production history for the film being studied, seeking to grasp how its narrative and style were negotiated by industry factors and developments affecting industry practices. In such an analysis, new film histories involving Hollywood provide formative models for this aspect of reception study.[21]

Film Distribution How was the film in question distributed nationally and internationally, affecting where and under what conditions it appeared theatrically? While there are many possible applications here,

21 David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) has stood as a tutor-text of new film historicism. In addition, scholars such as Tino Balio and Tom Schatz have afforded insight into the impact studio affiliation has had on individual motion pictures in terms of house style and other considerations. See Balio, *United Artists: the Company Built By the Stars* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976) and Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988). Studies of film technology, such as John Belton's work on widescreen, as well as studies of censorship, such as Lea Jacobs's work, demonstrate, respectively, how technology and the film industry's moral considerations deeply influenced the appearance of certain films. See John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*.

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one example emerges from Douglas Gomery's work on the domestic distribution tactics of the 'Big Five' studios during the classic era. As he has shown, the distribution exchanges of these studios helped maintain a strict pattern of exhibition for films as 'first', 'second' or 'clearance' runs within certain kinds of cinemas and geographical territories. Clearly a profit-motivated strategy on the part of the studios, such definitions of venues for films helped define the cinemagoing attitudes of patrons toward these films (for example, seeing a much anticipated blockbuster with big name stars during its first week of release at top admission prices as opposed to seeing it months or years later with far less fanfare, in less glamorous cinemas and at a bargain price).[22]

Film Exhibition A particularly rich terrain for considering the industry's impact on the public presentation of a film, there are at least three central areas to examine here: national exhibition, local exhibition and the cinema site itself.

Materials the studio uses in national exhibition range from trailers, posters and lobby cards shown in or adorning cinemas, to nationally broadcast star interviews and tie-ins with major businesses such as General Motors, or, more recently, McDonald's. The researcher considers how the ephemera around the release of a film – trailers, posters and tie-ins – contribute to its social identity. Trailers, for example, obviously indicate how a studio wishes to sell a film. At the same time, the sales strategies used tell us how the film was semiotically presented to its potential audiences – that is, how the studios foregrounded certain of its aspects to appeal to industry and social trends of the time (as when studio trailers amplified the 'illicit' sexual content of 1950s Hollywood melodramas to sell them as representatives of the increasing 'sexual display' within 1950s culture).[23] Tactics and materials used by local cinema owners and managers to sell films to their particular demographic audiences include specially designed posters, as well as such exploitation devices as product giveaways or star lookalike contests. These materials again help indicate how meanings for films can be motivated: a star lookalike contest emphasizes not only the particular star as commodity and the forces of identification between star and audiences already at work, but also reifies the film as spectacle of genderized glamour and visual appeal, among other things.[24] Lastly, the design, location and other features of the cinema site itself constitute significant determinants of the filmgoing experience. Trends affecting the exhibition site, such as the development of the picture palace with its grand architecture, the introduction of air conditioning, concession stands, double features and many other theatrical innovations, create 'framing' devices that strongly interact with the phenomenon of viewing, affecting the historical apprehension of films.[25]

22 Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: a History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), pp. 66–9. For other texts that treat distribution practices, see Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America Since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969) and Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–34* (London: British Film Institute, 1985).

23 Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, pp. 36–57.

24 Diane Waldman treats this aspect of exploitation gimmickry in 'From midnight shows to marriage vows: woman, exploitation, and exhibition', *Wide Angle*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1984), pp. 40–48.

25 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, pp. 57–82.

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Film Personnel While this category belongs both to production and exhibition, its significance to the social circulation of a film merits separate attention. The studio's choice of actors, scriptwriters, directors, producers, and so on has a lively impact on a film's social appropriation via the studio's circulation of stories in the print and visual media about those personnel. While the director is often considered the most important of these personnel, these background stories, interviews and gossip items often feature stars, scriptwriters, original source authors and others involved in the making of a film. Such discussions are often intended to incite greater interest in the film among cinemagoers and to guide audiences to preferred reading(s) the production company may have in mind. A contemporary instance would be interviews with stars Demi Moore and Michael Douglas in which they try to steer the viewer away from seeing *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, 1994) as a backlash film about sexual harassment. Hence what Terry Eagleton once called authorial ideology[26] does not simply apply to the primary author, but, within the collective enterprise of filmmaking, potentially to all those involved in the process. Various personnel's biographies, commentaries and reported worldviews become part of the public's structuring principles for viewing films.

Among works attempting synthetic production histories for specific films which touch on many of the above considerations (though not necessarily from a reception studies perspective) is Stephen Rebello's *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*.[27]

26 Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso, 1978), pp. 58–60.

27 Stephen Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

Intertextual zones

These zones mainly acknowledge cinema's relation to other media and businesses, the mutual influences between film and associated practices external to the film industry. These include such influences as adaptation from an original source or reference to conventions from preexisting forms that entered into the audience's experience of film, as in the case of vaudeville's impact on early cinema audiences in the USA. For reception studies these intertextual situations are particularly important in helping to depict further formative influences on the film text itself, sets of expectations or desires audience members may have brought to their filmgoing from their participation in other adjacent spheres, and modes of evaluation other media may have brought to bear on the cinema at specific times. Hence, studying the film's association with closely related terrains illuminates just how strongly intertextual its existence is, as this provides another step in reconstructing its historical meaning.

Other Businesses and Industries These would include fashion, advertising, the car industry, fast food, and myriad other businesses that have served not only on occasion as models for Hollywood enterprise, but also as rich sources of tie-ins for film promotion,

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publicity, and exploitation. These external influences, as in the case of fashion, have the power to influence the film's visuals, as well as provide a strategy of appeal to viewers. Productive research in this area that targets the tie-in includes Jane Gaines's work on *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) where Gaines traces the strategies used by US department stores to sell versions of the film's costumes against the historical backdrop of the development of the department store window and cinema screen as spectacles of consumer luxuries.[28]

Other Media and Arts The performing arts, popular media, and 'high' art forms comprise a vital intertextual environment in which films are made and viewed. Thus vaudeville, radio, comic strips, pulp fiction, bestselling novels, television, music, 'classic' literature, theatre, painting, dance and opera are all potential influences on films and their reception. Such forms serve, most familiarly, as sources of adaptation (for instance, MGM's adaptation of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* [George Cukor, 1935]). But they can also affect the film industry's economic decisions (when, for example, a studio decides to make 'A' productions to maintain or gain a first-run market by producing prestige pictures based on classic literature). In addition, media intertexts deeply affect film style: one can think here of the impact of the sharp repartee of Raymond Chandler's literary noir characters on acting styles and dialogue in film noir or the pervasive presence of music video's rapid editing style in a variety of media from advertisements to film today.

Through their characters, conventions, genres, and styles, forms external to cinema create horizons of expectation for their audiences as well, shaping how they view the cinema. Film historians have written extensively about the influence vaudeville had on film – how, specifically, vaudevillian stage acts helped determine the narrative and exhibition strategies of the early US film, and the expectations of its emerging audiences.[29] As for a less examined intertextual alliance, Gaylyn Studlar has argued that developments in dance (such as European-influenced art dance and the tango) shaped the textual features of Rudolph Valentino's films and the star's public reception via the controversial vision of masculinity these dance forms suggested.[30]

Review Journalism This refers to film criticism that appears in newspapers, magazines, radio and television. As Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery comment, such criticism helps establish the terms by which films will be discussed and evaluated in public.[31] By illuminating the critical standards and tastes within the aesthetic ideologies and social preoccupations of a given historical moment, the study of review journalism reveals a great deal about the terms governing a film's cultural circulation.

28 Jane Gaines, 'The *Queen Christina* tie-ups: convergence of show window and screen', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1989), pp. 35–60.

29 For a work that analyses other intertextual influences on early cinema, including Shakespearian drama, see William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: the Case of Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

30 Gaylyn Studlar, 'Valentino, "optic intoxication," and dance madness', in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 23–45.

31 Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 90.

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Star Journalism and Fan Culture Stories about stars appear in numerous sources, including women's and fan magazines, tabloids, tell-all biographies and television. Like studio-generated materials about stars, which often cross over into this arena, star stories as they circulate in the wider culture are vital to an understanding of the social semiotics of the celebrity image in conjunction with the celebrity's roles and what she or he might signify to various social groups. Richard Dyer's work on Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland in *Heavenly Bodies* has influentially demonstrated the significance of such forms of intertextuality in understanding how these stars signified, respectively, white female sexuality, blackness and gay iconicity, within specific historical circumstances.[32]

32 Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986).

Social and historical contexts

Although cinematic practices and intertextual zones occupy distinct spheres with their own respective operations, they not only intersect with one another but also interact with social and historical developments. This category attempts to come to terms with a series of larger social processes which, in concert with cinematic practices and intertextual zones, help produce meanings for films. Below are a series of admittedly large terrains which suggest aspects of the social formation involved in the complex negotiation of what films mean publicly.

The Economy The cinematic institution, its practices and its alliances with other media and businesses can be associated with economic considerations within any conjuncture (for example, the rise of transnational corporations in the 1960s and their effect on creating what Thomas Schatz has called the 'blockbuster syndrome' in Hollywood filmmaking in the 1970s).[33] Film historians have also frequently emphasized the relationship between consumerism and the cinema by analysing a series of connections between historical eras emphasizing consumerism, the fashion and advertising industries, film style (including decor and costumes), exhibition practices and the female consumer.[34]

33 Thomas Schatz, 'The new Hollywood', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8–36.

34 Charles Eckert's early work has spawned a small cottage industry on this subject. See 'The Carole Lombard in Macy's window', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1978): pp. 1–21.

Law Here the analyst places a film, related cinematic practices, and intertextual zones within the framework of legal rulings. As in the other areas, the applications are potentially as broad as the category itself and depend on the film's specific historical situation. Researchers of US film history might explore the relationship between film censorship and regulations on obscenity from the municipal to Supreme Court levels. On completely different fronts, they may investigate the impact local or federal rules regarding city planning, zoning and housing (such as post-World War II practices of red and green lining) had on film exhibition or how import–export trends affected film exhibition and film culture. As Janet Staiger has pointed

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out, the influx of foreign films into the USA after World War II influenced standards of review journalism applied to domestic films, helping to put a premium on cinematic realism and mature themes.[35]

35 Staiger, *Interpreting Films*, pp. 178–95.

Religion Religious groups or trends can affect the production, public circulation and reception of specific films. The strong involvement, from the earliest moments of the history of the medium up to the present day, of religious interests in film censorship and in firing the public imagination about the immorality of certain films are well documented. In addition, there are magazines with religious affiliations which review films, such as the Catholic sources *Commonweal* and *America*, tying religion to the intertextual circumstances of reception.

Politics Scholars have long linked films with political developments, ranging from turn-of-the-century US policies on immigration to the Reaganism of the 1980s. For example, critics have chronicled the government's greater influence on Hollywood during World War II, an influence resulting in films that supported such official platforms as national unity and equality.[36] They have also shown how, in the period directly following the war, these platforms helped inspire Hollywood to make a series of 'conscience liberal' films addressing antisemitism and racism in the USA.[37] A total history would relate film and its discursive context to the political climate, government policies, legislation and other factors involved in political history on national and local levels.

36 See, for example, Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); and Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

37 Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: the Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Class Class relations permeate films and their discursive surrounds in numerous ways, including the division of labour within the studio system itself, and representation of class and class conflicts within films. Familiar examples of this latter case are the working-class musicals and gangster films produced by Warner Bros in the early 1930s in the wake of the Great Depression, an economic crisis that precipitated a reassessment of class relations in the USA. Jane Gaines has also examined how the narrative and characters of a 'race' film, *Scar of Shame* (Frank Peregini, 1927), appealed to the class constituency of the urban African–American audience of the time, as well as the attitudes of that audience towards racial caste.[38] Debates about early US cinema have demonstrated the central role played by the class status of film patrons in the evolution of film narrative and patterns of exhibition. The factor of class, then, ranges in its effects from the economic structure of the film industry to the demography of its audiences.

38 Jane Gaines, '*The Scar of Shame*: skin color and caste in black silent melodrama', in Marcia Landy (ed.), *Imitations of Life* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), pp. 331–48.

Race and Ethnicity Similarly, the social constitution of ethnic and racial identities broadly affects the cinema. One can think here of the neonativist movement in the 1920s that demonized ethnic others. As Miriam Hansen has shown, this movement helped shape a deeply

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ambivalent public reception of Rudolph Valentino, whose films strongly amplified his ethnic otherness and 'exoticism'.[39] As mentioned, the postwar development of 'race liberalism' spawned a series of race films in Hollywood, including *Home of the Brave* (Mark Robson, 1949). In addition, Richard Dyer has argued that Paul Robeson's image was influenced by public conceptions of folk culture, atavism and the African–American male body from the 1920s to the 1940s.[40] In each of these cases, social attitudes toward race and ethnicity, as well as the perspectives of the racial or ethnic group itself, penetrate films and their discursive surrounds, helping to negotiate the terms of reception.

39 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, pp. 245–68.

40 Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 67–139.

Gender and Sexual Difference Researchers have amply chronicled the relationship between social developments constituting definitions of femininity, masculinity and sexuality and the cinema. There is, for example, the rise of 'sexual liberalism' in the USA of the 1950s due to a host of factors, including the release of the Alfred Kinsey reports on male and female sexuality. The publication of *Playboy* magazine in the early 1950s escalated the atmosphere of sexual display and helped define the appeal of a succession of blonde bombshells on the screen, including Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield and Mamie Van Doren.[41] During the same historical moment, the greater visibility of gays after World War II led to a series of Hollywood films concerning homosexuality, including *Tea and Sympathy* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956) and *Suddenly, Last Summer* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1959). In the postwar era these and other forces, such as the powerful image of the nuclear family, defined gender and sexuality in multiple ways. In any era, representations of gender and sexuality respond to such social developments and discourses as they attempt to establish standards of deviant and normal sexuality and appropriate sex roles. As in the categories above, the appeals made by films and their circumstances of exhibition to specific demographic audiences also occur in relation to gender (as, for example, in the case of the production of women's films or promotion strategies aimed at the housewife). In addition, research into the impact of class, race and gender on film reception can engage in empirical/ethnographic studies of particular audience reactions to the cinema.

41 For a discussion of the rise of sexual liberalism in the 1950s, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: a History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 239–74; for a connection between *Playboy* magazine and the blond bombshell, see Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, pp. 19–66.

Family Reception studies can also examine the social forces affecting the family's definition during specific historical moments. For example, in the USA there was a shift in ideal family configurations from the extended urban ethnic family to the white middle-class nuclear family immediately after World War II. This was due in part to the demands of an expanding consumer economy which required consuming units like the suburban family for growth. Films such as *I Remember Mama* (George Stevens, 1948) and *Marty* (Delbert Mann, 1955) attempted to negotiate this shift in response to changing ideals.[42]

42 George Lipsitz discusses this shift in relation to the television situation comedy in *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 39–96.

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Discourses about the family circulating in the social formation thus describe its ideal configurations, its crises and its inadequacies. Reception theorists can study the impact historical definitions of the family have had on the film industry (where the family has served as a target audience and marketing focus for certain productions), on the intertextual zones surrounding the film, and on the representations of the family in specific films as they participate in social dialogues about the state of the family during a given era.

Ideology Few researchers in reception studies continue to employ a classic Marxist or Althusserian concept of dominant ideology in their discussions of film and context. In light of the work of Raymond Williams, Foucault and Gramsci, scholars often treat the historical moment as an ensemble of discourses, from the filmic to the social, that exist within a contested ideological space in the throes of uneven development. Research on cinema and the public sphere, in particular, has emphasized the necessity of a non-reductive approach to cinema and ideology. Miriam Hansen, for example, theorizes cinema's place within a 'contested field of multiple positions and conflicting interests'. Annette Kuhn also argues that, as cinema actively participates within the production of 'certain discursive positions', it does so in 'a complex and contradictory manner', because meanings 'may vary according to circumstance'.[43] A totalized view thus looks at the instabilities of the historical moment, its assembly of conflicting voices. At the same time, such a view considers the manner in which films are differently appropriated within the social formation by potentially contradictory ideological interests. A total history seeks to avoid reductively equating a text with an ideology (where the text is either reactionary or subversive). Researchers attempt instead to depict the many ideological interests that intersect with a film during its public circulation and to engage as fully as possible the range of its social meanings within its historical moment.

43 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p. 7; Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality*, p. 10.

Crosscultural Reception Another dimension of a film's 'meaningful' existence is its reception in foreign countries. Inquiries into crosscultural reception activate the areas already mentioned, but these areas need to be reconsidered with the specificity of the national culture in mind. Crosscultural analyses have perhaps a more established place in studies of contemporary television,[44] but scholars have begun to explore this aspect of a film's reception as well. Jackie Stacey writes of the enormous appeal female Hollywood stars had for British women in the 1940s and 1950s, in part because Hollywood's glamour and displays of wealth attracted an audience accustomed to wartime deprivations in goods. Similarly, Helen Taylor analyses how women in Britain and the southern United States read and viewed *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), an indisputable 'classic' in both literature and cinema, through the screens of their indigenous

44 See, for example, this recent crosscultural study: Jostein Gripsrud, *The Dynasty Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995).

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cultural, historical, and personal preoccupations.[45] Such perspectives emphasize how malleable film meaning is by demonstrating the difference national contexts make to how texts are appropriated.

45 Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994); Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: Gone With the Wind and Its Female Fans* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

Diachronic areas of study

While considering a film in relation to cinematic practices, intertextual zones, and social and historical contexts is still relevant to discussing diachronic dimensions of meaning, some adjustments in these categories are necessary. Prime among these is a shift in the definition of what I have previously called cinematic practices. Since films often exist in surrogate form in their post-origin appearances – that is, in broadcast, video, laserdisc and other new technology formats – the industry practices involved in producing, distributing and exhibiting films from the past are no longer contained within the studio system, but include the operations of other forums. For example, while a production company or studio now often manufactures laser versions of its films, on occasion companies that sell laserdiscs, such as Voyager (a joint venture with Criterion-Janus Films), have produced their own lasers in league with film distributors who have the rights to certain titles.[46] In addition, contemporary exhibition of classic Hollywood films is subject to the institutional practices of art museums, retrospective houses, academic classrooms, broadcast and cable stations, video stores, and other venues through which 'old' films now have a public existence. Thus, the category of cinematic practices must be reconsidered more generally as a conglomeration of media industry and associated practices.

46 Thanks to Kriss Ravetto for this insight.

While these various practices afford film a new public presence, they also produce certain intertextual commentaries to create significations for a cinematic text far removed from those defining its origins. Since these practices and intertextual zones are most visibly active in the reappearance and circulation of classic era films through new moments in history, I will consider them in concert by focusing on several significant ways in which Hollywood films are resuscitated for contemporary audiences. To approach a totalized view adequately, the practices described below require more detail, particularly in regard to the specificity of the means of production, distribution, and exhibition employed by the various involved industries. Since film and its discursive surround act symbiotically with social and historical developments to create arenas of reception for a film, these practices and intertexts would need to be positioned in relation to these developments as well.

I intend what follows, then, as a suggestive mapping of terrains significant to the diachronic study of the classic film, rather than an exhaustive discussion. Clearly, more research is needed on the intricacies of the diachronic life of this type of cinema.

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Practices and zones

Revivals and Retrospectives Films from the past appear in revival houses (particularly in the 1960s and 1970s); in retrospectives held in such venues as art museums, film festivals and archives; and through gala special screenings of restored, previously censored, forgotten or rare films (for example, the early 1980s big screen rereleases of several of Alfred Hitchcock's films, including *Rear Window* [1954] and *Vertigo* [1958], after they had been out of 35mm distribution for many years). Reception theorists can gauge the new meanings generated for a film by weighing the impact the particular exhibition site (revival house or art museum) has on reception. Other elements that come into play include: accompanying materials such as programme notes, newspaper advertisements and commentary from film or 'art scene' reviewers; the state of alternative filmgoing at the moment of revival; and relevant aspects of the moment itself.

Reviews Reviewers comment directly on revived films, evaluating them against whatever aesthetic canons dominate journalism at the time to renovate the films' appeal for new audiences within existing systems of professional taste and social and aesthetic ideologies. A striking feature of review aesthetics in the USA in the 1970s, for example, was a penetrating nostalgia for classic Hollywood films and their auteurs, including Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock and Douglas Sirk. Reviewers touted the originality and artistry of these filmmakers' works to strike a contrast with what was perceived as the greater commercialism of New Hollywood films. This nostalgia led to lavish praise for such films from the classic era as *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939) and *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) and helped extend the force of auteurism from the academy into the popular press. In any case, from popularly canonized works such as *Gone With the Wind* and *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) to the more obscure, films from the past are routinely mentioned and often evaluated in newspapers and magazines, guidebooks to films on television and video, film encyclopedias in print and CD–Rom formats, and books about the making of a particular work (including Janet Leigh's *Psycho*, a recent behind-the-scenes book on Hitchcock's film).

Academic Theory, Criticism, and History This is one of the regions most prolific in remotivating the meaning of films via contemporary institutions and perspectives. As David Bordwell has exhaustively elaborated, academic interpretation operates with its own set of protocols and conventions to make films signify.[47] Like revivals and retrospectives, academia constructs assessments that differ dramatically from any the film may have earned in its original context. We can see how shifts in academic protocols of interpretation, as well as such theoretical and critical developments as auteurism, semiotics,

47 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

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psychoanalysis, feminism and the new film history, affect transformations of cinematic meaning through time within the institution itself.[48]

Broadcast, Satellite, and Cable Television It is impossible to account for a film's reception each and every time it is broadcast on television. However, scholars can begin to address the phenomenon of rebroadcast by looking at specific cases and historical situations. As one instance of this kind of research, Robert Ray has written about how the massive broadcast of classic Hollywood films on US television in the 1950s and 1960s helped create an audience steeped in the conventions of Hollywood narratives, thus paving the way for the self-conscious and at times parodic products of the New American Cinema within the 'revolutionary' context of the era.[49] Researchers might also consider how specific television channels attempt to define a film for consumption. Each channel seems to have a particular 'persona' in its presentation of films, whether it be an archival sensibility which presents the film as a classic or an irreverent 'kitschy' format which updates the entertainment value of an old film through parody.

Any consideration of this diachronic dimension of a film's life would also need to theorize the effects of watching films on television, where they are inserted into the US home and into a particular social formation.[50] In any case, by examining the impact of exhibiting films on television, researchers address the factors that influenced the ways in which films were substantially 're-viewed' by audiences in one of the most influential of post-film media.

Video and Laserdisc Reproduction Like television broadcast, the release of films on video and laserdisc constitutes a major contemporary forum for viewing which reception studies should address. These formats represent a completely different mode of reproduction and exhibition, one which engages specific media industry practices as well as a transformed viewing situation. There are many different kinds of issues to be raised here: they include the technologies and business practices involved in the development and institution of these new formats, as well as the film classification or commentary used by video stores, laserdisc packagers and surrounding media that orient the viewer towards the film in question. How, for example, are laserdiscs marketed to their audiences in speciality magazines such as *Widescreen Review*? How do the special editions of films appearing on laser – which come with extended commentary from critics, directors and stars, as well as guidelines for using the film for 'study purposes' – reconfigure a film's identity and reception? In further examining the implications of laser and video for reception, what of the possibility these formats present to re-view films frequently? And, to ask the most difficult question, what role do video

48 For an interesting essay on the academic construction of the avant garde, see Gregory T. Taylor, ' "The cognitive instrument in the service of revolutionary change": Sergei Eisenstein, Annette Michelson, and the avant garde's scholarly aspiration', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1992), pp. 42–59.

49 Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

50 Perhaps here undertaking a cinematic version of David Morley's work in *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Routledge, 1986).

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or laser reproductions of films play within the social interactions, larger patterns of consumption, and historical developments that circle around the film/viewer relationship during a particular diachronic moment?

Fan Culture On its first appearance, a film's stars may very well have a coterie of fans or fan clubs. But as critics such as Helen Taylor have shown, fan culture extends well beyond the original moments of reception, lingering long afterwards to solidify group identity around media products, as well as develop or dispute certain reading strategies.[51] This is then a powerful region for considering how the media may be reactivated over time by specific groups with particular social identities and interpretive agendas. It also allows scholars to study how rereading, even to the extreme of fetishized rereading, affects individual media products. As recent work by Henry Jenkins has suggested, contemporary fan culture solicits consideration of the role played by new technologies, such as computer networks and lists, in creating, maintaining and disseminating textual identities far removed from the 'official' readings offered by the production company in question.[52]

51 Taylor, *Scarlett's Women.*

52 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); also Taylor, *Scarlett's Women.*

The Biographical Legend Much of the commentary involved in the above areas helps constitute 'biographical legends' for various personnel, legends that deeply affect contemporary meanings for past artefacts. The biographical legend of film personnel begins in the synchronic moment, but through the cumulative effects of time achieves potentially its biggest impact on meaning. In studies of Chaplin and Hitchcock, Maland and Robert Kapsis have respectively shown how each director's reputation – constructed through such varied sources as his films, production companies, the mass media and academia – affects the reception of his work in contemporary contexts. The creation and re-creation of the author's personal and creative 'legend' through time (for example, Hitchcock as entertainer, Catholic auteur, moralist, subversive and sexual obsessive from the 1950s to the present) dovetails with both journalistic and academic enterprises. At the same time, it relates to developments in cultural history (for instance, after years of political exile, Chaplin was belatedly embraced by cinephiles within a more radical 1960s and 1970s US culture). As in the synchronic dimension of film meaning, biographical legends are not created solely in relation to film directors, but also pertain to other film 'authors', including screenwriters, composers, cinematographers and, particularly, stars. Rock Hudson serves as one of the most dramatic recent examples of how revelations about a star's identity occurring well after the appearance of his films affect their contemporary reception. In 1985, the public disclosure of Hudson's AIDS diagnosis and homosexual lifestyle caused a radical shift in his legendary heterosexual screen identity, retrospectively interfering with the seamless sexuality of his past roles.[53]

53 For more on Hudson's iconic shift, see Richard Meyer, 'Rock Hudson's body', in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 259–88.

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Crosscultural reception Like US revivals, foreign film festivals, retrospectives and screenings can reactivate old US films for reception in different national contexts and historical situations. Scotland's Edinburgh Film Festival and England's National Film Theatre, for example, boosted the cause of auteurism in the 1970s with respect to such directors as Frank Tashlin and Douglas Sirk by organizing programmes devoted to their films. Such revivals of classic Hollywood films abroad occur constantly. The screenings at the Action Rive-Gauche and Action Ecoles theatres in Paris specialize in new prints of old classics, while French art houses feature mini-revivals of various US directors' films. Classic Hollywood films also appear more bountifully in other national contexts through their broadcast on television and distribution on videotape and laserdisc. When studying these crossnational resuscitations of US films, researchers must also take into account potentially all of the other diachronic issues mentioned above. In addition, there are questions peculiar to this kind of reception, such as the country's contemporary relations with the United States, as well as its own cultural, historical, and national characteristics.

A total history, in conclusion, may well be an impossible enterprise. But as I have argued, pursuing a fleet of 'multiple historicities' excites reflection on the practices of reception theory in necessary ways. At the same time, it emphasizes vexing problems which are already very much a part of film historiography. How does the historian conceive of the interactions between text and history? How does the historian establish relations between the different phenomena she or he sets out to describe? Is there an ultimate determination of, or hierarchy in, relations between levels (a question aggravated especially by post-Marxist thought with its attack on the classic base/superstructure model)? What is the researcher's working conception of history?

Somewhat paradoxically, by showing us impossible vistas a totalized view reveals how all manner of semiotic baggage encumbers textuality in its public existence. And by raising difficult questions, it reinforces the need to attend to the fine points of historiography. In addition, we cannot expect any single approach to solve all of the mysteries of the text/ideology relationship, nor will we find any that do not need to perform a critique of their own basic terms and assumptions. Both text-based and context-based criticism find that their ultimate object – the text – eventually eludes their grasp, transformed by new critical paradigms, new information and other events endemic to the passage of time and the 'natural' rhythms of revisionism within the academy as well as in the surrounding culture.

Bringing this point to bear specifically on film history, this state of affairs does not lead inescapably to absolute relativism and cynicism about historical research. As Tony Bennett writes, it does not necessarily follow that 'because we cannot establish certain

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propositions as absolutely true . . . we have no means of establishing their provisional truth – of determining that they meet conditions which justify our regarding them as true and so as capable of serving as a basis for both further thought and action'. History as a discipline provides some of these conditions through its protocols of investigation that help regulate standards of evidence and verification. The 'evidential standing' of historical facts must pass at the very least the 'test of disciplinary scrutiny'.[54] The 'quality controls' on historical research exercised through its disciplinary institution do not guarantee truth, but they do promote rigour in making propositions about the past, which are the best possible at the time of writing.

In addition, there is much at stake in the writing of history, in giving the past a future.[55] The knowledge propagated by a historical account becomes part of the social fabric. It enters into the competition over what the past signifies to contemporary culture and thus attains a political dimension as it manoeuvres to reawaken concepts of the past to serve the present: note how politicians have used a certain image of the 1950s to support their call for a return to 'family values' in the 1980s and 1990s. With their focus on primary documents in relation to such issues as gender, race and class, reception histories enable us to rethink the past. Because what they find demonstrates the complicated heterogeneity of the past, they can combat the kind of monolithic summaries that usually characterize public accounts of bygone eras. These histories can thus make the past useful in current political struggles over social issues. In this sense, the changeability of the past is not so much a liability as a significant register of the activity of conflicting and competing ideological interests: in this situation, not having a voice in interpreting history can mean the silencing of contestation.

Despite the endless complexity of issues involved in considering a total history, this is not to say, finally, that such a history need be interminable. Like Freud's model of psychoanalytic therapy, film history is both terminable and interminable. Paraphrasing Freud, the analysis can be ended appropriately when the historian has secured the best possible explanation for the functioning of a historical moment.[56] But, in theory, it could extend indefinitely, because of the vastness of the enterprise – the difficulty of detecting all of the complicating factors involved in the past – but also because of the unpredictable concerns of the present and the future which continue to animate and otherwise affect the events of the past. The point is not to abandon the enterprise, but to deepen it by confronting its difficulties, securing historical writing as a vigorously self-reflective activity.

54 Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 55–6. On this issue, see also David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, 'Linearity, materialism, and the study of early American cinema', *Wide Angle*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1983), pp. 4–15.

55 As Raymond Aron writes, 'The past is never definitely fixed except when it has no future'. 'Relativism in history', in Hans Meyerhold (ed.), *The Philosophy of History* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), p. 158.

56 Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis terminable and interminable', in *Therapy and Technique* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 268. (From his 1937 essay 'Die endliche und unendliche Analyse'.)

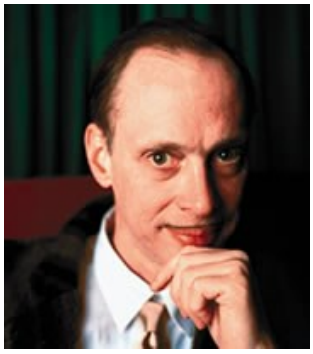
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Waters, John

Daniel Mudie Cunningham October 2003 Great Directors Issue 28



b. April 29,1946, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

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"Warning: This movie is gross"

If asked, most people would probably be able to identify a moment in their own personal history when a film has changed their lives. Film can affect change in so many ways, and perhaps some of the most dynamic and powerful ways this can occur is in the way the projected image can manage to bypass the screen and become imprinted on our psyches, attached to the skin. This is the viral nature of film, its ability to spread a kind of 'dis-ease' within our body and mind. The one film that changes our lives becomes a breathing part of the self that alters the way we relate to the apparatus of film and our forever unstable conception of self.

The film that did this for me was John Waters' *Female Trouble* (1974). Made a year before I was born, I didn't actually see *Female Trouble* until 1988. I was 13-years-old. Browsing the shelves of the local video store, I was drawn to the video

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because its cover art announced “Warning: This movie is gross”. Accompanying this “warning” on the video box was a caricatured drawing of *Female Trouble*’s two stars, Divine and Edith Massey. While watching the film later that day, I discovered that both Divine and Edith Massey were every bit the grotesque caricature suggested by the video’s cover design (1).

How I managed to sneak the R-rated film out of the video store, I’ll never comprehend (2). More importantly, the impact the film had on me during this very pubescent time in my life is even harder to comprehend, because it changed the way I consumed film from that moment on. I remember watching the film with a mixture of horror and morbid fascination: never before had I encountered such a freakishly queer ensemble of characters and situations on screen. Upon viewing *Female Trouble* at such a young age, I could sense some weird awakening where all of a sudden it felt as if someone had flicked the queer switch in my head. Thus began my life-long journey of hunting out films that warned of potential grossness. This cinematic road trip led me to suss out other offerings from the ‘great director’ John Waters.

Good Bad Taste

John Waters began making films in 1964, the same year that Susan Sontag penned her landmark essay “Notes on ‘Camp’”. This is a notable cultural moment because, while Sontag’s ideas have been refuted or extended by many cultural critics, there was a general consensus that a camp sensibility was alive and well in the arts. Of course, this camp sensibility could be interpreted in any number of ways, but Sontag claimed that “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration…” (3). I have isolated this one sentence because it is a definition that can be applied to John Waters’ films.

Perhaps a better fitting definition of Waters’ brand of camp is one that is defined by the filmmaker himself in a 1997 episode of *The Simpsons*. Titled “Homer’s Phobia”, Waters makes a guest appearance as a collectable junk store owner called John. Upon visiting his store, Homer asks John why a “grown man” would collect such junk, and John replies:

> *JOHN: It’s camp!*

Homer looks back at John with a blank expression, not comprehending what he means.

> *JOHN: The tragically ludicrous, the ludicrously tragic.*
> *HOMER: Oh yeah, like when a clown dies.*
> *JOHN: Well sort of, but I mean more like inflatable furniture or Last Supper TV trays or even this bowling shirt…*
> *HOMER: And that kind of stuff is worth money? … You should come over to our place, it’s full of valuable worthless junk* (4).



This dialogue from *The Simpsons* plays into the way Waters’ camp aesthetic playfully celebrates “valuable worthless junk”. In many respects, this view of camp echoes

cultural critic Andrew
Ross' argument that camp is primarily concerned with reconstituting history's trash as treasure. Ross perceives camp as a delight in that which is considered culturally outmoded. He writes: "The knowledge about history is the precise moment when camp takes over, because camp involves a rediscovery of history's waste" (5).

Waste is one of the recurring themes of Waters' films, and is depicted on screen as something that is often corporeal. Waters delights in demonstrating how shit, vomit, puss, mucus, saliva and other such bodily fluids can be a rich source of material from which to develop a cinematic language for the white trash body. Part of the appeal of Waters' films is that they belong to the category of low camp. As Waters states, "I've always tried to please and satisfy an audience who think they've seen everything. I try to force them to laugh at their own ability to be shocked by *something*. This reaction has always been the reason I make movies" (6). In a contemporary context, however, the appeal of Waters' films has extended far beyond the select few. In a review of one of his more recent films *Pecker*, Mark Kermode writes:

> *The greatest irony of John Waters' career is that he has ended up loving and being loved by Baltimore, the town he initially tried to infuriate. From being the most disgusting filmmaker in the world, Waters has become something of a local hero, venerated for bringing an element of glitter into an area not known for its star-spangled potential* (7).

This "local hero" status was certified on February 7, 1985, when it was proclaimed "John Waters Day" in his home town of Baltimore by the presiding mayor. Despite such accolades, Waters has also become more generally an icon in American cinema. As Sarah Hampson notes, "He is the iconoclast who has become an icon; the anti-establishment voice who has become an institution" (8). Certainly, Waters has become something of an anti-establishment institution in US culture, evidenced by the way his work has been celebrated within a mainstream context. For example, Waters' film *Hairspray* (1988) was transformed into a hit Broadway musical in 2002 (9).

Unique to Waters' aesthetic is the way his trash imagination celebrates the marginal and excluded; his films elevate white trash above all else. But Waters is not really concerned with white trash characters who are unaware of their trash status, and in effect think they have good taste. Rather, Waters constructs his white trash characters as pioneers of bad taste. Of course, not all of his characters are white trash; one notable exception is the later inclusion in *Desperate Living* and *Polyester* of an overweight African American character (Jean Hill) who played variations of the maid and gospel minister archetypes respectively. But it is *largely* a white trash population that inhabits Waters' cinematic universe.

In his book *Shock Value*, Waters writes: "To understand bad taste one must have very good taste" (10). Waters is referring to the way there is good bad taste and 'bad' bad taste. The distinction is a simple value judgement of whether the bad taste in question is a particularly good thing. Although Waters' films always place bad taste in the frame, they strike

a chord with audiences because an understanding of good taste is extolled so that it might be trashed once and for all. Upon release, *Pink Flamingos* was dubbed "an exercise in poor taste" by its distributor New Line Cinema. This clever pun refers to the film's bad taste, but by using the word "poor" it also suggests its white trash class-specificity.

Waters' films always reflect his extensive and obsessive knowledge of film, and they are often heavily influenced by a diverse range of film culture sources. Hailing from a middle-class family in suburban Baltimore, Waters consumed films with a feverish regularity. This education included the 'high-brow' spectrum of the film world (Fellini, Godard, Fassbinder and Bergman), coupled with 'low-brow' underground and exploitation genres. Among the (supposed 'low-brow') directors that influenced Waters are: William Castle, whose corny horror films were value-added with on-site gimmicks; Herschell Gordon Lewis, who pioneered the low-budget gore genre; Russ Meyer, whose sleazy oeuvre lasciviously coupled dumb hunks with busty broads; Kenneth Anger, who spearheaded the underground movement with his homoerotic paeans to motorbikes, comic books and cruising; Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey, whose deadpan glamour and superstar chic revolutionised pop culture; and George Kuchar and Mike Kuchar, whose Douglas Sirk-inspired melodramas were so incredibly lurid in colour and design it was enough to make your eyes water. It was Waters' avid consumption of marginal American exploitation genres and underground film movements that share a commonality with – and gave rise to – the practice he was to develop.

The Filthiest Films Alive

Waters' first films were short, black and white and filmed on stolen 8 mm stock. His first film *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* (1964) featured his long-time friend and collaborator Mary Vivian Pearce. According to Waters, the film "is about a black man and a white girl's … wedding on the roof of my parents home. He courts her by carrying her around in a trash can and chooses a Ku Klux Klansman to perform the wedding ceremony" (11). Two years later, Waters completed *Roman Candles*, a tribute to Warhol's *The Chelsea Girls* (1966), because it was composed of three 8 mm reels projected simultaneously. Unlike his debut film, *Roman Candles* and his next film *Eat Your Makeup* (1968) featured his friends Divine, Mink Stole and David Lochary who, along with Pearce, would become Waters' most recurring stars. In a move undoubtedly inspired by Warhol's Factory of Superstars, as well as obvious economic restrictions, Waters' casts were friends from Baltimore, rather than trained actors. Waters would write parts in his films mostly for the aforementioned friends and star discoveries (Edith Massey, Cookie Mueller and Jean Hill) and this group formed the core of his repertory company Dreamland Films.

As Waters and his Dreamlanders mostly hailed from Baltimore, it seemed the logical setting for the films, and one which was invariably emphasised. Baltimore was – and still is – the ideal backdrop to his trash epics because it is, in his opinion, "Trashtown, USA, the Sleaziest City on Earth, the Hairdo Capital of the World" (12). In a review of the 25th Anniversary re-release of *Pink Flamingos*, Gus Van Sant (1997) notes how it was not uncommon in the 1970s to use the phrase "the Baltimore aesthetic" in response to the low or

no-budget production values of Waters' films: "It is all part of the lowball-punk-fuck-it-who-cares-and-who's-gonna-know-anyway ground rules of the Baltimore aesthetic" (13).



The three early films – *Hag*, *Roman Candles* and *Eat Your Makeup* – have never received distribution, mostly due to the fact that Waters prefers describing their contents, and keeping them under lock and key. The circulation of myths that inevitably attends such unavailable or rarely seen products transforms these earlier efforts to legendary status. *Mondo Trasho* (1969) was Waters' first feature, and often considered his first film because, unlike earlier efforts, it is widely available. Moreover, it was the first to star Divine in a lead role, which imbues the film with an increased cult value. *Mondo Trasho* was filmed in 16 mm and was only interesting for the way it picks up where Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) left off. *Scorpio Rising* was notable for its images of motorbike-obsessed beefcake who cruise one another to a soundtrack of popular rock and roll songs such as "I Will Follow Him" and "Blue Velvet". The ironic use of such music emphasises the way sadomasochistic imagery can, in some contexts, be a spectacle of camp.

Unlike *Scorpio Rising*, *Mondo Trasho*'s narrative is only ever mock-erotic. Among many other things, *Mondo Trasho* features a "foot-shrimper" who delights in licking Mary Vivian Pearce's feet, and Divine fantasising that she has picked up a nude hitchhiker. The soundtrack adds an ironic layer, rendering these self-consciously 'degenerate' or 'perverse' acts as humorous, rather than erotic. Even though it is attenuated by camp performances and a low-budget trash aesthetic, *Mondo Trasho* is primarily played for laughs while *Scorpio Rising* encourages a certain degree of visual pleasure (particularly for gay viewers).

Following on the shrimped heels of *Mondo Trasho* was the short film *The Diane Linkletter Story* (1969) which Waters describes as an "improvisational joke" (14). When Waters read that Art Linkletter's LSD-frenzied daughter, Diane, had committed suicide by jumping out of a window he assembled the usual Dreamland group to improvise a re-enactment of the tragedy. Divine starred as Diane, while Pearce and Lochary played her distraught parents. The film was primarily conceived as a way of testing a 16 mm camera that Waters intended on using for his first "talking" feature *Multiple Maniacs*.

Filmed in 1969, but completed the following year, *Multiple Maniacs* stars Divine as Lady Divine, a petty criminal who believes she is "the most beautiful woman in the world". Lady Divine and her boyfriend Mr David (Lochary) use their carnival "The Cavalcade of Perversion" as a front for crime. The cavalcade would lure audiences into gawking at "puke eaters", "real life queers kissing on the lips", junkies shooting up, and pornographers at work. At an unsuspecting moment, Lady Divine would trap the stunned audience and steal their money and drugs. With *Multiple Maniacs* Waters' cheekily attributes the recent real-life murder of Sharon Tate

to the fictional characters played by Divine and Lochary. During filming, however, Charles Manson was arrested so the film was rewritten to discount the cast's involvement in the Tate murder. *Multiple Maniacs* is perhaps most famous for its blasphemous content. In one scene a "religious whore" (Mink Stole) fucks Divine anally with a set of rosary beads in a cathedral, while reciting the stations of the cross.

Beneath the grotesque drag personae of Divine was a young overweight drag performer, Harris Glenn Milstead, who Waters christened Divine in the mid-1960s. It is in the "rosary job" scene of *Multiple Maniacs* that the religious connotations of Divine's name are parodied. The "rosary job" sequence in *Multiple Maniacs* is often cited as the most obscene moment in a John Waters movie, however, the juxtaposition of a ridiculous and over-theatricalised sex act with the rituals of Catholicism underscores the way religion can be likened to theatre. After committing mass murder in *Multiple Maniacs*, Lady Divine experiences a frenzied spiritual awakening: "I am Divine!" she melodramatically screams, realising she has earned the right to be Divine. Moments later she is raped by a huge mechanical lobster, suggesting that Divinity has more in common with surrealism than spirituality.

These early films achieved a cult status in Waters' home town of Baltimore, where they were screened to sold-out audiences in cafes and, ironically enough, Catholic churches. But it wasn't until his next feature, and the first in colour, that Waters was to achieve universal acclaim and notoriety. *Pink Flamingos* is the story of Divine (played, of course, by Divine), a shock-fetishist who reigns in underground circles as "the filthiest person alive". Having adopted the pseudonym, Babs Johnson, Divine lives in a trailer in Baltimore with her son and lover Crackers (Danny Mills), her "travelling companion" Cotton (Pearce), and her "retarded", egg-obsessed mother (Massey). On the other side of town lives Raymond and Connie Marble (Lochary and Stole), a middle-class couple who have declared war on Babs in the hope they will become "the filthiest people alive". Raymond and Connie aren't your average middle-class couple: they sell drugs to school children and run a black market baby-selling ring. After kidnapping young white girls, they force their gay butler (Channing Wilroy) to inseminate them, and keep the girls imprisoned in a grotty cellar for the duration of their pregnancy. Once the babies are born, they are sold to wealthy lesbian couples.

Babs eventually wins the "filth" war when she personally convicts the Marbles of "assholism", and then executes them in front of a crowd of gawking reporters. After executing the Marbles, Babs qualifies her filth status by eating dog shit. The scene occurs in a single take so that the audience will be convinced that Divine actually performed this shit-eating stunt. Waters has defended the authenticity of this scene in numerous interviews as well as his own writings: "And yes, for the thousandth, for the millionth, for the trillionth time, Divine really did eat dog shit at the end of the film" (15).



In *Pink Flamingos* filth is primarily represented through Babs/Divine's crimes, a theme explored further in Waters' next film



Female Trouble (1974). In this film Divine stars as Dawn Davenport, a career criminal whose life is represented from high school juvenile delinquency through to her death in the electric chair. Divine also plays a male character, Earl Peterson, to whom Divine falls pregnant after running away from home. The scene in which they have sex is carefully choreographed to appear as if Divine is fucking herself, even though a body double was used for this scene. When Dawn demands money from Earl, he exclaims, "go fuck yourself". Due to Divine's dual casting, Dawn had already "fucked herself". Earl's words reinforce just how "fucked" Dawn's situation has become now she is now pregnant, broke and homeless. Dawn gives birth in a cheap hotel without medical assistance and, thereafter, supports herself and her daughter Taffy through money raised from petty crimes.

While Divine's character in *Pink Flamingos* inhabits the fringe of culture, commits her crimes on the sly and is rarely malicious, Dawn is self-centred and will do anything to become a star. Dawn marries an equally self-centred hairdresser called Gator (Michael Potter), and after a time he starts preferring his tool kit to Dawn. Gator's lesbian Aunt Ida (Massey) resents Dawn because she would rather Gator was gay. Upon meeting elite couple Donald and Donna Dasher (Lochary and Pearce), Dawn's career in crime finally takes off. They transform Dawn into a "crime model" by taking photos of her committing various crimes to prove their theory that "crime is beauty". The Dashers gradually brainwash Dawn into believing that "crime enhances one's beauty; the worse the crime gets, the more ravishing one becomes". When Aunt Ida throws acid in Dawn's face in a fit of rage, the Dashers convince Dawn that her glamour is enhanced due to the criminal act that led to her scarred face.

Waters' next film *Desperate Living* (1977) did not star Divine (though the part of Mole was originally written for Divine). During this time, Divine was appearing in an off-Broadway stage show called *Women Behind Bars* which eventually travelled to London. The success of this show led to another called *The Neon Woman* which played in New York, San Francisco, Provincetown and Chicago. To add to this, David Lochary died from a drug overdose just before Waters was to begin working on his follow-up to *Female Trouble*.

Desperate Living continues his oddball fascination with crime. Set in an over-ripe kitschy location called Mortville, *Desperate Living* features an ensemble of criminals, outcasts and deviants who are forced to submit to the fascist monarchy of Queen Carlotta (Massey). Stressed out middle-class Baltimore resident Peggy Gravel (Stole) and her black maid Grizelda (Jean Hill) escape to Mortville after they "accidentally" murder Peggy's husband.

Like his earlier films, *Desperate Living* continues to align camp and trash, though arguably on a grander, more realised scale. One review of *Desperate Living* claimed, "[Waters] remains the visionary of camp and the den mother of the bizarre. The film is a triumphant example of the most vital bad taste in America" (16). In terms of production

design, “Mortville was made almost entirely out of garbage” (17). This bit of trivia gels with the way Mortville’s population of scum are continually referred to as garbage. For example, class-conscious Peggy is “mortified” by her new home, referring to her new neighbours as trash: “You’re so ‘low’, you make white trash look positively top drawer” says Peggy to Mole (played by Susan Lowe, whose name is referenced in this intertextual byte of dialogue).

Desperate Living was the last film Waters made in the 1970s, and was also the last where he employed self-conscious attempts to shock and outrage his audiences through comedic means. After *Desperate Living* Waters softened his direction somewhat because he realised audiences expected to be shocked, and they would inevitably be disappointed. Though his films in the 1980s and 1990s were less obsessed with shock value, they continued to explore the well-traversed themes of crime, fashion, celebrity, gender and sexual perversion (or subversion) and were still occasionally infused with scatological humour. Waters also maintained a camp/trash aesthetic in these later films, though it was more polished than his earlier 1960s and 1970s efforts.

Desperate Living was followed by the suburban housewife melodrama *Polyester* (1981), which starred Divine, Edith Massey, Hollywood ring-in Tab Hunter, and some of the regular Dreamland group. Divine played Francine Fishpaw, a Baltimore housewife who is dumped by her husband and despised by her children. Her ideal suburban life becomes a living nightmare and she develops a drinking problem to escape from a succession of rather outrageous scenarios that threaten to drive her insane. *Polyester* was Waters’ last film with Edith Massey who died from complications relating to diabetes in 1984.

Waters did not make another film until the successful mainstream crossover *Hairspray* (1988) – his last with Divine who died only weeks after its premiere in Baltimore. Included in his autobiographical book of musings, *Crackpot* (1986), is a piece called “Ladies and Gentlemen…The Nicest Kids in Town!” (18). In this story, Waters discusses his adolescent obsession with a teenage dance party TV program called “The Buddy Deane Show”. Popular in Baltimore between 1957 and 1964, Waters’ memories of “The Buddy Deane Show” form the basis for the plot of *Hairspray* (19). Waters changed the name from “The Buddy Deane Show” to “The Corny Collins Show”. Starring a teenage Ricki Lake in her first ever film role, *Hairspray* was a sweet-natured comedy that explored not only the general mayhem associated with teenage life, but the racial tensions rife in the USA during the time. White and black kids were not allowed to dance together on television due to the politics of segregation. But buxom “hair-hopper” Tracy Turnblad (Lake) eventually affects some social change by forcing the show to integrate.



Hairspray was followed with *Cry-Baby* (1990), Waters’ musical homage to 1950s juvenile delinquency, starring Johnny Depp in the lead

role. In 1994 Waters made the delicious black comedy *Serial Mom*. Like *Female Trouble*, *Serial Mom* explores the often tenuous link between criminality and celebrity by satirising serial killers who become media spectacles. The titular character of *Serial Mom* is Beverly Sutphin (Kathleen Turner), an unlikely serial killer housewife whose career in crime reaches an all-time high when the rights to her story are sold for a Hollywood film. *Serial Mom* also featured Sam Waterston, Mink Stole, Ricki Lake and Suzanne Somers.

In *Pecker* (1998) the eponymous character's nickname derives from having pecked at his food as a child. Pecker (Edward Furlong) is a cheerful amateur photographer who photographs the eccentricities of his working-class family and Baltimore community. When Pecker is first discovered by a New York art dealer, Rory (Lili Taylor), he is transformed into an art world star because of his apparent "outsider" sensibility. Back home, however, his friends and family feel exploited and irritated by the attention. As Pecker's mother (Mary Kay Place) remarks, "some people don't feel like being art". Pecker's pictures are reproduced on the cover of *Art Forum*, and earn him the approval of various art critics and renowned photographer Cindy Sherman (who appears in the film as herself). Unfortunately, the unexpected attention turns his Baltimore subjects into white trash caricatures, caught in unguarded moments or acts of crime. Among *Pecker*'s large ensemble cast were well-known actors Martha Plimpton, Christina Ricci and Brandon Sexton III.

Waters' last completed film was *Cecil B. DeMented* (2000), a satirical look at cinema terrorism and guerrilla filmmaking. Ambitious underground filmmaker, Cecil (Stephen Dorff) kidnaps famous mega-bitch Hollywood actress Honey Whitlock (Melanie Griffith) and forces her to star in his underground film. One of the most inspired bits of casting here was the inclusion of Patricia Hearst in a small role. Having also featured in Waters' other films *Cry-Baby*, *Serial Mom* and *Pecker*, Hearst is better known as the newspaper heiress who was kidnapped and brainwashed by a radical terrorist group who forced her to rob a bank and spend some 50 days in a closet. As it turned out, Hearst was convicted for grand theft and served two of a seven year term in prison until her sentence was commuted by President Jimmy Carter. Hearst plays mother to one of Cecil's co-conspirators. *Cecil B. DeMented* was an ambitious project that included more stunts, car chases, and pyrotechnics than Waters had ever used before and featured a large ensemble cast of emerging young indie actors like Alicia Witt, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Adrian Greiner and Larry Gilliard Jr.

While *Cecil B. DeMented* was Waters' last completed film at the time this piece was being written, his career is by no means over. Apart from also being a prolific lecturer, art photographer, and author of several books, Waters is set to embark on a new feature. Slated for a 2004 release is his latest trash epic *A Dirty Shame*. Selma Blair, Paul Giamatti and Johnny Knoxville have signed-on to star in this production alongside Dreamland regulars Mary Vivian Pearce and Patricia Hearst. *Variety* reported that *A Dirty Shame* will be produced by legendary producers Christine Vachon and Ted Hope. The film, which is about a sex addicted convenience store owner, has been described by Waters as being about "one family's cosmic descent into

sexual dementia" (20). Vachon, who is best known for her work with indie mavericks Todd Haynes and Todd Solondz, claims, like the recent reinvention of *Hairspray*'s theatrical adaptation, "*A Dirty Shame* represents yet another reinvention and, in some ways, a return to the dangerous cinema of his roots" (21). If this is true, Waters' unique brand of cinematic terrorism may just reach new heights – or 'lows' – in good bad taste, leading to the start of a new phase in this great director's demented career.



Filmography

As director and writer:

Hag in a Black Leather Jacket (1964) short, also producer, cinematographer, editor

Roman Candles (1966) short, also producer, cinematographer, editor

Eat Your Makeup (1968) short, also producer, cinematographer, editor

Mondo Trasho (1969) also producer, cinematographer, editor

The Diane Linkletter Story (1969) short, also producer, cinematographer, editor

Multiple Maniacs (1970) also producer, cinematographer, editor

Pink Flamingos (1972) also narrator, producer, cinematographer, editor

Female Trouble (1974) also producer, cinematographer, editor

Desperate Living (1977) also producer, cinematographer

Polyester (1981) also producer

Hairspray (1988) also coproducer and actor (as Dr Fredrickson)

Cry-Baby (1990)

Serial Mom (1994)

Pecker (1998)

Cecil B. DeMented (2000)

A Dirty Shame (2004)

Kiddie Flamingoes (2015)

Acting credits:

Something Wild (Jonathan Demme, 1986) as Used car guy

Homer & Eddie (Andrei Konchalovsky, 1989) as Robber #1

Sweet and Lowdown (Woody Allen, 1999) as Mr. Haynes

Chameleon II: Death Match (Craig R. Baxley & Russell King, 1999) as Henry Kubica

Blood Feast 2: All U Can *Eat* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 2002) as Reverend

Each Time I Kill (Doris Wishman, 2002)



Notable film and TV appearances (as himself):

Love Letter to Edie (Robert Maier, 1975) short

Divine Waters (1985)

The Incredibly Strange Film Show (1988) in episode "John Waters"

The Simpsons (1997) in "Homer's Phobia" (episode # 8.15), first aired February 16, 1997

Divine Trash (Steve Yeager, 1998)

Home Movie on John Waters (Alessandra Populin, 1998) short

Divine: The E! True Hollywood Story (1999) television

The 20th Century: Yesterday's Tomorrows (1999) television

Pie in the Sky: The Brigid Berlin Story (Shelly D. Fremont & Vincent Fremont, 2000)

In Bad Taste (Steve Yeager, 2000)

Indie Sex: Taboos (Lisa Ades & Lesli Klainberg, 2001) television

The Cockettes (Michael Kalmen & Bill Weber, 2002)

Pia Zadora: The E! True Hollywood Story (2002) television

Hollywood High (Bruce Sinofsky, 2003) television

Seed of Chucky (2003)

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Articles in *Senses of Cinema*

Divine Dog Shit: John Waters and Disruptive Queer Humour in Film by Stuart Richards

Web Resources

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Waters' actress Mink Stole has an official site with Waters-related information.

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Endnotes

1. I am referring here to the Australian Palace Home Video release of *Female Trouble*. Year of release for the Australian video release is not provided on the cover design, but I can safely assume it was sometime in the early 1980s.
2. The R-rated classification is specific to the Australian release of *Female Trouble*. In the USA, *Female Trouble* was classified NC-17.
3. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" [1964], reprinted in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, London & New York, Penguin, 1983, p. 105.
4. Dialogue transcribed from *The Simpsons* episode "Homer's Phobia" (episode # 8.15) by the author. This episode originally aired in the USA on February 16, 1997.
5. Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp" in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, London & New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 151.
6. John Waters, *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste*, New York, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1981 (reprinted 1995), p. 2.
7. Mark Kermode, "*Pecker*" [review], *Sight and Sound*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1999, p. 51.
8. Sarah Hampson, "King of the Golden Age of Trash", *The Globe and Mail*, April 5, 2003, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/TPPrint/LAC/20030405/RVHAMP/TPColumnists/
9. In June 2003, *Hairspray* won eight Tony Awards including Best Musical, Best Actor and Best Actress. For more information go to http://www.tonyawards.com/
10. John Waters, 1981, p. 2.
11. John Waters, 1981, p. 41.
12. John Waters, 1981, p. 76.
13. Gus Van Sant, "*Pink Flamingos*" [review], *The Advocate*, April 15, 1997, p. 40.
14. John Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters*, New York, Vintage, 1983, p. 126.
15. John Waters, *Trash Trio: Three Screenplays*, New York, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1988 (reprinted 1996), p. ix.
16. John Waters, 1988, cited on book cover.
17. John Waters, 1981, p. 167.
18. John Waters, 1983, pp. 88–100.
19. Sadly, Buddy Deane died at 76 years of age on July 16, 2003. This news item caught my attention just as I was preparing to begin work on this article. Deane's *New York Times* obituary is online at http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/27/nyregion/27DEAN.html?ex=1060491082&ei=1&en=253acfe3b987c089

20. David Rooney, "Waters Talking 'Dirty'", *Variety*, June 10, 2003.
21. David Rooney, "Waters Talking 'Dirty'", *Variety*, June 10, 2003.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Mudie Cunningham

Dr Daniel Mudie Cunningham is a writer, curator and lecturer specialising in screen cultures and contemporary art. Based in the Blue Mountains, Daniel completed his PhD on white trash cinema at University of Western Sydney in 2004. Nell Schofield interviewed Daniel for his insights into *Puberty Blues*, and quoted him in her forthcoming Australian Screen Classics monograph on the film.

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Cult Cinema

Cult Cinema

An Introduction

Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton

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"*One has to be in a state of* euphemia*, cultic purity … Any religious ritual is arbitrary unless one is able to see past it to a deeper meaning …. It had to be approached on its own terms …. It was heart-shaking. Glorious. Torches, dizziness, singing. Wolves howling around us and a bull bellowing in the dark. The river ran white. It was like a film in fast motion, the moon waxing and waning, clouds rushing across the sky. Vines grew from the ground so fast they twined up the trees like snakes; seasons passing in the wink of an eye, entire years for all I know … Duality ceases to exist; there is no ego, no "I" … as if the universe expands to fill the boundaries of the self. You have no idea how pallid the workday boundaries of ordinary existence seem, after such an ecstasy. It was like being a baby*"

– Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (1992)

"Keep you doped with religion and sex and TV
And you think you're so clever and classless and free"

– John Lennon, *Working Class Hero* (1970)

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Introduction

Cult cinema is a term that is often met with some confusion. One of the problems of responding to the puzzled enquirer who asks "what exactly *is* a cult film?" is that the phrase has been adopted and employed in a variety of ways in its relatively brief lifespan. This book is an attempt to provide an overview of the predominant means by which cult cinema has functioned and been understood in all of its complexity, without simplistically contending that its instability is evidence of its redundancy as a valid concept. Such dismissals can only be accepted if one believes that words and terms can always be reduced to short, definitive explanations. Many words, however, have unstable meanings, often because their connotations fluctuate throughout time and also because they are used in different ways across varied contexts. David Lee has argued that "meaning is not an inherent property of words but is strongly influenced by contexts of use" (1992: 16), stressing the heterogeneous and complex nature of words.

To begin with, there is the range of meanings associated with the word "cult" proper. Generally speaking, there are two frameworks through which the word "cult" is approached, a sociological one and a religious one. The religious understanding refers to "cult" as the ancient or original procedures of practice that are externally present in the observation of a belief. These procedures of practice represent the care (from the Latin *cultus*) given to exercising a belief. The emphasis of these procedures lies on rituals, routines, and on material elements of the belief (idols, temples, shrines, attire).

The sociological understanding of the term "cult" also deals with religion, but it approaches it more as a degree of institutionalization. According to Ernst Troeltsch's (1931) typology of religious beliefs (which concentrates on Christian religion only) a cult is a form of religious behavior that is different from a church or a sect. Whereas a church claims its belief to have absolute truth and is geared towards the elimination of competitive beliefs, a cult is less concerned with universality of belief. Cults are also far less professional and bureaucratic in their organization than churches (with only a very small number of full-time salaried clergy), and they are not as closely allied with state-powers as churches usually are. Troeltsch also notes that like sects, cults promote a purity of belief. But unlike sects they do not usually advocate a return to purity. Instead, they embrace a new purity (this is why they are often called NRM: New Religious Movements), which makes their type of belief more open to esotericism and prone to mysticism. Cults are also different from sects in that they originate much more organically, whereas sects are typically break-offs from churches.

Troeltsch's typology was further refined by Howard P. Becker (1932) and Colin Campbell (1977), who emphasize that cults are usually small in size, that the observance of belief is of a private nature, and that their difference from churches means they are often portrayed as deviant – in opposition to mainstream culture. Cowan and Bromley (2008: 10–11) specify this last point by arguing that cults, like many religious beliefs, operate with a concept of 'unseen order' which acts as an incentive for the "harmonious adjustment" of behavior to a greater good. The unseen order motivates explanatory narratives that interpret its relationship to the everyday world (myths), and it acts as a sort

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of compass for prescribed behaviors (rituals). For Cowan and Bromley a main difference between cults and established religious groups lies in the fact that culturally "their myths, beliefs, rituals, and practices . . . differ significantly from those of the dominant culture" (2008: 11).

Although cults have always carried a pejorative connotation, an organized resistance against cults has arisen in recent decades, especially since the second half of the 1960s (Cowan 2003; Beckford 2003: 30). Christian counter-cult movements have tended to regard all cults as deviations from orthodoxy, and therefore as heretical. Secular counter-cult movements too have increasingly opposed cults because of the perception that high-profile controversies (such as the Manson Family, Jonestown's People's Temple, the Solar Temple, or Heaven's Gate,) but also more moderate movements (such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation, of which the Beatles were famed followers) have created cults using methods of conversion such as "brain washing" and "mind control," and that cult members are essentially slaves to charismatic leadership ("gurus"). For example, in "Why the Cults Are Coming", Marvin Harris (1981) argues that one reason for increased cultism is as a response to perceptions that society is too alienated in its post-industrial age. For Harris, this response is ineffective because cultism too runs the danger of alienation, of seeking solutions to spiritual crises through worldly means – economic and political. This is worth noting because of the immediate context it provides for the increase in use of the term with regard to cinema that occurred around the same time.

The phrase "cult cinema" – which has brought the connotations of the existing word "cult" to bear on the world of film culture – is a particularly knotty term, which renders it difficult to pin down in any definitive manner. It is subject to differing applications and battles over its meanings (as when disputes arise over which particular titles are cult films). Despite its contested nature, it is not totally elastic: its use has been influenced by historical and other contextual developments, so that when one looks at the ways in which the word functions within various contexts (i.e. in journalistic articles, in academic papers, on a variety of internet discussion platforms), there are a number of recurring themes which tend to be associated with it.

This book provides an overview of a range of topics which we believe are important to cult cinema. Within each of the chapters we attempt to describe the concept or category in question and to outline ways in which it has been important to cult cinema, to provide information on historical and/or theoretical features which centrally inform such categories, while also making reference to films where necessary to illustrate particular points. In this way, we hope to provide a thorough overview of cult cinema from a number of different perspectives, which we feel has the benefit of pointing to the diverse ways it has functioned within film culture. While we are aware of the contested nature of cult cinema, we nevertheless offer our own interpretation in the light of previous research. We also think that an introductory book of this nature should reflect the diversity of interpretations and designations involved in the field of cult cinema, and in this sense the book can be considered as following a "constructivist" approach to cult media (though of course we only focus on cinema) outlined by Philippe Le Guern, who posed the question: "Is it, in the end, the usage of the concept of cult, its mobilization, and its varying interpretations by audiences that should be examined, independently of the question of whether cult corresponds to an objective reality and a proven body of work?" (2004: 4) We certainly think that the usage, interpretations and values attached to cult are particularly important; yet while we do not think that any film is immanently cult, we do think that the ways in which the concept has been utilized in different contexts and developed historically has nevertheless led to a body of texts that are frequently referred to as cult films, and this is reflected in films that are repeatedly mentioned throughout the text. We have, however, also attempted to present a wide range of films here in order to point towards the large, and varied, body of work that has been termed cult. The large number of films mentioned and discussed in the book precludes us from being able to explain in what sense *every* film is to be considered cult, though we do frequently do so. If an explanation is lacking, we should stress that it has been discussed and/or listed as a cult film within print or online.

We should also mention our use of another concept that is difficult to pin down, and which is often used as a yardstick against which cult cinema is measured,

namely the concept of the mainstream. The mainstream is referred to a number of times within this book and we would like to make it clear that we also use this term in a similarly constructivist manner as we use cult: it acts as an umbrella term which refers to a number of values, most often denoting the "norms" of film production, textuality, and consumption. However, what counts as the mainstream (and what counts as the norm) may differ according to context. For Jancovich *et al.* (2003a) the mainstream tends to be a rather fuzzily defined imaginary concept among a number of different "taste cultures," yet despite such imprecision it still functions as a crucial concept among fans who use it to define themselves against more "normal" or "average" film viewers (2003a: 1–2).

The History of Studying Cult Cinema

Considering our claim that cult cinema has been influenced by its historical and other contextual developments, we will provide a brief overview of the historical emergence of cult cinema as a subject, particularly within an academic context. Hitherto there has not been a great deal written on how cult has emerged and developed historically within film culture, though some works have contributed to this field. These would include the contextual introduction sections in Mathijs and Mendik's collection *The Cult Film Reader* (2008a) as well as Greg Taylor's history of "cultism" within American film criticism, *Artists in the Audience* (1999). Other historical work can be found in occasional articles or as fragments of larger works, which include Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1991), Jancovich (2002), Smith (2006), Sexton (2011), and Stevenson (2003e).

While the use of the word "cult" within film culture stretches back much further, it was probably in the 1970s that the term "cult film" or "cult cinema" began to be used (at least relatively frequently), and it tended to refer to films that gained repeat audiences and who would often indulge in behaviors considered "ritualistic," hence the adoption of the religious metaphor. Thus, in addition to the ritual of continually returning to "worship" a particular text, other rituals such as repeating the lines of the films (as was the case with *Casablanca*) or dressing up and talking back at the screen (as was the case with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) were observed as evidence of cult viewing practices. The 1980s saw the rise of academic studies of cult cinema, with most attention being paid to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (see, for example, Austin 1981a; Siegel 1980), but also including Umberto Eco's (1986, first published in 1985) canonical study of *Casablanca* as a cult movie. While the first two articles are largely sociological in nature, primarily focusing on audience responses as cult, Eco's article was an attempt to map out the textual nature of the cult film (albeit through a single example), noting that a cult film is particularly rich in *intertextual* detail; that it is an example of "living textuality," consisting of a large assemblage of characters and situations which draw upon archetypal characters and situations from other films. While he states that all movies do this to an extent, he claims that *Casablanca* does so excessively, so that it is not "one movie. It is *movies*." (1986: 208). He ended by claiming that this process of excessive quotation, which he did not believe was a deliberate strategy of the film's creators, was more recently becoming a self-conscious component of film production and that we were entering a "Cult Culture" (1986: 210). Several chapters in this book explore the importance of Eco's ideas: Chapter 17 discusses intertextuality in relation to classical Hollywood cults; Chapter 21 explores the importance of intertextuality more broadly, particularly through the strategies of parody and irony. Chapter 22 looks at the importance of "meta-cult," which Eco argued was culture that self-consciously draws on cult (1986: 210).

As academic studies of cult cinema grew Eco's arguments became questioned. J.P. Telotte, for example, claimed that Eco overstated what he described as the "imperfections" of *Casablanca*, thus "trivializing what the public perceives to be a classic of the American screen" (1991b: 44). Whereas Eco viewed it as a kind of incoherent patchwork, Telotte stressed how the film managed to unify all of its various, disparate elements. Barry Keith Grant, meanwhile, questioned Eco's stress upon the cult film as a "collagelike assembly of interchangeable parts" as he stressed that this was a general characteristic of *all* classical Hollywood genre films (1991: 125). Both of these articles appeared in Telotte's 1991 collection on cult cinema, which was the first academic book entirely devoted to the cult

film phenomenon. This collection was also important for broadening academic cult studies: while the two films that had up to this point gained most coverage as cult films – *Casablanca* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – featured prominently, a large range of additional titles were also included. These films were approached from a wide variety of frameworks, though among these different perspectives there was an assertion that the cult film came in two notable guises: the "classical cult" film and the "midnight movie." The former were films produced within the classical Hollywood system between, approximately, 1917 and 1960 (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985) and which had endured through being repeatedly viewed by particular audiences at repertory screenings or through frequent television appearances. Issues explored in relation to the classical cult film in this volume include nostalgia, the role of the cult star, and the function of camp, topics discussed respectively in Chapter 7, Chapter 8 and Chapter 17. The midnight movie phenomenon (discussed in Chapter 1) – which had already by this point led to two books on the subject (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991 [1983]; Samuels 1983) – was at this stage perhaps the most noted manner by which films were designated as cult, and was where *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* gained its cult reputation. Scholars in this section discussed issues such as transgression (covered in Chapter 9), performance (covered in Chapters 7 and 10), nostalgia (Chapter 17), as well as distribution/exhibition trends (Chapter 1). And yet, while midnight screenings still occur, this edited collection was published when their heyday was passing. In Gregory A. Waller's empirical survey of midnight movie screenings in Kentucky between 1980 and 1985, he notes the "shrinking market" for midnight movies and claims that one of the reasons for this is because "many once-popular midnight movies – and movies that might have become successful at midnight – became available on videocassette" (1991: 177).

The importance of the videocassette, and home viewing more generally, was only briefly mentioned in Telotte's edited collection, but it would soon become a central focus of academic studies of cult cinema. The idea of repetition – of viewing films again and again – became much easier when films were accessible on videotape. As Anne Jerslev noted, videotape also enabled viewers to be able to have more mastery over films through functions such as fast-forward, rewind and freeze-framing (1992: 194). Videocassettes had a huge impact on film culture generally, and inevitably affected the processes associated with cult cinema. The domestic arena now became an important site in the construction of cult films: new "sleeper" patterns could be formed, for example, when films which flopped or disappointed at the box office found a new life on videocassette. Or, as was the case of the "video nasties" in the United Kingdom (see Chapter 4), new forms of censorship could lead to the formation of particular subcultures based around a corpus of videotapes. Video companies could also use "cult film" as a marketing label, releasing films that already had a cult reputation (or fitted vaguely into a cult-like genre such as exploitation) in order to sell films.

Novel viewing conditions and the expansion of cult discourses into marketing would feed into new approaches to cult cinema within academia. In 2000, Mendik and Harper edited another book-length collection on cult cinema, in which a variety of approaches to the cult text were evident, including theoretical analyses of films which had already established a cult reputation, the study of "transnational cult" films, cult stars and video nasties. Perhaps the best-known (and notorious) chapter in this collection was I.Q. Hunter's piece on *Showgirls*, much of which explored his own liking of the film and the politics of taste. The interrogation of cult in relation to taste – why people like particular works and for what reasons, and how these relate to particular social conditions – became particularly notable in the 2000s, with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu the most influential figure being drawn upon to analyze such issues. Bourdieu had already been drawn upon by Jeffrey Sconce in his influential 1995 article which investigated enthusiasts of a variety of exploitation films, a mode of ironic connoisseurship he termed "paracinema" (see Chapter 8). While Sconce's article did not discuss cult film as such, it certainly made an impact on subsequent studies of cult cinema, and paracinema tends to be considered a subsection of cult cinema. Work by Hawkins (2000), Hills (2002a), and Jancovich (2002) all extended research into areas of cultist taste (and other cult media in the case of Hills), and this was

also evident in some of the chapters within another collection on cult cinema by Jancovich *et al.* (2003b). The growth in the study of taste and cult was undoubtedly linked to the rise in academic studies of fans (see Chapter 5), a research area that has often overlapped with cult studies (Hills' aforementioned cited work was a study of fan cultures) and which has also been influenced by Bourdieu. Another research area influenced by Bourdieu which also overlaps with cult studies is the study of subcultures, particularly those subcultures identified through intensive forms of media consumption.

While the mass consumption of video technology marked an important stage in the domestication of cult cinema, the increasing digitization of media technologies has arguably led to a new stage in such domestic trends. In particular, the increasing embedding of the internet into people's lives and the success of DVDs have led to new patterns being observed within cult studies. DVD, which usurped VHS as the dominant media upon which films were domestically consumed in the early 2000s, actually expanded the types of material available to view at home. As the discs were cheap to manufacture an increasing body of film material began to be released, with small companies emerging to cater towards more "niche" tastes. This was undoubtedly aided by the growth of the internet which in the 2000s was being used by an increasing number of people. This had a number of impacts for cult cinema, relating to areas including e-commerce, sites of consumption, as well as ways in which cultists could share information and communicate with other cultists. E-commerce meant that it was now easier to obtain a wide range of films; this would have been particularly important for those who lived outside of the metropolitan areas in which "specialist" films were more likely to be accessed (such as repertory cinemas and specialist outlets selling more exclusive videos). This is not to claim that cult films are *always* more obscure, marginal films (see Chapters 5, 17 and 20 for discussions of more "mainstream" cult films), but such fare does constitute a significant corpus within traditional canons of cult cinema. The virtual networks created by internet connectivity not only enabled people to search out and obtain films and film-related goods from a range of actual locations, it also created a wealth of accessible information on films so that people could find out about new films, seek out production details about particular films, interpretations of films, or details about stars and actors, for example. The proliferation of information, whether through databases such as the *Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*, fan sites, online journals, blogs, or wikis, to name only a few notable examples, is important because of the ways in which cultists often want to know more about particular films. This eagerness to know more, or to "master" a film, manifests itself not merely through repeat viewings, but also through gaining knowledge of films in other ways, so that films become much more than just specific viewing encounters and feed into the cultist's broader cultural life in a variety of ways.

The significance of online culture for cult cinema first made itself present within Mendik and Harper's and Jancovich *et al.*'s edited collections but only as a marginal presence, most notably in Julian Hoxter's (2000) analysis of internet fan sites on *The Exorcist* in the former, and Harmony Wu's (2003) consideration of online cult material in relation to Peter Jackson in the latter. Yet a number of articles have been appearing over the past few years which consider the importance of network culture for cult cinema either directly or indirectly, including Brooker (2002), Jenkins (2006), and Telotte (2001). We discuss digital issues occasionally throughout this book, most notably in Chapters 4 and 5, where we point to some trends within cult fandom that have been sparked by new technologies and their uses, and in Chapter 22 where we consider the emergence of cultist DVD labels. The fact that technological change is increasingly accelerating and being used in novel (and often unsurprising) ways makes it difficult for academic work to keep abreast of such shifts. No doubt when this book is published there will have emerged new trends and a number of more recent articles that we will not have been able to consider. We have done our best, though, to at least indicate some of the debates engendered by technological changes and how these have impacted on the field of cult cinema.

At some point in the oscillation between availability and scarcity the conscious avoidance of easy access becomes an important attitude. Anecdotal evidence from studies of collecting, the long-term reception of the video nasties, and so-called "residual media" suggests transferable technologies impact on the "street

value" of their reputations (Staiger 2005a; Egan 2007; Acland, 2007). Jancovich quotes director/cultist Frank Henenlotter:

> all those obscure films that I would have risked injury and death to see (literally, in some of those theatres) are now available at your local clean video store! It's a little unnerving. I'm wholeheartedly in support of this, but I'm still not used to the fact that those films that I spent my whole life trying to see are now *consumer items* (quoted in Jancovich 2002; our emphasis)

Henenlotter was speaking about the early 1980s, and things have accelerated since. We should, however, remain aware that new technologies do not displace older technologies and therefore render them redundant. Instead, they reconstitute relations between different types of mediated activities, whether watching films, writing about films or talking about films. Thus, public visits to the cinema to watch films may have been overtaken by domestic viewing, but they still remain important, and for some the cinema experience takes on ever greater value in relation to watching cinema on the home screen (whether this be a large, high-definition set or a small laptop screen). And while VHS has "officially" become an obsolete format, its marginal status can create a new set of cultists. Analogous to music fans preferring vinyl over compact discs these cultists trade or swap VHS cassettes, or post older videos or videotaped televised films of movies which are otherwise hard to get as digitized AVI files (on sites such as Cinemageddon and Karagarga). New technologies do not necessarily wipe out old technologies: they can co-exist in interesting ways, feeding into value judgments or new cultural patterns. The circulation of a low-fi quality VHS bootleg is of high significance for the cult surrounding *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (Davis 2008). The relations between old and new technologies, between the public and domestic film viewing site (and between mobile and static platforms), will undoubtedly continue to inform the future trajectory of cult cinema. It may be that cult cinema becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between other forms of cult media, but we do not think that this is certain. In the age of "convergence" the distinctions between different media platforms may have become increasingly intertwined, sometimes murky, but we do believe that despite such overlaps many people do distinguish between cinema (films, movies) and, for example, television. It is for this reason that we think that cult cinema is worthy of an overview as a self-contained subject, albeit one that cannot be isolated from the broader, interconnected media sphere within which it exists.

Definition of Cult Cinema

Numerous attempts have been made to define cult cinema. Many of these approach the topic from a vernacular angle, highlighting elements that cannot be caught in a description and – hence – remain intangible and very subjective. If anything, this means that a definition of cult cinema can only be intersubjective. Many overviews of cult cinema give lists instead of definitions, in the hope that the aggregate of illustrations of how individual films are cult leads to an explanation of why they are cults.

If we look beyond lists, definitions of cult cinema come in four contexts: sociological studies, reception studies, textual interpretations, and aesthetic analyses. Sociological studies assume that a cult film is a film with an intense following, not unlike religious cults. It is a contested parallel, which we will explore further in Chapter 12. However, if cult cinema is seen as a form of cultism in which religiosity has been replaced by an intense mode of consumption, the kind Douglas Cowan and David Bromley have called "audience cults" (2008: 89–90), it offers valuable insights into how exactly cult followings develop and what kind of cultural status they take on. Similarly, cult film can be approached as a form of deviant subculture. The most strident example of the sociological approach is presented by Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich (1992). They define a cult film as one whose audience community intensely celebrates "themes that (1) place typical people into atypical situations, (2) allow for narcissistic and empathic audience identification with subversive characters, (3) question traditional authority structures, (4) reflect societal strains, and (5) offer interpretable and paradoxical resolutions to these social strains" (Kinkade and Katovich 1992: 194). This definition describes a double bind: these components are features of the films themselves as well as characteristics

of what audiences experience. For Kinkade and Katovich, a contradictory attitude is essential. Cult audiences rebel against the mainstream and canon of cinema and hold that "nothing is sacred"; at the same time they present their own fandom as "sacred."

Reception studies investigate the trajectories through which films develop cult followings as part of their passage through markets. Such studies often offer theoretical outlines of cult films' place in culture, mostly through illustrations and case studies. For Hills (2002a) and Staiger (2005a), cults are a very visible form of fandom. For Jeffrey Sconce (1995, 2007) and Mark Jancovich (2002), cult receptions are to be understood as struggles for cultural positions, rooted in battles over taste hierarchies. Reception approaches also concentrate on the conditions under which cult followings are developed and maintained (Waller 1991; Hawkins 2000; Klinger 1994). In this view, cult films are films whose celebration or appropriation by cultists is the accidental consequence of their fractured reception trajectories. Often failures upon their initial release, and frequently encountering obstacles in their search for audiences, they develop committed followings during repeat screenings (often at fringe times) and they go on to enjoy long lasting fandom. For Danny Peary (1981: xiii), cult receptions are minority receptions, which means that they concern methods of distribution and consumption outside the mainstream. Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 4–8) isolate active fandom, a sense of community, the liveness of the viewing experience, commitment and endurance, a sense of rebellion, a paracinematic desire for the deconstruction of canons, persistent legends of distribution, specialist or niche events, and a long-term presence, as characteristics of cult receptions. We will examine these concepts more closely in the first section of this book.

The textual approach follows closely on the reception studies approach. While the stress in this approach is on offering a definition based on the analysis of the films, there is a strong acknowledgment of the role of viewers. A central point of attention in these studies is the complexity of communication between text and viewer. A key component of that communication is the use of what is often called "allusions" or "inferences" (by Carroll 1998 and Bordwell 1989 respectively). These are salient moments or small clues within a film that are picked up by savvy viewers who relish their expertise in recognizing these "cues." Other central points in the textual interpretation approach are "nostalgia," "irony," and "camp." These concepts refer to hyperbolic uses of modes of representation, picked up by viewers eager to appropriate these in their enjoyment and celebration of the films.

There are a few attempts to define cult film from a uniquely aesthetic angle, as films whose reception is secondary to understanding them. Most of these are valuable because they emphasize issues of "exoticism," "rarity," "genre," "trangression," and "quality" (Grant 1991; Cox and Jones 1990, 1993). Often, these studies concentrate on specialized subgenres and formats (such as the giallo, anime, martial arts, vampire movies, sleaze movies). These studies are essential in outlining the stylistic components that trigger enthusiasm, aberrant reactions, or repeat-viewing devotion. We will explore many of these instances in the second section of our book.

At their narrowest, aesthetic approaches seek to understand cult films as so unique that they defy interpretation, and operate purely on an affective and visceral level (hyperbolic camp, pornography, extreme horror, weepies, schmaltz, or maudlin melodramas). These films are defined through their representational and stylistic excess, which frequently motivates their subsequent critical interpretation. Such definitions are most common in fanzines and specialist blogs, but echoes of this sentiment are traceable in academic studies as well: for instance, Jancovich *et al.* have defined cult via a "multitude of sins" (Jancovich *et al.* 2003a: 1), while Welch Everman refers to it as something "kind of offbeat, kind of weird, kind of strange" (Everman 1993: 1). Harper and Mendik have compared its intensity and physical impact to an "orgasm" (Mendik and Harper 2000a: 7), while for Allan Havis (2008: 2), the very nerve of cult film is related to "personal frisson," which he explains in the form of a recurring dream. Umberto Eco has perhaps come closest to a description of this elusive factor. He has explained the cult cinema experience as having an "archetypical appeal" that provokes a "sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a déja vu that everybody yearns to see again"' (Eco 1986: 200). Even though Eco is quick to separate the term archetype from any "mythic connotation" (1986: 200), and

even though he shies away from invoking any reference to pontifical language, or to Carl-Gustav Jung's collective unconscious, his reference to a desire to relive some "magical moment" as a group is central to his argument.

Based on these previous attempts, and with the historical shifts in usage of the term in mind, any updated definition of cult cinema is both an amalgam of what has been said before and a departure from it. In our view, *cult cinema is a kind of cinema identified by remarkably unusual audience receptions that stress the phenomenal component of the viewing experience, that upset traditional viewing strategies, that are situated at the margin of the mainstream, and that display reception tactics that have become a synonym for an attitude of minority resistance and niche celebration within mass culture. In turn, filmmakers have used audiences' management of their "cult attitude" to consciously design films to include transgressive, exotic, offensive, nostalgic or highly intertextual narratives and styles. Although such opportunistic programming of cultism has created the impression that the term cult is now merely a marketing ploy, there continue to be receptions – especially in relation to the use of new technologies alongside traditional theatrical exhibition – that generate unexpected audience engagements which reconfigure the very notion of viewership.*

Structure of the Book

This book is structured into two main parts, each of which include a number of chapters on subjects that we feel are of particular importance to the study of cult cinema. The first part is "Receptions and Debates." Receptions are particularly important within the field of cult cinema, as the term emerged as a phenomenon that described particular reception patterns as opposed to specific textual features. In Chapter 1 we outline the important reception contexts which have been historically intertwined with cult status and move on to look at more specific instances of reception that can feed into cultism. In Chapter 2 we look at the importance of the marketplace in relation to cult cinema, an area that has been neglected in many studies of cult because of the way in which cult cinema has often been perceived as antipathetic to commercial strategies (a view which we do not share). Chapters 3 and 4 interrogate the institutions and mechanisms of prestige and evaluation that govern films' immediate reception into public culture. Among the elements we discuss here are awards, festivals, conventions, censorship, and criticism. In Chapter 5 we focus on fandom and subcultures, both of which are interlinked with the study of cult cinema in important ways and which have increasingly gained academic attention in the recent past. Chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on two concepts that have attracted very specific forms of fandom, namely auteurs and stars. In Chapter 8 we discuss camp and paracinema: viewing strategies that have been labeled cultist because they are seen to diverge from normative viewing positions in order to create alternative evaluative criteria. The importance of differing from cultural norms has been a key theme running through debates on cult cinema and in the final three chapters we explore the idea of difference further. Chapter 9 analyses the concepts of transgression and freakery, Chapter 10 deals with issues of gender and sexuality, and Chapter 11 looks at issues of exoticism and transnationalism. In the final chapter in this part, Chapter 12, we look at how the historical bond between the concepts of cult and religion can inform modes of appreciation.

Part II of the book, "Genres and Themes," analyzes modes that have been prominent within discussions of cult cinema. We therefore identify the ways in which particular genres have been linked to cult cinema through exploring relevant historical and conceptual issues. In our discussion, we will first pay attention to motives, tropes, traditions, and genres that have been located outside of, and regarded as antithetical to, mainstream cinema, such as exploitation films and B-movies (Chapter 13), underground and avant-garde cinema (Chapter 14), drugs (Chapter 15) and forms of music such as rock, punk, or glamrock (Chapter 16). We will next discuss modes of cultism within genres and themes from films that use formulas and motives more firmly entrenched in traditions close to, or within, the mainstream. Chapter 17 looks at Hollywood cinema, Chapter 18 at the horror film, Chapter 19 at science fiction, and Chapter 20 at blockbusters. In each case, we will identify which films within these traditions are more likely to receive cult reputations, and through which means. Our last two chapters will focus on the notions of intertextuality (Chapter 21) and meta-cult (Chapter 22), and interrogate the

increasing self-awareness and use of modes affiliated with cultism within discourses in the critical reception, production and marketing of cinema, a process that has impacted greatly on how films are identified as cult today.

The large number of chapters in the book reflects the many diverse threads that feed into the overall topic. Inevitably, there are overlaps between some sections. No one category is ever entirely isolated from others. The parts and the chapters are constructed to provide a structure which can be used by readers to navigate their way through this book. Within chapters, where there are overlaps with other chapters, we note this by referring to other chapters which provide further detail on the particular material under discussion. We hope the book thus allows readers to explore particular aspects of cult cinema and to map their own journey through this broad field.

As this book is primarily an overview of cult cinema studies up until this point (even though we would like to think of it as also extending current studies), it reflects some of the "blind spots" within such research. Perhaps the most important one that we are aware of is the very American-centric nature of cult cinema studies up until this point. That is, the focus on cult receptions has tended to focus on reception within the United States. It is true that there has been research on cult reception outside of the United States (primarily, but not limited to, the United Kingdom), but this is comparatively marginal. Following from this, the majority of films which get listed as cult films and discussed as such are also from the United States. There are certainly exceptions, and there are particular geographical areas that have become prime sites of cult production (notably Japan and Hong Kong, discussed in Chapter 11), but their films still tend to gain their cult reputations at least partly in the United States. While we have attempted to provide a range of cult films from different countries, we are bound by the state of research in the field up until now (although the growth of the internet has started to complicate, if not entirely eradicate, such trends). We hope that more research charting cult reputations in a greater diversity of contexts, such as Latin American cult cinema or Eurocults, will increase over the forthcoming years. Likewise, we anticipate that more research will be conducted into "female cults" (which we briefly touch upon in Chapters 6 and 10) and other areas that have hitherto fallen beneath the radar of cult cinema studies. This, we feel, demonstrates that there is a great deal of work still to be done within cult cinema studies, which signals a healthy and productive future for the subject.

Part I

Receptions and Debates

1

Cult Reception Contexts

We have proposed in our introduction that cult cinema is primordially known through its reception. In this chapter we provide a conceptual view of various elements that inform cult reception contexts. In order to illustrate how cult receptions differ from mainstream or normalized trajectories our attention first goes to the paradigmatic historical exemplar of cult cinema, namely the midnight movie. Next, we will outline the significance of a phenomenological approach to cult film reception. Subsequently, we will theorize the kind of experience cult receptions offer, and the value it generates.

Midnight Movies

Traditionally, the midnight movie is associated with New York. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum (1991: 310) observed that, on a worldwide scale, "New York is Palookaville when it comes to midnight movies," and there were vibrant late night scenes across North America and Europe.[1] Yet the New York scene is the only one thoroughly investigated and therefore we will use it as our key example.

Most scholars agree New York's midnight movie scene started when, in the late 1960s, underground and avant-garde theaters, with established clienteles and institutional affiliations, started programming risqué and exploitative materials. Mark Betz (2003) argues this shift was encouraged when "kinky" foreign art films and American underground films came together, near the end of the 1960s, in an exploitation/art circuit that emphasized the countercultural potential of cinema. Parker Tyler (1969) suggests a cross-fertilization between filmmakers who started to include more sex and violence in their films, and the demands of theaters catering to more permissive taste patterns, created a momentum in which practitioners and patrons encouraged each other to go ever further (Tyler 1969). The film usually credited with initiating the transition is the infamous *Flaming Creatures*, with its Dionysian theme and brutal rape-orgy. It was seized at several screenings and stunned audiences at others (for more on this film, see Chapters 3 and 14). Soon, other films with provocative aesthetic attitudes, and shocking or politically radical imagery drew similar receptions: *Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, *Blow Job*, *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, and *Chafed Elbows*, which Tyler describes as "the offbeat of the offbeat." It had a "marathon run at a small East Village theatre" (Tyler 1969: 53). Probably the most cultist trajectory was that of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* and *Invocation of My Demon Brother*, both of which ran for long periods of time at late night slots in theaters East of Greenwich Village (Betz 2003; Tyler 1969). A constant reference in the receptions of these films was that of physical and mental liberation from repression – a function similar to that of ancient rituals.

At the beginning of the 1970s a string of New York theaters started midnight programming. The underground repertory was complemented with exploitation films with kaleidoscopic and apocalyptic motives, revivals of previously banned films, new and explicit horror, films pushing the boundaries of sexual permissiveness, and exotic and surreal foreign films (Figure 1.1). The acceleration was a sign of the

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Figure 1.1 Midnight movie classics from 1970 to 2002: from left to right, *El Topo, The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Donnie Darko*.

vibrancy of the counterculture, and of its widening into radical "outsider" films – the weirder the better. Topping them all was the visceral and symbolically heavy Mexican western-on-acid *El Topo*. Virtually unadvertised, *El Topo* sold out the Elgin theater for half a year. After a while, its screenings were described as a "midnight mass" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 94). With the success of *El Topo*, the midnight movie really took off. Films as diverse as George Romero's zombie film and civil rights-metaphor *Night of the Living Dead*, Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* (a mystical adaptation of René Daumal's *Mount Analogue* to which Jodorowsky improvised a clever ending), and the mind-boggling surrealism of *Viva la muerte* attracted repeat audiences looking for "underground" thrills, and gusts of revelations – often aided by illegal substances. With these films, the midnight movie added an anti-establishment stance to its radical aesthetics; increasingly graphic depictions of sex and violence and explorations of immorality correlated with the audience's anxieties about the "violence engulfing the United States" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 99, 112). Even if this feeling that the midnight movie exemplified a revolutionary attitude was more an impression than a fact, for midnight movie viewers the era's general unrest seemed to synchronize with what they experienced on screen – as if it predicted "the end of the world as we know it."

As the 1970s progressed, the countercultural movement lost momentum. Midnight movies became ever more outrageous, but as their popularity widened across campuses, generic and aesthetic radicalism replaced ideological commentary. Art house and B-movie distributors such as Janus films and New Line Cinema became engaged in the midnight movie. Lesbian vampire movies, porn chic, blaxploitation movies, and foreign philosophical allegories such as *Antonio das Mortes*, *The Saragosa Manuscript*, or *WR: Mysteries of an Organism*, replaced the original batch of films. The most notorious among these films was *Pink Flamingos*, which tested viewers' threshold for revulsion – exactly the reason for its successful reception.

By the late 1970s, the midnight movie had become a staple of alternative cinema exhibition, the urban and college town equivalent of the drive-in. It was characterized by a hedonistic and wildly extravert context of rambunctious yet joyous celebrations. Many of the films championed in the circuit were as flamboyant as their audiences, with as figureheads campy rock musicals such as *Tommy*, or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Proudly self-referential, these films were as much performances of cults, as cults themselves. Because of its endless runs *Rocky Horror* became a repertory in its

own right (Weinstock 2007; Austin 1981a). Occasionally, "original" cults would still develop, around enigmatic films such as *Eraserhead*.

In the 1980s, much of the midnight movie attitude moved to VCR viewing, where "pause" and "rewind" functions on the remote control replaced the theatrical repeat viewing experience. What survived were nihilistic or flamboyant post punk movies such as *Heavy Metal*, the hardcore *Café Flesh*, or *Liquid Sky*. By the end of the decade many of the original midnight theaters had closed their doors, and filmmakers joined the burgeoning "independent" scene, or went underground again, with Abel Ferrara (*King of New York*) and Larry Fessenden (*Habit*) as crossover exceptions (Hawkins 2003). Only with large intervals would new midnight movie cults appear. The most prominent ones – *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Donnie Darko* – became the phenomenon's de facto eulogies. In 2001 "everything changed", writes Joan Hawkins:

> The World Trade Center in New York City was destroyed . . . The geography of downtown Manhattan has changed. So has the mood in the USA. And it's not at all clear what new avant-gardes and cult films might rise up to address what seems at this point to be a new era (one in which irony, for example, may not be considered an appropriate response to anything) (2003: 232).

For Hawkins, the cult of the midnight movie, a "moment when we believed that direct intervention in the country's spectacle would do some good," was over (2003: 232).

As befits cult receptions, the midnight movie did not really die. Since the 1990s the demise of the original phenomenon was balanced by three other trends. First, new films found their ways into festivals, which increasingly included midnight showings as part of their programs. Second, midnight premieres also became a feature of blockbuster releases vying for cult status. Third, the midnight movie phenomenon went into meta-mode. *Donnie Darko*, for instance, arguably the most famous midnight movie after 9/11, is also a meta-midnight movie. Its audiences at the New York Pioneer Theater, aware of the legacy of the midnight movie phenomenon, were not only continuing a tradition that had existed for more than thirty years, they also consciously knew they were contributing to the heritage of the phenomenon by keeping it alive, or honoring the tradition by paying lip service to it. A decade after its first midnight run, college campuses, art houses, and festivals still screen *Donnie Darko* at midnight for this reason. Other instances of the meta-mode of the midnight movie include nostalgic revivals and queer celebrations of often overtly mainstream "classics" such as John Hughes's teen comedies (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*), or sword and sorcery fantasy films (*Conan the Barbarian*). Their midnight success relies on the kitsch and camp attitude *Rocky Horror* had cemented as a core characteristic of the cult reception trajectory, and it reclaims some of the irony Hawkins claims it lost by exposing topical political attitudes through cheesy old movies. In its most recent form, this reflexive nostalgia has also included the original midnight movies, with relaunches of *El Topo* joining the never-ending runs of *Rocky Horror* and occasional newcomers, such as *The Room* (Bissell 2010).

In sum, the midnight movie highlights the key characteristics of a cult reception trajectory: films lumped together in a lively and "countercultural" exhibition context by their capacity to commit, through outrageously weird and explicit imagery, subcultural audience collectives, and to elicit performances of fandom and obsessions with the interconnectedness of elusive details intrinsic as well as alien to the films that enables allegorical and political interpretations that position themselves outside the realm of normalcy.

The Difficulty of Researching Cult Cinema

As the exemplar of the midnight movie illustrates, cult reception contexts are extremely heterogeneous. According to Mathijs and Mendik (2008a: 4–10), part of why they are called cult is because these receptions contain multitudes of competing and opposite discourses that stand in contrast of what a "normal" consumption process ought to be like. How does one begin to research such diverse contexts? At the basis of the cult reception context lies a fundamental philosophical question: does the value of a cultural product lie in its features and intentions or in the eye of the

beholder? This question has important implications for the methodology of researching cult cinema.

Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 15–16) distinguish between two schools of thought on this problem, with different implications:

> ontological approaches to cult cinema are usually essentialist: they try to determine what makes "cult cinema" a certain type of movie . . . Phenomenological approaches shift the attention from the text to its appearance in the cultural contexts in which it is produced and received. Such attempts usually see cult cinema as a mode of reception, a way of seeing films (2008b: 15).

In the ontological approach, the reception process is one that affirms the properties of the product. In the phenomenological approach the reception process negotiates these properties in the light of how they make themselves known – as a kind of phenomenon. Mathijs and Mendik refer to the work of Jerome Stolnitz as an effort that tries to solve the deadlock between these two positions. For Stolnitz (1960a, 1960b) any value is less a matter of the properties of the work or the viewer than of the experience generated by the flow of meaning during the process of perception. Stolnitz distinguishes between objectivist, subjectivist, and objective relativist views of experience. Objectivism, like the ontological approach, places the essence of value in the work itself – as if the work carries meaning within itself. This makes perception a process of detection. Subjectivism, on the contrary, identifies value as a faculty of the perceiver – as if the audience places its own meanings upon the work. This makes the work "empty."

Most reception studies of cinema embrace this approach. Janet Staiger (1992), for instance, explains that in order to understand how films work, and how the strategies through which they are given value operate, one has to distinguish between meanings generated through texts, through readers, and through contexts. Throughout, however, one has to accept

> that cultural artifacts are not containers with immanent meanings, that variations among interpretations have historical bases for their differences, and that differences and change are not idiosyncratic but due to social, political, and economic conditions, as well as to constructed identities such as gender, sexual preference, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality. (Staiger 1992: xi)

Staiger argues that the best methodology for stressing contextual factors is to shift the focus of subjectivism from the mind of the spectator to the material conditions (the labor) involved in assigning meaning to a work – she calls this methodology a neo-Marxist approach. According to such an approach, studies of receptions should place emphasis on the use-value, exchange-value, and symbolic value of films (the latter being the value that is not expressed in material terms but in terms of the knowledge, expertise, kudos, and status, but also the dangers for exclusion and isolation any affiliation brings).

There have been several attempts to carve out procedures for this methodology. One attempt, by Barbara Klinger (1997), distinguishes between diachronic and synchronic approaches to film reception. The first stresses the materials that feature in a chain of events over time during a film's reception; the second emphasizes the materials from events that co-occur within the reception. The first method gives breadth, the second depth. Because cult reception trajectories are known to be volatile it is necessary to use both approaches simultaneously. Moreover, cult reception contexts are highly influenced by what Martin Barker (2004) has called unpredictable "ancillary materials": already existing artifacts and discourses that relate to the upcoming release that lead to polemics and legends and that prevent a nice match between expectations and the actual experience. The best example is probably the myth surrounding the troubled production history of *Casablanca*. Another good example is the abrupt way in which *Night of the Living Dead* was introduced to audiences, as part of a matinee double bill, before it became a midnight movie. This means that an essential part of the cult reception context is that it is "fractured." Its smooth running is interrupted or otherwise compromised, and audiences struggle to find an appropriate frame of reference for the newly released film.

Another attempt concentrates on the units of meaning that circulate in receptions. Each reception contains "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" references. Following David Bordwell (1989: 13), intrinsic references can be labeled "cues," elements of the film and its immediate

production context used by viewers as tools in their construction of arguments about the film. Extrinsic references are "quotes," influences from outside the regular context that interfere with the reception. The degree to which a film's public course takes on the characteristics of a cult reception often depends on the abundance and the weight of extrinsic references. The longer a film's public visibility lasts (even in small communities), and the bigger the influences, the more likely it is to fracture a smooth reception. Controversies and moral panics are frequently a major part of the fractures in a cult reception trajectory.

There are some complications with the attempts we sketched. Topical events can penetrate so far into a film's reception they take over its direction. This is what initially happened to *Donnie Darko*. Even though it had been set for the Halloween weekend, traditionally a time for darker, more adult fare, *Donnie Darko* was too meta-generic to pose as a horror film, and the destruction of New York's World Trade Center on September 11th had temporarily eliminated audiences' appetites for dark materials and provocations. As one critic put it in hindsight: "why seek out talking rabbits warning of the end of the world when it already seemed to be happening?" Cult receptions also demonstrate psychological tendencies towards "insulation." Russ Hunter (2009, 2010) observes how subsequent to *Suspiria* (usually considered his best film) the reception of Dario Argento's films petrified into a series of mantras, which led to a refusal to include new achievements (or rather the lack of them) into reappraisals. The more Argento's reception became mantra-like, the more frequently it was called "cult." Such inoculation from new debates demonstrates how difficult it is to distinguish between instances of cultism that are convictions, and instances that are *performed* as attitudes, and if indeed there is a measurable difference.

Finally, there is the complication of a cult reception context's endurance. Films such as *The Wizard of Oz* or *Casablanca* have been enjoyed *as cult* by generations of audiences. The label cult is also instrumental to the long-term reputation of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or *Pink Flamingos*, films that can be said to be on perennial release, as well as to the cult status of *Emmanuelle*, which played in theaters for a full decade. As figureheads for a certain period and style, their long-term receptions are imbued with a sense of nostalgia, one that is equally often a nostalgia for a period (a zeitgeist or a popular myth) as a nostalgia for a kind of cultic experience. For years, *El Topo* was virtually unavailable – it only made it more cult. The search for bootlegged copies of *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* quickly became a characteristic of its cult instead of an obstacle to it – as the vibrant illegal trade of VHS copies of it testifies.

As a result of these complications cult reception contexts ultimately remain exceptions to insights into how film receptions work. It is in this important sense that cult cinema is kept isolated from the mainstream – as an unresearchable, "fugitive" object with elusive receptions that don't "work" and that are in essence, dysfunctional and unproductive.

Cult Cinema as Phenomenal Experience

The way into investigating cult cinema receptions, and cult cinema, as an object of research lies in operationalizing that exceptionalism. This is possible through the third view Stolniz isolates, namely objective relativism. This concept assumes value and meaning lie in between product and perceiver – in the actual *phenomenal experience* of the spectator, and the mutual material environment of both. Adopting a phenomenological perspective, argues Dudley Andrew (1985: 631), attempts to make visible reason "on the run." When we look at the ways in which our exemplar of the midnight movie presents itself, a more matching approach hardly seems imaginable. There are several reasons why Stolnitz's practical form of phenomenology, objective relativism, and its focus on the phenomenal experience, provide a good framework for studying cult reception contexts.

First, the phenomenal experience is an aesthetic one. It is an experience that is sought for its own sake – as an end in itself. It sketches the experience as one that cannot be purposeful, that cannot be an end to a means. Otherwise the perception would shut down under pressure of the perceiver's desire to find functions for the work (Fenner 2008: 104–106). There are several advantages to outlining the reception of cult cinema as a phenomenal experience of an aesthetic kind. It offers the opportunity to balance traditional

points of attention in a reception study (such as box office performance, critical reception, marketing, and so on) with a focus on elements such as emotive overtones, degrees of investment, or formations of attachment. It also offers a possibility to investigate terms such as loyalty, time-wasting, excessive idolatry, or enthrallment in a reception. These terms are exactly the kinds that are found time and again in descriptions of cult receptions as "useless."

A second characteristic of seeing cult receptions as a phenomenal experience concerns the space in between the work and the perceiver. A phenomenal experience implies closeness, and so does cult cinema. This spatial relationship is to be understood as both geographical and mental. The cult film experience is indeed often described as one of close proximity to the screen (enthrallment with the giant canvas), to fellow viewers (huddled together in communion), and to the subject matter (overly close-reading of themes and motives). The two most commonly employed metaphors are that of the darkness of the theater (much loved in lyrical assessments of the midnight movie), or that of being glued to a home viewing set. The mental closeness refers to the viewer as someone near to the film, someone with a connection and an investment in it, and, as we will see in our discussions of fandom, someone with a sense of ownership over the film. At the same time the closeness also assumes that the object itself (the film) has some agency in the relationship, not only as carrier of cues and clues, but also something that first receives its meaning from the viewer and then talks back. Often, the closeness makes it difficult for the researcher to clearly distinguish between viewer- and object-agency (for an elaboration, see Miller 2010: 42–78).

A third characteristic Stolnitz draws is that of disinterestedness. Disinterestedness needs to be seen here not as a refusal to engage with a particular reception, nor as a position of free or detached engagement towards it, but rather as a form of decontextualized commitment, a sense of focus. It is not in the film that the cult reception is disinterested. Rather it concentrates intensely on everything to do with the film, the properties and appearances of which are interrogated and elaborated upon with detail and repetitively. Repeat viewing, as a physical reliving but also as a reactivation of emotion, is a key component and recurrent characteristic of cult receptions (Wood 1991: 156–166, Châteauvert and Bates 2002: 90). The parallel with a religious exegesis of sacred texts is an obvious one. This is not to say that any attention for the rest of world is absent, only that it is viewed through the lens of the text and its affiliate discourses. Norman Kreitman (2006) employs the term "cultural disinterestedness" to identify this form of attention. He adds that it operates with a keen sense of the "generalized other," and that it can achieve a feeling of liberation from immediate personal concerns. Jean Châteauvert and Tamara Bates (2002: 93) observe how film cultism always harbors the desire to know the other's experience. For cult receptions, this characteristic is essential, as it highlights the extent to which the perception is always part of a larger whole – never limited only to one individual.

Cult Cinema as Bad Experience

An important qualification governing cult receptions is their perceived status as "bad," as an inferior form of experience. Watching a film for its own sake, from really close up, and with an intense focus that channels everything else through that film's perception in order for it to achieve meaning, is generally regarded as something an enlightened or informed viewer would not do. Ritual repeat-viewing is regarded as childish, boring, compulsive, but not tasteful. It goes, for instance, against the template of the cinephile as someone with an omnivorous curiosity and taste for films of quality.

Many cult reception contexts explicitly refer to the films as "bad," as poor or distasteful filmmaking. This badness has moral as well as aesthetic components. In chapters throughout this book we will analyze instances of cult films that are celebrated because of their representations of transgression, abjection, freakery, grossness, gore, misogyny, or cruelty. Likewise, cult receptions are known to revel in exoticism, fetishism, idolatry, and repetitiveness. This badness is as frequently approached ironically as it is carried as a sign of pride.

The tendency to classify the cult experience as inferior depends largely upon the degree of rationality and freedom attributed to how people watch films.

Studies of receptions of cult films often deal with expert audiences (such as critics, connoisseurs, or taste leaders). Often this is for practical reasons: these groups are the ones who most visibly embrace the positive attitude, the direct access, and the obsession with detail typical for disinterestedness – they are the easiest to research. If one looks at some influential studies of film reception contexts, especially fan studies, that apply to cult cinema, one gets the impression there is an assumption all such viewers operate as perfectly rational agents, not affected by cultural or social conditions, and totally free to choose their affiliations (Peary 1981; Jenkins 1992; Sconce 1995, Taylor 1999). Not only is this an artificial form of rationality; it is also far removed from the reality of many cult receptions. The liberty to browse freely between kinds of receptions before electing one is balanced by personal inhibitions, and by the cultural and social conditions that influence the environment within which the phenomenal experience occurs. It seems obvious to state that choice is limited by the material conditions within a given time and place. Next to that, alignments and affiliations frequently come through certain cultural ties, such as class, gender, ethnicity, or heritage. To use Kreitman's terms: the sense of the generalized other often looms large. These conditions make concepts such as loyalty, affordability, and pride, *and* the connections between them (such as declaring a loyalty to an affordable item at a certain time and place as a source of pride) a key feature in cult cinema receptions. Yet many scholars of cult cinema and many researchers of film receptions overlook these conditions and consequences.

One of the most prominent scholarly efforts to address this limited freedom has come from Pierre Bourdieu (1984). According to Bourdieu, taste can be distinguished in "tastes of luxury" and "tastes of necessity." Tastes of luxury are typical of the kind of freedom and limitless choice assumed by rational agency, though they can depend on habit as much as conscious decision-making. Tastes of necessity are, Bourdieu argues, the result of a "forced choice" that is fulfilled not only because it is an economic necessity but also a cultural reflex of people who "are inclined to fulfill it, because they have a taste for what they are anyway condemned to" (1984: 178). Bourdieu's conceptualization of taste as socially conditioned has been very influential. Yet his conclusions are often criticized by studies of cult receptions that continue to assume that cult viewers exercise free taste. In fact, the cult receptions of "tasteless" films (gore, pornography, rape-revenge, video nasties, trash) are regarded as choices of luxury by cult fans who thereby assert themselves as taste leaders because they can elect to apply aesthetic criteria to otherwise unredeemable movies. Reading protocols such as "camp" and "paracinema," which we will discuss at length in Chapter 8, are examples of this assertion.

One important exception to this view is the work of Mark Jancovich (2002). Paraphrasing Bourdieu, Jancovich sees these protocols as games of formalist sophistication: "As Bourdieu shows . . . the privileging of form over function asserts the 'superiority [of the bourgeois] over those who, because they cannot assert the same contempt for . . . gratuitous luxury and conspicuous consumption, remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies'" (Jancovich 2002: 312). In this sense, cult receptions display tastes of necessity as much as tastes of luxury. Cult reception contexts can thus be conceptualized as sites of struggle between choices of necessity on the one hand and games of luxury typical to bastions of middle-class luxury such as college towns or urban centers like Manhattan (locations where the midnight movie blossomed) on the other hand, with "taste" (and tastelessness) as the tool of distinction between kinds of cult receptions.

Cult Cinema as Collective Experience

A major way in which cult receptions are different from other forms of film receptions is that they are part of a collective process. We have already alluded to the fact that cult reception contexts work with a sense of the generalized other and that they are tied to social conditions of groups of people. Of course this notion is embedded in the very definition of the term cult as a community, a commonality of congregation that sees itself at odds with normalized culture. But it is not always this clear-cut. The collectivity of cult receptions is not just an aggregate of individual perceptions; it is more an impression of a collective effort that supersedes it. Put otherwise, the phenomenal

experience is a shared one, even when the actual perception occurs individually.

This means that the collectivity of cult receptions is frequently a sensibility in addition to a material fact. There have been numerous attempts to describe collective processes of cultural reception of this nature. Siegfried Kracauer (1926) and other members of the Frankfurt School of sociology, employed the terms "crowds" and "masses" to describe movie audiences unaware of each other's presence yet attuned to the same points of interest. Throughout this book we will return to how film cultists and fans have been described through labels that stress collectivity. Overall, the intent was pejorative: by describing these audiences as groups they are denied individuality and agency – they are seen as an effect of their consumption rather than an active force shaping it.

Recent decades have seen a change in that patterning of collectivity. Benedict Anderson (1983) has used the term "imagined communities" to refer to autonomous and sovereign communities not based on face-to-face everyday contact yet sharing strong convictions and opinions. The conceptualization of community that comes closest to capturing the collectivity of cult receptions comes from Michel Maffesoli, who uses the term "affective communities" to describe what he regards as instances of neotribalism in contemporary society. According to Maffesoli (1996a: 40), such communities are active agents rather than powerless or passive recipients, even in their resistance to productivity. He observes how they place an emphasis on style and hedonism as a reaction against what is perceived as an increased instrumentalization of the world:

> the more one encourages a "utensilitarian" conception of existence, then the more, as if in response, a sociality asserts itself, one that, on the contrary, rests on the imaginary, on an existential casualness, a search for hedonism, a shared pleasure in living, and on appearance and the play of forms. (Maffesoli 1996a: 40)

Maffesoli stresses how this reaction is shared and social, a collective effort. Furthermore, his observation of how it relativizes utilitarianism acknowledges the aesthetic component of the collectivity – a core component of the phenomenal experience. Maffesoli's preferred metaphor for this conceptualization is the mythical figure of Dionysus (see Chapter 12). Maffesoli's description fits perfectly formations of fandom that have developed around cult receptions. It also matches the analysis of various subcultures (see Chapter 5).

Maffesoli (1993a, 1993c) further observes how collectivity is not always expressed in numbers, such as attendance figures. It often remains hidden ("imaginary"). The collectivity we speak of here is often an impression, a feeling of feeling together, an impression of solidarity and sharing that informs one's emotional attitude, and not necessarily one's material life (though it has effects in that material life). According to Maffesoli it is also a collectivity inspired by directness of experience, by hope, by a tendency to imagine other times (nostalgic pasts or utopian or even apocalyptic futures), and by a desire to dissociate itself from purposefulness. Instead of purpose it preferences "drifting" and the seeking of pleasure in what Maffesoli calls "the excesses of everyday life" (Maffesoli 2005; also see Mathijs 2010a). These elements certainly influenced the exemplar of the midnight movie, even in its post-heyday incarnations.

There is a tension between Maffesoli's conceptions of collectivity and those underpinning a lot of studies of fans and subcultures. Maffesoli's observations concentrate on radical degrees of collectivity that carry a deep suspicion of authority and an anarchist resistance to it, and that refuse to settle into "the real totalitarianism [of] interpretative systems [that] reinforce every social and political institution" (2005: 199). This is a collectivity of simultaneously active and passive opposition to dominant ideology that in its anti-intellectualism stands at odds with some more radical activist, utopian, and nihilist forms of cultism. It also stands at odds with more authority-friendly versions of cult reception contexts that see themselves less in opposition to dominant ideology and/or are co-opted into normalized patterns of consumption and behavior. Tensions between degrees of commitment in the collective experience, for instance between oppositional versus co-opted cult receptions, inclusive versus exclusive cult receptions, omnivorous versus univorous receptions, and sincere versus ironic or performative receptions, will inform much of our discussions of the cult experience.

At its broadest, for instance at moments when films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *The Lord of the Rings* acquire a sort of cultural presence wider than their immediate niche appeal, the collective experience can be close to a sensibility that typifies a zeitgeist. At such moments it can be referred to as "part of the fabric" of society or a defining feature of the "social ambiance" (Maffesoli 1993b). When *The Lord of the Rings* films became a massive success some critics saw this as the result of the fact that its niche, which was frequently described as "geekdom," was now no longer a cultist, marginal position "but a formative force in the cultural imagination of our times" (quoted in Biltereyst, Mathijs and Meers 2007: 46). In this book we will analyze specific articulations of various senses of collectivity on numerous occasions.

Cult Cinema as Connected Experience

In some of his analyses of affective communities, Maffesoli (1996b, 2007) remarks that they give rise to "networks of relationships" whereby the network itself creates a feeling of belonging. The implication is that next to the collectivity the very notion of the network is of importance to maintain a sense of togetherness. This observation is not new. The idea finds its roots in the 1950s, when the concept of "para-social interaction" became a central component in attempts to understand how mass media could offer viewers a sense of close interaction with performers (Horton and Wohl 1956). In the 1960s the idea also appeared in media theories and semiotics (the work of Marshall McLuhan, Umberto Eco, and Jean Baudrillard).

The concept of connectivity fully entered onto the foreground in the 1980s and 1990s, when the idea of the network became the point of focus of Manuel Castells, who employed it to posit the idea of a "network society" (1996–1998). According to Castells, the end of the twentieth century (and of the millennium) is a moment in which a new kind of global society is coming into place, one that is based on three processes: the information technology revolution, a string of crises in capitalism and statism, and the coming of age of a range of social and cultural movements such as environmentalism, libertarianism, and feminism (what Maffesoli would call "neo-tribes"). Castells calls this emerging society one of "real virtuality" – a pun on one of its technological tools of imagination, virtual reality, but also an indication of how much of that new society exists as a network of links and connections between "cultural communes," which produce what Castells calls "global hypertexts," units of information in constant flow. Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum, the copy without original, is a powerful influence on this vision (Castells 1998: 336; also see Bell 2006: 55). Castells' network society is not a program for an ideal world, nor is it a dire forecast for a dystopic world – it explains how "bad" *and* "good" cultural communes exist in spite of public spheres that pressure them.[2]

If we apply the idea of the network to cult reception contexts the emphasis shifts from the "essence" of these groups (that what makes them unique) to the ways in which they establish and differentiate themselves in relation to the rest of the world (that what connects them) through the quantities and qualities of their connectedness. In theory, this allows for the mapping of cult receptions in terms of their proximities, alignments, or affiliations as much as in terms of their isolated identities. It is a perspective that is less concerned with the preservation of the essence of each group in alignments between communes or tribes (to use Maffesoli's term) and more with how the tangents through which they share contexts of action shape their existence.

Since Maffesoli and Castells presented their ideas there have been a number of attempts to apply them to cultist receptions. Joshua Meyrowitz (2002) uses the concept of connectedness in relation to fan obsessions and degrees of intimacy between fans and celebrities – what he calls the cult of media friendship. Diken and Laustsen (2002) discuss *Fight Club* as a film about cultural communities (for instance neo-fascist ones). Judith Halberstam (2003) and Angela Wilson (2008) use it to examine lesbian punk-rock and Riot Grrrl subcultures. Bernard Cova, Robert Kozinets, and Avi Shankar (2007) apply it to the receptions of goth subculture, surf culture, and *Star Trek* wikimedia. It also informs numerous studies of online fandom. What remains under-researched is how links *between*

micro-groups fuel cult receptions. Early twenty-first-century cult films such as *Donnie Darko*, *Ichi the Killer* or *Ginger Snaps* have derived at least part of their cult reputation from crossing over between various cultural communities, and as such they are perfect illustrations of how the connected experience affects cinema cultism, fandom, and subcultures. For instance, the cult status of *Ginger Snaps* largely lies with how it links cultists from various cultural communities (horror, Goth, lesbian, feminist) around an affective catch-phrase ("morbid sisters") that allows the building or sustaining of bridges between each of these communes – it is a "facilitator" of crossovers (Figure 1.2). In that sense, *Ginger Snaps* is an exemplar of a new kind of cult reception, equally deep in its commitment, but less easily pinned down to just one type, and because of that more empowered. For the study of cult cinema this perspective can be of great importance. For one, the concept of connectedness explains how a shift might be needed from studying cult receptions in function of finding their essence to studying them in function of how they connect to each other.

Cult Cinema as Surplus Experience

Cult reception contexts frequently upset protocols of meaning making. Next to generating values that can be understood in terms of the mainstream (i.e. in terms of productivity and functionality) cult reception contexts generate what Paul Ricoeur has called a "surplus of meaning and of value which is qualified but not exhausted by analysis" (quoted in Andrew 1985: 631). We would call it surplus experience.

In cult receptions, a connection equals an intimate affiliation, and what is connected acquires power. In a move to update Marxist methodologies of



Figure 1.2 A collage of imagery from *Ginger Snaps* arranged around the "morbid sisters" motive and dialog: "out by sixteen or dead in this scene, together forever."

understanding material culture, Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1990) argued that objects – such as films – do not uniquely occupy a use value (their practical value) or even exchange value (their monetary value), but that they rely on symbolic value: they trigger needs and desires which attract cultist affections – such as investments in paraphernalia, antiques, or memorabilia. The connections of such objects, and object-signs, to each other generates a complex network of proxy seductions and fetishisms. One example of this is the appearance of an actor at a fan convention, where they sign autographs on posters and where, via exclusive meet-and-greet sessions, distinctions are drawn between those who can converse with the actor, and those who remain outside that circle. These networks of seduction, appropriation, and fetishism can be summarized as what Andrew Ross (1989: 210) has called a "cult of knowledge and expertise." In terms of value, these networks produce as a surplus value: they are the outcome of a form of labor in which the involvement of the perceiver is crucial, but which is not generally recognized as a productive effort, and does not render a direct profit. Therefore the surplus generated by cultist details is often called wasteful, a "geeky" self-indulgence that does not advance cinema, or improve the material conditions or cultural literary of the perceiver. The components informing these extensions of the perception process are furthermore elusive, obfuscated, and difficult to chart because they exist at the margins of what is accepted as evidence and material fact: gossip, trivia, hearsay, legend, prejudice, are often relegated as pieces of information, excluded from data as insignificant. Because of their contentious nature they pose a challenge to methods of analysis (they are almost impossible to codify, quantify, or qualify). In terms of a cult reception context it means cultists will always look for a further meaning, even when there is none, because connecting things gives the impression that one displays expertise and is, hence, powerful.

A complication is that not all elements of a cult reception are of equal weight. Nor does the physical film itself remain at the center of its reception. Klinger (1989) has called attention to the ways in which actions accompanying the reading of a film allow for "digressions" in which contextual information provides clues for enjoyment and communication with the text that compete with the ones in the text itself. This is at least in part informed by an ability to connect the (experience of the) text to an active knowledge of (and willingness to use) contextual or ancillary information. Some receptions disregard a film's features altogether. The video nasties (films whose UK video releases were caught up in a controversy in the early 1980s) are an example where a reputation of a group of films developed independent of their intentions or even their actual content: they were lumped together by the press, and subsequently by prosecutors, for their supposed impact on the viewer, not because they shared any common features (Barker 1984; Egan 2007). Furthermore, some meanings cannot be seen in separation of other texts, such as sequels, remakes, serializations, or re-imaginations. Trailers, double bills, directors' cuts, added footage, accompanying soundtracks, retrospectives, revivals, rediscoveries, restorations, prequels, spoofs, and new cultural sensibilities all impact on that reception. Literally anything can change public opinion on a film, as is demonstrated by Klinger's (1994) research on the changing status of the films of Douglas Sirk, and Cynthia Erb's (1998) study of the changes in the reputation of *King Kong* as a cultural icon after numerous remakes, appropriations, and parodies. Any research into a cult reception context, then, needs to integrate the complex patterns of influences and opinions operating in particular situations (synchronically), and maps them as processes over time (diachronically), all analyzed as types of "talk" – uttered by those involved in the production, presentation, and perception – in order to map the combinations of strategies used to forge (or fail) meaning. The obsessive mining for details and endless *kinds of talk* imply an *explosive* and *completist* frame of reference for cult receptions. For those outside that frame of reference any knowledge it generates is irrelevant, *only* surplus.

There have been numerous attempts to conceptualize the obsession with connectedness and cross-talk. According to Dana Polan (1978) they are part of an increase in "self-reflexivity" of cinema. Robert Stam (1985) has called it "reflexivity." Umberto Eco (1986) sees it as "intertextuality." Danielle Aubry and Gilles Visy (2009) label it "transtextuality." Whatever its label, early attempts regard the concept as a

countercurrent to cinema's mainstream. Polan calls it Brechtian; Stam links it to Jean-Luc Godard's interrogations of film language. But in later discussions of the concept it is less seen as exceptional and more as a routine or protocol that has gradually been embedded into the very fabric of cult film, as well as into the range of expectations audiences have of cult films, so that every cult film becomes intertextual by default – that is how Mathijs and Mendik (2008a) present it. There are some small but significant differences between the various ways in which this cross-talk is discussed. We will address these in chapters that analyze the specific contexts in which they are used (see Chapters 2, 17, 18, 21).

There is some dispute over connectedness and cross-talk as surplus experience. One school of thought holds that the obsession with trivia is playful and revealing yet without relevance for the perceiver. The affiliations that connections allow are less causal than rhetorical, circumstantial, or incidental. They can be made for the sake of it. For Robert Stam (1985), the way in which films can invite connections, and be reflexive, is a sign of their aesthetic maturity. It testifies of expertise in contemporary culture, of posture to show off one's social standing within an existing cultural constellation, but also of a need to demonstrate some connections are indeed precious in a society that increasingly comes across as detached, specialized, and fragmented. But it does not do anything of a wider cultural relevance (see Chapter 21 for an elaboration). Against that view stands another school of thought, which claims that if one looks carefully at the moral and political consequences of the obsession with details, it becomes clear that they can *also* be used to uproot existing constellations and instead promote revolutionary ideals (Ross 1989; Havis 2008). Thinking through the ideological implications of the "transgressions" of culture that occur in films said to be cult can create imbalances, provoke controversies, and stimulate utopian ideas. Through their fascination with details, then, the surplus experience that cult receptions generate allows audiences to "imagine" another world with other rules, and laugh at that world at the same time. It creates a rebellious attitude of defiance at odds with what dominant forces in a society endorse.

Conclusion: Cult as Performance?

In this chapter we have argued that cult cinema is best served by an approach that has its philosophical roots in a practical form of phenomenology. We have moved in this chapter from cult cinema's paradigmatic exemplar, the midnight movie, and the smallest possible unit of perception, the spectator, to the largest possible, a society, and we have identified the cult experience on each of these levels. Needless to say all of these levels inform each other.

In conclusion, we would like to highlight one aspect that we briefly touched upon in our summary of the history of the midnight movie, namely the fact that in several cases the cult is less lived than performed. The distinction between an actual, sincere, and authentic cult experience and a performance of one is difficult to make and we will argue throughout this book that in many cases it is virtually impossible to make the distinction. In most of our chapters we will discuss instances of cult receptions and indeed of moments in cult films that can both be seen as authentic *as well as* a performance of an experience. We will tie some of those debates into an organized view on just how performative a cult experience and, by extension, the very notion of cult is.

Notes

1. In Paris, it is often associated with the ten-year run of *Emmanuelle*. In Los Angeles it has kept close links to the underbelly of Hollywood, with a special interest in reviving "maudit" and "bad" Hollywood films such as *Plan Nine from Outer Space* or *The Room*. In London it is connected to the vibrant nightlife of Soho. In Antwerp cinemas like The Monty linked to the cosmopolitan attractions a port brings. In Ottawa it is still associated with the Mayfair cinema, whereas in Vancouver all original midnight movie houses have been replaced by multimedia centers such as

the Rio Theatre. San Francisco (with its Roxy Theater and Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive), Cambridge MA (with its Brattle Theater, which started the *Casablanca* cult), and Montreal (with its Rue St Catherine repertory theaters) also had lively midnight scenes. Many American college towns, such as Ann Arbor, MI, Madison, WI, Austin, TX, or Lexington, KY, also were, or are, at some point or another, thriving markets for midnight movie programming (Waller, 1991).

2. The concept of connectedness has been the subject of discussion for many decades, from the experiments of psychologist Stanley Milgram in the 1960s, to Malcolm Gladwell's musings on "Connectors" as people essential to setting trends. The concept of connectedness gained popularity in the early 1990s when it became the central metaphor of John Guare's play *Six Degrees of Separation*. In the play, a character declares: "I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation." (Guare 1994: 81). According to Gene Plunka (2005: 352), Guare's play exposes how in an attempt to "make a difference and feel we belong" the only thing one *can* do is *connect*. A revealing variation of the degrees of separation concept is the cult game *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*. The challenge is to connect actor Kevin Bacon to as many other celebrities in as few steps as possible.

2

The Cult Cinema Marketplace

When *Blues Brothers* director John Landis visited a cult film conference once as a guest of honor he was amazed at the attention cult films are accorded. "Back in the day, when someone called your film cult it meant it had bombed. Why study failures?" Like most other films, cult films are intended to provide a healthy financial profit in return for investment, even if the emotional component of that investment was a "labor of love." Landis's remark suggests cult films have a reputation of not delivering such profit. However, while it remains a very risky business, the label "cult" also has enviable commercial prospects, with potentially high profits margins. This chapter looks at cult cinema from the angle of political economy. It pays close attention to labor, funding and entrepreneurship, marketing, niche promotion, exhibition culture, and black markets.

Production Culture

Studying the production and business routines of films known as cult can provide valuable insights into the conditions that help shape the prefigurations of those receptions. This chapter aims to do that by painting the contexts of inception, labor, production, the aid of technology in the creation of films, and the attitudes, routines and practices as a culture in itself – a community very much like the kind anthropologists study. This community is what John Thornton Caldwell (2008) has called a "production culture."

The production culture of cult cinema is rife with attitudes of hyperbole and reflexivity, and it behaves as "a masonry" (Caldwell 2008: 36). Practitioners in the film and television industry display a high degree of self-importance (hyperbole), and self-consciousness about their profession (reflexivity). Some of this attitude is seen as inflated entitlement or arrogance, and as the "role-playing" of tasks (playing to "be" an industry professional). But these attitudes also reflect the degree of commitment, dedicated labor (and long hours), and professional care that goes into the production of films – a vocation more than a day task. It can lead to surprising innovations, often improvised under tense pressure, and to bursts of creativity in solving practical problems within strict financial constraints against looming deadlines. As Caldwell points out, the hyperbole and reflexivity cannot be separated from the perception of importance that the world accords to the film industry. The press, ancillary industries, and circles of fans, business associates, and dignitaries see being associated with the industry as important, and the industry sells its self-importance as a "culture" one wants to be associated with (2008: 10–11). "Genesis myths," "making-it sagas," "war stories," and gossip, rumors, buzz, and reputation play a crucial role in the sustenance of this culture. They provide a framework for the trade of the product that is delivered, and they establish career capital (2008: 37–68). Since much hinges upon the public delivery of a final product (a film), there is a careful balancing of presenting to that public rituals of trade and turf marking implied in this culture: occasionally on-set

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troubles or "behind the scenes" revelations fit the profile, and are willingly leaked, but sometimes they are kept under cover.

Cult films differ from this system in that their attitudes of hyperbole and reflexivity seem to be more extreme than those usually accepted as normal. In jumping out of bounds they fit the reputation of cult cinema as "out of control." *Casablanca*, with its much-told production legends, is a famous example of this, but much of the production culture of Hong Kong cult cinema of the 1980s, or Italian horror of the 1970s operates in similar ways. The degree to which hyperbole and reflexivity are part of the production contexts is evidenced in the stunt work, the fight choreography, the work of crews and cast, and the professional approach to the subjects – always more over-the-top or self-aware than is the norm in Hollywood (Card 1991: 66–78; Reid 1994; MacCormack 2004). For Umberto Eco (1986), this quality is what makes *Casablanca* the archetypical cult film. It is also evident in products that become cult because of their failures, when the final product of labor is perceived as an abject fiasco, and the reason for that failure is seen as the result of inefficient use of skill and craftsmanship. This was the case with high-profile disasters such as *Heaven's Gate* and *Waterworld*, films known as megalomaniac and extravagant.

Another noticeable set of differences concerns scale and skill. While many cult films have had reasonable budgets, many of them are made for much less money than traditional cinema. This is a particular characteristic of exploitation cinema and B-movies (which we analyze in Chapter 13). Yet even in the classical poverty row and exploitation industries, and in the non-industrial cultures of avant-garde and underground cinema hyperbole and reflexivity remained a prevalent dynamic. Crew and cast working on films that became cult often display a "superior survivor" tactic – as if referring to an experience one has to be initiated to and graduate into. It is often associated with a "military-identity" complex, which Caldwell sees in particular with stunt and camera crews, with nomadic labor systems and working-class machismo (2008: 113).

The best example in that respect are special effects crews, in particular those of Tom Savini, Rick Baker, Rob Bottin, or Gary Zeller (also see Chapter 18). To illustrate the similarity with cult audiences it is insightful to quote one of Caldwell's sources at length here:

> I would say that our company is a kind of "tribal" thing. Once you are in, and get the secret tattoos – we're then in there as a family operation . . . The core group that we have is intensely loyal. When work is slow they'll come in anyway . . . It's not just a paycheck issue. I'm old school. You just gotta love the work. And one of the bad things that happened when everything went digital was suddenly – compared to the old days – there were enormous sums of money thrown around . . . When this Hollywood cycle goes bust, we'll see a lot of these folks go away. And the nerds like us will still be there – doing the work. (2008: 127)

This attitude certainly helps sell products as "cult-like." Occasionally, companies and crews straddle the distinction between cult and mainstream: the KNB EFX company of special effects combines work for blockbuster Hollywood productions with smaller, more "streetwise" productions with lots of cult potential, like the *Ginger Snaps* films, *From Dusk 'till Dawn* or *Splice*. The creative challenge of accomplishing a vision within strict constraints and volatile conditions posed by these productions, and the war stories and street credibility that come with that, transfer easily into cult reputations. They become a point of pride.

Put together, next to a very high degree of reflexivity and hyperbole, the production culture of cult cinema appears to be more accidental, improvisational, renegade and subject to professional obsession than mainstream cinema, operating on a much smaller scale but with a notably bigger "family" influence (Caldwell uses the word nepotism).

Funding and Distribution

The spirit of independence of cult films is evidenced in their unique funding structure, complete with unsavory accounting tricks. The opaque financing and accounting practices of colorful figures such as Coffin Joe, or the dispersed funding of Alain Robbe-Grillet's films, have become legendary (Barcinski 2003: 27–38; Tombs 2003: 352–356). So is the impenetrable funding structure of *Daughters of Darkness*, evidenced in its seven production partners from six different territories

(Mathijs 2005b: 455). Other curious examples include the financing of *Caligula* by adult magazine *Penthouse*, the patched financing of Orson Welles's films late in his career, and the participatory, communal self-financing by the crew of *Mariken van Nieumeghen* (Agterberg 2004). The long incubation periods that several cult films went through contributed to their appeal, but were nightmarish in terms of financing. David Lynch started work on *Eraserhead* with a small grant, and worked stubbornly on it for a full five years. *El Topo* took four years to complete.

Two oppositions run through the funding of cult cinema. The first pitches commercial funding against state involvement. The overall majority of cult cinema is commercial in funding. Subject matter is partly responsible for this. Films such as *Emmanuelle*, *Behind the Green Door*, or *Café Flesh* would probably have never been possible if local authorities had to approve their funding. In some cases producers consciously avoided state involvement because of the associations of art house and "legitimate" filmmaking it brought with it. *Daughters of Darkness* is one such example. Director Harry Kümel wanted to produce "something nasty" and therefore chose to forego state-supported funding (Mathijs 2005b: 454). Yet state involvement is not uncommon in cult cinema, especially in Europe. State subsidy programs became well established in most European countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and they were frequently complemented by tax shelter systems that encouraged investments into cinema, exactly at a time of increased permissiveness, when state grants and funds would be less likely to declare ineligible the kinds of materials that would have been rejected a few years earlier. As a result, local authorities have been a substantial factor in funding films that acquired cult followings. In several cases this caused outrage, especially when the features of the films in question were deemed morally challenging. Canadian films from *Shivers* to *Ginger Snaps* have suffered (or benefited, depending on the view one takes) from such debates, as have Paul Verhoeven's *Turkish Delight*, in the Netherlands, the Belgian *Man bites Dog*, several of Pasolini's films in Italy, and the films of Dusan Makaveyev and Jan Svankmajer when Eastern Europe was still under Communist rule.

The second opposition is between single and multi-source funding. This is largely a historical distinction. In the period before the end of the 1960s, the majority of films that became cults were financed through one main source, often the production company. It channeled all investments into the film. The careers of Roger Corman, William Castle, and Samuel Arkoff were built on this system. Because the system guaranteed some sort of continuous production gambles could be taken in terms of style and subject matter, as more profitable productions would cover less successful ones. It gave young filmmakers the chance to try their hand at movies. Though the system did involve presales, there was a relative independence; deals with distributors were not necessarily cut before the films were made (Schaefer 1999: 98–99). This also gave distributors the liberty to tailor films they purchased. Radley Metzger's company Audubon Films made several changes to European films they made available in the United States. New York distributor Sam Cummins even added a diary and voice-over narrative to the scandal film *Ecstasy*, in an attempt to get it approved without having to cut a sex scene. The attempt failed (Fischer 2001: 130).

This single-source situation first changed with the establishment of state subsidies in Europe, and the destratification of production, distribution, and exhibition in the United States. In many cases, funding opportunities across European countries enabled producers to look for small, hence less contentious, sums of money from a variety of authorities, and combine these with private investments to patch together a budget. In this system, presales to distributors played a crucial role. The result of having the distributor involved in the production meant that changes were made during production, rather than after the delivery of the print. But it made for less stable financing. Christopher Wagstaff notes how the majority of Italian spaghetti-westerns of the late 1960s and early 1970s were financed through an "extremely fragmented" model of advances and guarantees from distributors (Wagstaff 1992: 250; Eleftheriotis 2001: 92–134). Exploitation filmmaker Jess Franco made good use of such opportunities in securing small amounts of money from widely diverse sources, pulling funds from practically every European country, adding extra scenes of hard or soft material to meet local demands, and even taking on ethnic sounding pseudonyms for himself and his cast and crew in order to meet criteria

for "regional" involvement. Until the mid 1980s overseas sales were usually excluded from this practice. It put US distributors of European cult cinema and European distributors of American cult films in the position to pick up films cheaply – a key feature of the midnight movie circuit. *El Topo*'s acquisition by Allen Klein of ABKCO, and *Even Dwarfs Started Small*'s acquirement by Robert Shaye of New Line Cinema, are among the most noteworthy examples because both cases concern filmmakers, namely Alejandro Jodorowsky and Werner Herzog, who were only just embarking on a career as filmmaker, and for whom the support from burgeoning distributors was more or less a guarantee that they could embark on new projects. In the case of Jodorowsky, that was *The Holy Mountain*, which was partly financed by John Lennon through ABKCO. As if to underscore the unpredictability of cult movies, and of course their niche appeal, *The Holy Mountain* did not receive wide visibility. It premiered in Cannes in 1973, and it had showings in New York and at various festivals but then it disappeared from circulation – at least until its DVD release in 2007.

Having to sell a film territory-by-territory, or city-by-city, had the side effect that word-of-mouth and reputation preceded the actual arrival of a film. The beneficial aspects of this free publicity have led to the tradition of staggered releases: distributing a film in a few selected venues first before making it available elsewhere. It helped *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, for instance, receive much press attention and it fueled the controversy around it (Peary 1981: 347; Staiger 2000: 183). These days, staggered releases are a well-known tactic to sustain a film's run across territories. In business terms, such films are known as "sleepers," and when they continue to attract good business they will be said to have "long legs." Needless to say, the long legs of *Emmanuelle* and *Donnie Darko* outrun most mainstream cinema's trajectories.

With the increased global trade in films, and the home-viewing market exploding in the 1980s, overseas presales opened up opportunities for increased funding and exposure. The travails of Roger Corman in Argentina, shooting productions there in order to benefit from local funding and distribution prospects, are one example (Falicov 2004). Another was the aggressive presales technique practiced by Cannon, led by Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, who had learned from Corman and Arkoff. Throughout the 1980s they financed camp classics such as *Bolero* and *King Solomon's Mines* shoulder-to-shoulder with art house films such as *King Lear* and *Barfly* (Beauchamp and Béhar 1992: 91–98). Eventually their system backfired, but it extended numerous horror and soft-core franchises well into the 1990s. The advent of the internet opened up possibilities as well, though more in terms of marketing than funding or distribution. Online distribution (or internet retailing) enabled more direct contact with clients, and the niche culture of nostalgia made DVD re-issues of camp and cult classics a lucrative area, but the market remains small and profit margins are slim (for an elaboration on DVDs and cult, see Chapter 22).

Marketing: Causing and Containing Commotion

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of marketing efforts, and distinguish between wanted and unwanted outcomes. Cult cinema forms an illuminating case in this respect. On the one hand it carries an abundance of production legends into its reception, ready to be distorted, abused and pulled out of context by slick marketeers. On the other hand, it has an audience that resists being told what to like and that is inventive in circumventing prescribed consumption. Film marketing needs to strike a balance between getting a film noticed and risk threading on communities' sensitivities (summarized in Earnest 1985; Staiger 1990; Jäckel 2003; Barker 2004). Cult films regularly upset that balance.

Many of the producers and distributors mentioned earlier in this chapter have become better known as publicity riggers than good businessmen or creative artists. They managed to bring their products under the attention of audiences by forcefully associating their films with topical fears, pleasures, and promises, and as such they generated what Thomas Austin (2002) has called "satellite texts," materials so closely associated with a film's public presence that it can be seen as part of the sales or production processes, developed to respond to and manage problematic discourses surrounding films. Whereas "making of" videos and

programs, or notes in press kits function as attempts to streamline receptions, many other satellite texts allow meandering tangents of association, offering audiences the chance to "experiment" with meanings. Examples include the mentioning of sources of inspiration by stars and directors, of influences carried over from other films or the alignment of the film with certain causes and social issues – a favorite technique of exploitation cinema. In some cases, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, satellite texts are part of a subtle prescription of how the film should be read (Biltereyst, Mathijs, and Meers 2007). As Cynthia Erb (1998: 34) put it in relation to *King Kong*, however, there is a general willingness to let the "wild logics of the marketplace" determine the reading of a film.

The very term "cult" is finding increased application in marketing because of the rising awareness that it might lead to some revenue. Yet there is still some apprehension among publicists to plainly self-identify a product as "cult." *Snakes on a Plane* is an infamous example of a film that encountered resistance in being accepted as cult by audiences partly because it had boldly announced its own "cultishness" (or at least encouraged it). Most often, the use of the term "cult" is introduced into marketing campaigns indirectly, for instance through quotes from critics and reviewers predicting a film's cult reception. Though one would anticipate that the term "cult" is indiscriminately used, its occurrence is relatively selective. It occurs less in materials that are geared towards a mass public that is not automatically associated with the kind of moviegoing and consumption linked with cult cinema. Put differently, the term "cult" is an exclusive one. That is also evident in its use in press books. It appears predominantly in press materials accompanying films by directors consistently linked to independent and exploitation cinema (Argento, Cronenberg, Lynch, Corman). In genre terms it is most heavily employed in relation to science fiction, horror, and fantasy publicity materials.

Indirect and auteur-related usage aside, relatively few films actually make an effort to market themselves as cult. For one, publicity budgets are usually tiny, and there is no consensus over what strategy is most effective, or over which elements of the film need to be highlighted. Quite the contrary, marketing campaigns accompanying films that became cults have often found themselves struggling to achieve any direction at all, drowning as they were in a sea of numerous little, uncontrolled stories surrounding the films. Even films whose big budgets and strong backing would presume tight control over prefiguration, can succumb to legends and accidents which may lead to cult receptions. The distributors of *Hannibal*, the sequel to *Silence of the Lambs*, for instance, had made efforts to pitch the film as a "weird romance." But they had underestimated how the character Hannibal had sedimented into popular consciousness as a cult monster, and how circulating tales had already affected a Hannibal film's reputation. No Valentine's Day release was going to change that perception (Mathijs 2002).

One particular form of marketing associated with cult cinema is the presentation of material that is as persistent and remarkable as the stories surrounding the films. Stunts, rumors, scandals, and daring an audience to "sit through" an experience are key tactics in that effort. They have their roots in entertainment marketing, where as much effort went into adorning the front of house and canvassing the audience as in the stage show itself. To paraphrase one reviewer, the best show should be put in the lobby (Schaefer 1999: 102). Cult film learned from circus, vaudeville, burlesque theater, sideshows and roadshows how to attract audiences' attention. The releases of *King Kong* and *Psycho*, with carefully planted materials in lobbies (and in the media) are good examples (Erb 1998; Williams 1994). Producer William Castle equipped several of his films with gimmicks and accompanying gadgets that would incite audiences by way of antagonism – daring them into the theater as it were (Waters 2003; Brottman 1997). Castle's stunts were often too elaborate to work effectively, but the reactions they elicited still helped his releases gain attention. Roger Corman's publicity materials often latched themselves onto topical headlines to pretend they addressed hot topics, or were tailored to match local expectations (Pam Grier actually became Caucasian in some posters for *The Arena*). New World Pictures editors Joe Dante and Allan Arkush would liberally borrow shots from everywhere, or invent fake awards to link a coming attraction to "exciting promises" – usually drugs, sex or violence (Gray 2004: 107–109). Each of these marketing campaigns did not just poke audiences, they also

disciplined them, and – as Linda Williams (1994) argues with regard to *Psycho* – they brought the prefigurations and expectations in reign. This did not always work. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was supposed to follow on the heels of the Broadway stage production. But the show was so savagely dismissed by critics that the whole promotion campaign for the film fell in disarray (Weinstock 2007: 18). In many cases the distinction between carefully planned strategy, disciplining effort, and accident become completely blurred *into* the kind of legend cults are known for. The recurrent streams of gossip that accompanied the films, and careers, of Judy Garland and Hedy Lamarr are excellent examples (Staiger 1992; Fischer 2001). An example of a "legend" that was planted in order to create a distinction between those who would react to it in disgust, and those for whom it would serve as an attractor, is *Scanners*. The film was presented to horror fans (and to the fan press) as a film exclusively about exploding heads, with the infamous head blasting off its shoulders present in virtually every story, in trailers, fanzines, and on posters. *Scanners*' strategy, devised by Avco Embassy employees Bob Rehme and Mick Garris, drew admiration from fanzines, and outrage from the general press. The division it created worked brilliantly, and it gave the film a lasting cult reputation as the "exploding head movie" (Mathijs 2008: 94–98). In sum, marketing efforts geared towards rumor and scandals have always found themselves in competition with other ancillary discourses.

More recently, the internet has given marketing new opportunities to emphasize little stories, and assert control over them – complicating the distinction between planted and genuine rumors or scandals even more. J.P. Telotte (2001) describes in his analysis of the marketing and release of *The Blair Witch Project* how the creation of a website that concentrated on the little stories and aspects of the film, such as elements of narrative, excess, or inventiveness aided the film in gaining attention, and helped it sell worldwide. In combination with endorsements in the form of blogs, straight from the core audience, it gave substance to otherwise empty claims of "something special." Ever since, films have tried to follow a similar strategy, and several blogging sites have grown into centers of gossip, rumor, spoiler alert, and prefigurative chatter. It has made them popular with cult fans seeking information (especially the sites giving away details and spoilers, and in particular those of films with twisted narratives or special moments), but it has also created suspicion in the eyes of the "real cultists" – a common practice in subcultures eager for distinction. Ambiguity over the origin of stories of rumors and scandals can certainly help films achieve cult reputations, but the suspicion that marketing efforts are involved frequently clashes with cultists' preference for genuineness.

A final characteristic of marketing films received as cults involves niche promotion. Because of their extended reception trajectories, the marketplace of cult films contains a mix of new and old materials, and hot and cool reputations – the former referring to what is momentarily in the spotlight, and the latter to those products that are kept in circulation to meet demands of repeated consumption, either reruns, ongoing sales of DVD and video, or even reworked versions of old materials. Excellent examples are the many different cut versions of *Blade Runner*, the numerous edits of video nasties, and the different edits of the *Lord of the Rings* films. In such a chaotic environment it is essential to market a film to the right target audience, without wasting too much effort on the "wrong" constituency. As Matthew Ragas argues in *The Power of Cult Branding*, this means concentrating on the already established niche following:

> Using mass marketing to convert "pagans" is rarely where your company will find its true brand evangelists. The trick is, you have to preach to the choir. That's right. Focus your efforts on satisfying the happy customers in the "congregation" you already have! These are customers who already listen to your marketing messages, already know your product, already know your brand, and already feel real excitement for your company's product. Preach to them. Make them feel loved and accepted. (Ragas 2002: 61)

In other words, a film that wants to be cult needs to look for cultists. This strategy works best for homogeneous niches. It worked extremely well for the post-initial reception marketing of *The Blair Witch Project*. Well-directed messages to the known fan community of the genre were able to mobilize them and have them discuss the film to the point where fan excitement was noticed by other parts of the marketplace, whose

curiosity then led to wider exposure and profit (Telotte 2001). *Paranormal Activity* too cleverly mobilized fans of the horror genre, and even rewarded them by issuing paybacks: it included audience reactions of a preview in a trailer, and it offered fans the option to put their names on the credits of the DVD. These paybacks were in turn used in further marketing efforts. In much the same way, cult "bibles" such as the *Psychotronic Movieguide*, *Video Watchdog*, *Mondo Macabro*, or *Canuxploitation* have veered from the banal to the outlandish in putting cultists on their way to new discoveries, or, as marketers prefer, purchases. Recent years have seen a steep increase in efforts to reach out to niches, and this has had repercussions on how the term "cult" has been understood as a meta-concept (see Chapter 22).

This increase has solicited the reaction that the situation whereby many products supposedly designed to escape classical market mechanisms (such as films belonging to "underground" or "indie" categories) but still operating *within* that market, demonstrate the ultimate failure of cult cinema to exist outside the market place. It is a comment powerfully voiced by Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter (2004) in their discussion of the dual cult and mainstream success of films such as *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*. In a sense, it is an extension of an argument started earlier, by authors such as Thomas Frank (1997), who claimed the separation between "hot" commercial markets and "cool" underground/indie products was essentially an artificial one, and that cult, like "hipness," is one of several categories that enables films to carve out a spot in the marketplace.

Exhibition Culture

Exhibition is one area in which the identity of cult cinema is undisputed. It is in the interaction between screen and audience that cults become solidified. The most significant exhibition contexts for cult cinema are midnight movies, film festivals, fan culture, underground and avant-garde exhibition, home viewing (DVD and late night television), and the black market. Because of its paradigmatic importance for the study of cult cinema, we have discussed the exhibition context of midnight movies, and the importance of the phenomenal experience in Chapter 1. Film festivals are discussed separately in Chapter 3. Fan culture has intimate connections to contexts of auteurship and stardom, and will also be discussed separately, in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. We will devote specific attention to examples of exploitation cinema in Chapter 13, and underground and avant-garde exhibition in Chapter 14. Here, we will give an overview of the more general ways in which the exhibition of cult cinema has been organized.

The exhibition culture of cult cinema is twofold. On the one hand it refers to the screening of films outside mainstream venues, for niche audiences whose routines and practices of viewing are markedly different from "normal" audiences. On the other hand it refers to the unexpectedly different viewing attitudes that some films in regular exhibition contexts encounter. Since its earliest mentions this twofold is manifestly present. Harry Allen Potamkin (2008 [1932]) is among the early critics singling out the "special" behavior of cult audiences. Eric Schaefer (1999) and Jamie Sexton (2008a) on the other hand, give thorough overviews of how certain exhibition contexts helped determine not just the films that were available for audiences to view, but also narrowed down the kinds of reactions possible: the very fact a film was screened in, say, the Broadway cinema in Nottingham, equipped it with a certain audience that would see the film in specific ways, different from a multiplex viewing or television broadcast (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings 2003). Those ways differ from one locale to another, but some general tendencies do exist.

The pattern most commonly associated with cult cinema exhibition is borrowed from art-house exhibition. It relies heavily on a loyal audience that is heavily invested in film taste. Though such audiences will not always honor the "right" appreciations, and will display idiosyncratic local preferences (that vary from theater to theater), they are nevertheless prepared to attend screenings frequently (and even repeatedly). In a sense, their patronage is not dissimilar to that of theatre audiences including as it does such techniques as "seat reservations," "fixed seats" and "season tickets" – though these are often informally arranged. Barbara Wilinsky (2001: 6) refers to art house exhibition culture as one of "sure seaters," a term that amplifies the degree of loyalty of custom. Stressing the link with theater she quotes "It's like the Broadway theater.

They go on time. They like a small place that has no popcorn and no kids" (also see Smythe, Lusk, and Lewis 1953; Chamberlin 1960). Of particular interest is the research by Bruce Austin 1891a, 1981b, 1983, 1984), into both art house and cult film audiences. Above all, Austin notes the similarity in strategies these audiences use to decide on their choice of film.

Among the preferred exhibition techniques for cult cinema are staggered releases, double-billing, and re-runs. This pattern characterizes exhibition contexts from the late 1940s to the mid 1980s. It is the period that follows the Paramount decision, which saw a court rule forcing Hollywood studios to abandon their block booking practices and shed some of their tight control over the exhibition market (Borneman 1977). It opened up opportunities for exploitation, art house, and independent exhibitors to be creative in building an audience for their venues. The period ends in the mid/late 1980s when renewed vertical integration – this time augmented with suburban and city-limit multiplex exhibition, and video and television specialty viewing – replaced one-screen inner-city theaters and their practices of double and triple bills, matinees, and midnight screenings. Commercially, art house and cult cinema venues would be run in such a similar fashion that distinguishing between them from a business point of view makes no sense. What does matter is the difference in viewing strategy.

One thing the analogy with art house exhibition does not capture is the attitude associated with cult film attendance, the atmosphere. In an infamous article, Pauline Kael (1961) fulminated against what she saw as the snobbery and fake disdain displayed by art house patrons. Citing Dwight Macdonald's review of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Kael asked if the references to "a religious service," "hypnotic trances," and "incense-burning" were not a bit too hyperbolic to describe what was, after all, only a movie screening. She got particularly annoyed with the "repetition" of the film's main points, and the insistence that a "ritual mood" was necessary for the right reception of the film (1961: 6). What Kael failed to appreciate was the cult aspect of the screening. It was not so much the film that mattered, but the experience itself, and the images of the film were there to support that experience. The link with cult becomes more visible a little bit further in the article, when Kael takes offense to Kenneth Anger and Lo Duca's books on eroticism, scandal, and cinema, especially to their portrayals of women as lust objects. As we will see in Chapter 10, the performance of such sexist imagery is a key feature in the culture of cult film exhibition.

The main pattern sketched above does not cover all of cult movie exhibition. In fact, it excludes the most wild and radical examples. Numerous other formats have existed, and are still in operation. Most of these include the liveliness absent from Kael's account. Drive-in cinemas, grindhouse theaters, porn venues, college theaters, and even vibrant cinematheques, roadshows, and screenings of films in vaudeville and burlesque settings, complement the art house model. When looked at in general, cult cinema exhibition is art house exhibition with a more lively, visceral attitude. Among the more prominent towns and cities for cult movie exhibition are cosmopolitan cultural centers such as New York, Paris, Chicago, San Francisco, Paris, Los Angeles, London, Brussels, Amsterdam, Turin, or Montreal, and a string of college towns such as Madison, Wisconsin; Ann Arbor, Michigan; or Boston, Massachusetts (see Wilinsky 2001: 6–7). Nottingham's Broadway, mentioned above, fittingly became the site for the first ever Cult Film Conference (Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 20). Increasingly, however, such venues are competing with home viewing. Given the communal and lively aspect of cult receptions, home viewing needs to be seen in the contexts of small groups of viewers sharing a viewing experience in a context that is both lively and requires deep immersion. Examples are sleepover movies, either horror or chick-flicks, binge-viewing (understood as screening multiple films in a row: all the *Lord of the Rings* extended DVDs in one go, all three *Sissi* films, the twelve *Heimat* episodes, etc.), and special occasion viewing (bachelor parties, hen nights, hazing evenings, and so on). In this exhibition context, the formal and physical arrangement of the experience goes beyond technology, and even beyond the private boundaries of the "home," becoming a social, and in many cases semi-public event.

Piracy

A special case of cult exhibition is the black market. Overall, the loyalty of cult viewers virtually guarantees purchase (paying for entrance or products). Yet that

obedience to the market is often balanced by a resistance to having their object of fandom commercially exploited to the point where cult viewers feel they are being "sold" as well as by an attitude of rebellion against corporate commercialization and of an attraction to the thrill and hipness associated with illegal trade. In that sense, the entire black market has a cultist connotation, as it is a sign of its position outside accepted practices of film viewing.

Next to references to other black market activities such as moonlighting (illegal trade in alcohol), smuggling, or music bootlegging, the most often-used metaphor is that of "piracy." This metaphor gives the black market of film a romantic ring, and also links it to qualities historically associated with piracy (and with the myth surrounding pirates of the Golden Age of Piracy), such as anarchism, anti-authoritarianism, lawlessness, grassroots democracy, equality, naïve idealism, a penchant for unrestricted high living and a libertarian resistance against vast and shady corporations or state agencies (Snelders 2005; Leeson 2009). As we have seen in Chapter 1, these are also qualities of self-perception associated with film cultism, and because of this similarity piracy and the black market speak to the imagination of cultists.

Until the 1980s, when home viewing became a notable component of film consumption, the black market was one of freeloading. Scholars such as Eric Schaefer (1999) have made note of illegal copying, trading and exhibition of films, but this often occurred in the margins of accepted practices rather than squarely outside it. Only rarely were such practices criminalized or prosecuted. Audience freeloading existed mostly in the form of trying to sneak into screenings without having to pay, or in attempting to watch films outside one's age bracket (with sneaking into adult screenings an activity associated with rituals of initiation). The only research on this form of freeloading is anecdotal, but if the numerous admissions by critics of cult cinema of having attended screenings illegally is anything to go by then it is certainly a practice closely affiliated with the cult experience. Still, it was hardly ever regarded as a threat to the industry. That changed when home viewing technologies became a dominant mode of exhibition. With the move towards portable, cheap and user-friendly technology the counterpart of the legitimate marketplace became that of the under-the-counter exchange or the flea market: an act in a location where value is determined semi-independently of commercial market mechanisms and where clear distinctions between illegality and legality dissolve in a grey area. Among the most noteworthy elements of this form of black market were the trade in uncut VHS copies of video nasties such as *Last House on the Left* or *House on the Edge of the Park* (Egan 2007), and the trade in pornography (with the hardcore films of Radley Metzger or Traci Lords much sought after objects).

While this flea market model seems harmless, and is seldom prosecuted, it is far less tolerated by the regular industry. In fact, the industry's attitude changed so much that by the beginning of the twenty-first century the discourse of the flea market as one of small-scale entrepreneurs or modern-day Robin Hoods who made films (and thus culture) available to the public against the prohibitions of corporations or authorities was met by a competing discourse that regarded such activities as downright criminal, and even terrorist. Numerous critics have described this reaction as over-the-top, and argue that it has given piracy and the black market an unprecedented vitality and a political significance. Ever since large corporations started high-profile campaigns to push stringent copyright legislation and criminalize the hacking, downloading, copying, and sharing of marketable materials, piracy has become associated with a principle that sees the free and unregulated sharing and distributing of culture as an inalienable right of the public. This situation has reinforced the cultist edge of piracy, and it has made copy-culture an instrument in the struggle over the ownership of culture. Through anti-copyright organizations such as The Pirate Bay and concepts as the Darknet Theory (which holds that the internet's ability for peer-to-peer sharing renders copyright obsolete) copy-culture has intensified connections with the cultist overtones of cultural opposition that piracy already had.

Most instances of copy-culture concern popular and mainstream films, such as blockbusters. While such films are far from regularly seen as cult, the very activity of illegally accessing them *cultifies* their reception. Only in a few instances does this cultification move into a permanent mode of film cultism. The aforementioned video nasties are a good example, as are suppressed films such as Nicholas Ray's *We Can't Go Home Again*,



Figure 2.1 *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* owes much of its cult status to peer-to-peer sharing and bootlegging.

or Elias Merhige's *Begotten*. Often, these films are not explicitly banned but after their initial releases they have been so difficult to get hold of that a vibrant bootleg trade has replaced their legal circulation. Much of their status is subsequently derived from their place in semi-illegality. Their cult is a copy-cult. Among the most legendary exemplars of a copy-cult is *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (Figure 2.1). The film tells the story of singer Karen Carpenter of The Carpenters through the use of Barbie dolls. Neither the rights holders of the Carpenters nor the Barbie brand had given permission to have their materials used. Consequently, the film was withheld because of a copyright infringement suit filed (and won) by Richard Carpenter. Nevertheless, it was eagerly copied and shared, and it even appeared on university courses. As Glyn Davis (2008) observes, this slumbering presence has made *Superstar* a symbol for an anti-corporate low-fi sensibility.

Conclusion

The place of cult in the marketplace remains problematic. Production costs are usually low, labor can be found cheaply, and funding is of a volatile nature, with much improvisation, and benefits from unexpected partnerships. There is room for maneuvering as well. The marketplace for cult cinema is the ideal terrain for individuals and companies with a less top-heavy administration than the big studios, and an aversion of overhead costs. It is also a market where shady entrepreneurs meet organizations with high-principled aesthetic and political aims. Spreading efforts towards exposure across a number of media platforms, with consumption of and access to those platforms ever extending across time, can deliver sustained profits over a longer period of time than mainstream cinema. On the other hand, cult cinema is too unpredictable to fit the contingencies of any business plan – too dependent on erratic and impulsive receptions. Volatile partnerships break down easily, and adventures can come to a disastrous end, leaving projects without a completed product, without distribution or exhibition, effectively prohibiting profit. Even without these dangers there is a real risk that profits will be less direct, and more difficult to guard – it is far from certain they will end up with the same person or company who initially invested in the project.

3

Prestige, Awards, and Festivals

Like most other films, cult cinema receptions inhabit a network of cultural valuation and distinction. This network is at its most effective immediately after a film's release, when opinions and evaluations can be made freshly. Unlike most other films, however, cult movies have an antagonistic relationship with this part of official culture. They belong to what Jonathan Rosenbaum (1998: 48) has described as an "esoteric network" that "commerce deems irrelevant ... and that most mainstream reviewers prefer to ignore as a consequence." This alternative network of valuation exists parallel to – and occasionally *within* –circuits of institutionalized awards, prizes, and criticism. It also stretches over extended periods of time – concurrent with cult films' long runs. Chapter 4 will discuss censorship and connoisseurship as elements of cult cinema's relationship to this network. This chapter deals with cult cinema's relation towards event-based valuation. We will first detail how cult cinema receptions are affected by a cultural economy of prestige. Next, we will outline how cult receptions fare at one of the platforms of most significance in this prestige circuit, that of the film festival.

Awards and Prizes

Cult films largely stand outside what James English (2005) has called "the economy of prestige": the framework of valuation through award, ceremonies, and prizes. According to English, the last few decades of the twentieth century have seen a veritable frenzy in the establishment of prizes that designate cultural esteem. There are now, he observes, "more film prizes awarded each year than there are feature films produced" (2005: 324). This has led to a rhetoric in which nothing appears to matter more than just winning: "it is almost as though winning a prize is the only truly newsworthy thing a cultural worker can do, the only thing that really counts in a lifetime of more or less nonassessable, indescribable or at least unreportable cultural accomplishments" (2005: 21). According to English, this has simultaneously given rise to a counter-rhetoric in which wining an award is seen as somewhat dubious. He quotes Woody Allen from *Annie Hall*: "Awards! That's all they do, is give out awards, I can't believe it. 'Greatest Fascist Dictator: Adolf Hitler!'" (2005: 18). At the same time as this counter-discourse develops, however, English observes how the attention to awards and prizes has set in motion a fascination with quantifiable means of measuring cultural value that perpetuates itself, leaving little or no room for anything else: "[prizes] continue to serve as the most bankable, fungible assets in the cultural economy" (2005: 22).

Cult cinema has a peculiar role within this tensed situation. Because it occupies a marginal position within the market of official culture, it mostly falls outside the economy of prestige. In this sense, cult film receptions act as the opt-out of the desire to quantify culture. It is a position that confirms the marginal status of cult cinema and exemplifies the pride its audiences take in standing in opposition to official culture. However, in recent decades there has been a proliferation of cult cinema that has seen it partly being co-opted by official culture. Therefore its position

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these days no longer lies uniquely outside the economy of prestige, but partly inside it.

Cult films win few prizes, but if they do they are often mock prizes or prizes that fall within the aforementioned alternative "esoteric network" and are awarded through affective appreciations and niche recognitions more than widely publicized laudations. We will explore the latter as part of the network of festivals later in this chapter. Mock prizes are essentially awards created to ridicule the enterprise of issuing prizes in giving them to films that are generally seen as undeserving of awards or by inventing categories that are not sanctioned with cultural value. Historically, mock prizes began to achieve attention as a counter-cultural and ironic form of discourse in the late 1970s, around the same time that film festivals were garnering momentum as sites of celebrations for films which would otherwise not find distribution in the ever shrinking theatrical market. The result was a wave of attention for bad cinema, and a cultism of "badness," steeped in irony. Two books, *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time* (Medved, Medved, and Dreyfuss 1978) and *The Golden Turkey Awards* (Medved and Medved 1980), are usually credited for instigating mock prizes. J. Hoberman (1980) lists three reasons to celebrate bad movies: the change of taste (what was once bad is now good), a pedagogical value (to learn from others' mistakes), and the fact that movies "have a life of their own." All three culminate in what Hoberman terms the "objectively bad movie," films "so incoherent they unmake themselves" (1980: 518). Through this classifier Hoberman separates surrealist, delirious films, from films *maudits* and truly bad films, of which he sees Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* as the top. An important impetus to the celebration of badness came from satirical columnist Joe Bob Briggs, who set up the Hubcap Awards (the "Hubbys") in the early 1980s. These "so-called 'Drive-In Academy Awards' were presented at horror conventions or on college campuses and featured prizes for 'Best Slimeball', 'Best Kung-Fu', and 'Best Mindless Sex Comedy'" (English 2005: 93). As the mock celebration of badness became more prolific, however, it acquired and demanded esteem in its own right. English notes that the tone of the Hubbys Awards made it difficult to asses whether cultural hierarchies were being inversed, if the value of mindless pleasure was being asserted, or if the very capacity of movies to rise to the level of art was being mocked:

> with the Hubbys we can't be sure whether a serious honor is being bestowed on a marginal cultural product judged superior of its kind (an especially entertaining drive-in movie), or whether a mock honor, amounting to a form of dishonor, is being bestowed on a mainstream cultural product judged inferior of its kind (an especially trivial and squalid film) or whether the mockery inherent in the award is ultimately directed at particular styles of consumption (low-cultural or bourgeois). (English 2005: 94)

English maintains it is the second possibility of these three that lies at the core of mock awards. He remarks that there is a "tendency for instruments of consecration," which is how he sees awards in culture, "to take increasingly parodic and self-parodic forms without ceasing to function effectively as economic instruments in either the symbolic or the material sense" (2005: 97). This may well be true for the Hubbys. It certainly is for another award for bad cinema, the Raspberry Awards (the "Razzies"), which were instigated in 1981. The Razzies are clearly an example of English's second option.[1]

But when the mock celebration of badness takes on cult status, as it increasingly did since the beginning of the 1980s, it ceases to be mere mockery. It clashes, for instance, with the seriousness of genre-specific awards, such as the Saturn awards for fantasy, horror and science fiction, or the *Fangoria* awards for horror, named after the fan magazine, which also received cult status. *Fangoria*'s Hall of Fame, in particular, is hotly contested. One example English mentions, the AVN Adult Entertainment Awards, is perhaps a good test case. For English, its mimicking of the Oscars is part of its parodying of awards. But David Foster Wallace, covering the awards ceremonies, remarked that its protocols and procedures exude a desire to be taken seriously – only in the eye of official culture is it ridiculous, not on its own terms (Wallace 2006: 3–50). One symptomatic example of this is the fact that David Cronenberg's *Crash* won the award for "Best Alternative Adult Feature" at the AVN awards. Awarding it a prize was AVN's plea to be considered as authentic, not as (only) parody. Furthermore, even those awards



Figure 3.1 Halle Berry holds her Razzie award for Worst Actress of 2004 in one hand and her Oscar award in the other at the 25th Annual Razzie Awards, a spoof of the Oscars, on February 26, 2005, in Los Angeles. Berry won for *Catwoman* (UPI Photo/Barbara Wilson/Golden Raspberry Award Foundation).

that are merely meant to mock achievements, such as the Razzie, have had to revise their perspective since directors such as Paul Verhoeven (who won for *Showgirls*) and actresses such as Halle Berry (who won for *Catwoman*) appeared in person at the ceremony, and held acceptance speeches (Figure 3.1).

In other words, simultaneously with the rise of cult cinema as a perspective not uniquely outside, but part of the economy of prestige, mock awards have evolved to become equipped with a degree of authenticity and seriousness (the first option mentioned in English's quote). In that respect it is worth noting that there exists, since 2007, an Award for Lifetime Achievement in Cult Cinema, issued by the festival/conference Cine Excess. Recipients include Roger Corman, Dario Argento and Joe Dante. It is also worth noting that Corman was awarded a Lifetime Achievement by the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences two years after receiving the Cine Excess award; a further sign of the increased convergence of cult and culture.

In that regard the third option listed by English (that of the mock award as a critique of a mode of consumption) should perhaps no longer be seen as merely a critique but as a celebration as well. Mock prizes are exemplified by an expository desire to unveil some of the worst films ever, partly in order to ridicule them, and partly to demonstrate the entertainment value of sheer badness, and to celebrate this badness as a mode of reception. This so-bad-they're-good reason to champion bad films asserts that watching these films as valueless trash offers a form of phenomenal experience that is transgressive: it lifts the viewer out of the dreary normalness of everyday life and as such it operates in the same way religious cultism tries to accomplish epiphanies. With Maffesoli (1996a: 43) one could argue that celebrating badness alters everyday life as it elevates ordinariness and banality to a level where it can be actively enjoyed.

This mode has had some significant repercussions on the long-term receptions of several films, helping them achieve and sustain cult reputations. For the film the Medveds put forward as worst ever, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, it meant the start of a second career. The film was picked up by several festivals, and became the showcase piece of numerous "nights of bad taste" that were being organized from the beginning of the 1980s onwards. Next to Ed Wood's films, *Manos, the Hands of Fate* and *Robot Monster* are among the most perpetually recognized bad films ever. Most of the films at the top of the canon of badness are American, an indication perhaps of that culture's perceived obsession with rankings of cultural achievements. Among the most noteworthy non-American films are the Italian horror film *Troll 2* and the Bollywood film *Aag* (aka *Flames*). The former is not a sequel to *Troll*, and does not even feature trolls (but it does have former *Black Emanuelle* Laura Gemser as costume designer); the latter is a failed remake of Bollywood cult classic *Sholay*.

Since the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the celebration of badness has been exploding. Numerous books celebrating the worst movies ever have been added to mock awards, and in some cases even replaced them, as an increasing number of films are showcased for their badness. One of the most consistent candidates on such lists, *The Room*, has been regarded as straddling the line between incompetence and clever exploitation of badness. Because of its integrity it is labeled a post-camp cult film, a label that obliterates lines of reasoning along which it could be understood (Bissell 2010; Adams 2010: 298–300). Such contradictions continue to affect the receptions of bad movies. In 2010, *Battlefield Earth*, a multiple Razzie winner, and a film often cited as one of the worst in spite (or because) of it being based on source material by the founder of the Church of Scientology

L. Ron Hubbard, exemplified the thin line between real scorn and ironic celebrations of badness when one of its screenwriters, J.D. Shapiro, issued a public apology to moviegoers for his involvement in what had just been declared the worst movie of the decade.

Festivals and Valuation

Film festivals form one of the most important platforms on which processes of cultural valuation take place. For English (2005: 283), festivals are about the localizing of cultural value – literally placing it in a geographical or symbolic context and assessing value on the basis of this localization. The forces that determine this process consist of colleges of influence that include juries, programmers, boards, subscribers, sponsors, policy-makers, charities, audiences, guests, fans, and local businesses. Historically, films that developed cult receptions have not done well in such contexts. That is because most of these films exist outside – even in opposition to – normalized routines and protocols of cultural valuation. As we have argued in Chapters 1 and 2, its values are less tangibly and mostly only indirectly felt within culture at large – that is why their circuit has been called an alternative "esoteric" network. Occasionally, however, there have been overlaps, moments when films with burgeoning or nascent cult receptions appeared at regular film festivals, and caused commotions, scandals and outrage. Such upheaval mostly involved the film's ability to upset and expose the otherwise neatly hidden processes of valuation. Over the years, as the legitimacy of cult cinema has increased, such commotions have been fewer and fewer. Below, we will detail examples from Cannes to illustrate this development.

Another, parallel, historical evolution that helped to accept cult cinema's valuation at festivals has been the establishment of festivals for cults – events designed to celebrate and evaluate the kinds of films normal festivals would eschew. As their popularity grew, and they gained cultural visibility and recognition, so did the invisible colleges through which the processes of valuation took place. In other words, with the rise of niche festivals, the esoteric network became less esoteric and more respected – at least as part of a niche that earned its place in the cultural landscape. In this section we will first discuss the cultist aspects of film festivals in general, and next explore festivals that have played prominent roles in constituting and sustaining cult reputations for films.

The connection between festivals and cults goes back to Greek antiquity (see Chapter 12). With regard to film, this connection has been reinforced enough times to assume many critics see a sort of causal connection. Andrew Sarris famously cemented the link by quoting André Bazin: "No less a cultist than the late André Bazin had once likened film festivals to religious festivals" (Sarris 1970: 13). Actually, Bazin's article compared film festivals to religious orders, but there is a close link with cultism, especially in the observation of closely guarded rituals (Bazin 2009 [1955]). As Bazin's account demonstrates, to see festivals as a cultist experience is to rely on a sense of occasion of the event itself, where orotund rituals of presence and presentation such as "red carpet" walking are of equal importance to the appreciation of the actual films. Many festivals remain vague over the criteria of admission and valuation. This elusiveness has benefited the creation of myths, scandals, haphazard decisions, and rituals such as booing, hissing, and cheering (even ironically), as a result of which films implicated in such actions have acquired "legends" that have – in turn – facilitated their own cult status. In terms of the marketplace, the analogy is with the bazaar: crowded, bustling and unwieldy to the uninitiated eye but firmly structured to the insider. As mentioned, location matters greatly to these festivals. Cannes, at the French Riviera, Venice, and Locarno, are all known for their beautiful and awe-inspiring locations. Similarly, the festival of Sitges, near Barcelona, offers a large selection of horror and fantasy materials and draws a significant part of its appeal from its location and its proud self-presentation as Catalonian. More than inviting a parallel with the origin of the term cult, festivals' locations prepare audiences and attendants for a cultist-like appreciation (Harbord 2002; Koehler 2009).

The best-known festival that is a veritable cult in itself is the one highlighted in Bazin's account: Cannes. Sarris once divided the Cannes festival audiences into two categories: the moles and the moths: "the moles arrive, sniff suspiciously at the sunlight, and then plunge as soon as possible into the darkness.". The

moths "are noted for fluttering about the gemlike flames, emitted by the stars. For the moth, Cannes is an around-the-clock adventure of seaside lunches, cocktail parties, and gala dinners, all preferably free" (quoted in Beauchamp and Béhar, 1992: 24). Cannes merges the cult of stardom with that of classical auteurism, and mixes the elegance of glamour with the decadence of the bacchanal. It lays claim to grandeur, be it in the promiscuity and illicitness of the starlet appearance at the Croisette (from Simone Sylva to Pia Zadora), the sculpted majesty of the maggiorata, with Sophia Loren as its ultimate symbol, or in the presence of great, archaic auteurs – which helped to establish the cults of Alfred Hitchcock and Luis Buñuel (Sarris 1970: 53). The exhilaration, the "rush of excitement," the suggestion of easy sex, and the tireless disputes between novices and veterans that cult cinema is known for are constants in the discourse of Cannes (Beauchamp and Béhar, 1992). Much of the cult of Cannes is encapsulated in the 1960 debate over *La Dolce Vita*, champion of an edition presided over by jurors Henry Miller and Georges Simenon that was described as "the most scandalous ever" (Grenier 1960: 15). The question whether Fellini's film was a milestone in art, a celebration of moral decadence, or a cheap exploitation of women, "a satire of the female", as Pauline Kael called it (1961: 6), highlighted a debate over taste that would inform cult cinema and film festivals ever since (French and French 1999: 75–76). *La Dolce Vita* also bared the aforementioned invisible colleges and their criteria, even adding to the critical vocabulary by introducing the term "paparazzi."

Let us briefly explore two examples of Cannes film receptions that demonstrate how the esoteric networks operating in the valuation of cult clash with those of normalized cultural valuation. In each of the situations the films received part of their cult status as a result of how they exposed some of the routines and protocols of the invisible colleges at Cannes. In 1992, the low-budget Belgian black and white mockumentary *Man Bites Dog* won the International Critics competition at Cannes, amid controversy and to the astonishment of commentators who felt that the film's depiction of gratuitous violence and its status as a collaborative debut film (with overtones of being a send-up of filmmaking in general) from a small film nation did not warrant such an award (Lafond 2004; Mathijs 2005a). Several stories accompanied this controversy. One story tells of then unknown director Quentin Tarantino (who had his debut *Reservoir Dogs* to represent at the same edition of Cannes) fist fighting his way into the screening at Cannes; another story details the censoring of the original movie poster (which shows the main character killing a baby – something that is never alluded to in the actual film). The result of these two stories was that Cannes 1992 became known as the origin of the debate about a new wave of violent cinema, later known as new brutalism or "nouvelle violence." All of these stories created a situation that challenged the procedures through which films would normally be channeled at the festival, exposing part of their arbitrariness. As the involvement of *Man Bites Dog* as part of the "nouvelle violence" wave of film of the early 1990s spread, the functions of Cannes' award administration and cultural valuation became more fiercely interrogated. The combination of "violence," "Tarantino," "child killing," "mockery," and a self-reflexive critique of the media were enough to provide the reception of *Man Bites Dog* with a cult potential – mirrored in its subsequent receptions. As it turned out, *Man Bites Dog* would remain caught up in the "new brutalism" group of films said to exemplify a loss of morality in cinema. In fact, it became one of its exemplars (Hill 1997).

Another memorable example of the clash between the esoteric network that is the valuation of cult receptions and the "normal" processes operating at festivals is the reception of David Cronenberg's *Crash*, which was entered in the general competition in 1996. It was both booed and applauded at its screening, and it created a sharp division between audiences and commentators. This division articulated itself in the award it was accorded: under the presidency of Francis Ford Coppola, *Crash* was given the newly invented prize for "audacity." It was the only time such an award was ever given, and a clear sign of how the film's fast developing reputation along esoteric networks of appreciation was impacting on the procedures of valuation the festival felt it had to honor. Two of the key terms in this esoteric network were "cool" and "depravity." "Cool" referred to the film's ability to use detachment as a stylistic tool, and was used by both the film's opponents and its defenders. "Depravity" was a term uniquely

employed by its opponents, who felt the film – much like *Man Bites Dog* a few years before – crossed boundaries of moral decency (Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath, 2001; Mathijs 2008: 187–194).

Niche Cults and Festivals

One kind of film festival we want to highlight is the one where niche cults rule – where the interrogations of and confrontations with processes of valuation are built into the fabric of the festival. In that respect, we are no longer talking about cult receptions at festivals but about self-sustaining cult events. This is not to say these festivals are therefore cut off from the regular circuit altogether. While wary of interference with their devotion to certain films, such festivals remain curious for new experiences, ready to embrace them into their midst and appropriate them as "one of us."

Among the earliest such examples is a festival that was explicitly set up to champion films excluded from the regular festival circuit: the experimental festival of Knokke-Le-Zoute, in particular the editions in the 1960s. According to Parker Tyler, (1969: 165) this festival was one of several that gave expression to the "neuroticism of modern life with its new and unusually morbid accent on youth." The festival, started in 1949, and located at the casino of the affluent Belgian seaside resort of Knokke (a location similar to Cannes), focused on presenting underground and experimental films – of the kind that were also being shown on the burgeoning midnight movie circuit in New York – to critics in Europe. The festival received notoriety in 1963, when it first selected and then rejected *Flaming Creatures*, a film that had already caused upheaval in New York. Under the auspices of members of the jury, including Jonas Mekas, an improvised New Year's Eve screening of *Flaming Creatures* took place. It was interrupted by scuffles, discussions, and riots (see Broughton 1964; Garcia Bardon 2002). After the controversy was widely reported in European newspapers, the film eventually received a special *film maudit* prize (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 59). As Gerda Cammaer (2005) argues, the festival of Knokke was, at the time of this controversy, a "try-out festival, an event that was still searching for its true calling and shape." This in itself means it did not have the set protocols of the regular festival circuit. That allowed for the pushing of alternative agendas. Cammaer (2005) also notes how the *Flaming Creatures* controversy actually became "an ambassador for the festival".

The best contemporary examples of niche cults and cult festivals are horror, fantasy and science fiction genre festivals that have inherited, or sometimes grown out of, the midnight movie phenomenon. Many of these developed firm cult reputations more because of the kinds of audiences they catered to than what they screened. The festivals of Sitges, Avoriaz (now defunct and replaced by that of Gérardmer), Brussels' International Festival of Fantastic Film, Fantafest in Rome, and Fantasporto in Portugal, which all started before the mid 1980s, became crucial for the development of science fiction and horror cult fandom in Europe. The attitude of these festivals towards taste and indicators of quality is at its least problematic here: their programmers and audiences share an agenda, and they demand more of the same – more blood, more gore, more full moons, more sorcery, more time travel, and more vampires. Yet, in much the same way genre cinema never only relies on repetition and recognition but also on variation and innovation, these festivals regularly relish films that stretch the confines of the genres they cherish. As long as the framework within which these new experiences are presented is the trusted environment of the festival and the peer viewers they have known for years, they are in for the ride. This creates opportunities for a delicate balance between tradition and novelty.

This commitment is proof of the strong alignment between viewer and programmer, as part of the same cultist alliance. Visitors to these festivals are seldom only visitors, but rather fellow believers. They are closely involved with the festivals' selections and organization, and are extremely vocal in offering their opinions. As virtual co-owners they can stage boycotts or disrupt ceremonies, or lift the entire experience to a higher level of excitement and appreciation. Instead of snubbing minor stars they champion them as groundbreaking artists (an attitude that many guests have difficulty responding to; see Hills 2010b: 95). They act reflexively, very aware of their active role in the festival, and they are not afraid to exercise their power – not only verbally but also in terms of their subscription to future editions (the fact many of these festivals

actually have subscriptions makes the audience a patron in the classical sense). While several such festivals exist in North America, such as Fantasia in Montreal, Fantastic Film Fest in Austin, Texas, and elsewhere in the world (such as the Puchon International Film Festival in Korea), the emphasis of this phenomenon lies in Western Europe.

The most noteworthy network here is the European Fantastic Film Festivals Federation (EFFFF), also known as the Méliès network (www.melies.org). Unlike the loose esoteric networks described above, it is a close collaboration between Europe's major genre festivals. Over the last few decades, this network has represented 8 to 15 niche festivals across Europe, with sustained presence in Belgium (BIFFF), Finland (Espoo Cine), Italy (Fantafest), the Netherlands (Amsterdam, AIFF), Portugal (Fantasporto), Spain (Sitges), Sweden (Lund, LIFFF), and Switzerland (Neuchatel, NIFFF). The network has its own council, board and rotating presidency. Annually, the network offers one top award, the Méliès d'Or, to one of the films that were crowned in each of the individual festivals (a sort of season playoffs alternately hosted at one of the participating festivals). Through its network Méliès reaches 600,000 genre fans in Europe, making it the biggest fan-based cult-network on the continent. It furthermore facilitates a global network of adherent members in North America, Asia, and the United Kingdom. The festivals in the Méliès network also take on the role that, in North America and East Asia, fan conventions play. They are catalysts for genre fandom. In terms of scope and appeal they are on a par with conventions such as the World Science-Fiction Convention, Comicon, Otakon, or Fangoria's Weekend of Horror. But they are decidedly less corporatized and more adventurous in their programs.

Location plays a role here too. More even, the choice of theater and the urban quarters it is part of can be seen as crucial for the constellation of the cultist audience. According to Hills (2010b: 98):

> there is a fit here between a venue with an established subcultural reputation, and the materials of the festival. Just as "midnight screenings" or "late-nighters" serve to distinguish cult and horror film screenings from a cinema-going "mainstream", so too does the screening of films . . . at specific, independent cult/subcultural venues.

Hills isolates several other components that set up these niche festivals as cultist. They allow for an unusual closeness between fans and producers. They also require the performance of subcultural capital in order to overcome the threshold (a jargon, access to certain venues, insider knowledge in order to feel welcome, and so on) that equals prestige and status, and the attending of premieres, and previews. Q&A sessions, panel discussions, collectors' markets, autograph sessions, and costume parties can easily be added to this list. It is equally important, again according to Hills, that the industry that is the subject of celebration at these festivals (the actual horror productions, the sci-fi films, the fantasy games, etc.), acknowledges the labor fans and festivals audiences put into their celebration and, hence, into the establishment of a long-term reception. More and more DVD releases of cult movies include secondary materials that testify to horror, fantasy and science fiction films' success and cult appeal at festivals. The DVD collectors' editions of *Ginger Snaps* and *Evil Dead* are two examples that do so explicitly.

We want to conclude this discussion of niche cults and festivals with a short case study of the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film (BIFFF). It is an exemplary instance of cultism, in terms of its pedigree, franchise and networking, programming, and audience activity. The BIFFF started in 1983 (Figure 3.2), and it is a founding member of the Méliès network. It has a predecessor in Antwerp's festival of Fantastic Film that ran from 1974 to 1977. That festival had *The Wicker Man* as its first ever screening. *Rocky Horror Picture Show* director Jim Sharman and the director of *Blue Sunshine*, Jeff Lieberman, were among its prominent guests (Magiels 2004: 161). The last edition took place in Cinema Monty, known for its midnight movie screenings of *Eraserhead* (Apers 2004: 143–144). This midnight movie heritage remains reflected in some elements of the BIFFF programming. BIFFF quickly attracted attention because of its cultist programming. It introduced Dario Argento, Luc Besson, and David Cronenberg to Belgian audiences. Cronenberg visited in 1984 and brought all of his films, including the then unreleased *Videodrome*, which became a small-scale cult among Belgian film critics (De Kock 1983; Danvers 1984). It became the start of a template that regularly saw new auteurs



Figure 3.2 The Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film, a festival with a communal atmosphere that mixes art and exploitation. Clockwise from top left, the posters for 1983, 2010, 2005, and 1993 © BIFFF/Buzzelli, BIFFF/Sokal, BIFFF/Michetz, and BIFFF/Mauricet.

singled out for celebrations. Unique among festivals, the programming was done communally, by a team of eight full-time programmers. BIFFF's core audience quickly became heavily invested in the festival via annual subscriptions. Today, that audience is largely in its twenties to forties, university or college educated, and it has a 66/33% male/female ratio (previously that was 75/25%). The first editions drew about 30 000 viewers. Currently that number is up to 65 000, spread over two weeks. About 90 films are screened, many of them in European or world premiere. The BIFFF carved a name for itself internationally when it started

programming outside the circle of American horror. It screened Shinya Tsukamoto's, Guillermo Del Toro's, and Alex de la Iglesia's films well before they were known widely, and it unceremoniously programmed unusual materials such as Kim Ki-Duk's *The Isle* and Vincenzo Natali's *Nothing* amid traditional fare thus stirring up debates. In 1999 the BIFFF was among the first to present Europe with the new wave of Japanese horror, and in 2002 it showed an uncut version of *Ichi the Killer* to non-suspecting audiences. Also since the end of the 1990s, and following a trend of cult nostalgia, the BIFFF has organized a parallel stream of screenings called "the Seventh Reel," in which camp science fiction is screened alongside notorious horror cult material (Lucio Fulci, Jean Rollin, or Jess Franco) – at midnight of course (Van Laer 2004).

Of particular significance to the cultist feel of the festival are some of its locations. For the first 25 years of its existence the main venue was a gigantic, gothic cinema theater, the Auditorium in the Passage 44, adorned with long curtains and creepy statues. An additional venue had the design of a small, concrete bunker-like theater. Equally cultist is the highly ritualistic start to every screening: an enthusiastically shouted back-and-forth dialog by the audience that features a loose imitation of the Muppet show's "Piiiiigs in Spaaaaace' tune, various chants such as a rendition of the 20th Century Fox tune, and a loudly declared invitation to murder ("Tuer encore!"). This ritual ceremony separates the novices from the veterans at the start of each screening. When stars or directors introduce their film to the audience it loudly demands not promotion-talk but "une chanson!" (a song!); organizers usually hasten to explain this request to guests as "good natured" and occasionally guests dutifully oblige and actually perform a song (needless to say it makes them immortal) with the crowd. During screenings heckling and shouting are commonplace, as is the cheering of sex and violence on screen. Each full moon that appears on the screen is greeted with howls, each room entered followed by the yell "Close That Door!" It is in these activities that the BIFFF presents itself as a pure blooded cult. As former programmer Dirk Van Extergem describes:

> [Just like] every cult constitutes a community, a group that worships similarly and regularly, and finds strengths in that shared experience, it relies on a set of practices or conventions shared by the devotees. And the demonstrated knowledge of those things (the participatory action such as the shouting being the most evident example) certifies the initiated, binds them in their privileged knowledge to others . . . . (2004: 224).

This communal celebration suggests that the BIFFF is more about its audiences, more about itself perhaps, than about the films. That is also evident in the many side activities, the carnivalesque nature of which proves its cult to be extremely festive. Body-painting contests, parades of "film monsters," and crowd surfing precede screenings. Each press conference is open to the public. Each edition of the BIFFF is closed with a gala "bal des vampires," in which guests and audiences don outrageous costumes inspired by the history of horror, science fiction, fantasy, and cult cinema. The full compliance of attendees with the dress code makes it difficult to distinguish guests from pundits, thereby achieving the abandonment of traditional cultural status often associated with cults.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this chapter we would like to highlight how, in many cases, processes of valuation of cult cinema consist of a mixture of the main instances we have isolated, namely the interrogation of prizes and awards systems, the upsetting of protocols at festival where a nascent cult clashes with existing traditions of valuation, and the celebration of films festivals where a film's cult reception is the confirmation of a largely pre-existing cult sensibility.

A perfect example of this mixture is the festival career of *Ichi the Killer*. The film had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), at 15 September 2001, as part of a midnight screening series called Midnight Madness. But a few days before the screenings the World Trade Center in New York had been destroyed by a terrorist attack. Many flights through North American airspace were still canceled. Miike was trapped in San Francisco. He commented: "I turned on the TV barely half awake. The situation

was worse than I could imagine. This was real people. Real human beings with more stupidity, more violence, more sadness, and more pain than any movie could have" (Macias 2001: 216). In spite of gimmicks such as complementary "barf bags" with Ichi's Superhero logo on it and in the absence of its main guest the TIFF Midnight Madness series did not become a great success; no one was in the mood for exuberant violence.

After TIFF, *Ichi the Killer* was screened at about twenty film festivals before it became widely available on DVD. Most of those festivals were specialty festivals. In order to assess the cultism involved in viewing *Ichi the Killer* at these festivals, it is helpful to contrast two festival appearances: the International Film Festival of Rotterdam (IFFR) and the BIFFF. The IFFR is known for its cinephile audience, a position encapsulated in founder Hubert Bals' assertion that he wants "to find an audience for his films and not films for his audience" (quoted in de Valck 2005: 102). When the IFFR screened *Ichi the Killer*, in February 2002, as part of a series of eclectic films that shared its fascination with sex and violence the reception was positive but also somewhat restrained. Many viewers and critics felt uncomfortable with the film, not knowing where to place it, a confusion that was further heightened by the fact that Miike's other film at the IFFR, the *Sound of Music* parody *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, was nothing like *Ichi the Killer*. In short, there was admiration but not much enjoyment. At the BIFFF in March 2002, where *The Happiness of the Katakuris* again accompanied *Ichi the Killer*, the reaction was the opposite. A packed house welcomed Miike with a thundering roar, and the entire screening was enlivened by screams, cries, chants, loudly voiced wisecracks (mostly of the "ouch, that must hurt" variety), and loud bursts of applause. Each killing and most acts of violence were greeted with hysterical laughter. There was much enjoyment, but far less respect and admiration.

The audience reactions of TIFF, the IFFR and the BIFFF to *Ichi the Killer* can all be regarded as part of the film's overall cult reception, but in different ways, and through different processes of valuations. TIFF is an audience festival, and a market. Its interest is in *Ichi the Killer* as a novelty and as a film that can whip audiences into a state of frenzy. But those valuations were blocked because of the disaster of 9/11 that overshadowed the event. The IFFR is generally recognized as a leading festival for cinephiles, one where the serious valuation of film as art takes precedence over other forms of enjoyment. As such the IFFR's audience reaction is one that highlights the "uniqueness" of *Ichi the Killer* as a film in a class of its own. The fact it astonishes audiences and pulls them out of their comfort zones is what makes it cult. The BIFFF is a niche cult festival whose very reason of existence is owed to the cult of horror. The BIFFF's audience reaction demonstrates that if the framework of the audience itself (its ambiance) is robust enough, a film such as *Ichi the Killer* can function as a catalyst for the community it is unleashed upon, and heighten its already high level of cultism to a degree other films cannot.

This chapter followed a trajectory from the most mainstream events involving valuation, in which cult film receptions were isolated aberrations, over events such as festivals that by accident or design have become known to allow for "cult moments" – instances in which films with cult reputations and receptions (many of them only nascent or potential) exposed otherwise secure protocols and routines of cultural valuation, to niche genre festivals in which cultism is cemented into the fabric of the event. Throughout, the location and cultural place of events (i.e. their status in the wider landscape of public and commercial presences) has been instrumental in allowing or blocking cultist intervention. The next chapter will explore the presence of cult cinema with regard to methods of valuation in the contexts of censorship and criticism.

Note

1. The same could also be said for the pie-in-the-face anarchist mock awards (which were not limited to film). One of its most prominent activists was Belgian filmmaker Remy Belvaux, co-director of *Man Bites Dog*, who participated in the pie-ing of Bill Gates, and who later committed suicide.

4

Censorship and Criticism

This chapter discusses how the actions of two institutions in film classification, censorship and criticism, impact on cult reception contexts. The function of these institutions is to mediate the mechanisms of promotion and event-based valuation (which we explored in Chapters 2 and 3). This stage of intervention in the reception process is where the meaning of the term "cult" is most often seen as pejorative, and where films known as cult suffer a lot of adversity. Yet it is also where some of the consolidation of certain films *as* cults starts. In particular, we will isolate which roles controversy and connoisseurship play in forging cult reputations.

Censorship and Controversy

Censorship encompasses the efforts from regulators with political, legal, or moral authority to ban or withhold films from the public. At its strictest, this process entails the compulsory submission of films to boards of classification mandated by regional or national public services of a territory (such as a state) that result in legally binding rulings which can prevent films from being released in certain formats. In a looser sense it also includes negotiating the recommendations and complaints issued by religious and political pressure groups that operate through self-assigned mandates. Such groups see it as their duty to safeguard the sensitivities of communities from certain forms of harm. Negotiating the activities of pressure groups does not always lead to effective bans of films, but it does regularly lead to controversies, public upheaval over the appropriateness of a film. Pressure groups can often muster a lot of vigilant support, expressed in boycotts or pickets of a film's screenings. Combined with inadequate policies to deal with this, and clumsy communications between policymakers and pressure groups, controversies can impact significantly on the public status of a film.

One look at the canon of cult cinema reveals that censorship and controversies are a constant in its history. From *Häxan*, *Un Chien Andalou*, and *Freaks*, via "deviant youth" films such as *Rebel without a Cause*, and instances of violence in *Enter the Dragon*, to the serial violence and sex eruptions of *Baise-moi* and *Ichi the Killer*, releases have been blocked, prints cut, and screenings picketed. There is, however, an evolution in the kind of roles institutions have played in objecting to films known as cult. Throughout, bans remain scarce, and they are mostly located in the periods that precede the 1960s. With the increases in permissiveness of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the introduction of new platforms for film releases (video, DVD, internet), single-sided regulation was mostly replaced by debates *about* films' appropriateness. This, in turn, has led to an increase in controversies, enhanced by social network technologies that stimulate public discussion. In such a climate of constant negotiation cultism was likely to flourish. It might partly explain why recent decades have seen a steep increase in films laying claim to the label cult.

If we look at the kind of films embroiled in censorship and controversies, the emphasis lies on those

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films containing explicit representations of sex and violence, and those with morally unacceptable imagery. As Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 9) remark, representations of "animal cruelty, misogyny, non-Western ethnicities, small-town mentality, and the Holocaust" are among the depictions that most frequently lead to censorship or controversy. To these categories can be added children and people with physical disabilities. In some of the more extreme cases of such representations, there is a strong connection between a film's cult status and the censorship and controversies it attracted. Realistic "mondo films" such as *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Faces of Death*, rape-revenge films such as *Straw Dogs* and so-called "sick films" à la *Salò*, various Italian horror films (especially those of Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci), and several *Emmanuelle* films (especially the *Black Emanuelle* series), are good examples. Without the opposition they have received their cult status would be far smaller.

The commotion over content is mostly a symptom of the awkward cultural position of these films. It is because cult films are films with fractured yet inoculated reception trajectories that they are ideal candidates for censorship and/or controversy. They come from outside the mainstream channels of distribution, often unaccompanied by canvasing strategies that pave the way for smooth classification processes; they are introduced to the public via niche and fringe festivals or have indeed upset protocols of valuation at mainstream festivals; and they come equipped with attitudes of hyperbole and reflexivity, with limitations in terms of nuance and skill impeding on their chances to be considered "normal." Therefore such films are more likely to be seen as at odds with what a film *should* be. It is exactly with such prescriptive modalities of audience reception that institutions such as censorship commissions operate.

A good example of this is the most infamous case of censorship involving the "video nasties" in the United Kingdom. Acting upon a request to provide video retailers with a list of titles likely to be impounded or seized if stocked (to save them from random raids by local authorities, but also to make retailers aware of their rights and duties), in 1982 the Director of Public Prosecutions published a list of 74 titles of films that had at one point or another had charges pressed against them. These films became known as the video nasties. It took until 1984 before a law came into place that gave the British Board of Film Classification the authority to regulate and censor videos – which led to the prosecution of 39 titles. In the meantime, campaigning groups and the British press had given the video nasties' list a lot of publicity. This created national media hysteria around the issue. In the course of these campaigns many titles not on the list, such as *The Brood* or *Taxi Driver*, were implicated. Such inclusion benefited their cult status. It also demonstrates how indistinguishable – and for the purposes of cult reputations, insignificant – actual and proxy censorship are.

Many of the films associated with the video nasties contain challenging, graphic, and disturbing imagery (Figure 4.1). However, as Martin Barker (1984) and Kate Egan (2007) have demonstrated, more important is that a great deal of the unease of the public lay with the cultural position of these films. Much of the concern over the shocking and spooky images of the video nasties can be understood as the result of the public's unawareness of rapid advancements in, and excessive use of, special effects, especially in the horror genre. The fact that that genre was, at the time, fast becoming a sort of grassroots, working-class cult in its own right, accompanied by particularly visible forms of fandom such as fanzines, heavy metal, and goth fashion, and various forms of merchandise and fan-art, made the concern only bigger – in the eyes of the mass media it looked as if the video nasties were the symptom of a subversive movement (see Chapter 18 for more on cult horror cinema). Moreover, there was the rapid and unwieldy expansion of the video industry, which took publics and lawmakers by surprise. There was also insecurity about labor relations in the ever-changing media industries, an anxiety that was regularly combined with worries over health and safety regulations. And there was a distinct unfamiliarity with the aggressive marketing techniques of new distribution companies such as Vipco (distributor of *Driller Killer*), Go Video (distributor of *Cannibal Holocaust*), Wizard Video (distributor of *Terminal Island* and *The Boogeyman*), or New Line Cinema (which released *Evil Dead*). Added to this were inadequate regulation guidelines for new carriers (such as cable TV or video), and laws ill-equipped to prosecute and/or protect consumers, employees, and the interests of the industry.



Figure 4.1 Several horror films that showcased the rapid advancement and excessive use of special effects offended moral crusaders and policymakers, and became known as "video nasties." Clockwise from top left: *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Evil Dead*, and *The Beyond*.

These factors became so intertwined a politically volatile climate emerged that allowed policymakers and self-proclaimed moral crusaders to lump actual and simulated, real and fictional, implicit and explicit, hyperbolic and reflexive representations of sex and violence together as an issue that commanded attention and repressive reaction.

Another example of how cult receptions clash with prescribed audience modalities is the pornographic film. One core reason for its cult status is the legal and public ambiguity of explicit sex in films, or strong suggestions thereof. Its consumption takes place in a context of semi-legality, where there are large overlaps between inconspicuous enjoyment of entertainment, geeky and cheeky fandom usages of popular culture, amoral and immoral behavior in defiance of society's norms and values, and downright illegal acts of obscenity punishable under criminal law. Distinctions between soft-core and hard-core, between suggestions of explicit sex and actual sex-on-screen have always existed, but have never really been followed through legally or in public perceptions. Hard-core pornography is tracked carefully, and often outlawed by censors. Richard Randall (1976), Linda Williams (1999) and Jacques Zimmer (2002), give extensive overviews of the censorship of pornography and its treatment by society, and comment on how this has helped create a reputation of rebelliousness. Zimmer (2002: 10–19) chronicles the history of pornography as that of a struggle between the bourgeoisie and progressive libertarians. Films such as *Deep Throat*, *Behind the Green Door*, and *The Devil in Miss Jones*, all from the early 1970s, a period known as "porn chic" in which the pornographic briefly blossomed as a quasi-mainstream form of entertainment, all carry labels of rebelliousness in their receptions.

Randall (1976: 440–443) observes how, from a legal perspective, the category of pornography has problematized representations of sexuality because it allowed for a divide between illegal products (such as hard-core sexual materials that can be prosecuted as obscene under criminal law), legal products presenting themselves as illegal (marketed as though they are legally obscene while they are not, in other words "pandering" to or narrowly avoiding a certain status), and completely legal products that occasionally attracted accusations of obscenity because they got caught up in the mix. Even in the cases where easily identifiable hard-core pornography was prosecuted, confusions led to a wild variety in verdicts; Randall remarks how *Deep Throat* was once found obscene and *not* obscene in the same state. Such ambiguities have greatly enhanced the cult reputation of explicit sex and materials caught in, or trying to exploit, the associations the term brought with it. It has certainly aided the cult status of films such as *Heat*, *Last Tango in Paris*, *Caligula*, and *Emmanuelle*.

In some cases, situations like these have led cult films to become proverbial *causes célèbres* that ignite broader

cultural debate on expressions of culture, and instruments that triggered regulations to change. However, in most cases such recognition is reserved for films with production credentials and reception trajectories closer to what is seen as respectable. A good case in point is the upheaval surrounding the NC-17 and R-ratings in the United States at the beginning of the 1990s. These two ratings were designed to replace the X-rating, which had lost much of its power as deterrent after hardcore pornography ridiculed the rating with its "triple X" self-assignations. In an attempt to re-regulate film markets, the MPAA hoped the NC-17 rating would allow a distinction between art house risqué material, and plain smut. Among the first films caught up in the confusion were *Atamé*, *Henry and June*, and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and her Lover*. *Showgirls* became one of the first big budget Hollywood films to have the NC-17 label bestowed upon it (Sandler 2001). The stubbornness of director Paul Verhoeven in making changes to obtain an R-rating no doubt helped the film gain its cult reputation. The atmosphere of reception, exemplified by the ambiguity of distinctions between art house and exploitation, was as significant as the film's content.

If we assume that those in charge of classifications and those attempting to influence the process are knowledgeable about the cultural position of films, we can also assume chances will be taken to court controversy. In Chapter 2 we observed how many marketing campaigns attempt to stir up interest in films that would otherwise not stand out among the general supply of films. Trying to create a controversy by rubbing against the sensitivities of the moral majority is as good a technique as any other. Similarly, the media, policymakers, pressure groups, and other players involved in public communication can use controversies to promote their own causes. The medium of film seems to be a preferred instrument for such efforts. Talk about film always makes good copy. It is highly visible, draws lots of attention, and makes for easy cultural currency. In fact, since the 1920s, and more or less parallel with the advent of Hollywood, of the star-system, of fandom, *and* of cult movies, cinema has had a privileged relationship with the reporting of scandal. This relationship is most infamously described in *Hollywood Babylon*, a book written by cult filmmaker Kenneth Anger (which we detail in Chapter 7).

Because cult reputations are so heavily implicated in controversies, it has become a tradition among researchers of cult cinema to investigate periods immediately preceding increased regulation – on the assumption such periods must have had some scandals causing the introduction of stricter censorship and tax regulations for cinema. They are therefore often framed as eras of "decadence" before the restoration. The early 1930s, just after the introduction of sound, but before the installation of the Hays code of self-regulation in Hollywood, saw exploitation cinema make concerted efforts to court controversy and aim for cultist receptions. In the case of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *Freaks*, *King Kong* and the first two Tarzan films (*Tarzan the Ape Man*, and *Tarzan and His Mate*) this aim was actually achieved. Thomas Doherty (1999) describes this period as a heady one. Similarly, the first half of the 1970s saw a steep increase in exploitation output and cultist appreciation combined with permissiveness in regulation and easy market access for independent productions.

In addition, it is worth noting the collective nature of controversies that have had significant impacts on, or created, cult reputations. Not every scandal or controversy, and not every act of censorship leads to a cult reputation. In fact, because there are so many controversies and scandals, and so many instances of censorship, singular cases might not pull a film's reception out of normality enough to account for a cult reputation. When cases run across an extended period of time, however, stubbornly refusing to go away and unnerving the public profoundly, there is a bigger chance they will amplify or establish a cult reputation. The several years that span the video nasties or pornography controversies, the recurrent upheavals around *Rebel without a Cause* (Biltereyst 2005) or the continued polemic between scholars over *The Brood* (Mathijs 2008: 79–83) are good examples.

In sum, censorship and controversy ignite curiosity and separate the reception trajectory of a film from the many others that are circulating in a territory. If the reason for the censorship is related to challenging representations of sexuality and/or violence, or to moral taboos, the film's chances of being isolated as an aberration are even higher, since it is more likely to fall outside what is considered "normal" and "acceptable." More important than a film's content,

however, is its challenging position as a symptom of cultural discomfort, especially when a group of films is lumped together. If, on top of that, public adversity towards a film extends across a sustained period of time, it is more likely controversies and/or censorship will become a dominant factor in its cult status.

Cult Connoisseurship

The majority of critical routines ignore films with cult reception trajectories. That is because criticism, as it is classically understood, involves the making of distinctions between "good" or "bad," and the offering, through interpretation, of viewing advice based on the criteria used in arriving at such distinctions. The best example, and also the most institutionalized, is reviewing: an act of classification of cinema that is most commonly expressed through value-judgment, and managed by various publications and media corporations. Because their protocols are so focused on the mainstream of cinema, or on finding the new and novel, reviews are often unable to capture the particularities of cult cinema receptions, let alone appreciate them. Films with cultist reception contexts consistently receive bad reviews. Let us give two examples. When *Bring me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* was first released, *The Wall Street Journal* called it "grotesque, sadistic, irrational, obscene, incompetent" while to *New York Magazine* it was "a catastrophe" (Cooper 2011). *Bad Taste* was, upon its release in the United Kingdom, greeted as a film that had "nothing to commend it but its foetid imagination" (Barratt 2008: 38).

Classifications that are somewhat more sympathetic to cult cinema appear mainly in what David Bordwell (1989: 20) identifies as "essayistic criticism." The formal and informal institutions that govern it are less corporate than reviewing and geared more towards collective attitudes, assumptions, and circles. When Bordwell uses the term "invisible colleges" to refer to the informal institutions that back up essayistic criticism, he is referring to informal and diffuse circles of authorship and readership that are very much like the ones that operate within the esoteric networks that characterize cult receptions at festivals (see Chapter 3). As Bordwell (1989: 19–20) points out, these institutions, and the classifications they develop to arrive at views on films, are often "riven by disputes," yet they also remain "consanguine by virtue of the concrete routines they employ." They admit wide-ranging differences but are united in what seems a cause. The metaphor Bordwell evokes is that of the medieval Christian church. Essayistic criticism often also attempts to devote attention to films ignored by the mainstream (so called "misunderstood" films) in order to expand or interrogate the canon. Films with cult reception trajectories are perfect examples. Above all, however, a substantial part of essayistic criticism is cultist in its own right in that it is inspired by *connoisseurship*: the skill and talent to be an arbiter of taste, and to deliberately pitch expertise against mainstream and middlebrow conventionality. Connoisseurship also includes the self-reflexive interrogation of skill, talent, taste, and expertise.

Cult connoisseurship, then, exceeds regular connoisseurship in celebrating films whose reception trajectories put them at the margins of what is culturally acceptable. It places itself in an oppositional situation, at the margins of the routines and practices commonly seen as key to criticism. According to Greg Taylor (1999: 16–17), this position is often a vanguard one, concerned with exposing critical gestures and attitudes with the aim of pushing aesthetic appreciation ahead. It is less about the films than about the critical writing itself. Cult connoisseurship tries to achieve a form of purist classification, untainted by demands of efficiency or timeliness. Because of its self-declared freedom from constraints, it cannot pertain to hold an objective or aggregate view. It has to be impressionistic, based on subjective judgment. It also has to be disinterested, never giving the idea that it approaches its subject with a purpose – the professional expression of the phenomenal experience detailed in Chapter 1. Below, we will summarize some of the most important occurrences of cult connoisseurship.

Surrealist Criticism

The first form of cult connoisseurship, surrealist criticism, is also the most notoriously impenetrable. Attempting to turn the tables on the dictates of taste,

and inspired by the rebelliousness of the Dadaists, surrealist criticism attempts to make a case for films whose combination of immorality, sheer lack of quality and popular, lowbrow appeal would exclude them from any canon. Films that were "more often than not involuntarily sublime, scorned by the critics, charged with cretinism or infantilism," wrote Ado Kyrou, "anecdotal" and "demented" films "shown in local fleapits," were the ones best equipped for this turning of the tables (Kyrou 2000: 68–69). The best-known example of the kind of film surrealist critics thus championed was American slapstick comedy, the anarchy of which was regarded as a rebellion against the bourgeoisie. The films of Charles Chaplin ("Charlot") and Buster Keaton in particular were put forward as works of genius. Next to that, surrealist critics lauded the fantastic films of George Méliès, the popular serials of Louis Feuillade (especially *Fantômas*), and, occasionally, Hollywood stars. Paul Hammond (2000: 29), in his overview of surrealist writing on cinema, refers explicitly to the "cult of Louise Brooks" among the surrealists. Much of the ensuing cult reputation of *Pandora's Box* was connected to that (Peary 1981: 247–251). Of course, surrealist cinema itself, and the films of Luis Buñuel in particular, were also cultified (see, for instance, Jean Vigo's critical poem on *Un Chien Andalou* in Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 173–174).

In its practices, surrealist criticism was extremely impressionist, effusive, and personal, and characterized by an aggressive tone. Its language attempted to escape rationalist argumentation and rhetoric, and was drenched with cultist references, such as "eroticism," "amorality," "pre-consciousness," "rejuvenation," or "vitality." A fetishism of commodities was prevalent throughout. Hammond calls it the "cult of kitsch" (Hammond 2000: 27). In arriving at classifications of "see" and "don't see" films, the surrealist critics often relied on three concepts: "dépaysement" (disorientation), aleatory (accidentality), and "photogenia" (a term from French critic Louis Delluc, capturing the "ineffable 'quintessence' or the magic of cinema"; Stam 1999: 34). All three referred as much to a quality intrinsic to films as to a position of perception, visible only through particular viewing practices. Buñuel (1927, in Hammond 2000: 61–62), in his praise for Keaton's *College*, listed photogenia as central to what cinema should be. This uneasy ambiguity between essentialism and perception is typical for cult connoisseurship. As befits the phenomenal experience, the truth never only resides in the text, but equally in the beholder.

Adding to the cultism of surrealist criticism was its invisible college of the surrealist movement. Cult cinema connoisseurship flourished in surrealist criticism especially during what is known as the "intuitive period" (1919–1929) of the Surrealist movement, when the writing was confined to publications with small circulations (Hammond 2000: 25). As the movement developed and became better organized, and more institutionalized, especially in its affiliations with the political Left, it became less cultist.

Cult Cinephilia and MacMahonism

The second form of cult connoisseurship we would like to highlight revolves around cinephilia and what Robert Stam (1999: 83–88) has called the "cult of the auteur" of the 1950s and 1960s. In his study of American film criticism, Taylor (1999) analyzes how critics such as Manny Farber (who wrote for *New Republic* and *The Nation*) and Parker Tyler (who first edited the surrealist journal *View*, and subsequently did much of his writing for *Film Culture*), moved away from the kinds of classifications and evaluations their predecessors had been making about cinema. Dissatisfied with the influence of the heritage of New Criticism and Modernism on cinema, and keen to assert their own specific connoisseurship, they started to adopt what Taylor calls "cultist" and "camp" attitudes. They championed films from low repute (and increasingly from a countercultural sphere) that allowed them to promote a "vanguard" aesthetic perspective, one that was more pure (more directed towards the "essence" of cinema) and continuously fresh enough to challenge the status quo of "classical cinema" and to prevent canon-making from settling in. The fact that Farber saw himself more as a painter than a critic, and Tyler regarded himself very much a poet, meant that both exercised their criticism more as a hobby, from a position of passionate disinterestedness. Their goal was not so much to "rescue film culture," as Taylor puts it, but to "shoot from the hip" and to "delineate the oppositional margins of popular

culture" (Taylor 1999: 43). Theirs was very much the position of the "solitary activist" (1999: 47), who sought to "liberate the spectator from the 'sweet fog' of mainstream culture and return him to an idealized, revitalized version of his own folk traditions" (1999: 48). Among the films Farber deemed worthy of discussion (though not necessarily of *liking*) were *Casablanca* and *All about Eve*. Among Tyler's key exemplars were Mickey Mouse and Charles Chaplin. But the actual movies mattered less than the "critical skill and an artistic imagination" (Taylor 1999: 73). As with so many other attempts to promote the "new," this joint cultism/cinephilia eventually exhausted itself. By the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, as the dissemination of underground and exploitation cinema grew, the vanguard perspective ran out of steam. Parker Tyler's scathing overview of countercultural cinema from 1969, *Underground Film*, observed an "intellectual bankruptcy in the name of chic [that] hindered informed aesthetic distinctions" (Taylor 1999: 118).

One instance of cinephilia that is particularly cultist in its connoisseurship is the MacMahonist circle. Located largely in France, it originated in the margin of the wave of auteurism, from the mid 1950s onwards. Against the highbrow and middle-class aesthetics that were being promoted by the Parisian establishment, a playful and cheeky reaction originated, dubbed MacMahonism. The fact that the MacMahoniens named themselves after the theater ("Le MacMahon," near the Place de l'Etoile in Paris) where they convened, and that they championed films because they went against what was deemed respectable, illustrates how here too the conditions of reception were as important as the actual films. It confirms the cultism of this invisible college.

The MacMahoniens are often mentioned in the same breath as disciples of André Bazin and the critics of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, with whom they shared many concerns (and many of the MacMahoniens did publish in the *Cahiers*). The main difference is the high degree of connoisseur-like gamesmanship and fetishism of masculinity. Instead, of constructing a canon consisting of John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, or Howard Hawks (like many other critics did), the MacMahoniens trawled deep into what Hollywood dumped on the French postwar market to emerge with Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, Raoul Walsh and Joseph Losey. Maverick directors such as Nicholas Ray, filmmakers courting B-movie status such as Jacques Tourneur, a few biblical films with Charlton Heston, and several Italian and Spanish Hercules epics also received high praise, especially in attempts to provoke reactions. This critical gambling was not void of cheekiness. As Raphaëlle Moine (2008: 144) points out, the MacMahoniens introduced the word *peplum*, with all its dubious connotations of historical insincerity and camp masculinity, to cinema parlance partly because they coupled their cinephilia to "a rather affected taste for the trashy." The main outlet for the MacMahonists was the magazine *Présence du Cinéma*. Its editor Michel Mourlet was decribed as the "high priest of MacMahonism." Jacques Lourcelles and Fereydou Hoyveda (who also wrote for the left-leaning, surrealist inspired *Positif*) were among the most notable critics of the group. Later, Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut were counted among the "apostles of the MacMahonist faith" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 26).

Even as it opposed canons, middlebrow and highbrow taste, and respectable filmmakers, the impact of cinephilic cult connoisseurship, especially its advancement of auteurism, was so great that it became constitutive of a new canon inspite of itself. The hysteria of the later criticism of Tyler, the ecstasy of some MacMahoniens, the praise for camp by Susan Sontag, the self-avowed "cultist auteurism" of Andrew Sarris, nor the irrational eccentric criticism of Jack Smith or Kenneth Anger could stop this evolution. During the 1960s, Pauline Kael, who had always been skeptical of the auteur theory, mourned the newfound seriousness of cinephilia on a number of occasions and pleaded for a return to "excitement" and "bad movies" (Kael 1969; see Sconce 2007 for an elaboration). But no new critical efforts revived New York or Parisian cinephilic cult connoisseurship. In fact, as the increased ritualism of the *Casablanca* cult celebrations in the Brattle theater near Harvard University and of the midnight movies indicated, cultism would move away from cinephilia altogether, at least for a while.

Fan Criticism

The final two forms of cult connoisseurship we would like to showcase are both instances of "niche criticism." With this term we mean a form of criticism

that has a strong emphasis on closeness with the object of scrutiny, an alignment with its receptions, and an intensification of the commitment that has the cultist see pretty much all of the world through the lens of their object of fascination – an attitude shared by fan and marketer. We will discuss two of the most prominent exponents of this, namely fan criticism and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) criticism. Both display a desire to move criticism as close as possible to the experience of the naturally emerging audience and the non-expert viewer. Yet through their desire to come as close as possible to the films they love, and through their obsession with details, these forms of criticism also present themselves as forms of specialization. As forms of amateurism they have taken over the vanguard role of defining cinematic purism that was once held by cinephilia. Yet they occupy a radically different part of the critical spectrum. In general, their efforts are ridiculed because they are seen as amateurs addressing audiences with shallow interests and curiosity. Much like surrealist criticism they are also less preoccupied with the "rhetoric of the text." Often their arguments are made through bricolage and illustration instead of through academic reasoning. This includes a much more liberal use of fonts, punctuation, and lettertypes, and also some preference for visual illustrations – drawings, original artwork, and the production of amateur media work (documentaries, taped interviews, short films, montages of clips, re-stagings, and so on). In a sense, the niche critic is located in a sphere of opposition to the professional industry of film reviewing. Its invisible college is what Terry Eagleton (1984: 115–118) has called the "intimate sphere" of culture. This is the sphere of informal personal contacts, such as family, neighborhood, community, flea markets, sidewalks, chat rooms, parking lots or bars – a sphere in which the experience of subjectivity is essential. It is the sort of atmosphere Maffesoli sees as crucial to affective communities (see Chapter 1).

Fan criticism first became visible in the 1960s but blossomed from the 1970s onwards. It consists of two types of publications, prozines and fanzines. According to David Sanjek (1990: 152), prozines are periodicals that address the fan reader but that are produced as commercial, mainstream magazines. *Famous Monsters of Filmland* (started in 1958) and *Castle of Frankenstein* (started in 1962) preceded a wave of prozine magazines such as *Cinéfantastique* (1970), *Starlog* (1976) and *Fangoria* (1979). In France, a pioneering role was played by *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*. It was among the first fanzines to make a move from a niche newsletter to connoisseurship. *Midi-Minuit* was succeeded by *Écran fantastique* (from 1969 onwards) and *Mad Movies* (1972). Inspired by specific communities, such as the cult of *Star Trek* and the cult of horror cinema (for *Starlog* and *Fangoria* respectively), prozines are often closely affiliated with burgeoning fan cultures and they share with their fans a dedication to a narrow focus on one or two genres – or even subgenres. For example, when the abundant supply of horror films in the early 1980s warranted demarcations of various subgenres within the genre, *Fangoria* developed a spin-off, *Gorezone*, dedicated to horror subgenres in order to prevent other magazines from intruding onto its market. *Écran fantastique* launched *Vendredi 13* with the same intent.

While prozines are a very visible exponent of cultist criticism, they are usually seen as less deeply committed than fanzines. According to Sanjek, fanzines are amateur publications that "constitute an alternative brand of film criticism, a school with its own set of values and virtues. They aim not only to *épater le bourgeois* but also to root out obscure marginalia ... and revel in the private consumption of outrage for outrage's sake" (1990: 153). Again, *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *Castle of Frankenstein* provided a lot of the inspiration for fanzines, especially through the ways in which they experimented with tone and tenor in their reviews (often a mix of admiration and sarcasm), and through their tools of analysis: retrospectives and biographies create a sense of history; interviews play a key role in establishing the impression of semi-direct communication between artists, critics, and audiences/readers; mini- or capsule reviews give fanzines a sense of completism and archivist significance; the editors and letters pages are prominent places for continued discussion. These magazines also display a desire towards seeing films as part of collective sensibilities, as part of a "wave," a "movement," or a "new era," one of which the fan critic and the readership declared themselves an equal part. Among the most notable examples of fanzines are *Sleazoid Express*, *The Gore Gazette*, *Wet Paint*, *Le masque de Méduse*, and *Vampirella*.

The relations of prozines and fanzines to cult cinema are radically different from those of cinephilia. Their rhetoric is directed towards an appreciation of the collective effort instead of the solitary genius (though there is ample praise for the "crazy loner"). Sanjek observes a slight preference for the "cult of the technician" in prozines and a "cult of the auteur" in fanzines. Across the board, however, special effects make-up artists such as Tom Savini, or storyboard artists and production designers such as Dan O'Bannon (before he moved into writing and directing) receive as much attention as renowned directors, and their work is imbued with a form of working-class street credibility. Among the directors that owe a lot of their cult status to fan criticism are David Cronenberg (*Scanners*, *Videodrome*), Wes Craven (*Last House on the Left*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*), Larry Cohen (*It's Alive*), Lucio Fulci (*The Beyond*), Tobe Hooper (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), and George Romero (*Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*). They formed the core of the "cult of horror" propagated by *Cinéfantastique* and *Fangoria* (see Chapter 18 for more on this). Among the many ingénue fan-critics were self-declared cultists such as Joe Dante, Frank Henenlotter, and Mick Garris, who were practitioners, fans, and critics at the same time. Numerous issues also contain DIY guides to special effects (Mathijs 2010b). Classified ads are often platforms for collectors to exchange fan-related materials – in this sense they function as an extension of the flea market model we sketched in Chapter 2.

Over time, the distinction between prozines and fanzines has become more pronounced. Prozines have developed less interest in cultist appreciation and moved into a more institutionalized kind of professional criticism, of which *Cinéfantastique*, *Fangoria*, *Starlog*, *SFX*, and *Starfix* have become the representatives. Yet they still maintain a niche interest through associations with parts of fan cultures, such as fan conventions, collector's weekends, specialist stores, or spin-offs. Fanzines, on the other hand, have become more radical in their cultism. In the 1990s they were represented by publications that were mostly one-man operations, such as Tim Lucas's *Video Watchdog*, Andy Black's *Necronomicon*, David Kerekes's Headpress, and Harvey Fenton's FabPress. The niche appeal of these publications actually helped films sustain cult reputations: it reinforced Mario Bava's and Dario Argento's reputations, spearheaded the praise for the films of Bigas Luna and Peter Jackson, and assisted in the rediscovery of the films of Radley Metzger, Harry Kümel, and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

In their political positioning too, fanzines have shown a tendency towards radical collectivity. Instead of the existentialism of cinephilia, it showed a preference for utopian and communal philosophies of society. Hiding behind straightforward descriptors of setting or storyworld, a lot of letters, editorials, and reviews of films such as *Blade Runner*, *Dune*, and *The Lord of the Rings* reveal a fascination with sometimes crude and naive but often also idealistic negotiations of democratic and totalitarian variations of governance. This function of interrogation makes fanzines "engaged"; it gives them a cause shared with much of cult cinema.

DIY Criticism

Since the rise of the internet developments in cult connoisseurship have shown a surge in criticism that, like fanzines, offers subjective, focused commentary with a penchant for trivia and details. We find those characteristics in abundance in what can be called Do-It-Yourself (DIY) criticism, a form of online commentary often formatted as "user comments," "threads," or "responses" that is widespread, though mostly directed to a small, niche readership. Among the most visible examples are the improvised user reviews and message board comments on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), and the various contributions of amateur reviewers to social network media such as Blogspot, Facebook, MySpace or Youtube. DIY criticism contains many characteristics of fan criticism: it preferences impressionist and subjective comments, it relishes focus, single-mindedness, and closeness, and it puts itself in opposition to professional reviewing while still claiming expertise. It is also decidedly peer-to-peer in its address (though not necessarily always in its readership) and, connected with that, it demonstrates a sense of informality of address – with much attention for hearsay, trivia, and conjecture.

While directors still receive a lot of attention in DIY criticism, there is less emphasis on their efforts than on other components of the films and their receptions.

This is undoubtedly linked to the fact that DIY criticism favors feature debuts, such as *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, *Tetsuo*, *Man Bites Dog*, *Cube*, or *Donnie Darko*, but it is also due to other factors. Among the most notable points of interest are speculations about the story world of the film (with ample elaborations on that world's plausible and improbable aspects), and observations about the simplicity yet ingeniousness of film styles (observations that are often approached as peer review, frequently with a "I could do that too" undertone). Next to this, DIY criticism appreciates wit, irony and mild nihilism, which it frequently mirrors in tone. A good case in point is the online reception of a film such as *Nothing*, which looks effortless and which invites audiences to speculate on issues such as user-friendly technology, pop-philosophy, and morality in a world where one can only trust one's closest friends.

Like fan criticism, DIY criticism has been suspected of maintaining a contentious relationship with the commercial or corporate sphere. According to Elena Gorfinkel (2008: 38), "media industries have embedded connoisseurship into online merchandising, for example, in the 'Users like you enjoyed. . .' recommendation feature of Amazon, Netflix, and Youtube." This suspicion of viral marketing, of being employed in a clever scheme, often affects DIY critics, and it has damaged some reputations such as that of superblogger Harry Knowles. In most cases, however, the tension between suspicion and trust does not deter participants from engaging in DIY criticism. Quite the contrary, the activity has become widespread, so common in fact that the perception at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century may no longer be that it is marginal or niche at all. In the form of "sweding" this form of cultist appreciation has even made its way into the film profession. Originally, a term used to refer to erased and subsequently recreated cinema in the period of VHS, sweding was re-employed as a result of its use in *Be Kind Rewind*, a film by Michel Gondry (who directed the deviously simple clip for the "Mad World" song that helped *Donnie Darko* reach its cult status). Thanks to *Be Kind Rewind* sweding has become a tool in discussions about different generations of "new media" and their user-oriented and deliberately artisan creations that carry limitations as a form of pride rather than an obstacle. In that sense it is similar to how lack of access and professionalism became points of "authenticity" for the niche critic.

Through its use of video, DVD and the internet, DIY criticism has had a profound impact on the viewing contexts of cult cinema connoisseurship. The rituals of endurance that were core to repeat viewing of the 1980s have been complemented by a new fascination for short materials (this has led to the cultification of the video clips of Michel Gondry for instance). In addition, shortness of exposure is a key element in new tendencies such as summary viewing or compilation viewing. Summary viewing consists of what Elena Gorfinkel, via Michael Newman, calls "snippy viewing" – whereby only the worst and most embarrassing moments, or representative samples, montages or "bloopers," are actually viewed (Gorfinkel 2008: 38). Good examples of creative interventions in summary viewing are *Pulp Fiction in 5 Seconds*, *Scary Mary Poppins*, or the *How It Should Have Ended* animated video speculations on alternative endings of films (most often cult films). Compilation viewing supersedes this by combining snippets of films into compilations pulled from multiple films. These are not always homages, but frequently also compilations of errors – with again the assumption that the DIY critic is a peer to the filmmaker. Frequently, such compilations are shared through the internet on shared user content platforms like MySpace, Facebook, or YouTube. Augmented viewing involves the adding of material to the original film in order to comment on it. The running commentary, or "riffing," that the television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* provided when it screened exploitation or B-movies has been a prominent source of inspiration for this practice.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter we would like to address "word of mouth endorsement." Because this process belongs equally in the areas of marketing, auteur, and star showmanship (especially celebrity endorsements, such as those Quentin Tarantino and John Waters are known for), and the peer endorsement of fan cultures of cult cinema, it is only tangentially related to the institutions of reception we have outlined above. But it informs them nevertheless.

Overall, most institutionalized forms of film classification, whether concerned with moral, legal, ideological, or aesthetic norms, behave adversely towards films whose receptions are fragmented, fractured, and unhinged. Yet within the margins there are several components of the same institutions that do find reason to champion these films. In most cases, this is not so much out of a love for the films themselves, though that is often offered as the overt reason, but out of a desire to position oneself, as taste-maker, as critic, or as intellectual. All of these processes try to achieve a status of trustworthiness that is directly related to a self-perception of significance.

It is at this level that the desire for advocacy and the fear of insecurity meet. The best possible metaphor to illustrate this situation is the concept of "word of mouth endorsement." As a simple communication process between two sources, without much interference from other forces, word of mouth is squarely placed within the intimate sphere; it relies heavily on mutual trust and personal contact. Word of mouth endorsements give the feeling they are to be trusted because of the position of equality between receiver and communicator. One of the most legendary examples is *El Topo*, a film whose midnight run in New York popularized the midnight movie phenomenon, and which relied almost uniquely on word of mouth endorsement (including that of John Lennon, who subsequently got involved in financing *The Holy Mountain*). Given the esoteric networks of connections cult films rely upon in their reception trajectories, personal endorsements have a fairly great importance – a single voice can make a distinct difference in the reception of cult cinema. To believe individual voices count is the prime conviction of connoisseurs and classifiers in a world filled with institutions.

5

Fandom and Subculture

While the study of media fans and cult media do not totally overlap, they do have much in common: cult media has often been identified through the fan devotion that it has given rise to. Our focus is, of course, on cult cinema. While we will draw upon broader media fandom in this chapter, we will consider its significance mainly in relation to cult film (though we will point towards the importance of other media, especially when non-film media consumption informs the manner by which films are framed by fans). We will chart the overlaps and interconnections between fan studies and cult cinema in relation to some of the key historical developments within these fields of study.

We focus primarily on the academic study of fans in this chapter. Some other aspects, such as fan criticism, and transnational fandom in the form of "otaku" are discussed in Chapters 4 and 11 respectively.

Fan Studies: Early Approaches

Within academia, earlier studies of fans within media and cultural studies have tended to engage with fans as particularly *active* audiences (Jenkins 1992; Fiske 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992). This was partly a response to the ways in which media fans had often been ridiculed and/or demonized within the media (for example, the constant stress upon fans with psychological problems who stalk and sometimes murder media celebrities). Thus, Jenkins argued that "to speak as a fan is to accept what has been labelled a subordinate position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities" (1992: 43). Against such negative commentary, there was a tendency to stress the positive nature of being a fan through focusing on the activities and communities which emerged from fandom.

Many studies of fans tended to focus on fans as producers, as a way of distinguishing them from "ordinary consumers." Henry Jenkins, drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, emphasized the notion of "textual poaching," whereby fans can appropriate elements of a popular text and inscribe it with their own meanings. Here, fans resist "official" ways of reading and instead "raid" (as opposed to respecting) the text: "Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions" (1992: 18).

Jenkins was keen to relate fandom to cultural politics, a political emphasis that was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that academic cultural studies tended at this point to focus upon popular culture in relation to broader social and political processes. Therefore, studies of audiences often focused on what Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998: 15–28) have termed the "incorporation/resistance" paradigm, which looks at how audiences are incorporated into, or resist, the "dominant order" via media use. Within the study of fandom this was evident in the stress upon fans' various forms of activity, of engaging in resistant behavior in order to undermine dominant ideologies (Fiske 1989: 56). While not all fan activity was construed as resistant, there was a tendency to focus on fans as engaged in "micro-political" acts: not

Cult Cinema: An Introduction. Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton.
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large-scale, radical activity but small-scale, resistant behavior. So, for example, fans could be seen as progressive in the sense that they were opposing "official" culture, through challenging what types of culture were worthy of consecration or through acts of reading/production which conflicted with institutionally sanctioned readings. An example of the latter is when fans come into conflict with copyright holders when they produce fan texts, particularly when they produce subversive interpretations which a company may not consider suitable. (Slash fiction, which creates same-sex couplings between characters, is particularly prominent within debates over correct types of fan production.) We will return to some criticism of these approaches when we focus upon more recent developments in fan studies, but for now we will think about the study of cult cinema fans in relation to these developments.

Visible and Performative Fans

It is perhaps no coincidence that both "fan" and "cult" derive from religious nomenclature: through negative connotations, both terms spread to other areas of culture. Both the study of fans and of cult cinema within the 1980s and early 1990s tended to look at the more positive aspects of the categories in question, thus marking a period in which the concepts were undergoing serious revaluation.

The stress upon audience activity marks one of the most well-known cult films, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: through dressing up, talking back at the screen, and dancing and singing within the cinema auditorium, fans of the film were engaged in textual poaching because they "remade" the text within a broader community of fans. This active, performative fandom, however, was not on the whole a prominent pattern in terms of cult film audience responses. There were, nevertheless, people who would note that many cult film screenings – in particular midnight screenings – were distinctively communal spaces in which the audience would often chat, drink, sometimes smoke pot, and occasionally shout things at the screen. Such visible text-audience encounters could be observed to note how cult cinema offered an alternative to "normal" consumption, just as fans' active behaviors could be contrasted to the consumption of "ordinary" consumers.

While *Rocky Horror* remains the most notable case of cult cinema as defined by its visible fan responses, a number of other cult films have developed visible and performative fandoms since then, and can thus demonstrate fans as active and communal agents. A more recent incidence of such fandom being linked to a film's cult status is *The Big Lebowski* (see Klinger 2010b, for an overview). In 2002, while vending at the Derby City Tattoo Expo, Will Russell and Scott Shuffitt were quoting lines from the film when other nearby vendors joined in. From this spontaneous moment of camaraderie arose an idea to organize a festival based around *The Big Lebowski*, and so was born the "Lebowskifest," a festival set in a bowling alley that features people in costume, bowling contests, and prizes (Figure 5.1). As the festival was popular, it spread: there have now been seven annual festivals in Louisville, as well as others in places such as

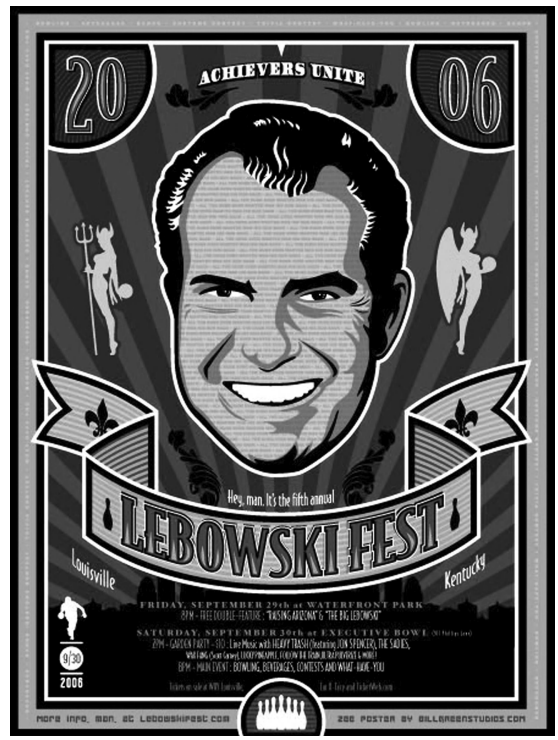


Figure 5.1 The fifth annual Lebowskifest.

Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, and one in Edinburgh, UK. Many subsequent events have grown in size and attracted guests from the film. They have also given rise to an array of merchandise: posters, t-shirts and stickers, as well as a 2007 fan book (Green *et al.* 2007). There was also an academic symposium on the film as part of the fifth annual festival, which featured a couple of presenters in costume (Robertson 2006) and brought together people who were both fans and scholars, or in Hills' terms, "scholar-fans" (Hills 2002a: 16–21). There are, additionally, a number of other related sites that have grown around the film, such as "Dudeism.com," which is a mock religion based around the ideas of the Dude.

Earlier academic study of cult cinema is more similar to fan studies, however, in its emphasis upon the fan/cultist as representing an alternative to the mainstream. As mentioned, fans were often valorized for the ways in which their activities could be seen as different from normal (and, by implication, mainstream) consumption practices through refashioning texts according to their own agendas, by using the text as a platform for communal purposes, and/or through challenging official taste. The cultist could also be seen as challenging taste and acting outside of mainstream consumption norms (through attending midnight screenings and repertory screenings, and repeatedly attending screenings of a single title) and of, in Sarris's words, loving films "beyond all reason" (Telotte 1991a: 5). Therefore, if we think about other modes of visible fandom, we can also associate these further to degrees of "alternativeness."

The fan pilgrimage, for example, has become an increasingly studied area (Hills 2002a: 144–157; Couldry 2003: 75–94; Sandvoss 2005: 44–66). These are not always necessarily related to cult texts, but those instances that are can be distinguished through the manner by which such texts embody alternative values for many of their fans. *The Wicker Man*, for example, has since its original release gained a dedicated following. Some fans of the film display their love for it in reasonably conventional ways, through purchasing the film and sometimes related memorabilia, and through gaining a good knowledge of the film. Others take this further by going on a pilgrimage to where the film was made, or collecting more obscure and hard-to-find collectibles associated with the film. Visits to the locations where the film was shot have become so popular that the South West Scotland Screen Commission publish a "Wicker Man trail" for visitors to follow, while a local coach company organizes a guided tour of key locations (Smith 2006: 264).

Such information signals a response to the continuing fascination that the film plays within a number of people's lives, despite the fact that it was not successful when originally released. In this sense, fans are a conspicuous segment of the film's identity: they have been active in resurrecting it from commercial oblivion and have kept it culturally alive. The film also is an alternative text: it represents a pagan culture and appeals to some people who are interested in occult issues and unconventional beliefs. Smith interestingly notes how the tourist visits to the film's locations are in some senses similar to the popularity of heritage sites, including locations that have featured within heritage films and television programs. *The Wicker Man*, though, exemplifies a kind of alternative heritage, a cultural trend that has been on the increase over the past decade or so. This is represented by record labels such as Ghost Box, which publishes music by artists "that find inspiration in library music, folklore, vintage electronics and haunted television soundtracks" (from the Ghost Box website); the "English Heretic" organization, which is both a parody of English Heritage but also an occult-inspired alternative to it (and which has published a booklet and CD-R guide entitled *The Sacred Geography of British Cinema*); as well as Julian Cope's "Head Heritage," which is involved in documenting prehistoric sites and pagan lore. *The Wicker Man*, along with other cult British films such as *Witchfinder General*, has become part of this alternative heritage which has further fuelled its cult reputation.

The alternative and "non-mainstream" nature of cult cinema continues to be important, though we do need to be aware that even these aspects are being challenged by more recent studies within fan studies.

Revising Fan Studies

While the first wave of fan studies was important and influential, it has more recently been subject to critique and revision. While many aspects of fan studies have

been elaborated upon, we will focus on challenges to the picture of the fan as a resistant, communal, and active agent. Hills, for example, drawing on the work of Crawford, has pointed out that the types of fans that Jenkins and Bacon-Smith focused on in their studies are not representative of all types of fandom. He notes that there exist a range of different types of fans and that the earlier wave of fan studies tended to focus on more excessive types of fandom, in the process overlooking more mundane instances (Hills 2006a: 104) Thus, more recent fan studies have sought to redress this imbalance. This, however, has fed into a need to rethink exactly what a fan is.

Contrary to the fan being distinguished through active productivity, it has been stressed that some fans may not actually belong to any fan networks (they may even confine their fandom to privacy) let alone engage in the production of fan-related texts. Rather than the existence of fixed distinctions between a fan and non-fan, Hills has suggested that "fan identity has recently been seen as context- and situation-specific" (2006a: 105). Some people may be termed fans by others, for example, for their particular consumption of a range of texts but they may not themselves identify as a fan; while Hills again cites Crawford in discussing how sports fans may be dismissed as not "proper" fans if they do not attend live games, but may be labeled as dedicated fans by those who do not have much interest in sport (2006a: 105).

Despite the context-specific argument about what constitutes fandom, it is necessary to outline a broad definition of fandom. Cornell Sandvoss provides such a definition, noting that fans are often considered to differ from more general audiences by nature of their *intense* or *excessive* interest in a particular, or a corpus of particular, cultural text(s). Sandvoss has felt the need to go beyond this particular definition, though, as he claims that intensity cannot be "objectively measured" (Sandvoss 2005: 6). He claims that the clearest behavioral indication of emotional investment in a particular text "lies in its regular, repeated consumption," so at its lowest common denominator fandom is "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (2005: 7–8). Of course, what counts as "regular, emotionally involved consumption" may again alter according to particular contextual variables.

It is worth detailing the overlaps and distinctions between a fan and a cultist, considering our overall focus on cult cinema. There have been some attempts to distinguish between these appellations within academic literature. Greg Taylor, for example, argues that the cultist can be distinguished from the fan due to a more resistant position; that is, the cultist will appropriate elements from commercial culture in order to mark out an individualized space within that culture. While the cultist will denigrate the majority of commercial culture, he or she will focus on selected moments of excellence that occasionally appear within the mass media (Taylor 1999: 161). From a different angle, Abercrombie and Longhurst have distinguished between a fan, a cultist, and an enthusiast: a fan is a person who "becomes particularly attached to certain programmes or stars within the context of relatively heavy mass media use;" a cultist is more focused than the fan, revolving around more specialist (and "refined") tastes; while an enthusiast is predominantly activity-based, spending a large amount of leisure time dedicated to their enthusiasms and often involved in networks related to them (1998: 138–139). There are problems with such categories: for example, their definition of an enthusiast is closer to how a fan has been described in much of the previous literature on the subject. Their attempt to demarcate a fan from a cultist seems too neat in light of the need to be aware of the importance of context, and also differs from Taylor's definition of a cultist.

While Taylor and Abercrombie and Longhurst conceive of the term differently, they do seem to be differentiating a cultist from a fan as understood in its general sense: that is, a cultist seems to be positioned as a particular type of fan. The growth of fan studies has therefore seen the need to distinguish between different kinds of fans. This is possibly a result of the growth of fan studies and the impact that digital technologies – in particular the internet – have wrought, further complicating understandings of the fan. It is now the case that many people will engage in online community discussions about their favorite media, whereas previously the establishment of community fandom would have been less common. In this sense, more and more people can be identified as fans, which has led Jenkins (2002) to claim that fandom is moving "from cult status towards the cultural mainstream." The need

to distinguish a cultist from other types of fans, therefore, could be considered an attempt to re-stress the non-mainstream nature of cult fandom. For the most part, this does seem to ring true: cult fans often stress the non-mainstream nature of their passions and a segment of cult fandom seeks out obscure titles that lie beneath the radar of mainstream media exposure. Nevertheless, in line with fandom's general mainstreaming, there have been arguments over whether cult cinema/cult fandom itself has become more of a mainstream process.

Cultural Capital and Subcultures

One particular figure who has been influential on more recent studies of fans is Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu has been an important reference point for those studying the politics of "taste cultures," both in terms of how fans make distinctions in order to differentiate themselves from others, and also how such operations are related to broader sociological processes. The most prominent aspect of Bourdieu's work which has been applied to subculture-related studies has been his outline of different forms of capital, particularly his notion of "cultural capital." Bourdieu (1986) outlines three main types of capital operable within society:

- *economic* capital – which is the most recognized form of capital, referring to a person's financial resources and material wealth;
- *cultural* capital – this refers to a person's educational status and their knowledge and skills related to different cultural fields;
- *social* capital – denotes the extent to which a person is connected to various social networks, for example.

Bourdieu argues that these forms of capital are interrelated, but not in any straightforward manner. It is, therefore, possible for a person to have significant economic capital but very little cultural capital: an example would be those derogatorily termed *nouveau riche*, who have come from a low-class background but who have accumulated substantial economic wealth during their lifetime. Despite being rich, their tastes (for example, in the way they decorate their home, clothes that they wear, entertainment they consume) may be considered "vulgar" by those who have a firmer rooting within a higher class and have therefore enjoyed a better education. Conversely, a person who has come from a background in which education is seen as important may be knowledgeable about a wide range of different cultural domains, but may have spurned the pursuit of money and pursued a relatively low-economic vocation: such a person would have high cultural capital but low economic capital. Social capital, on the other hand, refers to an individual's membership (which can be official or unofficial) within certain groups, which can therefore benefit them by helping them gain prestigious positions through the connections that they forge. Of course, the status of these particular groups within a broader social landscape may vary.

Sarah Thornton (1995), in her study of various underground dance cultures within Britain, coined the term "subcultural capital" to refer to the processes by which subcultures create specific forms of cultural capital. The term was used in order to mark out how distinctions are made and expertise valued within cultural areas that do not fit neatly into the spheres of "high art," which is the most common form of culture associated with cultural capital. Thornton writes:

> Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder . . . Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections . . . Just as cultural capital is personified in "good" manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being "in the know' " (1995: 11).

Within social life people are able to assemble cultural capital through expertise within specific fields. The types of knowledge possessed may be differently valued according to the field within which it operates: thus, knowledge of science fiction comics may not be held in much esteem within, say, a group of Shakespeare experts, but among science fiction comics enthusiasts it could place the beholder of such

knowledge in an advantageous position. (Of course, fields are not always separate, so that a Shakespeare expert may also be a science fiction comic expert, but such a person may play down their knowledge of comics when among other Shakespeare experts.) In the broader social field as a whole, however, Shakespeare has a higher cultural status than science fiction comics, and in this sense the latter could be seen as reflecting subcultural capital (as would cult cinema fandom) as opposed to more general cultural capital. The status and value of cultural phenomena can, of course, change: institutional recognition, for example, may be considered a means whereby a particular field becomes more widely validated, though it still may meet resistance. A very broad, general example is provided by the study of television within university: while such study enhances the reputation of the subject, it has nevertheless suffered a number of attacks (a subject, for example, not worthy of academic analysis).

Thornton's analysis of subcultural capital focused upon the media as a crucial mediator of subcultural status and cultural capital:

> [the media] are the main disseminators of these fleeting capitals. They are not simply another symbolic good or indicator of distinction, but a series of institutional networks essential to the creation, classification and distribution of cultural knowledge. (Thornton 1995: 118)

She argues that the media do not merely, as Cohen (1972) suggests, construct dominant ideas of subcultures after they have formed, but are crucial to the formation and development of subcultures. She distinguishes between three broad types of media that play a part in this process: micro-media (such as locally distributed fanzines, flyers, and listings); niche media (such as the specialist music press); and national mass media (the tabloids, the main television and radio stations). Regarding film, the categorization of different types of media may slightly differ from music, and the huge rise in internet communications since the mid 1990s will have also complicated such categories. Nevertheless, Thornton does point to the ways in which subcultures tend to promote and define themselves through niche media, while coverage of particular subcultural formations in niche media can help to "crystallize" them into a "fully-fledged subculture" (1995: 152). Mass media, on the other hand, are often involved in creating moral panics around subcultural activities or stigmatizing them in other ways. For Thornton, such negative coverage in the mass media is often welcomed by subcultures, for they define themselves against the "mainstream" and revel in their "deviant" status. When a subcultural trend becomes increasingly part of the mainstream, however – through being accepted, reported, documented by the mass media – it may well be denigrated by subcultural groups, who may then perceive the commercialization of particular cultural artifacts as "inauthentic."

Mark Jancovich has investigated cult film fans using Bourdieu's theories about cultural capital and Thornton's notion of subcultural capital. He claims that cult fandom is rife with distinctions and claims about authenticity, and is characterized by its difference from the mainstream and the mass media. Yet, while the mass media/mainstream and academic approaches to film appreciation are disparaged within cult movie fandom, they are nevertheless constitutive of such cult communities: "these institutions also provide the very mechanisms, spaces and systems of communication through which a sense of community is produced and maintained" (Jancovich 2002: 308). Jancovich argues that cult fandom emerged out of the burgeoning art house and repertory scenes that proliferated within the 1960s: the art house scene, he claims, was associated with commerce (many cinemas in this era converting to art cinemas in order to remain commercially viable), while repertory cinemas emerged from the college scene, itself linked to the academic study of film and the revaluation of older, commercial films emanated from Hollywood. Such an argument overlooks, though, how art cinemas – while commercial – are not often designated as "mainstream"; in this sense, Jancovich conflates commercialism/the mainstream here. Certainly, cult culture is characterized by a complex relationship to commercialism, but it does not seem to be opposed on a frequent basis to commerce *per se*. Rather, it is excessive commercialism, or particular *types* of commercialism (corporate and conservative as opposed to independent and "renegade") that are opposed. The academic opposition, although evident within cult

culture, is perhaps becoming less so in recent years, in line with an increased academic interest in cult media. There *is* still hostility towards academic approaches to cult (and other films) in some cult-related fan discourse, but it is certainly not as prominent as the opposition to "mainstream" values.

Jancovich cites various forms of media which help to sustain an "imagined community" using Thornton's categories of micro, niche, and mass media, though he also claims that niche media here is quite difficult to define: if tabloid newspapers, for example, constitute examples of mass media, where does this leave a specialist film magazine such as *Empire*? One answer would be that, considering Jancovich has already pointed out how the mainstream is an imaginary construct, it would depend upon the context within which the publication is perceived. From within a number of cult communities, for example, it will tend to be considered a part of the mass media, an example of a mainstream film publication. In this sense, we could distinguish between "generalized" and "specialist" aspects of the mass media. (If, on the other hand, it is considered by groups not particularly interested in film, it may be perceived as niche media.) Within niche media, we would have publications which tend to have a specialist focus *within* the field of cinema: magazines and prozines such as *Fangoria, Video Watchdog* or *Little White Lies*; while micro media would constitute fliers and programs distributed by specialist cinemas or related venues, listings, posters, etc. It is important to note, however, that "cult cinema" is not a single, reified object, but rather an imaginative concept which applies to, and is used by, a number of different subcultural film-related communities (which are not mutually exclusive). Jancovich writes that:

> cult movie audiences are less an internally coherent "taste culture" than a series of frequently opposed and contradictory reading strategies that are defined through a sense of their difference to an equally incoherently imagined "normality", a loose conglomeration of corporate power, lower middle class conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy. (2002: 315)

Homing in on a more specific example of cult cinema, we could apply Thornton's arguments to a particularly noteworthy controversy within the United Kingdom: the "video nasties" phenomenon, which emerged in the 1980s (see Egan 2007; Kerekes and Slater 2000, for detailed overviews of this phenomenon). In the early 1980s the nascent video retail business was dominated by small, independent ventures, and a number of controversial films were released on video cassette. The very lurid covers of a number of such titles (designed to attract attention, which they often did) could be seen to constitute a form of "micro-media" here, alongside the ways that such films were written about in specialist horror/cult fanzines (often in more positive ways than they were received in the mainstream and even niche press). It was not, however, until a moral panic broke out through mass media reports – particularly within tabloid newspapers but also, to a lesser extent, within broadsheets and within television and radio current affairs programming – that a particular subculture began to form. The labeling of people who enjoyed such films as somehow deviant, which was legally established through the banning of many films, only strengthened a sense of community among diverse citizens. From the moment that these films were banned, an underground network of trading and selling of illegal tapes was established through fanzines and specialist press. Within this network, (sub) cultural capital could be established through expertise (knowledge of different titles and their legal status, for example) and ownership (how many titles a person has in their collection). While most of the "community" as a whole would place themselves against the "mainstream" (which here would refer to the mass media's general perception of the films), there also existed inner-distinctions in which degrees of "authenticity" (established through performance of expertise and collections) were in operation (Egan 2007: 112–118). Such distinctions continue to operate as the "video nasties" have fed into the identity and marketing of previously banned titles on DVD, while collectors still trade and sell older video cassettes.

Mainstream Cult Fans?

Hills (2003: 185) has noted how some critics and academics – Peary (1981), Meehan (1991) – have considered the mixing of cultism and the mainstream

a paradox. Yet the case of *Star Wars*, which also forms the basis of Hills' observations, would seem to prove otherwise. Whereas a more obscure cult film may gain such status through its rarity (so that even owning a copy of the film may defer cultural distinction), this is replaced in the case of the "cult blockbuster" by repetition. Owning a copy of a blockbuster will not confer distinction, but perhaps the amount of times that a viewer watches it and comes to display knowledge of it, will. Additionally, the film also takes on a life of its own through its passionate fan base, who incorporate the film as an integral part of their everyday lives. As Will Brooker has written:

> *Star Wars* . . . is not just a film or a trilogy, or a trilogy and two prequels. For many people, including me, it is the single most important cultural text of our lives . . . . Even in 1977, *Star Wars* was a phenomenon. For many people now, it is a culture; a sprawling, detailed mythos they can pick through with their eyes closed. (Brooker 2002: xii)

While *Star Wars* was a relatively expensive, mainstream "epic," it has nevertheless furnished many fans with a spiritual experience and an ethical system that "traditional religion has failed to provide" (Brooker 2002: 5). In this sense, it could be seen as providing an alternative to the mainstream (in terms of beliefs) while at the same time being a mainstream product. Further, many fans of *Star Wars* have formed communities which sometimes come into conflict with the official creators of the *Star Wars* franchise (by creating fan work that Lucasfilm disapproves of, for instance, or criticizing some of the newer films) and are thus in conflict with the mainstream in some respects. The film is therefore both mainstream and cult: it has enjoyed such a remarkable presence within popular culture that it transcends the cult/mainstream dichotomy and alerts us to the fact that these categories may not be as distinctive as was formerly believed.

We could also think of the cult blockbuster as a kind of epochal film: a film that becomes, for many of its first wave of fans, a key film in their childhood memories which has remained with them as an important text throughout their life; additionally, it can become significant as an epochal moment in film history. The first is the most important in terms of cult reputation, but if this subjective importance is overlaid with a more "objective" significance, then this will perhaps increase the blockbuster's chances of attaining cult distinctiveness (also see Chapter 20).

The increasing proliferation of digital technologies within everyday life is further blurring the boundaries between cult and mainstream. One reason for this is that networked media, in particular the internet, make it much easier for researchers to find evidence of viewing communities that fit into existing frameworks of cult cinema. Previous to the domestication of the net, it would not have been as easy to find evidence of fans for particular films. Rather, more extraordinary cultural events would have constituted such evidence, including conventions, discernible audience patterns for specific films (as exemplified by some of the long-running midnight movies), and pilgrimages to film locations. Secondly, less direct evidence could be garnered by collecting traces of commitment for particular films, as well as tracking a film's overall reception trajectory, within film magazines, fanzines, and relevant newspaper columns. The internet massively increases the (virtual) public presence of film fans, many of whom leave online traces of their love for films via discussion forums, blogs, web sites, and social networking sites, to name some prominent examples.

Just as digital developments have led to fandom becoming more of a mainstream process (Jenkins 2002; Ross and Nightingale 2002: 143; Jennings 2007: 1), the same can be said of cult films. Cyberspace provides access to a vast social network that has been utilized by many fans and researchers of fans; discussion of cult cinema, too, has proliferated on the web, alongside activities that are demonstrative of cult reception. These processes have taken place alongside an increase in academic attention to both fandom on the one hand, and cult cinema on the other. Taken together they lead to an escalating reiteration of the concepts in question, so that being a fan is generally considered less derogatory than it once was while cult cinema is also less of an obscurantist field than previously. We can also add that the concepts of both performance and surveillance are important here, and also appear to reinforce one another. The internet and other network technologies enable people to perform their identity as fans on a more frequent

basis, which leads to them leaving greater data traces of their fandom to linger virtually as analytical fodder for future researchers. It is no surprise that increasing opportunities to form communities, to perform as a fan, and to detect fandom, lead to a greater mainstreaming of both fandom and cult cinema, which in turn impacts on the growth of academic work covering these areas.

Another reason why both fandom and an interest in cult cinema have grown with the rise of the net is that it now becomes much easier for people to engage in activities that single them out as a fan of particular media objects, and to become interested in cult films. David Jennings has written how previously it was difficult to get hold of a wide range of music and films if one lived outside large cities (2007: 1–2). Thus, a limited provision meant that it was more difficult for people to discover new films and play a part in their reputations. Of course, it was not impossible: a large number of films have always played on television, while people who have lived outside of metropolitan areas have been able to read about more obscure fare and (since the emergence of video) been able to purchase films via mail order. The actual ability, however, to discover material outside of the mainstream was a lot more difficult. (Of course, as noted above, cult films are not necessarily non-mainstream, but they often are, and even the ability to form a cult following around a mainstream product has become easier with networked media.) As cultural commentators such as Jennings (2007) and Chris Anderson (2006) have pointed out, an increasingly digitized, global multimedia environment alters this state of affairs. Jennings cites three particular important elements that contribute to a "culture of discovery": first, *trying out*, which refers to the abundant opportunities to sample media material; secondly, *links*, which enable people to constantly link from one subject that they are interested in, to another (some of which they may not have previously encountered); and thirdly, new forms of *communities* enabled by digital networks now mean that word-of-mouth (traditionally a core factor in the creation of cult status) can travel freely and quickly among connected citizens (Jennings 2007: 15–19). Anderson has also drawn attention to how the "long tail" now assumes much greater importance in the digital world. While "niche" tastes have existed for a long time, they are now becoming more important in an age where the costs of supply and demand are much lower, when it is far easier for consumers to find more obscure products and for retailers to reach customers (for an illustration of how instances of these developments in fandom have been linked to other discourses that operate in the evaluation of cult cinema, see the section on DIY criticism in Chapter 4 and transnationalism and orientalism in Chapter 11).

The growth of niche markets does not erode the boundaries between what constitutes mainstream and cult, but it does certainly alter the ways that these concepts become mobilized in relation to cultural trends. The increasing ability to spot processes that connect fan practices in relation to cult cinema, alongside the proliferation of choice and availability, means that we need to be aware that there are many different types of cult cinema fans, and that the actual status of cult cinema among such fans is very much contested: there are, for example, arguments between fans (and, perhaps, "non-fans") as to what constitutes cult cinema, which may depend on the type of film fan who is contributing to the discussion. We should also be careful to make distinctions between types of cult film and types of cult fandom. While some fans may only be interested in particular types of cult cinema (e.g. science fiction and horror), other fans will avidly consume a broader range of cult cinema (in addition to other films and other media). While it is possible to categorize some fans of cult cinema through the types of films that they are interested in, others may be more eclectic and may be more adequately categorized through their attitudes towards films and the ways in which they fit these films into their everyday lives.

Conclusion: Recent Trends in Cult Fandom

We will finish by discussing two examples of films that generated a substantial degree of cult fandom in ways which were very much connected to new technologies. The first is an extremely low-budget production that marshaled the web as part of its innovative marketing campaign, the second a large-budget spectacle

that intersected with other media in interesting ways. *The Blair Witch Project* cost only around $60 000 and generated profits in the region of $150 million in 1999 (Telotte 2001: 33). Much of its success was explained through the innovative design of its web site, which attracted a significant fan base long before the film had even been theatrically released (Jenkins 2006: 101–102). We should not overlook the fact that the website operated in conjunction with a more traditional marketing campaign (including TV spots, posters, radio ads, magazine ads, etc.) which cost around $20 million after the film was picked up for distribution by Artisan (Telotte 2001: 33). Nevertheless, the web site, in line with its related advertising strategy, was seen as important for the ways in which it generated a story world that could be appreciated on its own (and could spark interest in the film before its theatrical release), but which also acted as an added attraction for those who had seen the film. This was because the site constructed a mythical story world (presented as real) which documented the disappearance of students who had gone looking for a witch, and provided information on witchcraft that created a background against which the film was just one particular artifact (presented as found footage accidentally discovered and pieced together by Artisan). Taken together, the film, the web site, the ads, along with other artifacts (such as a pseudo-documentary airing on the SciFi channel and a series of related comic books) were constructed to interrelate with each other, so each segment added to the experience of discovering more about this particular mythical story world. They allowed people to become immersed within an active search for information: each segment could add to this experience, but one did not necessarily have to experience all of these mediated *Blair Witch* modes to appreciate it.

The cult of *The Blair Witch Project* was a very significant phenomenon as it was an instance of what Henry Jenkins has termed "transmedia storytelling," which is not entirely new but is taking on greater importance in what Jenkins terms "convergence culture" (in which the digital mediascape intersects with older media and forms new relations). Jenkins describes the transmedia story as unfolding "across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole." He continues:

> In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained, so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. (Jenkins 2006: 96)

If *The Blair Witch Project* represents a low-budget film that began to utilize the web as a transmedia device to add layers to its mythic story world (and which then enjoyed a large cash injection to expand this process across a broader range of more traditional marketing platforms), then *The Matrix* represents a much larger-scale example. Jenkins argues that it "can be seen as emblematic of a cult film in convergence culture" (2006: 98), in that its story world was disseminated across a broad range of media platforms. Each platform was carefully thought about and designed in order to exploit the specific strengths of the respective medium, so that the more platforms one encountered *The Matrix* upon, the more one knew about the overall *Matrix* universe. The story world of *The Matrix* was dispersed among three feature films, two games, a series of comic books, and a series of *Animatrix* animated shorts, with each singular piece itself containing a wealth of detail that was designed to encourage speculation and discussion. In this, it succeeded in generating a cult following of fans who discussed how bits of the story world fitted together, the wealth of references scattered within the story, and its philosophical dimensions.

Transmedia storytelling is thus an important process that can lead to the broadening of a fictional universe and produce new routes by which fans can engage with each other to create cult status for a film. It is only one way, however, that cult status can be built up through fan response in the current media landscape. Just as "new media" does not entirely replace "old media," but is overlaid upon it to create new configurations, so modern processes through which cult fandom forms are overlaid upon more traditional patterns. This means that cult fandom becomes more visible, complex and variegated.

6

The Cult Auteur

The notion of the "auteur" is inextricably bound up with the arguments published by François Truffaut and his contemporaries within the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma* during the 1950s, though related polemics existed well before such formulations and continue to take place. The concept of the "auteur" is a very specific inflection of the broader notion of the "author," adapted in relation to the cinematic medium. While it specifically refers to particular definitions of authorship, it is often employed to denote "cinematic authorship" more generally, which is how we will be adopting it in this chapter. The word "auteur" seems more appropriate within the industrial world of cinema than "author" does, as the latter is more connotative of literary and/or solitary creation.

Within the world of cult cinema the auteur acts, like in many other areas of cinema, as a crucially important mode of evaluation and categorization. A browse through many cult film publications reveals the auteur figure as a commonly significant structuring principle. Both academic (e.g. Mendik and Harper 2000b; Jancovich *et al.* 2003b) and more populist texts (e.g. Vale and Juno 1986; Ross 1993) devote substantial attention to auteurist figures.[1] The cult auteur figure is also prominent across a number of cult publications and has proliferated with the rise of web-based resources: not only do many cult-based film sites focus attention on individual cult figures, there are also whole sites devoted to cult auteurs. In addition, the name of a cult auteur can be a useful marketing tool in the promotion of certain DVD titles.

The emergence of auteurism in the mid 1950s was itself a cultist provocation: while it had previously been common to attribute authorial status to directors of "art cinema" (including figures such as Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa and Roberto Rosselini), only a select few directors working within Hollywood had tended to gain such kudos (D.W. Griffiths and Charlie Chaplin, for example). A young bunch of critics (many of whom would become filmmakers associated with the French New Wave) at *Cahiers*, including Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Claude Chabrol, championed a number of Hollywood directors (alongside more respected European directors) as auteurs, many of whom had until then been considered only as skilled craftsmen (including Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, and Nicholas Ray). While many critics disputed approaches that singled out the "genius" of directors working within a highly standardized Hollywood system, such positions nevertheless proved influential. The most passionate advocate of this position was Andrew Sarris, an American critic who popularized auteurism as a mode of film evaluation, and also outlined the position in a more systematic way in his 1962 article "Some Notes on the Auteur Theory." Auteurism also made an impact in the United Kingdom, chiefly through the journal *Movie* and writers including Robin Wood, V.F. Perkins, and Ian Cameron.

Previous to auteurism – and as outlined by Greg Taylor (1999) – cultism tended to be identified with an elite cadre of critics (Taylor focuses on Manny Farber and Parker Tyler as exemplars) who were valuing aspects of popular culture and, in the process, individuating themselves as critical provocateurs. Auteurism was an extension of this, in that it valued selected aspects of popular culture in a discriminatory

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manner, treating commercial films seriously through identifying the traces of authorial creativity within an industrial product. As such, a number of attacks were leveled at auteurist critics for promoting a "cult of the director" – in which "bad" films of privileged directors were given more credit than "good" films of directors who were not considered auteurs.

Auteurism became popularized throughout the 1960s and it also influenced the emergence of Film Studies as an academic discipline within that decade. In the 1970s, however, auteur study became either questioned or modified. As more rigorous, theoretical approaches to the subject began to increase, romantic notions concerning "genius" directors began to be questioned. While studies of directors did not cease, they were supplemented by a number of other approaches (such as genre studies and psychoanalytic analyses). Increasingly, the study of authorship began to be posed in more theoretical terms, in which the "author" within a text became seen as a functional device to activate a particular type of reading (Michel Foucault termed this the "author-function'), rather than a "creative genius" who has managed to express her/himself within a highly collaborative medium.

The more romantic approaches which focused on the "cult of the director" can be seen to have continued largely outside of academia, though here the stance of critics such as Sarris, for example, were somewhat expanded and modified. While Sarris's arguments about the constancy of individual personality shining through related film texts can certainly be considered important in the establishment of the cult auteur, his remarks on technical competence highlight an area in which cultist celebration has been expanded. Sarris wrote that "the first premise of the *auteur* theory is the technical competence of the director as a criterion of value. A badly directed or an undirected film has no importance in a critical scale of value" (Sarris 1962/2000: 132). Competence is not always a skill demanded for cult celebration, however. The celebration of individual creators within cult filmmaking can therefore be thought of as a variation on more "classical" auteurism, and it is towards a fuller elaboration of how someone gets celebrated as a cult auteur, as well as who some of the more renowned figures are, that we now turn.

One particularly important thread feeding into the status of many cult auteurs is the importance of extra-textual information. Unlike in many cases of more traditional auteurism, where the actual biography of the individual was far less important than the connections running through a cinematic oeuvre, the celebration of a cult creator is often highly dependent upon his or her reputation. Biographical information and other types of activities that promote the visibility of a particular figure may be crucial in establishing a cult status. Yet the reputation constructed through both cinematic and other means must be of a particular kind: it often tends, for example, to have connections with anti-establishment themes in some manner (though this is not always the case). In this sense, celebration of cult auteurs is often underpinned by a romanticist creed: the idea of a lone, heroic figure battling against the odds to create works that are taken to heart by outsider audiences. If academic approaches to authorship very much moved away from romantic notions, cult auteurism arguably expanded such romanticism. Further, cult fans do not always locate the director as the core of creativity (although the director is the most frequently acclaimed auteur figure). Rather, and perhaps more suitably in relation to the multiple roles afforded by film production, they can sometimes acclaim other creative forces. In relation to cult cinema, the other most acclaimed "creator role" would undoubtedly be that of the producer/entrepreneur, because such figures have had a particularly important influence on cult cinema's developments and reputations. There are other important roles, too, such as special effects creators (think of the work of Ray Harryhausen, for example, or of Tom Savini), which we briefly discuss in Chapters 2, 18 and 19.

The "Romantic" Cult Auteur

While the cult auteur's reputation needs to be acknowledged by a wider cult audience, the actual auteur can also play a crucial part in building a reputation. John Waters, for example, is a figure who has carefully constructed his own cult image through carefully referencing other cult figures and texts (such as Kenneth Anger, Russ Meyer, Herschell Gordon Lewis), through carefully courting scandal through the press (in order to widely publicize his films via

controversy) and through carefully cultivating a public persona which enhances his auteur reputation (through numerous media interviews, cameo acting appearances, writing books and compiling music CDs, and even appearing as a stand-up raconteur, one appearance of which was filmed and released as *This Filthy World*). Roger Corman, while perhaps not to the same degree, has also paid significant attention to promoting and manipulating his status, including attempts to "enhance the Corman image" through tactics such as planting bogus stories in the trade press (Gray 2004: 28). Corman is, of course, famous as a prolific producer of exploitation pictures, particularly during the 1960s when he produced a number of Edgar Allen Poe adaptations and "rebellious youth" films such as *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip*. He forged his reputation through the types of films that he made (exploitation films), but also through the sheer *volume* of films that he produced (some of which he also directed): a combination of aesthetic factors and sheer longevity has led to his canonization by a number of cult film fans. Corman is a man who has done things his own way, constantly making films on a shoestring budget and extremely short schedules. His status has benefited from the fact that he has given career breaks to a number of directors who went on to become established names, such as Joe Dante, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese, who subsequently name-check him and thus increase his general standing. He has also managed to maintain his productivity during huge industrial changes: in the 1980s, as the VHS market took off, he slowly began making straight-to-video films and now mostly produces either these or television films. On top of these status-building components, Corman has exploited his own growing cult image through writings and appearances. His book, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* (1990), plays upon his maverick and persistent nature. In addition, he has made a number of appearances at cult-related events and – until recently – maintained his own web site, where once his cult standing was trumpeted through slogans such as the "Reigning King of Independent Cinema" and, even more tellingly, inviting readers to "join the Corman cult."

Romantic cult auteurs can operate outside of the "system," like Corman. On the other hand, they may gain a reputation for individuality by working within, but at the same time battling against, the system. The former category would include avant-garde artists creating challenging "avant-garde" films, such as Kenneth Anger and Andy Warhol (see Chapters 12 and 14); or directors/producers working in low-budget, "exploitation" pictures, such as Edward D. Wood Jr, Herschell Gordon Lewis and Lloyd Kaufman (see Chapter 13). A figure like Anger has built a distinct reputation through being part of Hollywood (as a child actor) and then luridly exposing it through his *Hollywood Babylon* books, which is a crucial part of his cult status. His films are then a further rejection of Hollywood in terms of their experimentation and their sometimes controversial nature (*Scorpio Rising* was considered "obscene" and was sometimes impounded by police at screenings). The figure of Anger himself also fed into his films: his homosexuality and his interest in the occult further strengthened his outsider status. Contrasted to Anger's intentional rejection of the social mainstream is Wood Jr's less conscious creation of an "alternative" oeuvre. Rather than rejecting cinematic mores, Wood Jr was too incompetent to reproduce them successfully, which in turn created a kind of warped distortion of the mainstream. Biographically, his homosexuality and penchant for cross-dressing has also contributed to his cult standing. His merging of outsiderness in both life and art thus sets him apart; as Puchalski writes, "Wood was seriously demented in both his life and his work, and that twisted enthusiasm oozes through every sprocket-hole of his films" (1996: 126). His acclaim as one of the world's worst filmmakers has cemented his cult credentials, though this was unfortunately an accolade bestowed posthumously. Wood Jr's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* was voted the worst film ever in *The Golden Turkey Awards* (1980), which also awarded him worst director (see Chapter 3). He was remembered more affectionately in Burton's romantic celluloid tribute, *Ed Wood* (1994), which introduced him to a newer generation of cinemagoers.

While these figures do not belong to the Hollywood "system," others have been seen as important for the way that they have battled with the system to get their own way, sometimes succeeding, sometimes not. Perhaps one of the most notorious is Alejandro Jodorowsky, who has mostly worked outside of

Hollywood but who has also dabbled – often unsuccessfully – with the mainstream. His cult standing stems from his *El Topo* gaining the reputation as being the first midnight movie cult but is not confined to this film alone. He also directed the remarkable *The Holy Mountain*, a bizarre concoction of occultism, surrealism, and demystification. He subsequently encountered his first battle with the mainstream when directing an eventually aborted film of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (David Lynch, another cult director, eventually directed it but also had an unhappy time with it). Until the release of *Santa Sangre*, on which he managed to attain creative control, his film career has consisted of a single film, *Tusk*, which he disowned as a "compromised" film. Admirers of his work agreed; yet while *Santa Sangre* was seen as a return to form after *Tusk*, it was followed by what was seen as his most mainstream work, *The Rainbow Thief*, which he disowned and after which he has yet to make another film.[2]

Jodorowsky therefore stands as a cult maverick: a mad visionary who is able to make strange and remarkable films if left to his own devices, but who falters if compromised by too many external constraints. In this sense, he can be considered a cult, rather than a "classical" auteur, in the sense that many of the directors hailed in the first wave of auteurism tended to be admired for the ways in which they adapted to the compromises of the studios and retained a personal vision. His status is, as is often common, further fuelled by an extra-filmic reputation, in this case his extraordinarily prolific and diverse artistic output: he has worked as a theater producer, a mime artist, a comic artist, a circus performer, and a Tarot reader among other activities and thus fits the mould of a hyper-talented individualist. As Keesey writes of Jodorowsky, summing up his rebellious persona: "Say what you will about Alejandro Jodorowsky, but one thing is certain: he is not just another Hollywood director" (Keesey 2003: 15).

Other figures connected more centrally to mainstream filmmaking can gain a reputation for their battles with the studios, or for fiercely preserving an egotistical control over the creation of a commercial product: these directors are "mainstream mavericks." The latter is relatively rare but certainly applies to Stanley Kubrick, even though he did experience losing battles in the earlier part of his career, most notably with *Spartacus* (1960), which apparently led him to exert greater "autonomy" on his subsequent directorial work (LoBrutto 1999: 193). He has gained a reputation among fans and critics for being meticulous and controlling, a status that is difficult to probe into deeply because he always managed to maintain high levels of privacy.[3] Like Kubrick, Orson Welles is a filmmaker who fits into both classical and cult auteur frameworks, thus emphasizing their similarities in certain cases. A child prodigy and, like Jodorowsky, a man of many talents, he astonished film critics with his premiere film *Citizen Kane*. Yet this was followed by a series of frustrating encounters with Hollywood. If some of these have been critically recuperated, Welles is nevertheless a figure who retains a tragic aura: a prodigious talent whose creativity and originality was crushed by Hollywood. Welles' films have often been called uneven and incomplete, grandiose failures (Tyler 1970), and his acting was often deemed "over-indulgent, over-bearing and over-blown" (Jancovich 2009). The two films that exemplify this best are *Citizen Kane* and *Touch of Evil*. *Citizen Kane* features prominently in overviews of cult movies because of its flamboyance, audacity, and boisterousness, but also because of its box-office failure (Peary 1981: 52). *Touch of Evil* was supposed to be the film that would rehabilitate Welles in Hollywood. Taken out of his hands before it was released, it has had a severely fractioned reception trajectory, its status oscillating between unequivocal masterpiece or *film maudit*. Its reception is still far from having reached a "final moment" (Peary 1989: 255–260). In the words of Parker Tyler, Welles "remains a Cult hero, a film artist of ambiguous successes; a lone wolf, as it were, whose egoistic failures have stacked up to make him both notorious and famous" (Tyler 1963: 381).

Both Terry Gilliam and Nicholas Ray can also be considered examples of mainstream mavericks. Gilliam's cult status was bolstered by his legendary battles with Universal after they decided to edit his *Brazil* into a more audience-friendly version with a happy ending (usually referred to as the "Love Conquers All" version). Gilliam wrote a full-page ad in *Variety* appealing to Universal's then chairman Sid Sheinberg to release his longer version and then began to privately screen his cut to critics. Universal

eventually released a longer cut after Gilliam's cut gained critical acclaim, while the battles over the film were documented in the film *The Battle of Brazil*, which was released on Criterion's laserdisc (and then on the DVD) edition of the film. Gilliam has continued to work within Hollywood and, despite encountering a number of further obstacles, has been seen by many as managing to creatively express himself within the industry. He has continued to experience many problems working within the Hollywood system: *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* was beset by production problems and eventually flopped, while he has also been involved with a number of projects that have yet to see the light of day, the most notorious being his attempt to film *Don Quixote*, which began filming but had to be abandoned as during the first week of shooting one of the principal actors suffered a herniated disc and a flood wrecked the set. Nevertheless, despite these problems Gilliam is seen as someone who can impose his creative vision within Hollywood, creating fantastical cinematic realms notable for their elaborate mise-en-scène, grotesque characters and frequent use of wide angles and tilted camera set-ups. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, like Kubrick, he is an American exile who has settled in Britain and therefore retains a sense of distance from Hollywood.

Nicholas Ray also had to endure adversarial studio interference with his movies, which eventually led him to become disenchanted with Hollywood. Unlike his contemporary Welles, Ray was never a superstar. Therefore Ray's were cult films often attributable to other factors besides his direction. For *In a Lonely Place* it was Humphrey Bogart; for *Johnny Guitar* it was Joan Crawford playing a female Western heroine; and for *Rebel without a Cause*, it was James Dean and the controversy the film caused in Europe (Biltereyst 2005). Still, as Alex Cox puts it "certain individuals become cult heroes on the basis of a body of work which has genuinely curious or idiosyncratic nature ... Nicholas Ray is one such director" (Cox and Jones 1993: 26).[4]

From these few examples it is clear that the mainstream therefore acts as a major framework *against* which the cult auteur is constructed. Within this framework there are three broad models: those working outside the mainstream; those vacillating between independence and commercial work (often demonstrating some kind of tussle with commercial forces), and those who manage to work within the system but who maintain what are viewed as excessive levels of control (the "mainstream maverick"). It certainly is in the latter area where the cult auteur tends to overlap with more traditional auteur conceptions. This is unsurprising considering auteurism was a critical intervention that aimed to locate creativity within the industrial restrictions of Hollywood cinema.

The Cult of the Dead Auteur

Within such broad models, there are further categories – or perhaps what we could call "career trajectories" – through which creative film workers can attain cult status. First, and this is particularly related to the aforementioned importance of biographical information, there is the director (or producer) whose life is cut short. The cult of individuality based around early death is something more established within the world of music, particularly rock music (see Thompson 1999), though it is a phenomenon that can be seen as spilling over to the world of movies. The romantic "live fast, die young" ethos that fuels the veneration of certain rock stars is probably more connected to actors than it is to directors or producers (see Chapter 7), yet there are some exceptions. An example is French director Jean Vigo, who was associated with the first wave of the French avant-garde, itself one of the first movements to be associated with cultist viewing practices (see Chapter 14). Vigo directed only two short films and two features before his early death, yet left behind a body of work that is considered to be particularly impressive. His film *Zéro de conduite* was a boarding school picture depicting rebellious children that laid the template for others to follow, in particular Lindsay Anderson's *If*....; it further gained cult credentials because it was banned in France until 1945. His association with anarchism also fuels an anti-establishment profile: his father, Miguel Almereyda, was a militant anarchist who died in prison in suspicious circumstances in 1917 (Le Cain 2002a) and critics have often read his films as reflections of these anarchic tendencies. The fact that his two features – cut and compromised – were complete

failures on their release yet resurrected to great acclaim after his early death from tuberculosis at 29, further established him as a tragic cult figure.

The early death can often feed into the cult credentials of an individual, but it needs to intersect with other factors (i.e. death in itself is no guarantee). If a figure is marginalized or ignored during his or her lifetime, then the discovery itself of a significant body of work can imbue the "discoverers" with a sense of exclusivity via the process of righting past wrongs and drawing attention to previously hidden wares. It can also lead to speculation about the films that could have materialized if death had not so abruptly intervened (as is the case with Vigo). This would also relate to the life of British director Michael Reeves who, after directing the cult British horror *Witchfinder General*, died when it seemed he was approaching his prime. Once again, trouble fitting within the film industry – he was having difficulty following up *Witchfinder* – led to depression and a barbiturate overdose at the age of 24.

Speculation about the kinds of films that a director could have made is a form of discourse that can feed into cult kudos. This is not always the case with dead directors – as noted, Gilliam's attempt to film *Don Quixote* is an instance of a living director being subject to "what if" speculation – but it is more marked in this area, possibly because there is no longer any chance of such a film being completed (at least by this particular director). Thus, many Kubrick fans have discussed what his proposed *Artificial Intelligence: AI* would have turned out to be and how it would have been different from the actual version eventually taken over and directed by Steven Spielberg (whom Kubrick requested). More recently French director Henri-Georges Clouzot has been the subject of such "what if" speculations, largely stemming from a documentary based around his unfinished film *L'Enfer*, during the production of which he died. Serge Bromberg's film *Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno* is the result of the filmmakers' cultist obsession with this unfinished film, as Bromberg went to great lengths to track down all the negative reels shot for the film, much of it pre-production test footage. It also offers new cultist perspectives on Clouzot because the material indicates that this was going to be a daring undertaking, with Clouzot testing out optical effects to simulate a mescaline trip and also pushing the boundaries of sexual representation (Lucas 2010: 70–73). (The importance of drugs in cult cinema is discussed in Chapter 15; and sexuality is discussed in Chapter 10.) Similar cultist speculation exists around unfinished "daring" work of Alfred Hitchcock (*Kaleidoscope*) and Jerry Lewis (*The Day the Clown Cried*) (McCarthy 2003: 45–47).

Curt McDowell is another figure who died early and has a cult following, though he is certainly not as respected a figure as Vigo. Rather, his reputation stems from his more trashy output and his continual hand-to-mouth existence. Strongly associated with George Kuchar, who he often collaborated with, McDowell merged underground camp with elements of pornography in many of his films. McDowell's status is linked primarily to his feature-length film *Thundercrack!*, which Jack Stevenson has dubbed "the world's only Underground porno horror flick" (Stevenson 1996: 239–240). In addition to containing a very bizarre combination of generic markers at the textual level, *Thundercrack!* has also gained a real cult status because of its reception. It has gained the status of one of the most "walked-out-of" films, a reputation firmly established by mass walk-outs at its screening at the 1976 LA Filmex festival (Stevenson 1996: 241). After its cult popularity among midnight movie audiences in the late 1970s, the film became difficult to see because of scarcity of prints and the absence of a video release (Stevenson 1996: 229). McDowell's continual poverty also fueled his outsider status; he continually struggled to express himself via the medium of film and died of AIDS at the age of 42. With the release of *Thundercrack!* on DVD, it may be that McDowell's cult reputation filters down into a new generation of film lovers seeking something out of the ordinary.

Self-conscious Cultism and Cult Salesmanship

The "self-conscious cult auteur" is a figure who carefully manufactures her or his image through continual reference to broader aspects of cult film culture. Tim Burton is a key example here: through making the early short animation *Vincent*, based upon his obsession with cult actor Vincent Price, through to his cinematic homage to Ed Wood and onto the creation of a big-budget take on low-budget exploitation flicks, *Mars*

Attacks!, Burton's taste in cult cinema has defined his cinematic identity. He is a director who wears his cult tastes like a badge and this means that he is also seen as someone who makes very distinctive, idiosyncratic movies within the mainstream of Hollywood (with occasional exceptions, such as *Planet of the Apes*, which he was unhappy with). Another example would be Joe Dante, a cult film buff who constantly references other films in his own studio productions. (See Chapter 22 for more on Dante.)

The individual creator who self-consciously identifies with all things cult and therefore hopes to imbue his own personality with cult kudos is not destined to succeed, however. The self-created personality must also meet with broader recognition and acknowledgement if this cult identity is going to gain credence. Some figures may be accepted as cult figures by some but not others; battles around the notion of authenticity may occur when a cult persona is seen as too obviously manufactured. Such debates about authenticity and worthiness regularly circulate around Quentin Tarantino, a director who constantly refers to other cult films and directors: his work is worshipped by a number of fans yet despised by other cinema viewers and critics. (See Chapter 22 for more on Tarantino and self-conscious cultism.)

Within the cult film universe the construction of the auteur can sometimes veer between the heavily romantic notion of authentic individualism and the more artificial, campy notion of personality as a hyper-exaggerated performance. Sometimes, though seemingly at odds, these diametric ideas may co-exist through the combination of performance and backstory. For example, accrued information about the life of a figure may indicate that, despite the emphasis upon artificiality and performativity within the construction of a persona and cultural objects, there lay a real heartfelt commitment to this performance (or perhaps more correctly a series of performances). This would seem to be the case for an auteur like John Waters, whose films are marked by exaggerated camp performance but who is nonetheless often perceived as a director with a singular vision which grounds his work in discourses of authenticity.

The self-conscious construction of a persona links to the idea of the auteur figure as a marketable sign. Timothy Corrigan has pointed out that, from its inception, "auteurism had been bound up with changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies" (Corrigan 2003: 96), that it was often a way of singling out a work among a mass of industrially produced cultural objects. Corrigan was here discussing the ways in which auteurism had become increasingly commodified, so that the director was increasingly becoming like a star. Yet areas of cult cinema – in particular exploitation cinema – have been linked to commercial practices for some time. This was sometimes foregrounded through the role of the entrepreneur, who could actually gain a devoted following through creatively engaging in commercial salesmanship. Such figures are not self-conscious cult figures in the way that the previously mentioned directors are. Rather than drawing on cult traditions in order to imbue their own work with cult values, these personalities have gained a reputation for establishing commercial practices that have been embraced within cultish circles.

While Dwain Esper and William Castle both directed films, it is in the realm of showmanship that they have really gained their cult reputations. Esper, for example, used a number of gimmicks to "sell" films to patrons as he took them on the roadshow circuit, including hiring "freaks" to perform in theater lobbies to promote *Freaks* in 1949 (Stevenson 2003a: 22). Castle, meanwhile, produced gimmicks galore in order to market his films, including giving viewers a number of props (fangs, special viewing glasses, cardboard axes), while arriving in a hearse for the premiere of *Macabre* and then placing himself in a coffin (Stevenson 2003a: 23). For *House on Haunted Hill* he created "Emergo," in which cinemas were installed with a large black box placed next to the screen, out of which, at certain points during the film, a 12-foot plastic skeleton would appear and be wired over the audience. For *The Tingler* he created "Percepto," which involved installing small motors inside selected theater seats that gave small shocks to viewers at appropriate moments in the film. Such stunts have led to him being acclaimed as "King of the Gimmicks," while John Waters goes so far to claim that "William Castle was God" (Waters 2003: 14).

The lauding of certain salesmen within cult circles shows that the auteur can sometimes be venerated for commercial activities. Such tactics are still different

from the "norms" of mass marketing, however. Within a saturated marketplace, cult figures creatively draw attention to their films, often without a substantial budget. Salesmanship here combines with a fiercely individualist belief in standing out from the crowd via outlandish behavior, bolstered further by the "outsider" status of the "little man" doing what he can to earn money in a field dominated by large commercial companies.

Female Cult Auteurs

Finally, one regrettable area in which cult auteurism does not differ from more traditional forms of auteurism, or from mainstream values as a whole, is in its marginalization of female figures. While many women may feature prominently in cult films, few creative figures become cult auteurs. During the classical period of Hollywood cinema women directors only sporadically received any recognition, let alone achieve a cult status. Among the isolated exceptions are Dorothy Arzner, whose *Dance Girl, Dance* is lauded as a cult film by Danny Peary (1981: 59–63) and some of actress Ida Lupino's films such as *The Bigamist* or *The Hitch-Hiker*.

Outside Hollywood, the situation is largely the same. One of the few exceptions to have gained a sustained cult reputation is Doris Wishman (see Gorfinkel 2000; Luckett 2003; Modleski 2007), who made a large number of sexploitation pictures (including "nudist" films and the more explicit, darker sex films known as "roughies") and worked in a number of creative capacities (including writing and production, as well as directing duties). *Deadly Weapons*, usually seen as her seminal film, is often regarded as a sharp, reflexive comment on the exploitation of women in cinema. The work of a female auteur like Wishman working within areas of filmmaking often accused of their sexist attitudes has, though, troubled some feminists and further points to the problematic status of the female auteur within the world of cult cinema. Artists such as Maya Deren and Yoko Ono too have achieved cult-like status with their work, but its reach is usually limited to avant-garde circles (see Chapter 14). Outside the United States too, there is little or no cult recognition for female auteurs. Adrian Martin (2008: 42) lists Chantal Akerman as a cult figure but he immediately adds that her appeal, which he largely links to one film, *Jeanne Dielman*, is restricted to "the university circuit." Directors such as Agnes Varda (*Le petit amour*), Catherine Breillat (*Romance*), or Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*) have experienced similar restrictions of their cult appeal.

In recent years, there appears to be a slight change towards more interest in female directors as cult auteurs. Some filmmakers, especially those active since the 1970s, have seen their work acknowledged as cult. Among them are Stephanie Rothman (who was honored as a guest at a 2002 trash cinema conference in Berkeley), Kathryn Bigelow, Rachel Talalay, and Catherine Hardwicke. Still, in most cases this recognition is the result of an aggregate of their films being celebrated as cult, and less because they are seen as auteurs. For example, Rothman's films such as *Velvet Vampire* and *Terminal Island* are highly regarded but are consistently discussed in conjunction with the production work of Corman. Similarly, Bigelow's *Near Dark* and *Blue Steel* have attracted cult receptions (Powell 1994; Daugherty 2002; Redmond and Jermyn 2003), though they are discussed more frequently as "genre cinema" (the vampire film and the cop movie), or, in the case of *Blue Steel*, even as a special instance in the career of scream queen Jamie Lee Curtis. Her subsequent films, such as *Point Break* or *Strange Days* are often regarded as "masculine" in tone, while this stage of her career is often judged as a result of collaboration with James Cameron, her partner at the time. As for Talalay, the strong cult reception of *Tank Girl*, which is a favorite of the Riot Grrrl subculture as well as in lesbian circles, the equally strong cult reputation of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series (of which Talalay directed episode 5 and produced 2, 3, and 4), and her productions of John Waters' *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby* have not led to a discussion of her work through the lens of auteurism (Whelehan and Sonnet 1997). The case of Catherine Hardwicke, production designer on *Tank Girl*, but more commonly known for directing teen drama *Thirteen*, skateboard movie *Lords of Dogtown*, and the first film of the *Twilight* vampire saga is exactly the same: each of these films has a distinct cult following (see Le Breton 2009; Bode 2010) yet no efforts have been made to approach Hardwicke's oeuvre from an auteurist perspective. If one compares

this to the rushed eagerness with which male directors such as Eli Roth or Quentin Tarantino are lauded through cult receptions, a picture emerges of cultism and auteurism as masculine (this is an element we will further investigate in Chapter 10).

Conclusion

Within film studies there has been a return to thinking about the importance of authorship (e.g. Gerstner and Staiger 2003; Wexman 2003). Previously, the excesses of auteurism had come under attack for the ways in which it simplified the complex collaborative environment of filmmaking, while poststructuralist ideas undermined the romanticized belief in artistic genius. If thinking about artistic creation in individualist terms may seem a relatively recent socio-historical phenomenon (Wexman 2003: 9), the possibility of it being done away with is not very likely, at least in the near future. Nicholas Rombes (2005) has pointed out that authorship within film culture has actually proliferated in the digital age, in particular with DVDs often coming with director's commentary, which may lead some viewers to assume the director as a more central creative force than she/he actually was. Catherine Grant has termed DVDs "auteur machines"; she claims that director's commentaries and other DVD extras tend to encourage a "comprehensive attentiveness or responsiveness to the film's authorial context" (2008: 111).

Authorship should certainly not be idealized; the realities of collaborative work, industrial limitations and socio-historical determinations need our acknowledgment. Nevertheless, some people do make greater creative contributions than others, and their status and impact deserves recognition. In addition, the broader role of auteur figures within filmmaking is important in both the marketing of some films as well as the reception of films by large numbers of people.

The auteur figure is therefore important to cult cinema: within a mode of film culture and reception contexts very much based around the discovery of idiosyncratic films that differ from the "mainstream" (or at least "discovering" hidden profundities within mainstream texts), and where viewers often seek out information about particular films, the need to locate creative human beings is often an inevitable outcome of such a quest. Certain films may attain a privileged status because of connections to a figure who has already gained cult status; on the other hand, a figure may gain cult status due to his or her connection with a film that becomes a cult phenomenon. Cult auteurism shares some similarities with more "classical" auteurism, but also differs in particular ways. It tends to exaggerate certain tendencies, so that technical waywardness or scandalous personal details can be perceived as a maverick disregard for the mainstream.

Notes

1. In addition, primarily cult-oriented film books that are marked by a pronounced auteurist angle include Mendik and Schneider (2002b) and Schneider (2003). Even Hoberman and Rosenbaum's *Midnight Movies* (1983), structured ostensibly around particular films, devotes extensive discussion to directors such as David Lynch, Alejandro Jodorowsky, George Romero, and John Waters.
2. He told the *Guardian* in 2007 that he was planning to make a $5 million gangster film starring Nick Nolte and Marilyn Manson but had thus far failed to raise the money (Brooks 2007).
3. This is now about to change as a vast array of archive material relating to Kubrick's work (comprising over 1000 boxes) has been donated by his estate to the University of the Arts, London. This will undoubtedly stimulate a new wave of Kubrick research and will possibly enhance his cult status even further.
4. Ray's last two films, *We Can't Go Home Again* (1976), made with his students at Binghamton University, and *Lightning over Water* (aka *Nick's Movie*) (co-directed by Wim Wenders, 1979) are cult objects mainly because of how they sketch Ray's last years: as a raging and frustrated eye-patched veteran, and a dying, musing artist respectively.

7

Cult Stardom

Analyses of stars have become increasingly prominent within film studies since Richard Dyer's seminal publication, *Stars*, appeared in 1979, though there have long been reflections on stardom included in biographies, sociological accounts, as well as poetic rhapsodies, to name a few examples. Actually defining a star, however, is not as straightforward as it may at first appear. Without going into too many of the complexities here, we shall nevertheless stress some important ways of distinguishing a star from an actor. We can think of an actor as a person performing a role (on the stage or on the screen). When audiences begin to identify the face of the actor and recognize her or his name, and thus form some assumptions about how the actor will perform, then they also become a public *personality*. Such distinctions did occur within the early years of cinema: first, a discourse on acting emerged within the cinema around 1907, and then "picture personalities" were discussed from around 1909 (DeCordova 1991). The "picture personality" referred to the naming of an actor and related knowledge about how that actor had performed within a number of films. Stars, though, surpass the personality in that their fame and personas are more extensive. DeCordova notes that whereas knowledge about "picture personalities" is limited to their onscreen activities, the star (which he claims arose around 1914) is formed by information about screen roles *and* their private, offscreen life (DeCordova 1991: 26). The star, then, can be thought of as a construction formed out of onscreen and other public performances, media discourses which purport to shed further light on the private individual, and the projected desires of audiences who invest in these personalities.

The Cult of the Movie Star

It could be argued that all stars have gained a cult following; by their very nature stars tend to provoke desire, adoration, identification, sometimes impersonation, which are often indicative of cult status. Stars will often elicit greater interest than any particular film that they are associated with, which is why they are so important to the industry in terms of promoting specific films. Nevertheless, we will delimit the scope of this chapter by focusing on a number of stars whose status is particularly relevant to cult cinema. Thus, when we do focus on stars whose celebrity has been very much part of mainstream culture, such stars will embody additional values that promote their cult status. The first of these is the idea of *precedence*, which brings us to a discussion of the rise of the star system within the film industry. We will focus on Hollywood here, as it is generally considered to be the most important industry through which the star system emerged. We should not, however, overlook the transnational nature of stardom. Not only did Hollywood import stars who had established themselves in other national contexts, but precedents to the Hollywood industrial promotion of stars, such as the Italian phenomenon of the "divismo," played an important role in the development of Hollywood's star system (Fischer and Landy 2004: 3).

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The emergence of Hollywood stardom is now an oft-told story: early performers were anonymous, a state partly influenced by the fact that many actors wanted to establish themselves in the more respectable realm of theater and did not believe that cinematic appearances would be good for their careers (though it was beneficial to their short-term finances). However, many viewers began to develop a curiosity about recurring faces in the films that they viewed and wanted to know more about these mysterious figures. While film companies were at first resistant to the promotion of their star actors, fearing that this would lead to increased salaries, they soon realized that the marketing potentials of promoting star players could outweigh any economic disadvantages. Furthermore, the increasing demand for information on various actors from an emergent fan base would have made it difficult to perpetuate an anonymous system. In 1910, Carl Laemmle – head of the Independent Motion Picture Company of America – publicized the name of Florence Lawrence. Lawrence had previously worked for the Biograph Company and had become known as the "Biograph Girl." Laemmle, aware of Lawrence's popularity, lured her away from Biograph and promoted her name in a publicity stunt: first he circulated rumors that she had been killed in a tram accident, and then placed advertisements in newspapers uncovering the hoax and announcing that Lawrence was alive, well and filming a new production. Thus, the beginnings of the Hollywood star system were intimately connected with death (albeit a fake death), a theme that constitutes a major thread in cult stardom and which we shall address later in the chapter.

Lawrence's popularity was soon to be surpassed by an actress that Biograph had hired to replace her: Mary Pickford, who was the most popular star in the first decade of Hollywood stardom and had become "the best known girl in America" by 1915 (Barbas 2001: 49). Pickford was even hired by the McLure newspaper to write an advice column (actually ghost-written) and, importantly, contributed to the creation of the star persona: a carefully managed public personality whose onscreen and offscreen traits consistently mirrored each other. According to Barbas, she stood as an exemplar of modern personhood, adored by fans as an "ideal" individual. She therefore had a huge fan base that passionately watched her movies, sought information about her, and sometimes modeled their own lifestyles on her (Barbas 2001: 47–52). The only other star during this period to challenge Pickford in terms of star power was Douglas Fairbanks, whom she married in 1920. These stars were truly important in the development of a "cult of celebrity," which has remained with us to this day, albeit in varying manifestations.

Mainstream Cult Stars

While all stars could be considered cult in the sense that they provoke dedicated, passionate followings, the "cult star" or "cult actor" tends to be distinguished by a number of qualities. Once again, the idea of the mainstream acts as a broad, fuzzy yardstick against which the cult reputation is forged. A number of mainstream actors/stars have, though, also established themselves as cult figures, though this is often because certain factors enable them to stand apart from other stars, creating a double-tiered status (as both mainstream *and* cult). This may be because of the longevity of their star status and a particularly marked, passionate following; or it may be because their offscreen lives are marked by tragedy or activities that are considered to be unusual. One of the most notable mainstream stars who also enjoys cult status is Humphrey Bogart. Bogart's star status turned decidedly cultic when he became the subject of revivals and intense interest in the 1960s: in France, cinephiles adored him, while his films became staple features on the US repertory circuit. He has also become the subject of impersonation within films, particularly evident in Godard's *À bout de souffle* and *Play it Again, Sam*, written by and starring Woody Allen. These films testify to Bogart's iconic status as a cynical, cool figure whose image and gestures exemplified an "ideal" personality linked to rebellion and machismo. He was, for example, a key feature in the celebration of masculine values by the "MacMahonists" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 25–30; also see Chapter 4).

Joan Crawford and Bette Davis were two mainstream stars who also crossed over into cult status. Both often played strong females and both were incredibly popular throughout much of their careers. Crawford was a popular star from the late 1920s until the 1950s,

first at MGM and then at Warner Bros, and had a considerable, devoted fan base. Davis's popularity was also at its height during the same period, although she also gained a reputation for being a combative personality and was often at odds with Warner Bros because of the roles they offered her. It was after Davis and Crawford's careers were in decline, however, that their cult reputations really began to develop. In their peak, they never appeared together: they detested each other and would sometimes battle for roles. In 1962 they were eventually paired up in Robert Aldrich's psychological horror film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* This movie, which was financially successful, became a cult film due to its camp histrionics and its self-reflexive plot concerning two ex-actor sisters who despise each other. Many read the film as mirroring the tensions between the two characters in real life, heightened when Davis was nominated for a best actress Oscar, which Crawford campaigned against. Their cult credentials were boosted further due to their appearances in low-budget pictures such as *I Saw what You Did* (starring Crawford), *Trog* (Crawford), *The Nanny* (starring Davis) and *The Anniversary* (Davis). Crawford also starred in *Mildred Pierce* and *Johnny Guitar*, both of which would develop cult followings. Her personal life was also increasingly beset by troubles: she became notorious for alcoholism, while the publication of *Mommie Dearest* by her daughter Christina after her death accused her of child abuse (this was later turned into a 1981 film that found its own cult following). Both stars' cult status would also be connected to their appropriation as camp icons (see Chapter 8).

Crawford and Davis had their cult status elevated through a number of processes which are important in enhancing cult reputations. The main overriding principle involved here is how it became clear to many fans that there were cracks behind the surface of their Hollywood-constructed personas, thus revealing the seedier underbelly of the Hollywood dream. Crawford, in particular, embodied a tragic life: though her onscreen heroines often had to deal with misfortune, her alcoholism and reputed abusiveness indicated a personal life in more turmoil than any of her celluloid characters. Davis was less tragic and more bellicose, although her reputation was enhanced by publicized clashes with the studios, which marked her out as a maverick individualist unwilling to be easily molded. Both stars also revealed, in their later careers, the difficulty of aging actresses retaining their former status as they struggled with roles in films that were minor in comparison to the fare they had appeared in during their heyday.

Personal tragedy, unhappiness, decline, and scandal are all important factors which can feed into cult reputations. For those who are skeptical of the Hollywood dream factory, such stories reveal the rotten core at its heart, hidden by a veneer of mendacious optimism. For those alienated by Hollywood's narratives of happiness, they may reveal stories which are more in tune with their own lives and hence offer a point of identification or empathy. The cult fan, in seeking out difference, can thus find in such factors a way to justify their love of mainstream filmmaking, even as they denigrate the system responsible for producing such films. They offer stories of real, authentic individuals who resist the industry's tendency towards standardization and thus are considered important contributors to the moments of creativity and humanity within Hollywood films. Fortunately for such fans, there are plenty of scandals to hit Hollywood, which has led some to view it as decadent and immoral rather than virtuous. This view of Hollywood was most infamously recorded in Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*, first published in Paris in 1959 (it was not officially published in the United States until 1975). *Hollywood Babylon* pieces together a large number of scandals to hit Hollywood, most notably death, drugs, and sex. The decade that Anger focused on in greatest detail was the 1920s, when scandal after scandal hit Hollywood and when it began to be perceived by moralists as a den of iniquity. This led to the intervention of Will Hays and the cleaning up of Hollywood, though scandal would never entirely desert its shores.

What separates *Hollywood Babylon* from other accounts of scandals is that it takes the "cult of scandal" as its point of departure. Instead of only identifying individual scandals, Anger, who had grown up in Hollywood and was able to recount firsthand information, gave the impression that Hollywood was intrinsically associated with scandals, and that sectors of the public held a morbid, cultish fascination for these scandals. *Hollywood Babylon* was deemed so unnerving

that Anger could only get the book published outside the United States, in France. Fittingly, it has since received a cult reputation itself. Among the most noteworthy scandals mentioned by Anger are the 1922 Fatty Arbuckle scandal, which is usually credited for instigating Hollywood's reputation as a "cesspool," and macabre stories circulating around the sudden deaths and tragic demises of film stars such as Rudolph Valentino, James Dean, and Judy Garland (these have developed into what Mikita Brottman has called "cults of death," see below). Later editions of the book also included the slaying of actress Sharon Tate by the disciples of Charles Manson. By then, Anger himself had been courting controversy by associating himself with members of the Manson Family and Hollywood-located Satanists – a surefire way to sustain his own cult reputation (see Chapter 12).

The Cult of Death

Death, perhaps more than any other factor, has contributed to many a cult reputation, or intensified the status of those who already enjoyed devoted followings.

This subject has been analyzed by Mikita Brottman (2000: 103–119), who claims that the fascination with celebrity deaths is rooted in a dual fascination with the star as a "revelatory body" and the intensification of individualism within the twentieth century. The former point refers to the way in which the cinema, following photography, was seen to emphasize the connection between self and bodily gesture, and for stars this connection becomes heightened, as the public reads much into how their screen bodies reveal deeper meanings. The latter point refers to how identity has become increasingly individualized, moving further away from a more collectivist notion of self, which itself leads to a greater fear of individual death. Thus, for Brottman, celebrity death engenders fascination because of the way the individual celebrity relinquishes their "revelatory" power in one sense, but manages to retain it in another:

> That public body, once so expressive and so intensely scrutinized, is abruptly transformed into a limp marionette... And yet somehow, paradoxically, this detached puppet still purports to be the eminently notable celebrity its strings once so publicly animated. Little wonder, then, that the death of celebrity ... should arouse such violent emotion, such voyeurism, such curiosity, such alarm. (Brottman 2000: 111)

The cinema embalms a performance in time, while performers themselves continue to be marked by temporal decay. Cinema therefore creates a visible disjunction between then and now, which is heightened by the number of photographic images of stars disseminated through promotional materials and the like. When a performer dies, this temporal separation becomes intensified and, for those investing in the star image, poignant. Chris Petit has argued that as cinema ages it becomes "a mausoleum as much as a palace of dreams," as an increasing number of dead stars are re-animated by film viewing (quoted in Mulvey 2006: 17). It is perhaps this morbid flip-side of the palace of dreams that appeals to cult viewers, drawn as they often are to the more perverse pleasures of film viewing.

Brottman discusses two stars in detail who have gained a particularly cultic presence due to their premature deaths, but who had already gained iconic status in their lifetimes: James Dean and Marilyn Monroe. For these stars, as with others, a number of materials revealing personal, previously unknown details, flourished after their deaths. Death is certainly good for sales, as various segments of the entertainment industry have discovered. The range of personal, often prurient, information that floods the markets after a star's death can then feed back into our readings of the films that they appeared in, so that the temporal disjunction previously remarked upon becomes a constitutive feature of the viewing encounter. We may begin to read into the films elements of their personal lives that have come to light, so that they become, in Brottman's phrase, "inadvertent documentaries on the subject of human mortality" (2000: 112).

A huge star in her time, Monroe's iconic status has shown little signs of diminishing. Immortalized in Andy Warhol's silkscreen prints in the 1960s, her image has continued to proliferate in popular culture, while many of the films that she starred in also continue to hold interest for modern audiences. Brottman examines *The Misfits* as a particularly interesting film in

relation to Monroe, stardom, and death. The film was a critical and commercial disaster, but has continued to exert a morbid fascination for many because it was Monroe's, as well as co-star Clark Gable's, last completed film before their deaths. Monroe was in a depressed state during the making of the film and was reportedly difficult to work with. The combined effects of alcohol, pills, miscarriages, and breakdowns, and continual rifts with her husband Arthur Miller (who wrote the script) were reflected in the film, in which she played a confused woman going through a divorce. Montgomery Clift, who also starred in the film, was also undergoing personal problems and would die six years after the film was released. A rather tragic film therefore becomes loaded with personalized sadness when the cult of dead stars is read back into it.

James Dean's iconic status was also boosted by his early death. While, as Claudia Springer argues, many who came of age in the 1950s are likely to consider Marlon Brando the ultimate rebel, it is Dean who has come to symbolize "rebel iconography" in general. Brando, who influenced Dean, continued to evolve and change his image, whereas Dean's image became frozen in time, locked in place by the car crash that prematurely ended his life in 1955. It was at this point, argues Springer, that "James Dean was born – not the twenty-four year old man who had died on the highway, but the icon whose image would become instantly recognizable around the world" (2007:16). His death gave rise to an incredible outpouring of public mourning, led to his image selling a vast range of consumer items, and has inspired his more committed fans to visit the site of his death each year to commemorate his passing (Springer 2007). Dean's importance to subsequent "rebel iconography" is particularly associated with his most famous film, *Rebel without a Cause*. The film was released when Dean died and his portrayal of a young, sensitive, cool, and rebellious teenager became a figure of identification for many teenagers who were feeling alienated by the prevailing conformity of 1950s America. The chicken-run scene, in which Dean jumps from his car just before it speeds over a precipice, became a symbol of his real-life recklessness and took on a poignant edge. It went on to capture the imagination of many more viewers from different generations and in a number of countries, thus cementing Dean's status as a rebel cult icon.

Dean and Monroe are large-scale stars whose cult status is guaranteed by iconicity and a mixture of longevity (of status) with tragic brevity (of actual existences). Another cult icon who could also be grouped into this category is Elvis Presley, though his status is primarily as a musician. While his films do have a cult following, it is largely due to the reputation that he secured within his musical career, which then spills over to his acting roles (see Chapter 16 for more on music and cult cinema). In more recent times, young stars on the verge of breaking into the mainstream film industry and who seemed on the cusp of a glittering career have become the subject of particular cult followings. One notable example is River Phoenix, who died at the age of 23. A dedicated campaigner for environmentalism and animal rights, Phoenix died in a high-profile drug overdose at The Viper Room, a club partly owned by fellow cult star Johnny Depp. His background, too, marked him out from the crowd in a different way: his parents joined a cult religious group entitled the Children of God when he was young and his troubled life has been linked to his experiences within the cult. His death provoked intense media coverage and fan mourning, and he ticks a number of boxes that recur in various areas of cult cinema: drugs, religious cults, left-field political beliefs, and a tragically early death. More recently, the early death of Heath Ledger has led to an outpouring of emotion and it could be that he will also develop a particularly marked cult status.

While death may be the most important factor that elevates the cult status of certain movie stars, there are other features which allow mainstream (or previously mainstream) stars to attain a cult status. While space does not allow us to go into detail here, we should mention some of these. They include *scandals*, such as Fatty Arbuckle's heavily publicized criminal prosecution, in which he was accused of the rape of Virginia Rappe and of contributing to her death. Although Arbuckle was exonerated, the scandal effectively ruined his career, a tragic story which has fed his cult reputation. *Sexuality* can also feed cult status, such as the heightened sexuality of Mae West, whose risqué persona pushed at the boundaries of acceptability within Hollywood and who is thus seen as a daring, controversial figure. Or cult status may relate to *sexual* or *racial difference*: for example, gay actors whose

orientation may only come to light at a later period due to the earlier illegality of homosexuality (Rock Hudson being an example here); or black actors who struggled to carve out a career, no matter how compromised, within a racially prejudiced system (such as Paul Robeson or, later, Sidney Poitier). There are also actors who, though not gay, become gay icons, such as Judy Garland (see Chapter 8).

Cult Actors

The cultification of the dead star can be considered one of three broad ways in which a mainstream star can gain a cult status. Alongside the mainstream star who gains a cult after they have died is the mainstream star who gains a cult status after they have faded from the mainstream (such as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, who moved from the mainstream to the margins of the exploitation circuit after their mainstream heyday). Finally, a few stars seem to attain the status as both a cult star *and* a mainstream star at the same time. This can occur when a star with a rebellious or non-conformist persona moves into the mainstream but retains much of their cult fan base: while some fans may lose interest in the star for "selling out," others may identify a star who has entered the mainstream on their own terms and who has retained a non-conformist, idiosyncratic aura. Johnny Depp could be considered as a example of such a star: previously considered a rebel (through scuffles, fights, and drunkenness) who acted in a range of quirky films (he has acted for cult directors such as Tim Burton, Jim Jarmusch, and John Waters), he has now settled down and become a bankable Hollywood star through his turn as Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. Yet he still retains an aura of idiosyncrasy and exudes an air of uncompromising artistry for many.

In contrast to many of the mainstream cult stars mentioned thus far, however, are a number of actors much more recognizable as cult actors through and through, in the sense that they are not stars in the conventional sense. Some of these may have stronger connections with mainstream cinema than others, though most of them are better known as cult figures due to establishing reputations within "marginal" cinemas such as exploitation, independent, underground, "Art House" cinema, or "B" movies (of course these categories also criss-cross at certain points). Some of these actors can be particularly obscure and gain a reputation through small-scale championing.

Maria Montez, for example, was a Dominican-born actress who appeared in a number of Technicolor "costume adventure" pictures, such as *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *The Cobra Woman*. She tended to play exotic, seductress characters and was known as "the Queen of Technicolor." While critics tended to dismiss her acting abilities (not often helped by the type of pictures that she appeared in) she developed a dual cult following. First, she was adored by the people of the Dominican Republic as a figure of national pride, and even has an airport in Barahona (her birthplace) named after her; secondly, she was also appropriated as a camp icon (see Chapter 8). Her camp appeal was stimulated by underground filmmaker Jack Smith, who penned an extraordinary eulogy to her entitled "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez" (Smith 1962/3). Smith opposed the critical consensus of Montez as a "bad actress": "She believed and thereby made the people who went to her movies believe. Those who could believe, did. Those who saw the World's Worst Actress just couldn't and they missed the magic. Too bad – their loss" (Smith 1962/3: 28). Rather than judging her by the criteria of "acting ability," he asserted his own reasons to value her which were much more based around the *cult of personality*. For Smith, she encapsulated what almost amounted to a system of values, as though she were an essential reflection of the things that he believed in: "moldiness, Glamorous Rapture, schizophrenic delight, hopeless naivete, and glittering technicolored trash!" (1962/3: 28, capitals in original). This was clear in his own films, which were lo-fi attempts to recreate the exotic world that Montez, for him, captured.

In a similar manner to Smith's eulogizing of Montez, actress Rose Hobart also became the unlikely subject of an avant-garde artist's attentions. In 1936 artist Joseph Cornell made a film of Hobart after buying a film that she starred in – *East of Borneo* – for watching at home. He became so enraptured with her that he created a film, *Rose Hobart* (Figure 7.1), compiled entirely from moments in *East of Borneo* that she



Figure 7.1 Rose Hobart from *East of Borneo*, which was recontextualized in Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart*.

appeared in, and manipulated these original moments by slowing down the speed, tinting the print blue, and accompanying images with a musical soundtrack (thus dispensing with the original film's dialog). The film, then, tends to fetishize the image of Hobart and is a way of enabling viewers to pay sole attention to the movements and gestures of Hobart herself, and to perceive them in a new light, as though liberated from the original film that they appeared in. Further, as Janet Staiger argues, it is a way of "Othering Hobart by decontextualizing her from the film and yet locating her in the jungles in which everything else is 'other'." She further states that "Cornell's arrangement produces a withdrawal of meaning while investing Hobart's image with new sense and sensuality" (Staiger 2005b). This is in line with many other art works that Cornell produced, in particular the collection "boxes" that he is most reputed for, which were often based around images of stars, including Lauren Bacall, Greta Garbo, and Jennifer Jones.

As exploitation filmmaking, and particularly the fantastical-related areas of it, has strong links with cult cinema (see Chapters 13 and 19), it is no surprise that a number of actors heavily associated with such films have gained strong cult reputations. These actors include Boris Karloff and Béla Lugosi, primarily for their association with the classic Universal horror films of the 1930s (and, importantly, for their roles as Frankenstein's monster and Dracula, respectively), but also because of their subsequent careers within which they remained associated with exploitation material. Karloff, for example, appeared in a number of Corman productions later in his career, including Bogdanovich's *Targets*, a remarkably self-reflexive film about Karloff's position as a cult actor. Lugosi, meanwhile, cut a more tragic figure as he became increasingly typecast. Falling into poverty and addicted to heroin, he ended up featuring in a number of Edward D. Wood Jr's micro-budget productions, including *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, which featured posthumous archive footage of him.

Karloff and Lugosi were employed by segments of the exploitation industry because of the cult values accrued from their iconic status as classic monsters, but the emerging exploitation circuit in the 1950s and 60s also created its own star figures. Vincent Price, for instance, is a good example of an actor who both William Castle and American International Pictures (AIP) employed because of his star value, which enabled them to create films likely to find larger audiences because of the presence of a recognizable icon (Heffernan 2004: 90–112). Price's connection with Castle – in films such as *The House on Haunted Hill* and *The Tingler* – and AIP – in a number of its Poe adaptations – bolstered his cult appeal. Such appeal was also heightened in some sectors because of Price's camp qualities (see Chapter 8) and his particular acting style. In terms of acting, Price is renowned for his "hammy" style, which denotes an over-exaggerated acting mode (Figure 7.2). "Ham" is generally a term of abuse that refers to actors who do not have a very broad range of acting skills, and who thus tend to compensate through excessive facial and bodily gestures, which can render particular scenes bathetic. Yet ham can also be celebrated by cult fans because, rather than viewing ham as a failure to match the criteria of "professionalism," they sometimes view it as an *alternative* form of acting that contains more personality than many more respectable performances. This is not the case with *all* ham acting, and here the filter of subjectivity must enter the unpredictable field of evaluation. As Jack Stevenson argues: "ultimately ham is in the eye of the beholder: one person's divinely inspired ham is what another might deem complete garbage. It's an area of total subjectivity, which is why it is such an affront to critics" (Stevenson 2003c: 71). Certainly, subjectivity is a crucial component of such evaluation, but we must also add to Stevenson's assertion that broader cultural considerations must also



Figure 7.2 Vincent Price hams it up as he pretends to undergo the impact of psychedelic drugs in *The Tingler*.

be taken into account here, in particular the notion of "cultural capital" (outlined in more detail in Chapter 5), for broader cultural and social systems will to an extent shape a person's subjectivity.

Artificiality and Individuality

Price is an actor who, if he does embody ham, would seem to do so in a self-conscious manner at times. In many of the Poe adaptations, for instance, it is as though Price is aware of how he is expected to act, and plays up to these expectations of himself. While such play acting may at times be dismissed as self-parody, there is more to be said about it: in such performances there can be a consideration of an audience which is important for the cult actor, who may well cultivate her or his cult status among a particular fan base through solidifying a public persona. Mathijs (2011a, 2011b) has noted how cult actors often create formalist, rather than realist, portrayals. Thus, instead of "authentically" becoming lost in the characters that they are playing, they retain the tics and quirks that specialized audiences expect them to display. According to Mathijs qualities constitutive of formalist acting such as copying and ostentation are part of *referential acting*: "Referential acting includes homage, quotation and allusion. It offers the opportunity to include the magician's tricks: winks, nudges, signature gestures or direct address" (2011a). Referential acting highlights self-conscious qualities, and allows audiences "in the know" to register the ways in which the actor is referencing their own, as well as others', styles.

For a segment of cult fans, repetitious performances can provide pleasure rather than suggesting a lack of range. Pleasure can arise from viewing the same persona manifest itself in different filmic environments, in which subtle differences and qualities can be identified by avid, invested audiences. Certain actors become particularly cherished for acts or traits that evidence an identifiable style, a kind of authorial trace that they leave upon the films they appear in. These can include the manic tics and feral stare of Klaus Kinski, the quirky neuroticism of Jeff Goldblum, the physical athleticism of Bruce Lee, or the stately authority of Christopher Lee. Repetition can also prove pleasurable in terms of recurrent situations that some actors become entangled within. A key example here would be Giovanni Lombardo Radice, an Italian actor who has appeared in a number of low-budget horror films. A relatively obscure actor who is only known by sectors of horror fans, he has played a range of different character types, but has become known for his spectacular and gory deaths. As Patricia MacCormack (2004: 107) has observed, between 1980 and 1992 he appeared in ten horror films, of which seven included him being violently killed (while being mocked, wounded, and beaten in another). Any follower of the actor, then, becomes aware of him signifying not a "certain role, style or quality of acting, but a certain possible affect due to the probability of a visceral death" (MacCormack 2004: 108). In this sense, followers of Radice will watch one of his films with the expectation of a gory death, an expectation which may or may not be fulfilled.

The recurrence of performance gestures, role types and filmic situations can lead some fans to become highly conscious of intertextual connections evident within particular performances, which then leads to them being viewed in the context of a wider oeuvre (for more on intertextuality and cult film, see Chapter 21). This feeds into the aforementioned *self-conscious* performance style where actors will often reference other texts (which may or may not be their own performances). Bruce Campbell, who has gained a particularly dedicated cult following without ever becoming a Hollywood staple, is an actor who

certainly is well aware of his own cult status. This is evident through the ways in which he will sometimes obviously reprise his over-the-top, comic style within numerous cameo roles, but is most marked by the fact that he has played himself within a film based around him, entitled *My Name Is Bruce*. In this film "Bruce Campbell" gets mistaken for Ash, the character that he played in *The Evil Dead* films, which catapulted him to cult status. The self-conscious nature of an actor playing his or her own "self" is also a salient feature of the cult film *Pink Flamingos*, in which Divine plays Divine, even though Divine himself was only a constructed persona. Divine also parodied other stars within his own performance, such as Jean Harlow, Mae West, and Jayne Mansfield (Harries 2004: 155). Such self-conscious performances often draw attention to the artificiality of acting, which sharply distinguishes them from "method" approaches, in which the actor attempts to lose her or himself in the character.

A particularly interesting cult actor who developed a self-conscious style is Peter Lorre. Lorre made his name in Germany, coming to prominence as a child killer in *M*, and who came to Hollywood in 1935. Even though he was promoted as a star he proved difficult to cast in leading roles, tending to play either bit parts in major films or bigger parts in cheaper films, often "B" movies. Yet, even though he was never a star as such, he did, as Sarah Thomas argues, possess "cinematic value and he remained an important screen commodity, partly due to his recognisable persona" (Thomas 2007). This status as a well-known personality who nevertheless never established himself in the way he had liked, undoubtedly fed his cult status. This status was also linked to the repetitious element of Lorre's acting, as mentioned above: his performances frequently drew on a limited range of recognizable traits and gestures, including abrupt shifts from meek to sinister, soft speech patterns juxtaposed with sudden outbursts, and the movement between a blank expression and exaggerated facial contortions (Thomas 2007). Thomas argues that these repetitive elements of Lorre's performances were particularly self-reflexive and were a means of compensating for his marginal status. Thus, in *The Maltese Falcon*, he develops a distinctly recognizable vocal style so that he is still a crucial presence within the film, despite spending much screen time with his back to the camera. Lorre's persona, then, was very much tied to his position within the industry and often refers to his own status as a performer.

Hammy, self-conscious, and formalist styles can be related to the notion of *excess*, in that they exceed particular norms (of professional standards, of realist modes). Another important excessive element in the repertoire of the cult actor is *intensity* and/or *insanity*, which can often carry over into the off-screen persona of the actor. Klaus Kinski, who we have already mentioned, is loved just as much for his reported antics on film sets as he is for the performances that make it into the final cut. His insane fits are legendary and were an important part of the appeal of the documentaries *Burden of Dreams* (which documents the making of Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*) and *My Best Fiend* (in which Herzog focuses on his relationship with Kinski). Even his personal life seems to be exaggerated, as was the case with his (purportedly highly fabricated) autobiography *All I Need Is Love* (1989). In this sense, the cult actor's actual life becomes an extension of his or her on-screen persona (or at least vice versa). Other actors particularly known for their intensity and/or insanity include Dennis Hopper and Crispin Glover, who have both appeared within offbeat projects as well as more mainstream fare.

Excess can also inform the personas of cult actors in terms of the sheer amount of films that they have appeared within, and/or their association with a particular type of film. If an actor has appeared in a large number of films in a supporting or marginal role, it can provide cult fans with the potential to seek out as many appearances as possible, comparing nuances of performance in relation to the films as a whole. Often, actors predominantly associated with the fantastical/horror film tend to inspire interest in this regard, as fans of this mode of filmmaking are more reputed to seek out exhaustive details. Examples would include Mexican wrestler El Santo (Rodolfo Guzman Huerta), who crossed over into acting and starred in a large number of cult wrestling horror films; Barbara Steele, who became a fan favorite through her appearances in Italian horror films and for exuding an air of mysterious beauty; and Spanish actor Paul Naschy, who has appeared in a large number of horror-related films, and who has also written and directed a number of

films in this genre. Naschy himself was a fan of the horror film, but other actors became associated with the genre more through accident: Donald Pleasance, for example, after appearing in more respectable material in his earlier career, featured in a great deal of low-budget horror movies. Fellow British actors Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee also became cult actors for their horror-related roles, in particular through the work that they undertook for Hammer studios between the late 1950s and 1970s (though Lee often bemoans that people frequently overlook his parts in other types of films).

Conclusion

A huge number of actors and stars can be linked to notions of cult due to the ways in which they exert fascination and often accrue fan followings (see Chapter 5). In contemporary society this is linked to a "cult of celebrity," in which celebrities in general often assume hyper-real qualities through intense media scrutiny. Undoubtedly, Hollywood stars have played a central role in the cult of celebrity during the twentieth century, and continue to do so into the twenty-first century. The star can take on a particularly cultic aura because of the personalized relationship that a fan constructs between themselves and a star image, and/or through the fondness for particular stars within cult communities. In the digital age an intense relationship between fan and star can be extended, as it is now easier to extract the star image from its surrounding environment. Laura Mulvey has argued that this leads to the notion of the *possessive spectator*, who can use video or DVD players to halt the linear narrative and gain a heightened relation to the body of the star: "Halting the flow of film extracts star images easily from their narrative surroundings for the kind of extended contemplation that had only previously been possible with stills. From a theoretical point of view, this new stillness exaggerates the star's iconic status" (Mulvey 2007: 161).

Despite the cult of stardom, cult stars and/or cult actors can still be differentiated from more general stars, although such demarcations can vary according to context. Such differences will often hinge upon a conceptual imagining of the mainstream, in which the actor/star represents values and/or styles that differ from – or perhaps transcend – the norms associated with the mainstream. While the cult actor may be most commonly associated with areas of filmmaking that exist on the fringes, or outside, of the mainstream, there are also – as we have shown – a number of mainstream actors who are also cult actors. The mainstream star can also become a cult star through a broad process of *double coding*, so that they have a more general star status, but also a status among niche groups for different reasons. This double coding often occurs at separate temporal junctures: so a cult following may develop around the star *after* their mainstream status has waned. Less commonly, a mainstream star can also attract a cult following during the height of their popularity.

8

Camp and Paracinema

"Camp" and "paracinema," alongside partially related concepts such "trash" and "kitsch," have frequently been used to refer to a range of cult cinema practices. Camp is a term that has a long history of usage which extends far beyond cinema itself, whereas paracinema is a word that more specifically applies to cult cinema. In this chapter we will outline some of the main concepts that have been associated with camp and briefly reference its applicability to cult cinema, before more fully investigating the concept of paracinema and "trash" film.

Camp

While camp as a term became well known during the 1960s, it has a much longer history. According to Cleto, it first entered the language in a Victorian dictionary of slang and referred to "actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis . . . used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character" (J. Redding Ware, quoted in Cleto 1999: 9). Deriving from the French term *se camper* ("to flaunt"), it became associated with homosexual subcultures in the early twentieth century, as a type of communication between people "in the know," which could signal their (at the time illegal) sexual orientation (Benshoff 2007: 202; Cleto 1999: 9). The act of role-playing, of performing in a deliberately exaggerated manner to communicate with a particular group of people who understand such gestures, is still important in understanding camp. It has, however, extended beyond such initial understandings to become a much more complex term: it is, as Benshoff has argued "a confused and confusing term" (2007: 201); while Cleto claims that because it has different uses it should not be defined in a strict manner, as its meanings can alter according to the contexts within which it is operative (1999: 16).

One of the most well-known, and cited, articles on camp was written by Susan Sontag in 1964. This was a period in which camp was becoming much more visible within various sections of popular culture, and Sontag's piece helped to aid a particular understanding of camp. While earlier twentieth-century understandings of camp associated it with homosexuality, Sontag argued that it was much more than homosexual taste, even though homosexuals "by and large, constitute the vanguard – and the most articulate audience of – Camp" (2008: 51). Sontag articulated camp as both a mode of appreciation and a feature of objects. As a mode of appreciation, it is an approach that emphasizes artifice and exaggeration (2008: 43) and, as such, challenges dominant notions of *taste*: instead of appreciating what is considered to be conventionally "beautiful," or praising art works that contain deep meanings, camp transforms notions of beauty through stressing the importance of surface style. Camp privileges artificiality over the "natural," which stems from homosexuals' keen awareness, as minority outlaws, of gender being not a natural condition but rather something that is *performed*. Therefore, the camp persona adopted by many gay men exaggerates mannered gestures in order to foreground all gender roles as artificial constructions: that is, they are culturally learned as opposed to biologically inherent. Further, this mode of appreciation also has roots in gay men's

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feelings of alienation from dominant social norms: as a minority, excluded group, they exert power through finding value within objects that have been devalued by prevailing regimes of taste. Andrew Ross has written that "Camp ... involves a celebration by the cognoscenti, of the alienation, distance, and incongruity reflected in the very processes of which hitherto unexpected value can be located in some obscure or exorbitant object" (Ross 2008: 56). This leads to a cultish celebration of marginal artifacts in which "those who are otherwise dominant are, for once, excluded" (Cleto 1999: 31).

Appreciation of artistic film works as camp, then, can privilege film genres which are considered to be very much opposed to realism, such as the musical, melodrama, and horror, or films which are cheaply made and therefore do not disguise their artifice very well (Benshoff 2007: 203). There are also a number of stars who were appreciated as camp, including Mae West, Joan Crawford, and Bette Davis, due to their "indefatigable drive and bigger than life personas" (in which performativity is stressed) and also because of their "subordinate (but often resistant) position within patriarchal culture, and their frequent romantic troubles with men" (Benshoff 2007: 2003). A particularly important camp-cult star is Judy Garland, who Richard Dyer (1986) has examined in detail. For Dyer, any star can be read *as* camp, but Garland was also a star "who expressed camp attitudes" (1986: 179). Garland's cult reputation revolves around her child and adult career, and the pathos surrounding her comeback in the 1950s. As Wade Jennings (1991: 94) writes: "After the success of *The Wizard of Oz*, a persona was established on record. Dorothy's wistfulness and childlike candor became permanently tied to the Garland screen persona." Peary's comments on Garland encapsulate the ambiguity encapsulated in this persona perfectly:

> Much of the Oz cult among adults is a result of Judy Garland, so young, so innocent, so pretty ... Watching Garland today, and knowing how scared she was at the time, how uncomfortable she was in her tight strap, and how soon after her body would become messed up because of a growing dependency on speed and sleeping pills, our feelings must waver – between *delight* in her dynamic yet touching performance under trying conditions and *grief* that we are seeing the role that launched her into the world of superstardom she never was able to handle (Peary 1981: 393).

The cautionary tale of Garland's breakdowns, demise, failed comebacks, premature death, and quasi-sainthood, is a recurrent trope in camp. It pitches the poor defenseless child against an evil, faceless corporation, but it also portrays an irresponsible professional against the people who supported and cared for her (Kaufman 1994; Friedrich 1986: 346–349).

Camp followings, especially those of (former) child actors, are often deeply involved in identity-affirmation (Figure 8.1). Such involvements are combined with anxieties over the cultural appropriation of visual representations of child actors. In her study of the gay cult of Judy Garland, Janet Staiger details the similarities between public perceptions of Garland's adult "nervous exhaustion," "intensity," "insecurity," and "elf-like androgyny," and contemporaneous views of gays in American culture. She proposes that this similarity might be one of the reasons for the prominent queer cult appeal of Garland, articulated through organizations for gay liberation such as the Radical Faeries (Staiger 1992: 154–177). In more recent years, to the gay cult of Garland has been added, at least partially, a lesbian cult, one that departs from *The Wizard of Oz* and Garland's character of Dorothy, but which has increasingly focused on the "Wicked



Figure 8.1 Through the cult and camp following for *The Wizard of Oz*, the Wicked Witch of the West (Margaret Hamilton), Dorothy (Judy Garland), and Glinda, the Good Witch of the North (Billie Burke) have become identity affirmers for fans.

Witch of the West" Glinda. As Alexander Doty (2000: 51) writes: "I enjoyed the Wicked Witch of the West as another camp figure: she was a scary, tough butch dressed in black." The cult appeal of the theater musical *Wicked*, which takes the witches from *The Wizard of Oz* as its focus, has broadened this embryonic lesbian theme into a full-fledged mode of viewer engagement. These days, the lesbian appeal of *Wicked* and *Oz* is widely acknowledged (see Chapter 10). Tellingly, the Garland cults refer equally to her adult life and to the significance of her formative years – crucial in the formation of sexual identities. Similar anxieties can be found in the fandom surrounding Nathalie Wood and Shirley Temple, and the collectible-heavy fandoms of Deanna Durbin and Margaret O'Brien.[1]

Garland also became aware of her gay following and was well versed in gay culture, and these fed into her later performances. An awareness of her campness could, according to Dyer, be read back into her earlier film performances. They could do so in two main ways: first, knowledge of her working relations – in which the surface glamour of performativity clashes with her personal pain and hurt – became increasingly well known among sections of her gay followers; secondly, he argues that many of her performances can nevertheless be read as camp without this knowledge, as many of her roles – such as in Minnelli's *Ziegfried Follies* and *The Pirate*, and *The Wizard of Oz* – contain elements of theatricality, parody, and obvious artifice (Dyer 1986: 181). Garland's status as a camp icon became crucially heightened by the fact that her funeral (June 27, 1969) – attended by many gay men – occurred at a similar time to the Stonewall Riots (June 28, 1969), which have been linked to the emergence of gay rights activism (see Chapter 10).

Dyer's distinction between a star being read as camp, and a star embodying camp, deserves further consideration as it relates to how camp can be both a property of objects/people, as well as a mode of perception. Garland, and other stars, may embody camp because they are aware of the camp readings that have been inscribed upon them and they, in turn, actively incorporate camp into their persona as a willing participant in a kind of camp contract. Camp can also be considered to be a property of non-human objects, including films themselves. It is here where camp partly overlaps with "kitsch," which generally refers to art that is aesthetically deficient, particularly mass-art objects which are seen to tastelessly mimic other – more valuable – works. As such, kitsch is a pejorative term which is often used to denote the opposite of genuine art (as it does, for example, in Clement Greenberg's 1939 article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"; see Greenberg 1986). Nevertheless, since the growth of camp, kitsch objects themselves can be reclaimed through camp evaluations. So, even if kitsch is employed more frequently as a negative term, it is not always so (and neither is camp always used as a positive term): once again, the context of use is an important factor in the meanings of such terms. Kitsch, however, does tend to refer to the properties of an object, whereas camp is a broader term that, while it can be seen as existing within objects and as a trait of people, is more commonly thought of as a way of reading or communicating.

Susan Sontag actually identified two forms of camp, a distinction that has much commented upon: "naive camp" and "deliberate camp" (2008: 46). Naive camp refers to works which are not meant to be camp, but which are in fact attempts to create something straight, serious. However, such works are seen to fail in their attempts to be serious, and also contain a requisite degree of extravagance, ambition, and passion, which opens them up to camp readings. Sontag lists Busby Berkeley musicals such as *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933* as examples of naive camp. The elaborate swimming pool choreography that follows from the song "By a Waterfall" in Berkeley and director Lloyd Bacon's *Footlight Parade* is among the most extravagant possible. Deliberate camp, on the other hand, is camp "which knows itself to be camp" (Sontag 2008: 46). Thus, if naive camp is camp purely by dint of its appropriation as a camp artifact, deliberate camp is intentionally designed as camp. The first is camp through its readings only; while readings inevitably must affect the second (people must be able to perceive its camp intentions for its status as such to be established), such readings are not the sole dimension of its camp identity. Films that have often been singled out as deliberate camp include *Barbarella*, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, *Performance*, most of the films directed by John Waters, plus other underground works from filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger, George Kuchar, Jack

Smith, and Andy Warhol (see Chapter 13). However, neatly distinguishing between naive and deliberate camp can present occasional problems: if different people involved in a film quarrel over whether it was designed as camp, then how do we ultimately gauge whether it was deliberately produced as camp? Jack Stevenson has written how *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* – often cited as an example of deliberate camp – was nevertheless not interpreted as such by all viewers: some just saw it as bad, while others perceived it as a serious melodrama on its release (2003d: 116). Thus, both intentions and perceptions are never entirely straightforward. For instance, films such as critic Roger Ebert's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and writer Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckenridge* can both be interpreted as parodies of camp criticism (the novel *Myra Breckenridge* mentions critic Parker Tyler a few times explicitly). For Andrew Ross, these films are camp in attitude while also exposing that camp-ism (Ross 1989: 153).

Sontag also argued that time can play an important role in judging particular works as camp. The passing of time, she wrote, can provide us with the requisite distance to judge something as camp: "Time may enhance what seems merely dogged or lacking in fantasy now because it resembles too closely our everyday fantasies" (2008: 48). While we may judge more harshly failures in contemporary works of art, time can provide detachment and transform banality into the fantastic: "things are campy ... when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt" (2008: 48). Jack Stevenson links this temporal aspect of camp to nostalgia, or at least – in keeping with camp's "artificial" sensibility – a simulated form of nostalgia: "camp is not just nostalgia, but rather a distillation of its pleasurable essence. It is the sweetness of nostalgia detached from the overpowering personal memory that drives one to tears ... It's an appreciation of the *feeling* of nostalgia detached from any specific personal memory" (2003d: 113).

The importance of distance, and time, to camp appreciation links camp to a love of "bad movies," movies which often date from an older time. In particular, the 1950s is a decade that has proven ripe for camp cultism, whether it is in the many sci-fi and horror movies which have been reappropriated as camp texts, or whether it is through filmmakers – John Waters being an obvious example here – using the decade to feed into their own deliberate camp works. Alison Graham has written that the cultist embrace of the 1950s stems from "a kind of tragic irony. The perceived distance between the so-called fifties 'innocence' and a contemporary cynicism" (1991: 110). Certainly, this nostalgic distance is an important part of a camp celebration of bad films, though it is not the case that camp celebration necessarily entails such temporal distance. An example would be the more recent post-camp celebration of Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (Bissell 2010). After a brief unsuccessful run in Los Angeles during which viewers ridiculed the film in the presence of its director, *The Room* found an unexpected audience across North America at midnight screenings in art house theaters and on college campuses, where viewers began celebrating it as an ironic masterpiece – an antithesis of professionalism and craftsmanship. During such screenings, people shouted at the screen (yelling "Alcatraz!" at stock shots of San Francisco), and threw spoons and footballs around. Wiseau, who kept occasionally attending screenings, wisely embraced the newfound following and has since claimed *The Room* was always intended to be a pitch-black comedy – as the DVD proudly labels it. And neither can camp be reduced merely to the "bad film subculture" that Ross identifies as a crucial aspect of camp (2008: 60). We will, however, continue the discussion of a "bad film subculture" as it is feeds into the concept of paracinema.

Paracinema

One of the criticisms that was sometimes leveled at Sontag's article was that she downplayed the homosexual aspects of camp and was seen to "de-gayify" the concept, thus leading to its appropriation by dominant culture (Cleto 1999: 10). While it is beyond the scope of the present chapter to probe this particular debate, the idea of camp continuing in a "de-gayified" form could be applied to the concept of "paracinema," although paracinematic taste tends to resist the tastes that are seen to characterize dominant culture, as we shall go on to discuss. In actual fact,

Jeffrey Sconce – who wrote the defining article on paracinema – has stated that the tastes and attitudes characteristic of paracinema are in some ways similar to camp. He argues that there are differences, though, in that whereas camp often referred to a process by which gay men could rework Hollywood codes to suit their own sensibilities, primarily through irony, paracinema is a more aggressive attack upon reigning notions of "quality." Whereas camp is a subtle tweaking of dominant codes, paracinema "seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic art"; it is not a "queer" undermining of the mainstream but is rather a "straight" attack undertaken by white, middle class, educated, and disaffected factions (Sconce 1995: 374). (It could be argued, contra Sconce, that paracinema is *less* radical than camp because it empties the sexual politics associated with it.)

Sconce defines paracinema as a term that not only refers to a particular corpus of "trashy" films – which include various forms of exploitation cinema, government hygiene films, sword and sorcery epics, Elvis films – but, more importantly, a way of reading films and the subculture that forms around such approaches (here it is again similar to camp). He writes that paracinema is:

> less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. In short, the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic "trash", whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture. (Sconce 1995: 372)

Paracinema therefore refers to films that have been deemed worthless by elite culture and which are taken up by particular subcultural formations to establish their outsider credentials.[2] At the time of writing, Sconce observed a growing number of critics who were adopting a "paracinematic" position regarding film viewing and criticism. This was evident in a number of fanzines and other publications, including *Zontar, Subhuman, Psychotronic Video, Trashola*, *Ungawa, Pandemonium* and the RE/Search volume *Incredibly Strange Films*.[3] He states that the most visible document of this film community is Michael Weldon's *Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film* (1983). Many of the views expressed within these publications, argues Sconce, are espoused by highly cine-literate, educated citizens who are reacting against the common canons of films and filmmakers established within high cultural circles. By valuing a number of films generally considered worthless within such circles they proudly differentiate themselves from cultural consensus. *Psychotronic Video*, which began as a Xeroxed zine, was thus produced as a guide to obscure films that could be found on late-night US television, inviting readers to become interested in a realm of filmmaking that fell outside of both the mainstream and critical canons.

Sconce further argues that paracinema has a political dimension in that it explicitly challenges "reigning aesthetic discourses in the academy" (1995: 380). It does this through the way that it reads films and concentrates on an aesthetic disposition characterized by the concept of "excess." This concept, previously explored by Kristin Thompson (1977), states that excess in a film exists when style ceases to serve the diegesis (the story world of the film) and instead exists for its own sake, as a purely aesthetic element. Moments of excess within a film, because they can disrupt absorption within the film's narrative, are able to draw attention to a film as an illusory artifact. Film academics had previously privileged films that disrupt the norms of classical Hollywood cinema and its principles of continuity editing because they were seen to distance the spectator from the text and alert said spectator to some of the filmic codes that were in operation. Such films were considered politically "progressive" and constituted a core of modernist texts favored within the academy around the late 1970s and for the most part of the 1980s.

According to Sconce, paracinema shares characteristics with academic approaches to "progressive" texts. Nevertheless, whereas academics tend to analyze films as intentional products of authors, the paracinematic viewer "often celebrates the unintentional production of different stylistic features, which may be more to do with budget constraints or incompetence than with authorial intention" (1995: 385). In this sense, these viewers focus upon moments of textual "excess" perhaps more so than many academics; they are not interested in the story worlds of these films, which are often trite and negligible, but are inclined to focus on the stylistic quirks that render such films distinctive.

Sconce further argues that paracinema communities often draw attention to the politics of taste, in that they foreground how taste and aesthetics are socially constructed. The introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films* explicitly outlines this disposition:

> This is a functional guide to territory largely neglected by the film-criticism establishment ... Most of the films discussed test the limits of contemporary (middle-class) cultural acceptability, mainly because in varying ways they do not meet certain "standards" ... At issue is the notion of "good taste," which functions as a filter to block out entire areas of experience judged – and damned – as unworthy of investigation. (Vale and Juno 1986: 4)

This is an aspect of paracinema that is particularly linked to Bourdieu's work on taste and its sociological dimension, which is more fully outlined in Chapter 5. As the work of Bourdieu has become increasingly influential within a range of cultural studies work since the publication of Sconce's article, the interrogation of taste has become a more central concern within film studies. Sconce himself noted that this paracinematic attitude was already beginning to infiltrate the academy and was partly responsible for challenging approaches to film research within a scholarly context. This is an issue that we will return to as we now review how the concept of paracinema has impacted upon subsequent work on cult-related cinema.

Critical Responses to Sconce

The number of academic articles which have drawn upon, or at least referenced, Sconce's article testifies to its importance within the field of cult cinema. As with many influential academic articles, it has also been the subject of debate, criticism, and revision. Joan Hawkins's work (2000), which itself has proven influential within this field, drew on Sconce's work and extended its focus. Hawkins actually begins her consideration of paracinema by claiming that it is a type of filmmaking which is heavily characterized by *affect*: films which impact upon the viewer in a physical sense (i.e. fear, tears), rather than intellectually. Hawkins therefore stresses Sconce's oversight of affect in privileging a "reading protocol" feeding into the creation of cultural distinctions – against both the mainstream and high art (Hawkins 2000: 4). While Hawkins does not really pursue Sconce's neglect of affect, it is a criticism that others have leveled at him: that is, that his focus on how people read these films intellectually and ironically does not take into account the possibility that some people may actually become emotionally involved in viewing these films. This is a point that Sconce himself later admitted was a significant absence within the article (Sconce 2007: 8).

Returning to Hawkins, it is important to note that she also complicated the demarcations between "low" and "high," between "trash" and "art." So, looking at a number of "paracinematic" catalogs – produced by mail order companies selling the types of films discussed by Sconce – she notes some trends which complicate his assertion that paracinema places itself directly against high culture. Many of the films placed within modernist canons mentioned by Sconce, including films by Jean-Luc Godard, also find their way into paracinema catalogs. Hawkins further argues that many films considered high art actually trade on similar tropes and imagery as so-called "low brow" films. She mentions, for example, how Peter Watkins's *The War Game* and Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, while generally respected as works of art, nevertheless aim for a quite physical impact upon their viewers (Hawkins 2000: 5–6). It is also the case that many film directors have moved from the world of the avant-garde into more "lowbrow" exploitation territory. Hawkins mentions the work of Paul Morrissey, but we could also add filmmakers such as Anthony Balch, Curtis Harrington, and Walerian Borowczyk, to name a few other examples. The ease with which such filmmakers move from "high" to "low" filmmaking modes points to how such categorical demarcations perhaps tend to conceal a number of overlapping similarities.

For Hawkins, the paracinematic approach to film culture does not so much represent a need to celebrate low art in opposition to high art so much as it represents an attempt at cultural leveling; a need to break down high and low distinctions in order to create a more inclusive conception of culture (2000: 10). However, while on the one hand this paracinematic approach to film consumption is engaged in a form of cultural leveling, on the other hand

it still creates distinctions by placing itself against the mainstream. Hawkins mentions this when she notes how paracinema enthusiasts feel a need to consume something different (2000: 7) but does not really pursue how this may complicate her points about cultural leveling. Perhaps we could add that it actually consists of a strange mixture of cultural leveling *and* the re-establishment of cultural distinctions: rather than "trash" being opposed to "art," what we are now faced with is "conventional" and the "mainstream" being opposed to the "deranged," "inspired," and "marginal."

Hawkins also notes that while there is a general process of cultural leveling apparent within paracinematic catalogs, there are still distinctions made within these catalogs between different films, so that not all films are treated in exactly the same manner. She points out, for example, that some films are treated as straightforward "art" (e.g., Dreyer's *Vampyr*), whereas others are described as enjoyable in a more ironic, "so-bad-they're good" manner (e.g. *Plan 9 from Outer Space*). This points to how such paracinematic cultures are actually composed of a number of competing discourses. It is because this broad cultural sensibility is composed of a number of different voices that there are sometimes identifiable particular subgroupings within it. This is actually mentioned by Sconce when he refers to infighting between "paracinematic factions," citing overt antagonism between the zines *Film Threat* and *Psychotronic Video* (1995: 375). He does not, however, pay substantial attention to this matter and, for the most part, focuses on the particular mode of "trash" cinema represented by the *Psychotronic Video*'s approach to "trash," as opposed to *Film Threat*'s.

This skewing of focus towards a particular notion of trash, as a cinema of the past that has been neglected – what Matt Hills has dubbed "archivist" trash (2002a: 61) – downplays how "trash" can be defined differently by different communities. Jack Stevenson, for example, though writing on a variety of subjects covering historical underground and exploitation, as well as more contemporary currents, nevertheless defines trash as related to an underground, rather than archival-exploitation, sensibility. It is true that the two terms are not entirely distinct, hence underground "trash" is influenced by historical exploitation, but for Stevenson this is a mode of film-making that is very much manifested in low-budget "underground" films and practiced by filmmakers such as Jack Smith, George Kuchar, John Moritsugu, and Craig Baldwin. He argues that it is a form of *anti-art*:

> Like surrealism, it [trash] enables the film-maker, via a distorting prism of exaggerated stylisation, to use block humour to deal with shocking, horrifying or otherwise untouchable subject matter that would have been impossible to treat in a more conventional style. (Stevenson 2003b: 130)

For Stevenson, trash films self-consciously adopt a junkyard aesthetic, inverting the meaning of trash and adopting it as a badge of pride. These filmmakers collect cultural debris and construct a new aesthetic out of it; whereas Sconce's paracinematic subculture comprises critics who unearth and extol such debris and tend to find modern filmmaking wanting by comparison.

The archival bent within the paracinematic community can sometimes slip into a nostalgic tone (a tone, as mentioned, also evident in some accounts of camp). For some of these critics, the urge to delve into the more obscure and maligned recesses of film history can go hand in hand with a rejection of where cinematic culture, and often culture as a whole, currently stands. This also ties in with a rejection of the "mainstream" and an anti-corporate ethos: it is often considered that older cinematic culture allowed for a wider range of films to be seen because of the greater opportunities for small businesses to thrive. This often leads, in particular, to nostalgia for older "drive-in" "fleapit," and "grindhouse" cinemas and a distaste of the increasing, corporate-led dominance of multiplexes. This attitude is clear in Stephen Puchalski's following comments in introducing a collection of his criticism:

> More than just irreverent criticism, it's also a glimpse into a time long gone. Before the drive-ins I used to haunt during my college years were turned into mini-malls. Before the cool mom 'n' pop stores were buried by corporate-owned chains. Before 42nd Street – once renowned for its unsurpassed array of porno booths, convulsing junkies and gorgeous old theatres – was transformed into a Disney tourist trap. (Puchalski 2002: 9)

The link to films being consumed during a period of growth is explicit here, and this may well be a factor in other trash film connoisseurs' preference for films of a bygone era: they recall a formative period in their lives, when these types of films had particularly meaningful connotations, opening up as they did a vista to "another world."

This question of films being "meaningful" to particular viewers once again returns us to the question of "affect." As Sconce himself noted, the lack of focus on this particular angle was indeed a missing ingredient of his seminal article. And yet, this remark appears within an edited collection on "trash" cinema – *Sleaze Artists* – in which many contributors still tend to overlook this affective dimension. Many viewers, however, would not see themselves as gaining pleasure out of such films in a distanced, primarily ironic manner. Examples abound from people who are actually strongly affected by such films and approach them, sometimes write about them, in a serious manner. Tim Lucas's *Video Watchdog*, for example, is a consumer guide to "fantastic" cinema in which a number of such films are approached with a straight face. He and his contributors may not always acclaim such films as works of genius, and may not always maintain an entirely serious tone, but the "highly ironic" attitude identified by Sconce is not a particularly marked feature within the magazine. Likewise, Andrew Caine has written that although the "Beach Party" films made by AIP in the 1950s and 1960s have been reclaimed by some critics in ways that conform to Sconce's arguments, others – such as fans of Annette Funicello – tend to appreciate the films that she was in as "quality" products, related to ideals of "wholesomeness" (Caine 2001). Additionally, many people have recuperated these and related films in more ambiguous ways: while they may appropriate elements of them ironically, they also tend to value their soundtracks as "good." They therefore overlook the presence of music such as Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello and instead focus on more "canonized" sounds:

> Fans of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and the Beach Boys who relish *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956) and A.I.P. beach movies are arguably not engaged in "an overall aesthetic of calculated disaffection" (Sconce, 1995: 376), but rather cementing their own "good" taste according to the canonical hierarchies evident within rock criticism. (Caine 2001)

This should alert us to the complexities at work within the consumption of films that Sconce includes within his paracinematic list. Different people will appropriate films for different purposes, hence Ed Wood biographer Rudolph Grey's distaste of those who enjoyed the director's work ironically. We should therefore remember that paracinematic viewing coexists with other ways to evaluate such films. Caine's argument also points to the ways that separate textual elements can be consumed differently, so that "ironic" and "earnest" attitudes towards a single film (or a set of films) can be both present in people's responses to films.

Another problem in focusing only on the ironic recuperation of these types of films is that it leads to a contradictory position. If such films are only ironically recuperated, if we can only appreciate them because of their unintentional deviations from aesthetic norms, then there is an implicit suggestion that they are actually "bad." This, at least to some extent, goes against the argument that Sconce makes about this viewing community challenging taste. In fact, it merely reaffirms taste if it accepts such movies are actually "bad" (even if it does expand the parameters of acceptability). Such an approach also places doubt upon Sconce's claims that this community challenges the types of questions that can be asked about the cinema; bringing into question not just *what* types of films should be studied, but *how* such films should be studied. On the contrary, it would seem to close down how such films can be approached. It is for this reason that Chibnall, in a subsequent article, argued that "we should be wary of dismissing cheap genre productions as 'paracinema', dumb sensationalism which can only be camply appreciated as 'bad film'" (Chibnall 1997: 98).

There is a further problem with Sconce's focus on a selected range of critical material: his occasional tendency to make broader assumptions about audiences that is never actually evident in that material. Mark Jancovich has drawn attention to how Sconce slips into making unwarranted assumptions about audience responses to these films. For example, Sconce claims that paracinema is potentially political when he writes that "it compels even the most casual viewer to engage with it ironically, producing a relatively detached textual

space in which to consider, if only superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation" (Sconce 1995: 393). As Jancovich points out, however, this argument "fails to see that these responses are not the 'effects' of texts but the products of different cultural competence and dispositions" (Jancovich 2002: 311). Jancovich argues that Sconce incorrectly claims that paracinema challenges "bourgeois" taste or "legitimate" film culture. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, which Sconce also employs, Jancovich points out that paracinematic reading strategies privilege form over content, which Bourdieu had shown to be a "bourgeois" approach to art and which is a result of social inequality (2002: 311). Thus, this viewing community has much more in common with existing academic practice than it would like to admit, even if it does challenge some of its prevailing aesthetic tendencies. Ultimately, Jancovich argues, both "legitimate" film culture and paracinematic viewers privilege formal readings of film in order to place themselves in a superior position to "average" or "mainstream" segments of film viewers. He continues:

> far from serving as a reminder that "taste . . . is a social construct with profoundly political implications", paracinema is at least as concerned to assert its superiority over those whom it conceives of as the degraded victims of mainstream commercial culture as it is concerned to provide a challenge to the academy and the art cinema. (Jancovich 2002: 312)

This criticism is valid, though we should also be careful not to completely flatten out the differences between various segments of "educated" approaches to film art. While there may be similarities between these viewing "communities" – similarities that Sconce does not entirely overlook – their varying tastes and arguments also need to be acknowledged.

The point that Jancovich makes about paracinema communities being keen to assert their superiority over "mainstream" viewers should remind us of the earlier point made about how such viewers may on the one hand be engaged in "cultural leveling," but on the other hand produce exclusions. Matt Hills has looked at how some films and film communities beyond the mainstream can also be "othered" by paracinema *and* more "legitimate" forms of film culture. Focusing primarily on the *Friday the 13th* franchise, Hills claims that a number of slasher films have "marked one limit to trash's classificatory elasticity" (Hills 2007: 219). He draws attention to the fact that not *all* neglected "cultural detritus" is accorded the status of trashy art within paracinematic canons. Some films, including a number of slasher films, are not only regarded as worthless within more traditional forms of legitimate film cultures, but also are maligned within a number of the paracinematic publications that Sconce focuses on. They are not, though, generally representative of the "mainstream" and, adds Hills, actually have their own "cult" followings on the fringes of film culture. This demonstrates that a number of separate film viewing communities compete in different ways to vouch for the cultural value of particular films. As a majority of slasher films have been neglected not only by established film communities, Hills terms them "para-paracinema":

> As para-paracinema – simultaneously other to trash and legitimate film cultures – it indicates that [sic] ways in which paracinematic and legitimate film reading protocols can become tactically aligned through a shared revulsion for the untutored, the artless, and the commercial turned cultish. (Hills 2007: 232)

The points made by Jancovich and Hills highlight how there are a greater number of competing communities battling over the status of different groups of films than Sconce originally acknowledged. Because of the ways in which individuals differ in their tastes from other individuals, we should also be cognizant of the ways in which viewers may not always imaginatively identify with the same film viewing community at all times. To cite a hypothetical example: a person could identify and "belong" to a paracinema community when participating in an online forum, but may differ from many of the other members in her or his keen interest in political documentaries, around which he or she has formed a separate community. It is also the case that different communities themselves may forge allegiances over issues of taste on some issues and diverge greatly over others. To add to the complexity of these cultural dynamics, such alignments and divergences are not static: they are forever shifting in relation to the different socio-historical contexts in which they exist.

Conclusion

In 1995, when "Trashing the Academy" was first published, Sconce wrote how the phenomenon of paracinema was making inroads into elite culture itself, including academic film studies. Since then, academic attention to "trash" has increased as a new generation of scholars with interests in exploitation-related cinema have undertaken scholarly research. Not only have PhDs and academic publications related to such topics increased, but there has been a growth of conferences and courses within this subject area. Sconce also noted how the phenomenon was infiltrating mainstream culture, pointing out the television program *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and the film *Ed Wood* as examples. This process has also increased, as evidenced by Tarantino's continual urge to make bigger-budgeted "exploitation" pictures and the increasing accessibility of once difficult-to-find "trash" items (the latter process no doubt having reached new levels due to the growth of the internet). This process, which Hawkins terms "mainstreaming trash aesthetics" (2000: 205), demonstrates how the status of cultural objects can shift over time and across space: yesterday's "trash" can transform into tomorrow's "treasure" (to borrow terminology from Egan 2007), as evidenced by the previously "low" cultural artifact *Godzilla* being released at cinemas (and then DVD) by the British Film Institute in 2005, as it was now valued for its cultural significance. Of course, not all trash has been recuperated and there will always be films that slip through the net of cultural revaluation. Potentially, however, any film is capable of being rescued from the cultural garbage heap and transformed into a valued artifact.

The excavation of previous attitudes predating paracinematic approaches to film has been occurring alongside the academic revaluation of trash. Sconce, in his original article, noted a few predecessors to the phenomenon he was exploring: these included the surrealists, who attempted to buck the trend of bourgeois thinking by celebrating marginalized populist works, such as Loius Feuillade's serials and Max Sennett comedies. Joan Hawkins (2000: 18–20) has discussed "Macmahonism" as another crucial predecessor in this regard: named after the Cinema Macmahon in Paris, it refers to a number of French critics who lauded popular American cinema over more established "highbrow" fare and thus controversially challenged "legitimate" taste. Greg Taylor, in his book *Artists in the Audience* (1999), has identified "cult" and "camp" approaches to film art in the work of critics Manny Farber and Parker Tyler, and which fed into the work of Andrew Sarris as well as selected elements of the American Underground community (see Chapter 4 for more on Macmahonism and these critics). Despite their differences, what these critics shared was a celebration of "junk," which allowed them to display their own unique position through creatively transforming derided art works (Taylor 1999: 1–8). Sconce himself has more recently identified further paracinematic precedents in the work of Pauline Kael, whose 1969 article "Trash, Art and the Movies" extolled the AIP exploitation picture *Wild in the Streets* as a much more relevant film than the critically lauded *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

It is clear, then, that "camp" and "paracinematic" sensibilities have permeated the academy and the broader cultural fabric. This has marked important shifts in the legitimacy of what can be studied and how it should be studied. It should nevertheless be pointed out that a broadly ironic form of film appreciation is only one way of approaching neglected, derided works and should not lead us into thinking that we cannot evaluate such films from different perspectives (such as analyzing them as serious, aesthetic productions).

Notes

1. The ambiguities, anxieties and sentiments surrounding Hollywood's child cult are celebrated in Austrian artist Martin Arnold's *Alone. Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (1998), a short film of footage featuring child actors Rooney and Garland (in one of their many Andy Hardy pictures) that is alternately sped up or slowed down to highlight supposed innuendo in the relationships between the child actors and their adult counterparts.

2. We should note that there is a different way of describing paracinema which in fact precedes the use of the term by Sconce, but which has not gained such widespread currency. This refers to forms of experimental cinema that were attempting to expand cinema beyond its more common understandings, through – for example – creating works without film cameras, and which overlaps with other conceptual art practices emerging in the 1960s.
3. More recently, a small-circulation magazine entitled *Paracinema* – which focuses on "B-movies, cult classics, indie, horror, science-fiction, exploitation, underground and Asian films from past and present" – began publication in 2007. See www.paracinema.net for more information.

9

Transgression and Freakery

The apparent desire of cultists to experience something "different" can lead to strange forms of appreciation, as we have seen in the previous chapters. This chapter addresses how cult cinema's modes of reception are informed by debates around how they break boundaries of morality and challenge prohibitions in culture, how they dispute commonsense conceptions of what is normal and acceptable, and how in doing so they confront taboos. Among the most often mentioned instruments through which cult cinema is said to do this are "transgression" and "freakery."

Before we start, it is necessary to specify how perceptions and experiences of transgression and freakery lie at the heart of a particular range of cult receptions, namely *affective receptions*. As we have noted in previous chapters, aspects of perception such as curiosity, camp, and irony are of significance in sketching the cultist's interest. So are intense aspects of attachment such as fandom and idolatry. Those tools remain of high significance in how transgression and freakery are approached. Next to that, however, affective appreciation is a specifically crucial element in the perception and experience of transgression and freakery. In particular, cult cinema receptions negotiate *negative* forms of affect such as disgust, revulsion, and aversion. We noted in the previous chapter how Joan Hawkins' (2000) extension of Jeffrey Sconce's discussion of paracinema brought into focus the importance of *affect*, the impact of films upon viewers in a physical and emotional sense. She observed how affect played a role of importance in the cult reputation of films that traversed the distinction between high- and low-brow. The examples Hawkins gives are the silent documentary on autopsies, *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, and *The War Game*, a realistic imagination of the effects of a nuclear attack on the English population. Hawkins points out how the reception of these films was peppered with phrases such as "terrifying," "sickening," "destruction," "appalling," "haunting purity and truth," and she argues that rather than denunciations these terms actually were expressions of appreciation – appreciation for how, viewers claim, these films confront a sort of deep anxiety (2000: 15). As Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 10) remark, such fascinations and framings also underlie the cult reputations for films dealing with traumas that defeat representation, such as the holocaust.

Why would anyone emotionally like films about autopsies, nuclear war, or the holocaust? It could be out of a sincere sense of rebellion against what is perceived as a suffocating pressure from dominant morality. It could be out of a performative desire to provoke reaction. It could also be out of an attitude that attempts to challenge intellectualizations of film viewing – and cultural appreciation in general. It could also be out of empathy and alignment with the margins of society. Kinkade and Katovich (1992) argue that one of the key components of cult viewing's oppositional attitude is its empathy with the "little people," with which not only is meant those in disadvantaged socio-economic and cultural positions, but also literally little people (the non-normative physical body) and, by extension, every example of the anomaly, the persecuted, the outcast, and the victim. In Chapter 1 we have used the term "affective communities" to describe the ways in which a

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sensibility like this finds a grounding with a group of viewers and how it is part of a collective experience in which "the other" is always part of the consideration. The processes through which this occurs are the focus of our attention in this chapter.

Essentially, if we want to understand how the cult receptions of films that repulse or disgust viewers become tools for forging a feeling of community, we have to understand how these challenges to morality or confrontations of taboos work, how they reach viewers, and how these viewers articulate their fascination.

Taboo

A taboo is a cultural prohibition, an act seen as morally wrong. Central to understandings of taboo is the concept of "impurity" as an opposition to the normative "purity." Traffic *between* instances of purity and impurity challenges cultural systems and practices, thus leading to taboos. In the context of studies of cult reception, the concept of taboo has led scholars and critics to explore anthropological ideas to assess how cultism and (im)purity are linked to each other. Three of the main sources of inspiration in that respect have been Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva, and Mikhail Bakhtin, all of whom have considered the body the central site for discussions of morality and taboo.

The work of Douglas and Kristeva concentrates mostly on how bodies perform a structural role in presenting or preserving a cultural order that is fixed into stable normality. As a result of this concern, they see taboos as a reflection on the contamination of perceptions of purity by impure mechanisms. Incest, for instance, is a form of violation of the established normality of intercourse and sexual contact between bodies. As a consequence the focus of what a taboo is moves away from the ways in which a taboo protects normality towards the forms of traffic and communication through which purity – and normality – are assaulted. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas (1966) points out that the traffic between the inside and outside of the body correlates strongly with what cultures see as taboos. A crucial element here is that of any substance that allows for the crossing of borders between the inside and outside of the body. Mostly such materials are fluid, moist. If we look at the kind of fluids that traverse the borders between the inside and the outside of the body, they are all, to some extent, subject to taboos. Some, such as tears and sweat are easily accommodated – though not in every situation. Others, such as spit, blood, pus, urine, semen, menstruation, lactation, or feces are much more severely sanctioned and regulated. In sum, the regulation of the transfer of bodily fluids forms the cornerstone of how groups of people perceive themselves, and how they act as a culture.

Kristeva (1974, 1982) applies the concepts of taboo and impurity to semiotics, especially those of texts of horror, which she sees as teeming with instances of impurity she calls *abjection*. Abjection, literally "the state of being cast off" is a concept that denotes the threatening "unsaid" by virtue of which meaning can be delineated. Abjection is where cultural meaning collapses. It is that which must be expelled for normal meaning to exist. Abjection is also what language fails to describe – hence the frequent usage of "yuk," "ouch," and similar terms to indicate moments of abjection. In terms of the law, the abject is that which fails to respect rules and against which the law gains meaning. In terms of identity, abjection is that which is not "I" and which threatens identity, often because it involves a fluid breaking through the skin, or because it involves bodies with missing parts. Traversing the border between the tightly regulated outside of the body and its messy and often uncharted inside (uncharted in semiotic terms) is often regarded as traumatic. Images such as blood, vomit, urine, and feces, and "monstrous" creatures with disintegrated bodies are abject in the sense that they do not respect borders: the aforementioned fluids continually spill out of bodies, thus passing from the "I" to the "not I"; the monster often signifies a collapse of boundaries, such as mutated bodies or bodies that are neither dead nor alive.

Like Kristeva's, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1965) approaches the concept of taboo through a discussion of the origins of language, meaning, and semiotics. But Bakhtin uses a different angle, that of the "carnivalesque." The term derives from the word "carnival," a seasonally recurring festive event that marks the overturning of the routines and regulations of daily, normal life. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is a unique instance in the social processes of meaning-making in which taboos are lifted and people are allowed to engage in what is otherwise culturally

prohibited. During the carnival, amorality and immorality are condoned, and impurity and abjection are encouraged. Bakhtin argued that in the Middle Ages the carnival acted as a suspension of established order. While only temporary, it was a means by which to transgress the norms and regulations of official society, and hence an attempt to unhinge its rigid hierarchies (which kept the lower classes "in their place"). During the carnival, official icons, figures and rituals were mocked and ridiculed and an alternative, inverted society was acted out. The carnival, argued Bakhtin, was an expression of a worldview: a refusal to accept the certainties, and the seriousness, stipulated by the dominant order. The "grotesque" played a central part in the transgressions of the carnival: the flesh and the body – including those aspects often hidden by decorum – were celebrated. Objects of fear, meanwhile, underwent excessive distortion so that their power could be dealt with on a tangible level. Laughter, orgiastic pleasure, and grotesquery (especially grotesque bodies), which were both inimical to official culture, were celebrated as subversive acts, and the dominant order was rendered relative through its inversion. Umberto Eco (1984) qualifies the Bakhtinian take on subversion by adding that the carnival carries within itself the revenge of the established order, which governs the extent of the subversion in terms of time and the kind of rules that can be subverted. Still, the carnival may have been temporary, but it offered a glimpse of an alternative society and thus demonstrated that the current order was not eternal.

From Taboo to Cult?

There have been numerous attempts to link the cult appeal of films to theories of taboo. Robin Wood (1979) relied on ideas of Wilhelm Reich and on Marxist cultural materialism to draw up a categorization of horror films that represented monstrosity as either liberal or reactionary. Barbara Creed (1987, 1993) developed her ideas on the feminine as monstrous through the work of Douglas and Kristeva. Ideas of Bakhtin have inspired analyses of John Waters and Lloyd Kaufman's Troma films (Mendik and Schneider 2002). A lot of scholars and critics of cult cinema are eager to point to abounding fluids and deviant bodies in order to suggest a film as a cult film: the disintegrated bodies in *Freaks*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, or *Cannibal Holocaust* (Brottman 1997), the bodily fluids abounding in porn chic films such as *Behind the Green Door* (Peary 1989), the liquid mirror (and fluid reality) in *Donnie Darko* (King 2007), the shower and blood in *Daughters of Darkness* (Mathijs 2004), or numerous scenes in the *Emmanuelle* franchise (Mendik 2004 singles out the scene in the squash court). *Showgirls* seems to have every scene constructed around the exchange of fluids by hyperbolically deviant bodies, the most infamous of which are perhaps the pool orgasm scene and the pole licking scene (Hunter 2000; Lippitt *et al.* 2003).

But where are the boundaries of such strategies of interpretation? The arguments of Douglas, Kristeva, and Bakhtin are extremely universalist. They are constructed in a manner that applies to all cultures, all actions, all meaning, to every cultural product and, by extension, every film. For one, they can function as barometers of degrees of cultism. They illustrate the cult appeal of a variety of films because they give reasons for *how*, among other explanations, some films are seen as bad, oppositional, or countercultural because of the ways they depict or confront taboos. Moreover, they offer cultists the opportunity to reinforce their cultism, as it were, by offering it a philosophical rationale and grounding in cultural history it might otherwise not achieve, simply through association with theories of taboo and deviance in culture.

Besides the positive role conceptualizations of taboo play in offering theoretical grounding for the study of cult films, the problem is that their universalism invites scholars to ignore the context-specific components of production and (especially) affectively experiencing certain films as "different" because they confront taboos and challenge morality and normalcy. Establishing direct links between conceptualizations and a film's properties also carries the danger of overlooking that producers and audiences are actively and self-consciously aware of the implications of instances of impurity, abjection, or the grotesque in films. Consider the act of licking, which we referred to earlier. It could easily be argued that such exchanges of body fluids triggers cultism – makes a film cult and allows audiences to use its shock value as a tool in seeing it as cult. During



Figure 9.1 The exchange of bodily fluids: licking in *Emmanuelle*, *The Brood*, and *Showgirls*.

her journey towards ultimate sex in the first *Emmanuelle* film, Emmanuelle (Sylvia Kristel) is instructed to lick the face of a sweaty martial arts fighter; in *The Brood*, Nola (Samantha Eggar) really shocks Frank (Art Hindle) by licking her bloodied fetus; and in *Showgirls*, stripdancer Nomi (Elizabeth Berkley) answers the provocation of Cristal (Gina Gershon), who licks her boyfriend's cheek suggestively, by licking the pole-dancing pole, up and down (Figure 9.1).

Douglas argues that strict governance over such behavior marks the enculturation of communities; using the act of licking is a provocation of this governance. Is viewers' obsession with them, then, one more sign of their refusal to act as a validation of such enculturation? Perhaps it is. But in order for this to be the case *equally*, the production and reception contexts of all three films would have to be identical. And they are not: *Emmanuelle* belongs to a different framework of presentation and reception than *The Brood*, and *Showgirls* is dissimilar from both, and each film addresses its context in its own way. For instance, the three films were made in contexts that had widely varying views on the representations of sexuality on-screen (encapsulated in tags such as "porn chic," "body horror," and "camp"), and they operated within production cultures that used hyperbole in distinctive ways. As a consequence, their grossness is of a different order and their receptions are marked by qualities that identify them as cults *in separation*.

In sum, in addition to turning towards universalist conceptualizations of taboo, research into film cults needs to give attention to context-specific ways in which films offer ways, formally and self-consciously, to make impurity, abjection, and the carnivalesque and grotesque detectible rather than just deducible. Scholars of cult cinema have made several attempts to theorize such ways, and it is to these we now turn.

Transgression

The most notable context-specific notion that informs the study of cult cinema's appetite for taboo, abjection, grotesquerie, and impurity is that of "transgression." Commonly understood, transgression is any act that violates law or morality; more broadly, it refers to the act of passing beyond any imposed limits.

Barry Keith Grant (1991) has argued that transgression plays a central role in the construction of cult films. He states that transgression can take place on the level of *content*, in terms of *attitude*, and in a *stylistic* sense. In relation to content, transgression occurs through the representation of acts or objects that may be considered threatening to social norms, or may be deemed obscene. Grant cites *Freaks* as an example of representational content that is transgressive. Grant also notes that the attitude of the filmmaker(s) may also be transgressive in that they may deliberately

attempt to outrage. Such is the case with John Waters, whose early films such as *Pink Flamingos* often involved direct challenges to good taste. Thirdly, transgressive form involves stylistic excess, which can be understood as either competent excess (the use of kinetic pyrotechnics in the *Mad Max* movies) or incompetence (the ineptitude of *Plan 9 from Outer Space*). In his analysis of transgression, Grant also addresses the issue of reception, in particular when he argues that reception attitudes can undo some of the transgressive elements of a film. As such, the specific receptions of cult films can be equally subversive (in their flirting with taboo) and recuperative. For Grant they are actually more likely to be recuperative than subversive or taboo-challenging.

While Grant contends films such as *Night of the Living Dead* or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* are ostensibly transgressive on a number of levels, they ultimately "reclaim that which they seem to violate" so that the cult viewer "ultimately gains the double satisfaction of both rejecting dominant cultural values and remaining safely inscribed within them" (Grant 1991: 124). In most cases, Grant sees little opportunity for transgression to touch audiences. Consider the 1979 Toronto Film Festival, which contained a retrospective of the films of George Romero. Before the screening of *Night of the Living Dead*, critic Robin Wood wanted to discuss with Romero how the film was ideologically subversive: "the audience, however, was impatient with such talk, became rude, and shouted for him to leave the stage so they could enjoy the movie" (Grant 1991: 128). Grant suggests that this means that the film's transgression, which Wood further analyzed in his article "An introduction to the American horror film" (1979), is recuperated by an audience attitude that refutes it in favor of "a good time." He writes: "the fact that the film can be read as a biting critique of the American middle class accounts for little of its cult appeal, although for those who can perceive it, this theme lends a degree of respectability to ... a real horrorshow" (Grant 1991: 128). We would argue that the audience's reaction does not preclude their perception of *Night of the Living Dead*'s transgression. In fact, their boisterous behavior, which for Grant is a sign of their desire "to see the good parts," could well be a sign of its affective impact with audiences, which may well harbor sentiments that would include regarding the film as a biting critique – perhaps even triggered by the initial "ouch!" and "ew!" Grant presupposes audiences jump immediately to a level of interpretive sophistication without passing through an affective moment. We would like to suggest such an affective moment is essential as a reaction to representations of transgression that then enable interpretations and analysis of exactly which taboos are challenged and how this makes a film (like *Night of the Living Dead*) a critique of morality.

Another complication to the audience reception of transgression is the fact it can be performed, faked. The way in which the fandom for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* developed into a ritualized audience response with predetermined costumes and repetition of character lines is, for Grant, a sign of how any transgression the film might have carried over onto viewers was now undone: "The performative nature of this audience response was scripted, predetermined; it discouraged spontaneous improvisation by newcomers and suggested that this community of readers was in its own way as conformist and repressive as the middle class satirized on the screen" (2000: 21). This argument is rather sweeping. Other accounts of the receptions of both films offer counter examples that suggest that the "truly trangressive experience" (as Grant calls it) *can* be achieved even when receptions are steeped in recuperation as long as affective audience activities are not overlooked (see several of the essays in Weinstock 2008). Nevertheless, the observation on the performative nature of perceptions of transgression is valid and insightful.

J.P. Telotte (1991a) also claims transgression is a key element of cult movies, and he too relates the concept to both a film's textual properties and its reception (unlike Grant he sees it as an element of both in *equal* measure). Telotte asserts that the transgression of reason – the love for unreason – is a central trope running through cult cinema, most evident in the relationship between the film and its fans: "What the film cultist embraces is a form that, in its very difference, transgresses, violates our sense of the reasonable. It crosses boundaries of time, custom, form and – many might add – good taste" (1991a: 6). Like Grant, Telotte points to the fact that "the act of transgression may be little more than a gesture; it might

only signal a kind of cook's tour of various formal and cultural borders that, in the end, simply returns us . . . to a world of reason where we can relish the feeling of transgression" (1991a: 6). Telotte describes here a kind of transgressive tourism, in that we vicariously delve into forbidden and dangerous territory only to return to a world of reason. Midnight movie screenings are the most obvious examples of outré viewing experiences that are positioned as transgressive because they cross the boundaries of time and custom, but at the same time are comforting for those who attend them precisely to enjoy the aura of difference. This double process could be related to Georges Bataille's writings, a theorist who is brought up frequently in discussions of cult cinema (Botting and Wilson 1997). Bataille argued that death was the ultimate limit, an existential full stop, and that our transgressive yearnings are self-destructive because they ultimately lead to death. Because of human capacity for self-destruction, societies restrain this damaging potential through the imposition of taboos. Thus, "transgressive" films are a means whereby we can act out urges in ways that do not endanger ourselves. Yet, even when taboos are channeled via film representation, the results can still cause social outrage.

In sum, cult films offer ways to enjoy transgression safely and can challenge conceptions of normalcy. We need to accept, though, that audience experiences can contain performative and ritualized *as well as* affective reactions to moments of abjection, impurity and grotesquerie that appear to challenge taboos and confront morality. Often cult fans believe this is one and the same thing *and* they act as if they believe it.

Freakery

The complexity of studying how cult films break or challenge taboos by pinpointing the process of transgression is further complicated by the notion of "freakery." While very similar to transgression, freakery is even more dependent on context-specific reception conditions, in particular because of its singular focus on deviant human bodies as sites of transgression. Human bodies provide a ready point of reference for audiences. Therefore, the high visibility of freakery has attracted lots of analogies between freaks-on-screen and freaks-in-the-audience.

One of the earliest attempts to conceptualize the notion of freakery comes from Leslie Fiedler (1978). In his analysis, Fiedler goes further than the dictionary definition of "the freak" (as a fellow human whose physically anomalous features are stressed through exhibition) by asserting that freaks help establish the normality of those who witness the spectacle. He thus pushes the notion of freakery into one of perception. Similarly, Robert Bogdan (1988: 10) sees a freak as "a way of thinking, of presenting, a set of practices, an institution – not a characteristic of an individual." According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1996: xviii), "the freak is a historical figure ritually fabricated from the raw material of bodily variations and *appropriated in the service of shifting social ideologies*" (our emphasis). She adds: "the freak of nature [is] a freak of culture" (1996: xviii).

To the elements of perception and reception needs to be added that of performance. Fiedler (1996: xiv) refers to the success of *Freaks* by suggesting it found its audience among the "drug-obsessed generation of the sixties, young men and women who though physiologically 'normal,' liked to refer to themselves as 'freaks'." The suggestion here is that these audiences perform freakery – for Fiedler they are not really freaks but they like to be regarded as such because of their perception that their position at the margins of normalcy is akin to that of the disabled person. With that self-perception also comes an attention for ways in which freakery is culturally positioned, in particular for the abject, the grotesque, and the impure. For Fiedler it would be no coincidence that the attention for his work coincided with the cult appeal of films such as *Freaks*, *Eraserhead*, *The Elephant Man*, *Alien*, or *The Brood*, films to which he alludes. The element of performance of freakery is not uniquely one of reception and perception. As Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (Sandahl and Auslander, 2005: 1–12) argue, it also concerns the presentation and, with it, the self-reflexivity of the performance in the text. Unlike "normative" acting, they state, the performance of disability can never fully move into a neutral mode in which the actor and character fall together. A final aspect of the performance aspect of the reception of freakery lies in how it allows

audiences to take up positions of distinction and superiority. David Church (2011: 3) sees it as follows:

> freakery is premised upon unequal viewing and social relations. A nondisabled audience retains the power to subject the non-normative body (traditionally, that of a person with disabilities) to the ableist gaze as entertaining spectacle, enjoying a mixture of shock, horror, wonder, and pity.

In making this claim, Church follows a trajectory of reason not unlike that of Grant with regard to transgression: freakery confirms the position of superiority of the audience over the forms of instances of impurity, abjection, or grotesquerie in the film they are watching and in that process the potentially subversive aspects of those instances are neutralized, even recuperated into a system of normalcy. As we have seen with regard to transgression, this potential for recuperation, or even indeed its occurrence, does not preclude other non-recuperative modes of appreciation – for instance, by disabled audiences or advocates (such as disabled performance artist Mat Fraser, who has drawn on traditions of freakery as empowering and positive), whom Church here discounts as potential audiences.

Most studies regarding freakery refer extensively to *Freaks*, undoubtedly the best-known cult film that addresses the notion – and an inevitable example in any cursory overview of cult cinema. Originally released conventionally, it outraged people at the time and distributor Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer quickly withdrew it from circulation. It was censored in several countries. It was revived, however, on the exploitation circuit after being picked up by Dwain Esper. While it received a mixed reception, it was lauded by intellectuals in France and played in art house theaters, which led to it being resurrected internationally. It played the Venice Film Festival in 1962 and proved popular on the art house circuit during that decade (Hawkins 2000: 141–148). By 1970 it appeared on the midnight movie circuit. The film has since attained the status of a cult classic and continues to be viewed by new audiences. Much of the scholarly debate surrounding *Freaks* concerns the various strategies the film is said to employ to simultaneously present the freaks (such as the Hilton Twins, Johnny Eck, Prince Radian) as abnormal, to normalize them to the extent that the narrative can set them up as "good," and to re-ostracize them in scenes such as the widely quoted Wedding Banquet. The latter scene is also at the center of studies of the film's reception (most of which are anecdotal and impressionistic), allowing as it does for analogies between the actors' performance of the chant "one of us" as a mantra ("gabba gabba gooble gobble"), and the audience's self-reflexive perception of this mantra as reflecting their own position as unorthodox film viewers (Hawkins 1996, 2000; Brottman 1997; Larsen and Haller 2002).

Besides *Freaks*, there have been numerous films whose receptions are explained as cult through their solicitation of freakery – both in their presentations of deviant human bodies as signs of how they challenge taboos, and in their receptions by audiences seeing themselves as outsiders to normalized viewing routines. *Häxan*, for instance, uses representations of old, weathered, disheveled bodies of women accused of witchcraft in opposition to those of corpulent monks who interrogate them to press a point about the ruthlessness of the inquisition. When such markers are acknowledged by audiences looking exactly for non-normativities (as many viewers of a William Burroughs narrated version of *Häxan* did when the film was re-released in the late 1960s), conflations between the film's argument and its function as a piece of exploitation create an ambivalence upon which a cult reputation can be hinged. *El Topo* is known for providing viewers with the widest and most eclectic samples of freakery. It combines disintegrating bodies (the first ten minutes of the film show an entire village littered with slaughtered people and animals) with disabilities, malnourishment, and non-normative representations of age such as nude pre-puberty children, and naked seniors. In a sense, *El Topo* explodes the concept of "freakery." Yet, as Church (2011: 15) observes, this does not necessarily have positive consequences for representations of disability:

> the freakish body remains read by cultists as a deviant and "transgressive" marker of otherness through which they can assert their oppositional aesthetic in a bid for subcultural cachet. . . . Following the binary logic of cult subcultures, actual social change that could gradually remove essentialist stigmas from the visually "abnormal" body would also remove the taboo and supposedly oppositional connotations of those bodies. Consequently, there would be little incentive for cultists to actively champion political change for people with disabilities without imperiling a major source of subcultural distinction.

One only needs to look at the long line of films with cult receptions that feature short-statured people whose easy association with exploitation and "little people," to use Kinkade and Katovich's (1992) term again, to find evidence of this sensationalism. *Freaks* and *The Wizard of Oz* have been followed by dozens of others: *Forbidden Zone*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Suspiria*, *The Brood*, *Wild at Heart*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and so on. A lot of films with cult receptions offer framing devices to display these representations. It is part of their ambivalent attitude towards the subject matter: part apologetic, part exploitation. Among the most popular such devices are circus and sideshow environments, ornamental or extravagant settings (a boarding school in *Suspiria*, a rock music stage in *Spinal Tap*, a clinic in *The Brood*). One of the framing devices of *Freaks*, the circus, not only corrals the subject matter, it also carnivalizes it, encouraging audiences to abandon the constraints of realism for their freewheeling and far-fetching interpretations because they would have no repercussions in reality – after all, it is a circus world (for an argument along these lines, see Brottman 1997: 15–48). Church adds, however, that when the cult receptions of these films address the fluidity of the very concept of "freakery," as a constantly shifting concept in itself,

> a small opening for (sub)culturally rethinking freakery in cult cinema can develop [whereby] the "freakish" body would still remain exhibited as spectacle [but] its unruly and excessive qualities would point toward the openness and indeterminacy of all bodies, remaining capable of violating the established boundaries of "good taste." (2011: 15)

The careers of filmmakers such as John Waters (*Pink Flamingos*), David Cronenberg (*Shivers*), Lucio Fulci (*The Beyond*), David Lynch (*Eraserhead*), Peter Jackson (*Bad Taste*) or Paul Verhoeven (*Robocop*) are littered with receptions that place their films as challenges to the idea that a human body can only be of a narrow range of normalcy. A film such as *Splice* charts the mutations through which bodies can go in presenting itself as a discussion on "transmutation," and triggering a reception that circles around what a human body is in the first place. As Church (2005) points out in another essay, films such as *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (or *Of Freaks and Men*, or *In Bruges*) have experienced receptions that concentrate on how they manage to overcome the inclination to show disabled people only as "innocent victims"; they equally portray them as ill-tempered, arrogant, drunk, or in other situations still considered a little inappropriate but close to normative behavior. Iain Smith (2010a) has observed a similar development in the cult reception of the films of Philippine dwarf actor Weng Weng, known for his remakes of Bond materials (*For Y'ur Height Only*). In the case of Weng Weng, elements of "freakery" conflate with other modes such as the orientalist reception of the ethnic other (see Chapter 11) and the irony of camp. In such situations, the performance of freakery becomes a precarious exercise by audiences keen to destabilize processes of film perception.

There are two important complications for freakery. The first concerns gender, the second race. We will address gender separately, in our next chapter. Let us briefly expand on race here. The racialized body as a type of disability (or, occasionally, super-ability) and the complication of color-coding we find in the Tarzan and Kong films (see Peary 1981; Erb 1998) run through cult cinema as a constant thread but it is in the late 1960s that the portrayal of race becomes a real point of contention in cult cinema receptions. In *Night of the Living Dead*, the African-American protagonist overcomes extreme adversity, but in the final few minutes of the film he is killed by a posse of white cops and vigilantes who spot him, shoot him, and remark "here's another one." The abruptness of this ending, and the style in which it is shot (which invites comparisons with television footage of America's race riots of the 1960s) has caused critics like Robin Wood (1979) to see *Night of the Living Dead* as subversive and transgressive. As the aforementioned reaction of Grant (1991) testifies, not everyone agrees. Another example is the *Emmanuelle* franchise. As Xavier Mendik (2004) has observed, the *Black Emanuelle* series are a poignant counterpoint to the official franchise in that it exposes the underlying assumptions of racism and exoticism of the latter – which already held up a mirror of hypocrisy to audiences' taste for exotic sexuality. In each of these cases, a dark skin color is a signifier of a form of freakery.

In a few instances, this non-normativity has been appropriated, and turned into a performative quality, used by film and audiences alike to indicate

awareness of the color coding. That is most notably the case with blaxploitation films (also see Chapter 13). The main articulation of this performative affirmation is the sexually assertive protagonist – a self-assured African-American urbanite whose knack for flair and style helps him/her achieve narrative goals. In many ways, the body in blaxploitation cinema is still non-normative, but in its hyperbolic combination of sexuality, athletic prowess (less so in chases or fights than in swanky posturing), fashion-consciousness (flouting moderation in favor of excess, particularly through exaggerated "Afro" hairstyles), and urban street-smartness (bringing class-awareness into the equation), it helps viewers position themselves in opposition to the kinds of antagonism usually associated with non-normativity. Instead of having to undergo purely affective reactions of disgust, upset, or outrage, blaxploitation's self-aware performativity allows viewers to actively perform those reactions. Examples of films following this mode are *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, and *Welcome Home Brother Charles*. Without doubt the most celebrated cult icon of this appropriation is Pam Grier. Her performance in *Black Mama White Mama*, from the disreputable subgenre of the women-in-prison films, pits her against the model of white female normativity (the blonde, big busted, white girl), a battle she wins through collaboration (Sims 2006; Dunn 2008; Walker, Rausch, and Watson 2009). In the late 1990s, a wave of homage to blaxploitation received cult receptions, most notably Quentin Tarantino's celebration of Grier in *Jackie Brown*, which pitches her as the ideal woman: independent, able, confident.

A final element worth mentioning in relation to "freakery" is the hyperbolic and oversized body of attractions – the super-able body that is too athletic, too muscular, too sexualized. Such bodies are often portrayed in contrast with the diminished capabilities of disabled and non-normative bodies, yet it is equally non-normative. In *Freaks*, the strongman Hercules is easily accepted as "evil" because of his excessive strength, and his sexist ideas. Angela Ndalianis (1994, 1995) has noted the cult fascination with the oversized shape of muscular bodies in superheroes cinema. In his study of the cult fascination for bodybuilding Adam Locks (2010) has observed how the reception of the "ripped" body consists not only of the "shock" of the grotesque deviation from the normative body, but also the "pity" for the body-builders' body as a site of willful and wasteful destruction. Other, similar concerns can be found in the receptions of 1980s' action cinema (*Conan the Barbarian* and *Rambo*, for instance), in the bodily transmutations of performance artists such as Genesis P. Orridge, Orlan, Joseph Beuys Hermann Nitsch, or Jim Rose's Circus Sideshow (Kultermann 1970; Auslander 1997), or in pornography. The athletic porn performer is a sort of freak because of the "feats" they can perform. Here too oversized breasts or sexual organs are seen as a form of disability (see the receptions of the careers of Ron Jeremy, Chesty Morgan, Lolo Ferrari, or Mistress Rhiannon).

In sum, freakery is unorthodoxy made flesh. It is a tool that refers to the deviant body as one that is impure, abject, and grotesque. As a tool, it is used by groups in society that try to establish and defend normalcy, as well as by those that try and challenge it. The latter, among which we count cult audiences, use freakery in two ways: through association with the freak (encapsulated in the term "one of us"), and through affiliation with the potential that freakery brings to upset and challenge taboos. This makes freakery an extremely context-specific notion, which can be of great value in assessing the cult status of films.

Conclusion: Sick Films

In conclusion to this chapter, and to illustrate the ways in which transgression and freakery have operated in context-specific receptions and led to cult reputations, we would like to briefly discuss some kinds of films that owe large parts of their otherwise diverging degrees of cult status to their obsession with transgression and/or freakery. Most of these types of films we will discuss in some form at other points in this book, as belonging to cycles, themes, and/or genres. Here, we bring them together through a discussion of the ways in which they are said to sicken audiences via their confrontations of taboo through moments of abjection, impurity, and grotesquerie. The label of "sick" needs to be understood as containing both positive and negative connotations. For some audiences who identify themselves as cultist a sick film is something negative, while for others a sick film is not only a cult film par excellence but also a sign of admiration. In any case,

"sick" is a tag that helps understand the reaction to a cult film. As such, all of these films' reputations as "sick" are identified through reception categories rather than textual classifications and the blurriness of the boundaries between the two is evidence of how they actually resist *any* categorization. Our goal is to demonstrate how these receptions are characterized equally by sincere, affective reactions of disgust and outrage as well as by self-reflexive modes of performative reception in the negotiation of the phenomenal experience of moments of abjection, impurity, and grotesquerie.

According to Church (2009), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* – based on the work of the Marquis de Sade – is generally considered the sickest film of all time. Its presentations of a wide variety of mutilations and penetrations include acts of rape, sodomy, torture, and eating feces. These acts deliberately challenged audiences and unsurprisingly led to many countries banning the film from public exhibition. *Salò* was the culmination of director Pier Paolo Pasolini's increasingly challenging portraits of human transgression, and can be related to his earlier *Porcile*, which featured human cannibalism and concerned bestiality. Both *Salò* and *Porcile* linked these provocative acts to the theme of fascism and were thus examinations of the limits of human barbarism – forcing viewers to confront the basic cultural question: where does humanity end? According to Church, "*Salò*'s displeasurable affectivity [is negotiated] through classist and masculinist reading strategies, but their performed anxieties reveal the instability of cultural distinctions premised upon displays of (sub)cultural capital" (Church 2009: 1). In other words, the term "sick" refers here to the inability or refusal of audiences to reach conclusions about a film's place in culture. Church's observation about masculinist reading strategies here is telling. It means viewers reject speaking to the misogyny of the film in favor of a relentless and perpetually cyclical debate on its "artistic" or "exploitative" features – as if anything is better than having to admit the film is misogynist. Such a strategy can easily be regarded as a mantra that is part of the insulation of cult receptions. We will return to this point in more detail in our next chapter, when we discuss the rape-revenge film.

Sickness has also played a vital role in the construction, promotion, and reception of John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*, one of the most notorious cult films that proved enormously successful on the midnight movie circuit. Discussing Waters' work in the context of more mainstream attempts to disgust, Mendik and Schneider argue that Waters' early films approach the level of *pure gross-out*:

> It was not merely the vast downward shift in production values, pacing, acting and effects work that distinguished his works from mainstream attempts to offend. Rather, it was the fact that his cross-gendered, orally-obsessed filth fetishists belonged to a wholly distinct order of transgressiveness. (2002a: 205)

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque is used to interpret Waters here. Within the early features of John Waters – *Pink Flamingos*, and his next two films *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* – the material body, particularly in forms that are often repressed, are thrust into full visibility and often exaggerated. In fact, Bakhtin's term "grotesque realism" may be a perfect appellation for Waters' early films, particularly *Pink Flamingos*. The film is, because of its low-budget, "underground" look, connotative of realism. Waters said of this: "the very primitive (by which I mean 'bad') camerawork made people think [it] was like a documentary, and that really added to the scary part. I think the graininess and the cheapness of it all really gave it a further edge" (Kermode 1995: 19). At the same time, its characters and antics are larger than life, deliberately excessive. Additionally, the film is a litany of acts calculated to outrage, from the chicken-aided sexual intercourse to the "singing arsehole," from the slave who masturbates and then injects semen into kidnapped females, to Divine eating dog shit. Waters has claimed that his films are not political, but this is not entirely true. They are not overtly political in a didactic manner. But they are still all about challenging "taste," which is a politically charged motivation; as Waters has written, "To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about" (Waters 2005: 2). The films also challenge peoples' attitudes towards size and gender by parading cross-dressers, transsexuals, and overweight people (Figure 9.2).

Both *Salò* and *Pink Flamingos* (and other films of their directors) are so commanding in their transgression and freakery that they have established their own, unique contexts of reception.[1] This is not always



Figure 9.2 Divine and Edith Massey (as "The Egg Lady") in *Pink Flamingos*: challenging attitudes towards size?

possible. In many cases, films and their receptions have to be negotiated within pressing and well-established frameworks of exhibition and production that force themselves onto any consideration of these films as taboo-breaking, thereby partially disabling the transgression. This is particularly the case with avant-garde and underground cinema, exploitation cinema, and the horror genre, all of which are seen to have it as their duty to transgress, shock, and sicken. For an audience to manage to pull a film out of such a framework is a sign of just how forceful the instance of impurity, abjection, or grotesquerie is, and also how important it is for that audience to achieve this liberation from the pre-established framework – as if the success of the effort liberates them too. Examples include the uneasiness with which a film such as *Flaming Creatures* is included in overviews of avant-garde cinema (see Chapters 3 and 14), the perennially special status of the video nasties (see Chapter 4), and various subdivisions of the horror genre that stubbornly refuse to be recognized as "just another form of horror" – among these, the gore or splatter films of Herschell Gordon-Lewis, such as *Blood Feast* and *2000 Maniacs*, as well as Peter Jackson's early gross-out films, particularly *Bad Taste* and *Braindead* take up a special place (Grant 2000).

Exploitation cycles such as the mondo film have long tried to emulate the cult appeal of the above-mentioned modes of representing bodies in extreme peril. Because of their reliance on artifice, often a result of their limited budgets and talents, they have largely failed to achieve anything close to that authenticity (Goodall 2006). This has not withheld viewers from performing their disgust with these films – as if they were rehearsing it. Probably because of their non-Western origin, Japanese Guinea Pig films, have remained an exception – effectively combining "authenticity" with "exploitation." Jay McRoy (2008: 15–30; McRoy, 2010) points out it has given them a sizeable cult following. Even exploitation films that do not explicate atrocities are frequently keen to reference them; hence the abundance of mondo films employing the terms "holocaust" or "apocalypse" in their titles, soliciting the performance of disgust from viewers.

It appears, then, that for every moment of pure abjection represented on screen there is a context-specific framework that allows not only for viewers to be genuinely disgusted and sickened, but also to perform such reactions – and thereby recuperate into a cultural order whatever challenge was posed.

Note

1. We would like to signal one more important example where we belief any performance or recuperation is extremely difficult and where displeasurable affectivity, to borrow Church's term, remains a core aspect of its cult reception. The film is *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*. It is a fierce critique of the concept of sickness in the light of medical care, and in its treatment of freakery simultaneously a film that interrogates audiences' eagerness to perform modes of cultist viewing that embrace taboo-challenging instances of abjection, impurity, and grotesquerie. *Sick* shows a performance by terminally ill Bob Flanagan, whose entire life was affected by severe pain (he suffered from cystic fibrosis), that aimed to bring attention to the concept of "pain" – an element of bodily disintegration and of disability that is often overlooked in the world of medicine. In *Sick*, Flanagan ultimately hammers a huge nail through his penis – the ultimate act of de-masculinization (Perlmutter 1999; Sandahl 2000; Reynolds 2007).

10

Gender and Sexuality

Representations of women in cult cinema are complicated through the widespread acceptance in film studies of the notion of the male gaze. Most notably theorized by Laura Mulvey (1975) this concept holds that the female body is constructed for the pleasure of male viewership, as a tool for reproducing a patriarchic system of society. The notion of the male gaze also posits that female viewers will have difficulty finding anything in a film that allows positive, empowering identification, thus implying that a female viewer is powerless in her search for enjoyment – a victim, or someone passively undergoing the film. Next to that, there is also the prevalence of anecdotal evidence from cult reception contexts (such as the inner city fleapit theater, the genre festival and university campus theater) that testifies to boisterous audience activities regarding imagery of women, such as howling, hollering, whistling, or lip smacking, or muffled grunts of encouragements.

While the notion of the male gaze has been heavily criticized, and anecdotal evidence of audience receptions needs to be balanced against activities that are less easily construed as misogynist, there is no doubt that cult cinema has a worrisome reputation when it comes to gender equality. In this chapter, we address various components of this reputation as we sketch the most significant debates regarding gender, sexuality, and cult cinema.

Masculinity, Femininity, and Cult

Let us start with a macroscopic reflection on cult cinema and gender as articulated by Joanne Hollows (2003), who mounted a strong argument for a consideration of cult cinema as a masculine construction. The occasion of her intervention was the first international conference on cult cinema in Nottingham, UK, in 2000, and the publication of an influential study of fan-boy fandom of *Showgirls* (Hunter 2000). The *Showgirls* essay stressed how fan-boy fandom was as much a performative act as an admission of sympathy for the film's politics – with irony, camp, and hyperbole as instruments obfuscating differences between the two attitudes.

For Hollows, scholarly struggles such as those with *Showgirls* are symptomatic of perspectives that present all of cult cinema (including associated terms such as paracinema, trash cinema, or subversive cinema) as oppositional to the mainstream. The language used to draw this distinction, argues Hollows, is reminiscent of the ways in which distinctions are drawn between subcultures and popular culture – or indeed within subcultures, where degrees of authenticity are carved out. Hollows draws on research of subcultures by Sarah Thornton (1995) and Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1991) to argue that such distinctions are

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drenched with gendered language (and the values such language imposes), whereby subculture is given a masculine identity of adventurousness, resistance, and heroism, and the mainstream is regarded as passive, homely, and feminine. According to Hollows, a similar distinction operates in cult cinema: "cult has been culturally constructed as masculine," she writes (2003: 39). Hollows's argument may be obviously evident in examples of how erotic and sleaze movies are targeted towards and received by fans. But her claim also reaches farther because it questions just how inscribed ideas of masculinity are in conceptualizations of kinds of cultural appreciation. For one, argues Hollows, the masculinity of cult works to "exclude 'real' women from some of the practices associated with cult fandom" (2003: 39). She adds that:

> *Titanic* might have a "cult" following, but its associations with a feminine and "mass" audience on one hand, and "middlebrow" discourses of "quality" on the other, mean that it is unlikely to be easily accepted into academic or popular cult canons unless the "dominant" and "conservative" meanings of the women's film can be subverted by the strategies of cult fans (Hollows 2003: 38).

Since the publication of her essay, Hollows's claim has been reiterated by numerous other scholars who have noted that films with female cult fans continue to be isolated from what is commonly understood as cult, being lumped together instead with the masses or the mainstream as if their form of fandom is indeed inferior. A good example is recent research on the fandom of the vampire melodrama *Twilight* (Click 2009; Bode 2010).

In the light of critiques such as those of Hollows one would expect cult receptions to adopt a more sensitive approach to representations of gender. This is partly the case. There is a decided increase in scholarly work that notes the presence of discourses around political correctness, gender equality, and feminism within cult receptions (we will detail some of these further on in this chapter). This does not necessarily mean that these discourses dominate the receptions. But their presence is certainly visible. Examples include Annette Hills's (1997) research into discourses of gender in the receptions of films such as *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Man Bites Dog*, or various studies of the reception of *Carrie* or *Ginger Snaps* (Barker, Mathijs, and Mendik 2006). As we have noted in Chapter 6, there has also been increased interest for films with cult receptions that were made by female directors. The films of Dorothy Arzner (*Dance Girl, Dance*), Dorish Wishman (*Deadly Weapons*) or Stephanie Rothman (*Velvet Vampire*) for instance, have been celebrated as exceptions made, against the odds, in an industry largely dominated by exploitation, and their existence has been used to push debates about gender representation in cult cinema (Gorfinkel 2000; Luckett 2003; Modleski 2007). Increasingly, too, films such as *Baise-moi*, *Romance*, *Trouble Every Day*, or *Irréversible* – which are often associated with art cinema – have developed cult reputations of which gender concerns are an integral part.

There has also been some effort to isolate and analyze specifically feminist cults. Part of this involves research into the cultist receptions of activist films such as *Born in Flames*, *A Question of Silence*, or *SCUM Manifesto*, films made by women that concentrate on acts of violence against women, and on ways in which actions against such oppression can be taken (Lane 2000; Rich 1998: 319–325; Udris 2004). The most commonly mentioned example is Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Its style, structure, narrative, acting performances, and even its title are a deliberate challenge to mainstream cinema's androcentricity, and besides the genuine appeal it has with feminists (see Kinder 1977), much of its cult reception is hinged upon its status as an ambiguous work of art. This fits a pattern whereby visceral cult films are considered fan-boy material, while more abstract and intellectual films with cult followings are assigned a reception context that is seen as promoting supposedly more discriminative viewing strategies.

Even in the light of changes that have led to home viewing becoming the predominant site of consumption (hence closer to the femininity associated with domestication), much of Hollows' claim still stands. The core of cultism remains committed to a perspective that substantiates cultism as masculine. Hollows quotes David Sanjek's study of fanzines, which asserts that "self-conscious misogyny" and an "intentionally, juvenile, hard-boiled tone" go hand in hand because "only the most hardened sensibilities can bear the

assault of offensive imagery" (2003: 45). Similarly, Brigid Cherry's (1999) analysis of female fans confirms how women continue to be excluded as part of the imagined community of cult consumption.

Anxieties of Cult Consumption

One reason for the persistence of cult cinema as masculine, and a way of understanding the complexity of the process through which the tag "masculine" is perpetuated in spite of accusations leveled against it is offered by the work of Jacinda Read (2003). Read builds on Hollows's argument. She investigates how the awareness of scholars of a gendered distinction between subculture and the mainstream (and of the efforts signaled above) complicates their ability or eagerness to engage with films (and receptions) that are said to draw much of their cultism from misogyny. An evident exemplification of this awareness has been the term "guilty pleasure," a phrase popularized in the late 1970s when *Film Comment* started a column celebrating critics' favorite films they felt they could not defend, thereby of course mounting exactly that, a defense. It is telling that this backhanded form of defending what was often sexist material originated exactly at a time when "bad cinema" was being re-appraised and the pornographic and horror genres rose to infamous prominence. Read asks if some of the allegations of chauvinism and misogyny leveled against these genres (and their defenses) did not disallow fans and users to find a cultural identity or to amass cultural capital. Do such allegations not take away the possibility of male, straight fans to take up a position from which they can speak to the subject? In other words, does the criticism directed against cult cinema not make it impossible for fans to publicly remain male and straight spectators that are supportive of this kind of cinema? (Read 2003: 58). At the very least it leads to what Read calls "anxiety of consumption" (2003: 58), an acute awareness that in approaching, say, an erotic film one might well be exposing oneself to ridicule simply because of the overtones associated with cultism (we too have had to answer the question "why would you study such woman-unfriendly material" several times). In that respect, it hardly matters that the study of a cult film's *reception* does not imply an agreement with its politics. Attempts to justify, rationalize, or spoof (in the case of Hunter's *Showgirls* essay) analyses are then akin to what Will Straw (1997: 11) called "an ageing male's strategies for survival in a cultural realm in which his place is no longer certain." It puts the male scholar at the same level as the fan-boy, and it chastises both for associating with a kind of cinema that has the reputation of being "wrong." References to camp, irony or hyperbole as instruments of that attempt to survival thus become equally suspect.

Read poses a very valid point, though she offers no solution. Instead, she observes how scholar after scholar fails to provide a sound rationale when they try to claim that "new" forms of approaching cult cinema might offer a way out. Jeffrey Sconce (1995: 379) notes the position of "limbo" and disempowerment from which a lot of academics approach paracinema, as a site for "refuge and revenge." Steve Chibnall (1997: 85) goes perhaps the furthest in suggesting that "psychotronic criticism [which runs] counter to dominant streams of political correctness" and which is "aware of feminism and the politics of difference," can offer "a reassertion of the right to look, to make anything the object of the knowing, sardonic, ironizing and frankly excited gaze." Both Sconce's discussion of paracinema and Chibnall's argument on psychotronic criticism describe efforts not to address the allegation of misogyny but to blow up the system of debate, reasoning, and discourse by embracing outrageousness. Such descriptions certainly help us understand the tactics used by audiences that feel cornered in their right to align themselves with cultural products because of the dubious reputation those products have (rightly or wrongly so). By not taking into account the socio-economic and cultural conditions under which such audiences have to labor for their right to access and enjoy and cultify films, however, they fail to provide insights into just how forceful, demanding, and inescapable some tactics are.

There is also the problem that the very term "masculinity" is often used homogeneously. As Jancovich (2002) has argued, not all viewers operate from the privileged position of the "educated, male, white, middle-class" (to use Sconce's terms as paraphrased by Read) – a position of uncertainty perhaps (as Sconce argues) but unquestionably also one of liberty of access. It is a position not enjoyed by a wide range of viewers

that come from different constellations of class, ethnicity, and – indeed – gender. In fact, this is exactly the point Cherry made when she analyzed female horror fandom. Because there is a much wider range of audiences than those reflected in most research, it is not sufficient to merely describe and automatically dismiss the tactics used by viewers to regain their "right to look." There also needs to be an investigation of the material conditions that regulate the access to cult films those audiences have had, as well as research into the channels through which their cultism (of whatever degree of sophistication) is communicated.

The main implication of Hollows's and Read's work, and the consequence of our remarks above, is that many cult receptions take place in a context of anxiety, especially when it comes to mechanisms of (and receptions of) gender representation. Within these contexts it is absurd to assume that either "femininity" or "masculinity" are homogeneous concepts. Future approaches to gender in relation to cult cinema, then, would benefit by abandoning one-size-fits-all theories in favor of looking into context-specific cult receptions of gender representations – receptions by gendered, actual audiences that use their own *and* others' perception of "masculinity" or "femininity" to define themselves against mainstream culture. We will present some such efforts in the next sections of this chapter.

Non-Normative Sexuality and the Performance of Gender

In order to understand how cult receptions use concepts of gender and sexuality, it is necessary to analyze how these concepts have been embedded into the history of cult. More often than not gender and sexuality are fluid concepts, especially in the case of cult cinema. As Hoberman and Rosenbaum write (1991: 263), "Androgyny, transvestism, and gender blur have been major motifs in midnight movies from *Flaming Creatures* through the John Waters oeuvre to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*." Following Grant (1991: 129) it then becomes "important to consider how the alternative [sexuality] is used or consumed by audiences." In the next few sections of this chapter we will look at how cult films have overtly portrayed non-fixed or non-normative forms of gender and sexuality.[1]

For Judith Butler (1990), gender is always *performed*. It is the result of bodily routines, acts of stylized repetition managed through regulatory discourses: femininity, masculinity, and even the so-called "natural" and "biological" sex of a body are largely the result of cultural discipline. Breaking out of these regulatory constraints, then, is often seen as a subversive act of resistance against dominant ideologies and of liberation of the human body. This is very much the context within which much of cult cinema is discussed. The overt displays of cross-dressing, travesty, and queer sexuality in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Figure 10.1), for instance, feature against a background in which Frank (Tim Curry) constantly comments on the attire and gender presentation of Brad (Barry Bostwick) and Janet (Susan Sarandon) (Weinstock 2007).

Similarly, *Showgirls*, which also has the word "show" in its title, contains a continuous stream of comments on "performing" to be a woman or a man, and the film has elaborate scenes in which women are "checked out" for their female sensuality. In numerous other cult films too, men and especially women comment upon performing gender roles: Ilsa in *Casablanca* does so explicitly when she muses over what kind of woman she is to Victor and to Rick; in *Emmanuelle*, characters continuously comment on Emmanuelle's performance as a liberated woman. Even Emmanuelle's rape is explicitly staged as a performance.



Figure 10.1 In *Fame*, Ralph (Barry Miller) and Doris (Maureen Teefy) perform with the audience of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

There is a historical component to this link between cult cinema and the performance of non-normative sexuality. In their overview of midnight movies, Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1991) refer to the 1970 receptions of three films featuring drag, namely *Performance*, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and *Trash*, as a point in history that highlighted how performances of ambivalent or unfixed sexuality and gender roles were fast becoming a common part of cult cinema. Even films with drag and transvestite performances produced well before the 1970s, such as *Glen or Glenda* or *Some Like it Hot* received new cult appeal during midnight runs in New York in the early 1970s. The cult success of *Rocky Horror* and *Outrageous!*, which featured Bette Davis and Judy Garland-impersonator Craig Russell, continued the trend. For Andrew Ross (1989: 135–136), the link between cult cinema and the performance of non-normative sexuality (especially drag) has its origins in late June 1969 when two apparently unrelated events (the funeral of gay icon Judy Garland and the Stonewall riots that followed the arrest of people attending the gay Stonewall bar in New York) virtually forced a connection between the performance of alternate sexuality and the performance of subversive film viewing (see Chapter 8 for an elaboration on how this influenced camp viewing practices). Before the riots in Stonewall, cultist receptions were usually regarded as straight. After Stonewall, they were increasingly associated with gay and alternate sexuality, and with a conscious awareness of how gender is performed.

According to Staiger (2000: 125–160), however, the link between the collectivity of the cult experience and the performance of non-normative sexuality has roots that precede 1969 or 1970. Staiger's analysis of the receptions of the scene of the New York underground cinema of the early 1960s and especially of films such as *Flaming Creatures* (which features an orgy and several scenes of explicit sexuality) and *Scorpio Rising* (which has gay overtones), sketches a gradual symbiosis, across the decade of the 1960s, between countercultural developments, such as gay culture (we use the term gay here to refer to homosexuality as well as lesbianism and transvestism), and underground cinema that eventually culminated in cult receptions of the kind Ross and Hoberman and Rosenbaum observe. Staiger's research claim has far-reaching implications. On the one hand it demonstrates how cult cinema's development, in the guises of underground cinema, midnight movies and camp, helped find a community for a hitherto non-homogeneous gay culture. But it also suggests that for non-gay audiences who regularly attended cult screenings, and who felt themselves belonging to its subversive, subcultural or countercultural atmosphere, the performance of gender and sexuality of any kind became a notion they grew familiar with. Such a context-specific insight paints in a different light the discussion of the anxiety of male cult consumption we mentioned earlier in this chapter. For one, it signals that analyses of the anxieties of cult consumption receptions warrant placement in a historical context. Another implication is that the multiple lines of association and alignment make it near impossible for researchers to find evidence that justifies drawing a firm dividing line between so-called "innocently straight," "deliberately straight," "closetly gay," or "gender performative" attitudes towards affiliations between counterculture, gay culture, and cult or underground cinema, *especially* when not only "identities are at stake," as Staiger puts it, "but a *movement*," too (2000: 126). It is therefore perhaps more practical to assume, at least in broad overviews of cult cinema, no such line exists (and indeed both naivety and performativity may collide within the actions and beliefs of a single fan). It would also seem prudent, then, to allow the notion of so-called performed gender receptions to be of equal significance as that of so-called frank or earnest ones.

While the developments sketched by Staiger explain how gay culture found an association with a film-viewing community, it does not offer a connection to the mainstream. Many performances of non-normative sexuality remained too adventurous, too openly gay and lesbian or too ambiguous to be considered anything else but "exceptional," "problematic," or "political." That counted for new releases (such as *Harlis* or *La cage aux folles*) as much as for the reappraisal of older films such as Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*, Jean Genet's infamous *Un chant d'amour*, *Mädchen in Uniform*, or *Belle de jour* (Rich 1998: 174–206; Dyer 2003: 63–88, Cairns 2006: 58). *Personal Best* became the totemic lesbian film for a wide audience; it made Mariel Hemingway, who also

appeared in Playboy at the time of the film's release, an iconic yet controversial figure for the lesbian movement (Williams 1982). Within a smaller niche, the films of Monica Treut received a firm cult following (Straayer 1996: 23–41). For gay film cultism, the films of Derek Jarman were important (Richardson 2009).

The early 1990s saw a convergence similar to the one observed by Staiger in the 1960s, in which the performance of gender and non-normative sexuality underwent a further development and found a renewed connection with a film viewing community whose reception activities displayed cultist sensibilities. For the most part, this development is linked to the way in which so-called "New Queer Cinema" changed the narrative and stylistic frameworks through which performances of gender and non-normative sexuality were presented: stories about overcoming adversity became increasingly embedded in a context of "play" and the carnivalesque (with the circus a recurrent background). With the midnight movie circuit on the wane this renewed performativity found exhibition platforms in a growing number of LGBTQ-film festivals (LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer; see Gamson 1996, Rich 1999). Through the LGBTQ networks and communities, films such as *My Own Private Idaho*, *The Living End*, *Les Nuits Fauves*, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *Go Fish*, *When Night Is Falling*, and *Happy Together*, which combined anarchic, mocking, carnivalesque, and ironic attitudes received cult receptions across borders (Feigenbaum 2007; d'Allondans 2009). This change moved gay and lesbian cinema into a reflexive mode and in a permanent niche, a place that was still marginal culturally but that at least provided a secure position from where one could speak (to paraphrase Read's comments from earlier in this chapter). One result of this redirection were receptions that blended in nearly seamlessly with other types of cult receptions through shared stylistic tropes of hyperbole and irony, and shared narratives involving slacking and aimless young adults.

Since 2000, the emphasis on the carnivalesque has intensified to the extent that it has become the dominant lens through which performances of gender and non-normative sexuality are managed. To this has been added a self-reflexivity that roots many of these performances as homage or persiflage of previous performances of gender and non-normative sexuality – with *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, influenced by *Rocky Horror*, among its key examples (Havis 2008: 92–94; we will explore some of the mechanisms of this development in Chapters 21 and 22).

Erotica and the Performance of Gender

Performativity of gender and sexuality is at the center of many exploitation films with high erotic content – the kind of films that are said to reinforce dominant ideology. In fact, the explicit address of the performance of sexual acts and an equally explicit address of the act of observing that performance are key elements of the way in which audiences of erotic cinema are introduced to non-heteronormative forms of sexuality and gender role-playing, while the cultural sanction of this adventurousness is frequently absent. Among the most visible tropes these types of exploitation cinema employ is that of a setting that enables both performance and observation of sexuality – often a shower, a prison, a convent, or a brothel – and a quasi-automatic association of women with eroticism, most often evoked through series of scenes that revolve around female nudity and inferences of lesbian sex that is performed in the presence of (or spied upon by) a male or masculinized authority figure (a prison guard, a security guard, etc.).

A good illustration of this is the women-in-prison film, of which *Caged Heat* is an often-mentioned example (Peary 1981: 44–47). The performances of the film's stars, Erica Gavin and Barbara Steele, act as textbook illustrations of what Pauline Kael (1961) had called the "satire of the female" (Kael had Anita Ekberg's performance in *La dolce vita* in mind). We find similar routines of hyperbolic gender performance at work in nunsploitation films such as *Flavia the Heretic* and *Killer Nun* – with Ekberg in the leading role (Nakahara 2004). In the case of the soft-core erotic thriller too, the performance of female gender is constructed so it can be understood as performed. As Robert Eberwein (1998) and Linda Ruth Williams (2005) have pointed out, in the formula of the erotic

thriller female sexuality is literally put on stage, its performance explicitly worked into a story in which it is surrounded by surveillance cameras and voyeurs. Examples include film such as *9½ Weeks*, *Basic Instinct* and *Scorned*. In this context too, the body of the female is a satire of femalehood. Soft-core erotic parodic films such as *Lord of the G-Strings* and *Spiderbabe* have continued this trend of spoofing womanhood even more explicitly (Hunter 2006; I. Smith 2010b).

Some exploitation films present performances of gender and sexuality in a context of death and destruction. Among the most infamous such cycles is nazisploitation. In the wake of *The Night Porter*, films such as *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*, *Salon Kitty*, and *Gestapo's Last Orgy* have used the stages of camps and brothels to display performances of sadomasochist sexuality within the wider framework of the Holocaust (see Leiva 2008). Such performances are also prevalent in Sade-sploitation, a body of films inspired by the work of eighteenth-century French libertine author Marquis de Sade. Its representations of sadomasochistic submission – in particular blindfolding, chaining, whipping, branding, and piercing – gave films such as *Justine de Sade* and *Histoire d'O* highly contentious receptions. In the case of the vampire exploitation film, performances of gender and sexuality contain strong elements of violence, including torture, rape, and orgiastic sex. Because of the long history of the vampire film, several scholars have suggested that its representation of the performance of sexuality and gender can be seen as a barometer of Puritanism in a culture (Tseëlon 2001). Milly Williamson (2005) argues that vampire fandom, and indeed the entire cult of fashion surrounding the vampire figure, are influenced by views of the Western female as someone "guaranteed to be at fault" with dominant culture, someone "unattainable," an "impossible creature" and a "timeless cultural phantasy" (2005: 144). In vampire movies, this view is pushed to the extreme: women are represented in highly stylized and fashionable modes, yet they are also inaccessible; they are sexual, but out of reach for the spectator. An object of desire and a warning against that desire for both male *and* female viewers, female vampires are *only* performance. Films such as *Rape of the Vampire*, *Fascination*, or *Vampyros Lesbos*, showed women as active hunters as well as passive prey. Harry Kümel's *Daughters of Darkness*, a film highly praised in cult receptions, is often regarded as an example of a vampire film that problematizes the representation and performance of gender and sexuality to the extent that it takes on feminist traits (Mathijs 2004, 2005b; Dion 2009).

Probably the most acute case of the performance of gender and sexuality in the framework of eroticism is pornography, and the porn chic cycle of the 1970s in particular. For Ross (1989: 172) porn chic marks the rise of filmic porn as a full-fledged capitalist industry, characterized among others by a professionalization that saw an increase of women as agents in its production and reception, as well as a stylistic change: explicit penetrative sex was shown in full detail and the performativity of the sex act became the center of the narrative – indeed "performing" this or that sex act was what porn chic was all about. *Behind the Green Door* is an excellent example: Marilyn Chambers is kidnapped and brought to a secret sex club where she is forced to perform sexual acts on stage, surrounded first by only women (dressed as nuns), then by only men. Chambers' performance is attended by an audience that, spurred on by her actions, engages in an orgy. Eventually, the sex acts culminate in an extreme close-up "money shot" that lasts several minutes – one that is frequently commented upon as so surreal in its color-saturated slow-motion that it becomes hyperbolic, even abstract (Peary 1981: 23). *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* and *Café Flesh* too incorporated elaborate stagings and performances, turning these films into comments *about* sex (see Smith 2007). After the heydays of porn chic, the performativity of sexual acts remained a key component of the pornographic film: it informed the cult receptions of *Caligula*, *Debbie Does Dallas* and *New Wave Hookers* and it was central to the crossover reputations of the films of Annie Sprinkle, who moved from being a porn star to a career as performance artist. Hyperbolic examples of performativity in pornography are the performance of Annabel Chong in *The World's Biggest Gang Bang* (which also became the subject of the documentary *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*), and the collaboration of former Italian porn star Ilona Staller with "husband" artist Jeff Koons. In an attempt to disrupt the patriarchal and androcentric procedures governing sex Staller and Koons "performed" marriage, and ridiculed gender role-playing, sex, and dressing up.

The Performance of Gendered Reception

A complication of the performance of gender and sexuality that affects the reception contexts of cult cinema is that of the performance of gendered reception, or the degree to which audiences perform (i.e. *pretend*) affiliations or sensitivity towards one or another gender in reaction to various representations of, and allusions to, sexuality.

Many longer-term receptions of cult films of which the representations and performances of gender and sexuality had been the subject of controversy or of discussions of how they affected people (porn arouses or disgusts, Nazisploitation repulses, drag liberates, and so on) have experienced moments in which the performance of gendered reception is said to take precedence over any other form or mode of audience activity. In most cases, such performance causes doubt about how sincere or meaningful the reception is, at least in the eyes of the researcher. This is best exemplified by the wide range of analyses of the long-term receptions of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* that try to assess how any of the film's initial liberal politics are forgotten or buried under the high degree of ritualization of the performance of its gendered reception (Wood 1991). As we observed in Chapter 9, there are several context-specific instances in which the performance of gendered audience activity can still be said to achieve some form of transgressive liberation. Nevertheless, the question remains whether multiple layers of performativity do not make it unnecessarily difficult for audiences to access any liberatory content that might lead to personal liberation. In an essay on configurations of femininity in midnight movies, Gaylyn Studlar (1991) asks if the revelation that very few cult films have effectively subverted oppressive norms means that the films are not perverse enough to elicit change, or if they are too easily assimilated. Perhaps, as Grant (1991: 129–130; 2000: 21) suggested, the high degree of ritualized performances of gendered reception is conformist indeed, precisely because it is seen as performed. For Jeffrey Weinstock (2007: 1), the consequence is that "*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has never taken place . . . at least not for me."

But, as Weinstock (2008) goes on to show, this does not prevent communities from being established and anxieties from being reduced. Exposure to the multi-layered performances regarding films such as *Rocky Horror* does still generate debate and out of those debates grow understandings, solidarities, alignments, and affective commitments. Consider, for instance, the case of feminist cultism. Some of the films and receptions we have singled out earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 6 as examples of an increased attention for and sensitivity towards issues of gender representation (the films of Akerman, Arzner, Wishman, Rothman, or the *Ginger Snaps* trilogy), can also be said to have received part of their cult recognition as a result of critics and audiences "performing" feminism. As a result, debates have arisen over whether or not a cult film's "feminist" components are indeed "truly" feminist or partly the effect of the performance of feminist attitudes in its reception. *Tank Girl* in particular has been held up as a "real" feminist cult film, especially in comparison with the cult films of Kathryn Bigelow, which are said to be too masculine, or some of the films of Catherine Hardwicke, which are said to cater too eagerly to hetero-normativity (Powell 1994; Daugherty 2002; Le Breton 2009: 137–144). According to Whelehan and Sonnett (1997: 33):

> it is the "social organization of the relations between texts within *specific conditions of reading*" that work to define the postmodern circulation of meaning-making within contemporary media forms. This is important for assessing how heterogeneous audiences are addressed across the cultural sites which form the social context of reception(s) of *Tank Girl*.

To name a specific context: many fans will set up *Tank Girl* against *Twilight* through a comparison that will note that Hardwicke was the costume designer of *Tank Girl*. Equally, *Tank Girl* is used as example to complicate considerations of just how feminist Bigelow's films are – and if indeed these articulations of feminism in the films' receptions matters (Talalay 2010). What is at stake here is less the "truth" about these films' feminism – or even the feminism of the viewers – and more the heightened awareness of "feminism" as a tool of significance in perceiving films in certain ways.

Ultimately, the performance of gendered reception can become a tool that is applicable not only in cases where audiences see themselves confronted with films that harbor a clear desire to shock, transgress, or present performances of non-normative sexuality, but towards *any film*. This activity has been referred to as "queering." The concept of queering relies on the pun involved in merging the terms "queer" (gay) and "query" (investigation). It refers to the audience activity of reading against the grain, of willfully reinterpreting films by looking for performances of non-normative sexuality even against the intentions of the makers. Queer viewing strategies are aided by what Ross (1989) has identified as "camp aesthetics" (see Chapter 8). Most cult classics have been queered. *Casablanca*'s last line has become emblematic in speculations that see Captain Renault (Claude Rains) and Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) commence (or continue!) a gay relationship. Alexander Doty (2000) outlines the queering of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as a closet gay film, *The Wizard of Oz* as lesbian fantasy, and *Psycho* as a gay film. Through queering, Jodie Foster's portrayal of Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs* and Linda Hamilton's role of Sarah Connor in *Terminator II* have been turned into iconic examples of lesbian heroines (Staiger 2000). Harry Benshoff (1997: 230) remarks how much queering involves the horror film. He writes:

> one might think that after the release and cult popularity of a film like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the idea of the monster queer would be a harder one to exploit, since audiences would already presumably have some awareness of the genre's queer undercurrents . . . Yet the general public still maintains tremendous powers of denial about matters homosexual ("Don't Ask, Don't Tell"), and the filmgoing public has a seemingly short memory for cultish deconstructions of popular culture.

Note how Benshoff's reference to a distinction between cult and the mainstream is established through a separation of audiences that can queer "undercurrents," and audiences that are not capable of this. Among Benshoff's most cultist examples is *Nightmare on Elm Street II: Freddy's Revenge*, which he calls "exceptionally queer" (1997: 246–247).

While largely playful and seldom attempting to effectively alter the course of a film's reception, queering has nevertheless impacted on the status of resolutely mainstream films, up to the point where it has ignited, rather than extended, cult status. An example of this, observed by Mathijs and Mendik (2008a: 375–376) and Sean Griffin (2009: 212–214) is the queering of *Top Gun*. Employing a variety of trivia such as the biography of flamboyant producer Don Simpson, the symbolism of imagery of locker room scenes, beach volleyball, jets as phallic symbols, and curious pieces of dialog, audiences have produced an entirely alternative meaning for the film – one that, by means of confirmation, found its way into a scene in *Sleep with Me* in which cultural authority and spokesperson for cultist sensibility Quentin Tarantino held a manic speech in which he painted *Top Gun* as a queer film. In the form of montages of "Gay Top Gun" such readings have found welcome audiences on the internet.

Hidden Strategies of Cult Enjoyment

But what if cultists will not articulate their performance of gendered reception as explicitly as the cases mentioned above? One important consequence of the performance of gender and sexuality in the receptions of cult films is that labels of enjoyment and pleasure, performed or not, automatically carry the implication of approval. Frequently, the difficulty of disentangling enjoyment from approval muzzles explicit articulations of receptions. We would like to illustrate this difficulty through the example of the rape-revenge film. Because of their foregrounding of the link between sexuality and violence films such as *Last House on the Left*, *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Thriller – A Cruel Picture*, *Ms. 45*, and *House on the Edge of the Park*, to name a few illustrious examples, have never managed to escape allegations of misogyny or sadism regardless of the opportunities for performativity they offer. Any articulation of appreciation is drowned out by criticism, and the result is often that cult fans of rape-revenge withdraw from debates altogether.

In his cross-generation reception analysis of *Straw Dogs* Martin Barker (2005, 2006) gives an insight into the complications of the cultist receptions of rape-revenge movies. He concludes that the film's troubled reception "arises from a series of things that the film

isn't ... Audiences who loved the film, lived its ambiguities, its loss of moral or motivational certainties. Audiences who hated it, sought for a clear meaning in it, and became distressed when they couldn't locate one" (Barker 2006). Importantly, in his research, Barker used a method (first used in a study of the reception of *Crash*, see Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath 2001) in which audiences were asked to map their reception of the film not only in terms of how they "liked" it but also if they "admired" it. By offering their viewers the choice to avoid equating "pleasure" with "approval" through the semi-affective audience position of "admiration" they were given the chance to highlight what they felt were important elements of their appreciation or fandom without the risk of offending notions of political correctness. It made it possible to see the extent to which committed viewers who knowingly engaged with films they knew had a bad reputation (such as second- and third-generation viewers) were able to separate and negotiate conflicting affections and interpretations towards the film. Among the views Barker managed to isolate were highly affective ones (such as the fear of physical overpowerment) as well as highly intellectual ones (such as an admiration for how *Straw Dogs* attempted to understand the presence of violence in civilization as part of a "primal instinct" or an animalistic imperative). Barker's method enabled the assessment of the ambiguities that viewing *Straw Dogs* brought with it, and it thus gave an explanation for its cult status as "volatile."

Formats such as VHS and DVD have further confounded the ambiguities associated with rape-revenge films. A research project, funded by the British Board of Film Classification, into viewers' attitudes towards and consumption of both cut and uncut versions of rape-revenge movies available in different regions in the world, found that there were strong nuances in the cultism of rape-revenge movies (Barker *et al.* 2008; Selfe 2008). Unsurprisingly, receptions of *House on the Edge of the Park*, *Ichi the Killer*, and the French *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *À ma soeur* showed huge discrepancies, depending on the kinds of aesthetic values and meanings that were ascribed to the films, the kinds of attitudes with which the films were approached, and the kind of opinions and presuppositions existed about actions of censors. In each case, however, audiences describing themselves as "admiring" though not necessarily "liking" the films, embraced opportunities given by the films' textual cues or their contexts in order to explain their deep commitment to these films. In the case of *Baise-moi*, for instance, its self-declared feminist intentions, its exploitative distribution, and its hugely controversial reception helped establish a context of "ambiguity" that fixed itself onto the film's viewing situations to the extent that it made it virtually impossible for viewers to "un-cultify" (for overviews of *Baise-moi*'s receptions, see Franco 2003; MacKenzie 2002; Reynaud 2002; Le Cain 2002b).

The various contexts within which the rape-revenge movie can be understood offer viewers the ability to shift the emphasis away from their supposed pleasure in the presentation of sexual violence towards a position in which they engage in an *interrogation* of sexual violence. Such interrogations of the sexual violence motive invariably led to debates and controversies and then to defenses, which in turn fueled cult receptions. Even if many rape-revenge movies were only sporting the revenge element as a rhetorical excuse to exploit opportunities to show sexual violence, many audiences would still accord importance to that rhetoric as a significant part of the film's meaning. In a sense, then, the rape-revenge movie holds up a mirror to cultists' desire to see disturbing and challenging materials. It even implicitly criticizes such interests (while of course still profiting from it). Yet it ultimately validates this viewing attitude because the interrogation also exposes the wider context of the struggle over meanings of problematic categories in culture and it points out how the "cultist" viewer is put in the same corner as the problem regardless of the actual reasons for viewing.

In some instances, this constant struggle to separate one's commitment to a film, genre, or director with a disreputable status when it comes to gender representation has led cult fans to withdraw almost completely from debate – not in the sense that they blow it up (like paracinematic viewers do) or that they hyperbolically perform receptions (thus obliterating the distinction between fake and sincere convictions), but in the sense that there is a refusal to explain one's choices and alignments. Russ Hunter (2009, 2010) calls such entrenched and muted resistance an "insulation trajectory." In a study of the cross-cultural reception of the films of Dario Argento, Hunter observed how

Argento established a cultist rapport with horror fans in the wake of the release of *Suspiria*. Subsequent releases of Argento's films failed to reach the same praise. At the same time, new criticism highlighted a lot of the underlying misogyny or sadosexuality in Argento's films (especially with regard to *Tenebrae* and *Inferno* – two Argento films that landed on the video nasties list). Or, at the very least, such studies brought into view Argento's so-called disrupted, fragmented, and ambivalent representations of gender (Mendik 2000; Needham 2002). But instead of causing a change in the cult reception of Argento, this only led to a more stubborn reclamation of Argento's status as "cult hero." As both Hunter and Peter Hutchings (2003) observe, there is a high degree of seriousness in how fans of Argento comment on his work.

> We seem a world away here from the camp aesthetics associated with some cult movies, notably *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or from the more aggressive counter-cultural maneuvers associated with what Jeffrey Sconce in an influential article has termed paracinema (Hutchings 2003: 134–135).

Hunter notes that this does not mean that Argento's fans are blind to changes. Quite the opposite, they are happy to concede that the director is making "inferior" films aesthetically. But they do *not* appear to be prepared to discard their fandom in the light of what Hutchings (2003: 136) has described as a move towards understanding Argento's work as symptomatic, "as a window on themes and issues that do not pertain to Argento alone." He notes how in the case of Argento advanced insulation coincides with increased mentions of the term "cult," as if Argento's supporters attempt to defend their fandom by repeating a mantra of oppositional reading they have learned and adopted. In Hunter's words, it offers "for those so inclined, a chance to 'rebel' conceptually" (Hunter 2009: 12). Conceptually, but also muted.

There is a regional element to the cult insulation trajectory as well. Next to the lack of a context of "art cinema," and the refusal to adopt a camp position or to accept insights generated by symptomatic criticism, the insulation trajectory of Argento is also affected by its cultural origin. Hunter demonstrates how time and again fans and critics refer to the fact that his films are "giallo," a "typical Italian" format that is close to that of a Western but at the same time different – Mikel Koven (2006) calls it a vernacular category, Gary Needham (2002) calls it a discursive site of contestation, and several critics refer to it through the Italian term "filone" (literally: thread), thus eschewing any reference to genre (and its implication of debates over categorization). The confusion over the specific contours and components of the giallo, and its culturally specific status, has increased ambivalence over the status of the work of Argento on an international level. On the one hand it is an attractor (Guins 2005), but on the other hand it is equally often referred to as a component that blocks anyone not familiar with that context from understanding what Argento's films are "really about." This has the consequence that many Argento fans can easily point to any symptomatic criticism as "ignoring" the cultural context within which Argento's representations of gender take place, thereby blocking debate. We will further elaborate on elements of transnationalism in our next chapter.

Conclusion

To some extent the hidden strategies of cult consumption are performative as well. Insulation entrenchments and admiration-not-approval can be regarded as postures the same way the performers of female nudity, of erotic scenes, and of queer sexuality can be said to offer merely performances – as if they are playing along with the kinds of reactions and receptions the fans think they are supposed to have without actually meaning it, as if it was a directive from "mainstream culture" they are only too keen to subvert by pretending to adhere to it.

In this perspective, then, female fans protesting to being victimized by offensively misogynist horror films, queer fans subverting the masculinity in *Top Gun* by cheering on macho posturing, and fan boys reveling in downgrading erotic displays by howling and hollering, are part of the same reaction that typifies cultism: they are assumed to challenge mainstream culture without being so offensive as to cause direct sanction while also allowing those viewers to take up a position from where they can speak – to the films, and via the films to their peers, opponents, and

the rest of culture. In other words, the separation of pleasure from admiration, the insulation trajectory theory, and the varying degrees of performativity all offer audiences of cult cinema a way of addressing gender. While such performances can also confirm the very behavior they are criticizing, the fact that it is often virtually impossible to distinguish between genuine reactions, and performed ones, gives the entire process an ambivalence that characterizes cult cinema's receptions.

Note

1. We use the term "non-normative" in its most neutral understanding, as any form of gender or sexuality that stands outside the pattern of heteronormativity, monogamy, and patriarchy that has dominated film representation since the classical era.

11

Transnationalism and Orientalism

There is an increased effort to study cult globally. It is largely the result of the obvious observation that cult cinema is – by default say some – transnational or cross-cultural. Like many other forms of cinema it enjoys the opportunities of what Toby Miller has described as "an international division of cultural labour" (quoted in Schneider and Williams 2005: 5). This is not only a commonsensical observation. Research has highlighted just how international cult cinema is. Consider, for instance, the transnational contexts of consumption of the giallo film (Guins 2005; Koven 2006; Lucas 2007), of Latin-American cult cinema (Syder and Tierney 2005; Reboll 2009), and martial arts cinema (Hunt 2000; Bowman 2010).

Let us use briefly illustrate how wide-reaching considerations of cult cinema's transnationalism can be through two examples: *The Gods Must Be Crazy* and *Godzilla*. *The Gods Must Be Crazy* presents conflicts between normality and the trangressive "Other" in the form of intercultural and international conflict: African versus European, revolutionaries from one country versus the authorities in another, civilized versus primitive, even in its self-identification as a film from Botswana while it is in effect a South African production that wanted to sidestep the apartheid boycott. Regardless of how the narrative ostensibly mocks but ultimately supports recuperation (Grant 1991: 133–135), their awareness of connotations of "African," "South-African," "native," or "the bush," and the mere presence in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* of a people, a language, and a region that are far away from what they normally encounter asks audiences that see this film in a downtown art house or repertory theater to defamiliarize Western normality. Even in its quasi-transgressive guise it confronts idiosyncratic consumption patterns and non-effective use of time thus forcing audiences to treat their home culture as "temporarily different" or "temporarily useless." The cult of *Godzilla* also built on aspects of transnationalism and exoticism. Cynthia Erb (1998) suggests there is a strong link between the *Godzilla* cult and the cultism that had evolved around *King Kong*. Of course, a major difference lies in *Godzilla*'s post-nuclear, radio-active origin, a quality that – with the nuclear bombing of Japan fresh in viewers' minds – gives the monster a decidedly tragic characteristic, and which puts the distinction between friends and foes in a complicated light. According to Chon Noriega (1987), *Godzilla* found a following beyond Japan because it forces audiences to acknowledge the monster Godzilla, in its dual role of destructor and respected icon, as "Other" to both the indigenous population and to foreigners. To a large extent, *The Gods Must Be Crazy* and *Godzilla* are transnational because they are transgressive, *and* transgressive because they are transnational. They upset the binary us-versus-them opposition that Western cinema seeks to conform.

In this chapter, we tackle transnationalism via one region that was once considered an unlikely component of cult cinema, namely Asia. J.P. Tellote's seminal collection on cult cinema mentions only one Asian film: in Gregory Waller's market study of midnight movies, Bruce Lee's martial arts film *Enter the Dragon* is described as a "highly unlikely candidate" (Waller 1991: 170). *Enter the Dragon* is also the only Asian film discussed in several other overviews (Peary 1981;

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Mendik and Harper 2000b). In recent years, however, Asian cinema has had a fundamental impact on cult cinema. It is therefore crucial we highlight the region in our considerations.

Orientalism: Curiosity versus Exoticism

One recurrent problematic of how fans, critics, and audiences express cultism of certain Asian films is that of a Westernized perspective. Mathijs and Mendik (2008a: 275–280) point out that this perspective involves *both* a cultural curiosity and a predetermined notion of exoticism. Often, the qualities that Western audiences find so attractive in Asian cinema are a result of Western viewers' curiosity for and confrontation with systems of representation they have difficulty understanding (and that therefore violate practices, routines, and habits). But this does not automatically mean that curiosity is equal to a cultist *desire* to find "exotic" and "extreme" imagery. A cultist lens only occurs when audiences expand their viewing beyond curiosity to focus on the interrogation of "tainted reputations": when aspects of the culture of origin are read as separate from its "typical" elements and are instead seen to point to that other culture's taboos.

Any such effort is inevitably affected by what has been called an "orientalist" perspective. According to Edward Said (1978: 1), who coined the term, the Orient is a Western invention that regards it as a place, to the East of Europe, "of romance, of exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." "Orientalism," then, is the concept of engaging with cultures and cultural products originating to the East of Europe from a colonial, imperialist standpoint. The concept acts as a self-affirmation of the colonizer. Said's initial analysis was largely directed at the Middle East, as well as the regions of Persia and India. Said acknowledged that for the Americas "the Orient" might have different associations, because it might relate mostly to the Far East, but overall his conceptualization has been applied to all regions East of Europe and on the Western edge of the Pacific Rim, generally known as "the East." Orientalism has also affected Eastern critical observations of the West. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto (1993: 338) argues misrepresentations are unavoidable: "the Other cannot be misrepresented, since it is always already a misrepresentation."

With regard to cult cinema, orientalism most often refers to the ambivalent attraction of the cultural "other" from the point of the view of the Western "self." That attraction is frequently subjected to fetishist idolatry. After all, to assign a cult value to an object is an act of fetishism in itself. The fetishism of the Orient is often visualized through a series of traits associated with both femininity and uncivilized, unindustrialized wildness. Some of the most visible expressions of this fetishism include sexual seduction, soft-spoken or ornamental language, deception, immorality, ritualized lethal force combined with solemnity, and the depiction of scars, veils, and robes as props of sex and violence. As Gary Needham (2006: 10–11) has observed, such attractions are affirmative of the superior position of the West yet also indicative of the realization that that superiority is hinged upon the kind of imagery associated with the "other." In order to maintain the superiority, then, all Asian products, be they animated series (*Pokemon*), videogames (Super Mario) or hardware (Nintendo) are persistently framed as "other," regardless of whether such presences are ubiquitous or marginal. As a result, the distinction between center and periphery of culture that informs so much of cult cinema is invalid when it comes to Asian cinema – where everything is "other," everything is potentially marginal.

Given such complications, the cross-cultural exchange of Asian cult cannot be measured simply in terms of degrees of inferiority/superiority or degrees of misrepresentation. On the contrary, any surplus generated in its receptions (through fetishism, curiosity, or otherwise) falls well outside the scales of measurement for traditional cultural trades and exchanges. Films such as *In the Realm of the Senses* – too radical to be tied down into any cultural "normality" regardless from whatever angle it is considered – did a lot to deconstruct the classic orientalist view, as did several of the films we will discuss more elaborately further on in this chapter. The most significant deconstruction of orientalism occurs through cross-cultural fan receptions and the cultural surplus they generate. Such developments are accompanied, or even propelled, by globalized and transnational streams of distribution and marketing (Morris,

Siu Leung Li and Chan 2005; Denison 2006, 2008). Rob Wilson (2005: 268) even refers to this oversaturated translocality as necessitating a new form of cultist critique, one he enigmatically calls "spectral."

In sum, the orientalism of Said might work in both ways, as self-affirmative but also as interrogator of cultural identity. Even though it weighs heavily on the reception – across borders – of all cinema, it affects cult cinema differently because of that cinema's defiance of being measured in terms of normalcy. Only within the context of specific receptions and international exchanges, then, can we determine with any semblance of exactness how these acts of transnational affirmation and interrogation work.

The Reception of Asian Cult Cinema

Prior to the 1970s, cult receptions of Asian films were limited to isolated instances, most notably the samurai films of Akira Kurosawa (*Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*) and various *Godzilla* films (Peary 1983: 63–65; French and French 1999: 174–175; Everman 1993: 114–118). Since the 1970s, there have been two waves in the reception of Asian cult cinema.

The first wave occurred in the beginning of the 1970s, and runs parallel with the magnetic appeal of Bruce Lee. At this time, Asian cult cinema was largely limited to martial arts movies, re-imaginations of the jidai-geki, or Japanese films of what David Bordwell (2000: xi) has called "Sadean violence." After Lee's death and the posthumous release of *Game of Death*, cultist interest in these forms of Asian cinema dispersed across numerous tiny niches, constructed through festival audiences and Western film magazines. Characteristic of this first wave was that it relied on existing networks of cult and exploitation cinema (such as horror) to reach its audiences. It was part of the same market that sought to attract viewers by offering exotic, fetishistic materials. Put differently, during this wave Asian films became cults almost uniquely as a result of their Western reception within already cultified networks. The cult following of US-produced compilation film *Shogun Assassin*, distributed through Roger Corman's New World Pictures, and the French adoration for King Hu are illustrations of this (Macias 2001: 62–76; Wong 2007: 182–183).

The second wave, which took place from the early 1990s onwards, is radically different, partly because it shows discrepancies between regions of reception that had hitherto been presented as a unity, but also because the cultification of the films occurred *both* in Asia and in the West. In Europe, niche festivals and specialist retailers played a pioneering role in offering audiences access to Asian cinema that had already been perceived as cultist or marginal by the home territory. Similarly, in the early 1990s, specialist import-retailers of comic books and pulp literature started to carry VHS tapes and laserdiscs of Japanese anime and Hong Kong heroic bloodshed films. David Desser (2005: 210) notes that films such as *Akira*, *The Killer* and *City on Fire* were being picked up by fans whose willingness to watch them "with neither an audio or subtitle track" was a clear sign of their emerging cult reputations. These specialty titles were soon accompanied by Jet Li and Jackie Chan films, soft-porn such as *Tokyo Decadence*, *Sex and Zen* and *Naked Killer*, the fairytale *Chinese Ghost Story*, Japanese yakuza thrillers such as *Violent Cop*, and occasionally by Bollywood films (though these relied more frequently on their separate networks).

Already inscribed with cultist credentials, anime and heroic bloodshed films made their entry on student campuses, and in independent theaters. In contrast to the 1970s, audiences seemed to be treating these films as instant-cultist genres and formats in their own right, no longer as add-ons to existing networks. By the middle of the 1990s, anime and heroic bloodshed films had developed tight networks of retailers that supplied a growing Western cult following. The only significant change in that mode of distribution came in the late 1990s when a string of European festivals (of the Méliès network, see Chapter 3) started introducing their fans to anime and Japanese horror films as a means of breaking away from the traditional horror fare they usually offered. This wave of J-horror led to a diversification of the cult appeal of Asian cinema. The efforts of distributors such as Tartan (and its Asia Extreme label) brought Asian cult films to "an enthusiastic audience that is receptive to innovative genre, regardless of country of origin" (Berra 2010: 7). In the wake of J-horror, Korean films became late-night favorites at festivals, especially titles such as *The Isle* and *Oldboy*. An important factor in this development

was the attempt made by Korean festivals such as PiFan to connect to the network of European fantasy festivals.

Networks of Exchange: Otaku

Compared to Europe, North America's second wave receptions of Asian cult cinema were initially powered more by individual fans and the general dynamics of popular culture than by institutionalized networks of distribution (Brophy 2005: 1). The first attempts to chart Asian cult cinema were the reviews of Thomas Weisser in horror and trash cinema fanzines, and from 1991 on in the first fanzine dedicated to Asian cult cinema, *Asian Trash Cinema* – which later became *Asian Cult Cinema* (Weisser 1997: ix). Next to fanzines, prominent elements in this constellation were video retailers, specialty festivals, and fan conventions, especially for anime. The latter display the most visible form of cultism, particularly through what Susan Napier has called "anime nation's con culture," and in elaborate "cosplaying" (anime-themed costume parties) (Napier 2007: 149–167; Winge 2006). Universities and colleges too started paying attention to Asian cinema outside the canon (Bordwell 2000: x). Near the end of the 1990s, internet forums allowed for even more pronounced distinctions, especially between first-hand and second-hand, and pre-remake and post-remake fandom. As Matt Hills (2005: 166) notes, "individualized and psychologized notions" of cult fandom prevailed in these networks, especially through the manufacturing of distinctions between fans that had "discovered" Asian cults a while ago, and newcomers.

Perhaps the best exemplar of this development is the phenomenon of the "otaku." Originally an honorific pronoun and a word for "another's house," the term otaku commonly stands for "people who become particularly loyal fans of a subculture" (Newitz 1995: 4). Popularized by Akio Nakamori, and later also by Hiroki Azuma, the term was mostly used for predominantly Japanese male fans of video games, sci-fi, comic books, anime, and "idols" (heavily promoted Japanese pop stars). It initially carried a highly negative connotation, and like orientalism it also carries feminine associations of domesticity, passivism, ornamentalism, and shyness (Barral 1999). To this are added characteristics of sexual immaturity and a "detachment from reality that prevents the otaku from participating in society and forming authentic relationships" (Bolton 2005: 70). It is tempting to see in this initial labeling of the otaku a reproduction of orientalism that not only denies representations their right of meaning outside the Western, male gaze (much like Madame Butterfly), but also reduces the Eastern male to a powerless victim of a system of representation (cinema, media) over which only Westerners could command power.

Recent research into otaku fandom of newer generations and outside Asia, however, complicates this picture. Often, otaku are savvier than these cursory descriptions suggest. They reach a "higher perspective" in which their knowledge of mediation becomes a powerful tool in performing the delineation between the "real" and the "fictional." Christopher Bolton (2005: 66–76) adds to this the observation that there are numerous exceptions to the strict gender-division sketched above, especially in anime horror's "phallic girls." These characters function simultaneously as a confirmation of the male gaze and as a challenge to it – defying grounding in cultural reality through their highly fictional mechanical bodies. Nor did the term otaku remain limited to the East. The term also found wide application in North America, and in Russia, where it shed some of its negative connotations and became synonymous with cult fandom of anime (Napier 2007). As Annalee Newitz (1995) points out, this cross-cultural transfer of fandom gradually changed its feminine connotations (however ambiguous these often are) into associations of miscegenation, especially when the fandom involved the fantasy-horror genre, or "mecha." Newitz singles out *Tetsuo, Man of Iron* as one of several cult films from Asia that achieved its cult status in part because of how it challenged its fans to consider multiculturalism, racial mixing and identity construction. *Tetsuo* tells the story of an otaku whose body is gradually converted into a machine. *Tetsuo* is often regarded as a meditation on cyberpunk and a post-industrial crisis of identity (Conrich 2005). Newitz argues that *Tetsuo* in fact addresses the question of what it means to one's own cultural identity to access, digest, and celebrate foreign cultural products in a cultist manner. As Newitz notes, American fans might "enjoy Japanese anime precisely because it criticizes American culture" but they might

equally see it as a "respite from political correctness" in which America is blamed (quoted in Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 316).

Discussions of transnational and cross-cultural otaku fandom and comparisons with Western fandom have had the effect that they pulled this form of fandom out of a frame of reference that saw it as uniquely childish, and that, by extension, associated at least part of that childishness with the fact that the form of fandom is essentially non-Western. Instead they have presented otaku as "active," "empowered," in other words as performers of their fandom – similar to the kinds of performances we have discussed in previous chapters. An unfortunate consequence of this has been a tendency to homogeneously blend both otaku fandom and Western fandom, a tendency whereby cultural distinctions that do matter get swept aside in an effort to see all fans equally empowered by a "shared technological culture." According to Hills (2002b), it has meant that debates over how otaku fandom shares characteristics with Western cultism have shed one form of infantilization (fans are undeveloped and immature as human beings) in favor of another (as mere performers, fans are undeveloped in their critical awareness of transcultural media technology). According to Hills, this problem can be solved by regarding otaku fandom as a form of transcultural homology to Western cult fandom (*not* homogeneity) that does not erase context-specific differences in its eagerness to demonstrate similarities in performativity and achieve equality between kinds of recognition for cult fans. This homology could even, suggests Hills, form the basis of cross-cultural forms of solidarity between cult fans, a form of "fan internationalism" (2002b: 6). While Hills is careful not to push this analogy too far, it is nevertheless through the solidarity that the homology between otaku and Western fanboys escapes from the threat of "techno-orientalism."

In its straddling of various degrees of fandom and professionalism, especially with regard to series in which otaku have actively participated (such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* or *Otaku No Video*), the entire concept of the otaku becomes, according to Thomas Lamarre, "an evolution in human perception" (2009: 144), a new kind of connoisseurship, literacy or competency in reading images that is perhaps the closest possible description of what can be called a "cultist view" of cinema. It refuses to distinguish between center and margin of the frame, between storyline and setting, between foreground and background, between trivia and narrative, instead "demanding an attention to production details as so much 'data' [that it] has the effect of flattening the image into a distributive field of elements" (Lamarre 2009: 145). According to Lamarre (and he cites otaku animator Toshio Okada), otaku perception includes "isolating perceptual elements . . ., dehierarchizing layers, and flattening the production hierarchies" (2009: 149). If nothing else, the otaku intervention in fandom has heightened the attention of fans as "interactors whose pursuit . . . make him or her a cooperator in production and promotion" (2009: 153).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the reception of Asian cult cinema has exploded. Joan Hawkins has described this as part of the "mainstreaming of exploitation," a development that is particularly visible with Asian cult cinema. Tellingly, the example she uses is Park Chan Wook (*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *Oldboy*), as she quotes reviewers' struggles to accept that "movies that were once relegated to midnight screenings at festivals – and, in an earlier age, grindhouses like those that once enlivened Times Square are now part of the main event" (Hawkins 2010: 126). As a result of this mainstreaming virtually each region has developed its specialty festival and most of them have become fairly well integrated into the international circuit. Specialist online and mail-order retailers, and distributors such as Media Blasters, Section 23 Films, Bandai Entertainment, and Animeigo, which continue to supply niches of the Asian cult cinema market, find themselves in competition with major distributors and mass-market retailers.[1] The success of J-horror and other Asian cult films released theatrically have ensured this market's sustained visibility.

In sum, the cross-cultural reception of Asian cult cinema appears to have moved away from the stigma of orientalism, and away from a singularly negative connotation of the term otaku, towards an understanding of transnational cult receptions as informed by instances of performativity – fandom across borders performed by fans from various cultures embracing their fandom as an international sign of solidarity. But as the fandom grows, so does the need for internal

distinction. This need is acutely visible in increases in critical commentary that addresses particular constituencies. And as such distinctions are carved out complications of cult receptions arise, especially with regard to receptions that comment on references to intercultural and transnational traffic that many of the films themselves make. In order to sketch some of these complications the remainder of this chapter will outline the specifics of two regions that have supplied and propelled much of Asian cult cinema: Hong Kong and Japan.

Hong Kong Cult Cinema

Asian cult cinema's first highpoint in the 1970s developed around martial arts movies, or *wuxia*, coming from Hong Kong (Hunt 2003). The galvanizing moment of this cultism is the worldwide craze of Kung Fu and the cult of martial arts actor Bruce Lee. As Paul Bowman (2010: 8) argues, the films of Bruce Lee, and indeed the figure of Lee himself, present themselves as a series of clichés of what film should not be: "trivial and trivializing, violent, masculinist, orientalist stereotype; a mythologized commodification of alterity packaged for a fetishistic Western gaze; the mythological reduction of ethnicity into posters, t-shirts, nerds' film collections." At the same time, of course, Bowman explains, Lee is a challenge to all of those images. Above all, he provides an opportunity for viewers to elaborate endlessly on the clashes and mixes these images offer, a play with symbols that denies there is one single "body of knowledge" that can be gained from the international transfer of imagery but that nevertheless located Bruce Lee, not as part of this or that culture, but as a "shifting center of enduring intercultural and cross-ethnic representation" (Bowman 2010: 229).

To begin with, there is the idea of Kung Fu. *Fist of Fury* and *Enter the Dragon* Westernized Kung Fu before it was orientalized: they added realism to the choreography of fights by showcasing Lee's considerable athletic talent and his iconoclastic philosophy of fighting (Jeet Kune Do, "the way of the intercepting fist"), and by introducing exotic weapons (such as nunchakos or iron claws) and detailed ornamental props (Figure 11.1). They updated the storylines to

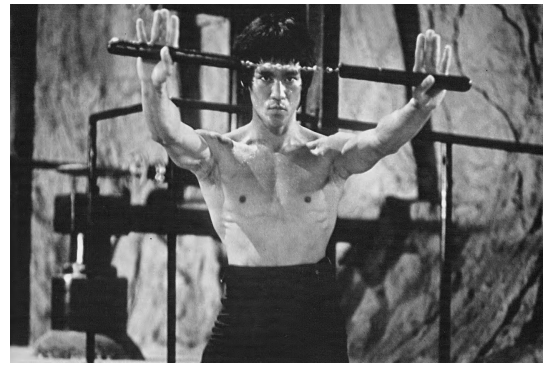


Figure 11.1 Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*, with nunchakos, at the center of enduring intercultural and cross-ethnic representation. Image courtesy of Royal Film Archive of Belgium.

contemporary, postcolonial times – even adding some references that put Lee in opposition to former colonizers, such as when he kicks a sign that says "no dogs or Chinese allowed" in *Fist of Fury*. In *Enter the Dragon* this sentiment had been tempered and changed into an international setting – a setting that fitted the transnational profile of Lee (of mixed American and Hong Kong upbringing) while offering nods to contemporary forms of exploitation cinema. The hype that had started developing around Lee in Asia was complicated by the limited availability of his films for Western audiences – as well as the fact that they were known under a range of different titles, some confusingly close to each other. Lee suddenly died, in 1973, just before *Enter the Dragon* was put on worldwide release. Within a matter of months, film fans went Bruce Lee-crazy. But Lee was not really a star *until* he died. As Eleftheriotis and Needham (2006: 407) put it:

> the legendary status that Bruce Lee enjoys has, at least partly, been facilitated by the impossibility for European and American audiences of engaging with him as a star at any level that can go, even slightly, beyond mythical opacity. ... Bruce Lee entered the consciousness of international film audiences not as a "real" actor and star but as a "legend".

It was the first time a non-Western actor from a non-Western film industry received such a cult following. The difficulties producers, distributors, and audiences

had in sketching a framework for the reception of a non-Western local martial arts star are indicative of the volatility of cult stardom (see Teo 1997; Hunt 2000; Bowman 2010).

The appeal of Bruce Lee catapulted the cult reputation of numerous Hong Kong films. *A Touch of Zen*, which predated Lee's films, but which did not receive visibility in the West until 1975, gained a cult following for its elaborate representations of fighting techniques and acrobatics, high doses of Jacobean violence of vengeance and humiliation, and inferences to Buddhist philosophies of self-defence, and because of that it stood as a firm counterpoint to contemporary Western flirts with Eastern mysticism. Because of its combination of spectacle and introspection, *A Touch of Zen* became as much of a template for cult cinema from Hong Kong as Bruce Lee (Teo 2007). Other post-Lee cult wuxia included *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*, and – increasingly – pastiches such as *The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires*, *Five Deadly Venoms*, and the posthumously produced Lee film *Game of Death* (in which he dons his black and yellow track suit). David Bordwell (2000) has observed that wuxia often evolve in cycles, in which periods of hyperbole are followed by periods of realism. The hyperbolic cycles were the ones that particularly drew cult receptions. After the hyperbole of the post-Lee pastiches, a period of realism arrived. That period of realism, in turn, spawned an even more hyperbolic wave of films in the latter half of the 1980s that again opened up Hong Kong cinema to international fandom. One part of this wave consisted of ghost stories and swordplay fantasy. Of these, a few films such as *Chinese Ghost Story* achieved cult status – especially through the ways they connected, at least in the eyes of their fans, mainland China's mythology to contemporary anxieties about the Western world and to Hong Kong's specific anxieties about the handover to China.

The most visible cult following went to a series of crime thrillers set in urban, modern Hong Kong, that pitched highly skilled, ruthless professionals such as hitmen, triad gang members, cops, and bodyguards against each other while simultaneously stressing their emotional bonds. Through close combat and choreographed fights, these films maintained the attractions of martial arts films, but they replaced tools with guns (kung-fu thus became gun-fu). Because of their high level of visceral violence, their often melodramatic and tragic storylines, and the prevalent theme of male bonding these films received the nickname "heroic bloodshed." The most noticeable of these films is *The Killer*. A collaboration between two of the most prolific creative talents of the Hong Kong film industry at the time (director John Woo and producer Tsui Hark), and the breakthrough performance of new star Chow Yun-Fat, *The Killer* appealed to cultist audiences because of its storyline of failed redemption, its plentitude of gun battles, and its intertextuality, hyperbolic religious metaphors (especially referring to catholic martryrdom), and homoerotic overtones. It took *The Killer* some time to reach international audiences, but it became the ultimate heroic bloodshed cult film. It is now invariably described as the Hong Kong film with the most "secure cult status" around the globe (Sandell 1996; An 2001; Hall 2009). In its wake, action films such as *Hard Boiled*, and dystopic wuxia such as *Ashes of Time* also became cults.

In terms of their international reception, heroic bloodshed and wuxia also benefited, ironically, from their association with a late 1980s Hong Kong rating system that saw them lumped together with horror films and softcore sex in a "Category III." Julian Stringer (1999) describes Category III as the "repressed underside of more respectable cultural forms." During much of the 1990s, almost 40% of released films in Hong Kong were labeled Category III: "*Sex and Zen III* is right there on the same shelf as Jackie Chan's *Mr. Nice Guy*" (Davis and Yu 2001: 13). In the eyes of fans, video store patrons, and audiences-at-large this created the impression that all these films were connected through "classifications of style (exploitation/cult film, art cinema, adult film) or genre (horror, gangster, martial arts)" (Davis and Yu 2001: 12). As a result, films with a Category III rating temporarily gave all of Hong Kong cinema a transgressive reputation, which in the context of the anxiety of the run-up to the region's reintegration to the nation of China, made Hong Kong cinema extremely ambiguous: "Category III is marked out as 'other,' not suitable for children; and yet, it is not stigmatized, segregated, or shunned by mainstream audiences. [I]ts transgressive, offensive qualities mark it as a 'come-on' and serve to integrate it into the market." (Davis and Yu 2001: 14). As several

scholars note, this transgression often took on the form of farce (Williams 2005). In short, Category III helped extend the international cult appeal of heroic bloodshed and wuxia films, and it enabled similar receptions for campy softcore detective films such as *Naked Killer*. Much of the cult dynamism surrounding the appeal of wuxia and heroic bloodshed films dissipated after Hong Kong's return to China.

Some elements were incorporated into the mainstream (such as Zhang Yimou's films), and some were pushed off the global audience's radar.

Anime and J-Horror

From the 1990s on, a strong cultism developed around two specific forms of Japanese cinema, anime and J-horror. Celebrated at niche festivals and through a vibrant video and DVD market, but in the margin of Japan's and the world's mainstream cinema, anime and J-horror have developed some of the most ardent fan followings of cinema of the last few decades. At the core of this cultism are an admiration for the visual flamboyance yet nihilistic morality of these two formats, and a fascination for their explorations of the themes of urban alienation and advanced electronic technology.

As a term, anime refers to Japanese animation cinema, usually adaptations of manga, comic books. The breakthrough of anime cultism lies in the 1980s, though its origins stretch back as far as the 1960s. In the 1980s, series and films such as *Akira*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, and *Bubblegum Crisis* attracted cult followings, which in the 1990s, as the formats and subgenres expanded, became more prominent and visible. The cult of anime consists of two partly overlapping areas: naive and mystical anime, and horror and science fiction anime, or *mecha*. The first category is often regarded as the least cultist, because it falls outside narrow understandings of cult audiences. Yet the nostalgia with which baby-boomer audiences remember 1960s films and series such as *Astro Boy* or *Magic Boy*, or the fondness with which 1980s youths recall the colored *Astro Boy*, the baby unicorn *Unico*, and *My Neighbor Totoro*, are strong indications of this area's ongoing cultist appeal (Brophy 2005: 36–37). As part of *kawaii* (or the cult of "cutification"), these products have established cross-generational fandom. Through series such as *Kimba, the White Lion* and the films of Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli (*Princess Mononoke*) this area of anime cultism has also been inscribed with a strong sense of karmic, environmental, and ecological awareness (Brophy 2005: 134–135; Cubitt 2005). In essence, it creates a form of "soft" or even "new age" global cultism. Rayna Denison (2006, 2008) argues this appeal needs to be seen in the context of the global marketing and presence of Miyazaki's films. Napier's study of Miyazaki online-fandom uncovers this cultism as ambiguous in the meanings its ascribes to the films, yet unified in its conviction that it presents a "non-Western worldview in which good does not always triumph over evil and the only appropriate response is to continue to look at the world 'with eyes unclouded'" (Napier 2006: 62).

Mecha has a more edgy cultist reputation, especially because its fandom demographic invites comparisons with that of other cults, such as horror and science fiction. The late 1980s are the breakthrough of mecha. Films such as *Akira*, *Tetsuo*, and the hugely controversial *Legend of the Overfiend* (Buruma 1995), received cult followings for their depictions of post-apocalyptic, macabre, highly technologized urban story-worlds in which heavily armed androids or demons, assassins, and gangsters (often supported by sinister surveillance police) fight it out at the expense of teens caught up in the battles. It is not difficult to see the image of the confused and corrupted youth become an attractor for young otaku. But the elaborate presentations of hostile urban jungles in which gangs and crime abound, and in which storylines are allowed to become lost in numerous asides are equally attractive. During the 1990s, as female otaku became a more pronounced part of the cult of anime, mecha also began to upset the fairly strict gender-divided market. According to this divide, shojo-anime, such as *Sailor Moon*, are directed at girls and presented throbbing emotions channeled through kinetic and dynamic visuals and an emphasis on altruism and attractiveness (Brophy 2005: 198–200). Shonen-anime, such as *Fullmetal Alchemist*, focus more on action, hybrid-humans and muscular athleticism, and address fanboys. The mixing of both is visible, first in "babes with guns" films, and subsequently expanded in the cult success *Ghost in the Shell*. In its representation of a dystopian urban technopolis it leans heavily towards shonen-anime. But it retains elements of

shojo-anime in the graceful, light-footed, free-floating fluidity of the female cyborg Kusanagi – who bases her identity on her relationship to the infinite ocean that surrounds her (Orbaugh 2002; Ruh 2004; Gresset 2009). Brophy (2005: 107) writes: "*Ghost in the Shell* freely mixes the karmic with the psychic with the robotic." Its fans across the world also cheer its lack of political correctness, and, like fans of science fiction and fantasy, they engage deeply in its story-world, enjoying an "estrangement from a world that sometimes can become a little too familiar" (Napier 2007: 190). Since the middle of the 1990s, series such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Final Fantasy*, or *Vampire Princess Miyu* have deepened anime cultism by establishing niches for epic, horror, and fantasy, and by applying story-worlds to numerous platforms and media (comic books, video games, television series, webcomics). In spite of this proliferation criticism accuses anime continuously of misrepresentations through its persistence of presenting women and girls as "in touch with intense, even magical, forces capable of overwhelming male-dominated reality" (quoted in Bolton 2005: 67).

The term J-horror entered cult parlance in the late 1990s, when a new generation of Japanese horror films began to forefront a mix of traditional horror elements, such as those of the *tokusatsu* (the special effects monster genre) and *yurei* (traditional ghost stories), with themes borrowed from the techno-existentialism of the anime, such as the placement of horror within an environment of economic crisis, or the view of monstrosity as a consequence of modernity. According to Ramie Tateishi (2003: 295), these films' inspired cult following is the result of a nostalgia for a cultural heritage that is entertained opposite an active destruction of that same heritage (so that it will not burden the present generation in its progress). *Ringu* is the most literal exploration of this ambiguous urge. It also opened up Western audiences for J-horror, and it introduced them to a series of similarly inspired films such as *Cure*, *Dark Water*, and *Ju-on: The Grudge*. Each of these films sees environments of modern technology (media, medical, or care-technology) trigger seemingly supernatural appearances, which its receivers are unable to process because of their disconnection from their cultural roots. Two key examples of this millennial "urban techno-alienation" are the satirical *Battle Royale* and *Suicide Club*. They present a generation of disillusioned teens who blame their ancestral culture for their desensitization. Only through cult-like arrangements opposing this parent culture do these teens find meaning for their own existence – and often they don't at all. Because of their imagery of dying teens and claims of parental culpability, *Battle Royale* and *Suicide Club* became engulfed in controversy, stirred up through speculation and agitation (in the case of *Battle Royale* fueled by the role of Takeshi Kitano, a figure with a cult reputation of his own). It caused interventions in the national parliament, calls for bans by politicians and educators, and hotly debated festival screenings abroad (Macias 2001: 149–152; Crawford 2003: 305–307).

The flagbearer of the cult of J-horror is Takashi Miike. His reputation is that of a prolific provocateur or agitator. His high and varied output flaunts the routines and practices of the industry, and of traditional authorship (Mes 2004). The difficulty with Miike lies, moreover, in his bold style: hard-hitting, flamboyant, nihilist, and above all, "cool." This coolness ties Miike to the particular reception context of "cool Japan." Miike's stylistic bravura, claims Aaron Gerow (2009: 34–35), offers a veil of superficiality that cloaks a visceral politics of diversity. Miike first rose to international prominence with *Audition*, a grand-guignol art house horror film that forever connected him to J-horror. But Miike's films are not uniquely Japanese but rather transnational. In their liminal settings (in-between places such as rooftops, tracks, streets), Miike's protagonists also find themselves hovering in between hero and coward. Characters in *Dead or Alive* claim to be "like Japanese but not Japanese, like Chinese but not Chinese"; Ichi in *Ichi the Killer* is both super-hero and cry-baby.

According to Jay McRoy, Miike's films are an interrogation of a trend of films within J-horror that have received cult appeal through their depiction of "dove style violence," a form of violence in which "human beings coldly abuse one another with a detached cruelty reminiscent of 'certain species of bird' who, when 'a flock member is *different* or weaker ... peck at the weakest bird dispassionately until it's dead'" (McRoy 2008: 103[2]). McRoy sees Miike's *Ichi the Killer* as an example of a film that is a send-up of a core theme of J-horror, namely *ijime* (buylling). *Ichi the Killer* shows not just the impact of

the bullying, but the fallout as well. It does so in such a hysterically hyper-moralistic over-the-top style (borrowing heavily from anime) that it defeats its purpose as a critique. The result, according to McRoy, is a representation of violence that is both painful and playful, and a reconsideration of the transgressive violence of desire that largely explains the film's huge cult reputation (2008: 132).

The boom of anime and J-horror brought with it attempts to extend its heritage into the past. Filmmakers such as Nobuo Nakagawa ("the Japanese Roger Corman") or Seijun Suzuki (*Branded to Kill*, "too much even for that hyperbole-drunk factory Nikkatsu") were eagerly picked up by cult distributors (Rayns 2009: 30–32; Atkinson 2009: 34). Around 2009, after a few key distributors went out of business and some festivals started to report audience fatigue, the general appeal of J-horror appeared to stagnate, and shrink to a smaller yet more devoted cult in the margins of the mainstream (Berra 2010).

Conclusion

The cult status of Kung Fu, anime and J-horror is largely undisputed. There are many other films from Asia, and from other regions of the world, where that is not the case. In general, this is because they are presented through a binary perspective: they are labeled cults either because they suddenly achieve niche popularity in certain regions (and are caught up in hypes), or because they remain forever obscure, in which case their cultness is one of invisibility instead of a niche following.

There is a danger with such a sharp-cut distinction. It relies too much on stable assumptions of what is mainstream and popular in transnational receptions, and what is at the margins. A good example of this is Bollywood, a term that originated as a tongue-in-cheek expression that describes Mumbai's Hindi-Urdu language cinema (Desai and Dudrah 2008: 1). But Bollywood is more than that. It has also become shorthand for a flamboyant style and a specific form of fandom of ethnically Indian fans for this type of film. As a dominant force in a vibrant market, Bollywood is the center of cinema, not the periphery. Still, its avid fandom, visible as much in box-office figures as in rampant piracy, equips it with cult characteristics. Furthermore, as Rachel Dwyer (2005: 1) argues, the "use of melodrama and heightened emotion" and the "grandiloquent dialogues and the all-important songs" give the impression Bollywood's production values are close to those of Hollywood cult classics. Imperial in its origins, but increasingly referring to a globalized culture industry, the very word Bollywood begs a comparison – not only one that pitches Hollywood as a standard against the derivative that are all other forms of cinema, but also one that exists only in the tensions of intercultural communication it throws up.

These complications of distinction, popularity and periphery also govern the reception of *Sholay*. This film is simultaneously regarded as the "greatest Hindi film of all time" (Dwyer 2005: 218) and as a cult phenomenon that started as a box-office flop and worked its way into the hearts of fans over the course of a number of years (Dissanayake and Sahai 1992). Lalitha Gopalan testifies to the cult status it has since acquired: "fans of this cult film extensively quote Salim Khan and Javed Akthar's script back to the screen; rumours abound on the existent variations of the closing sequence; and [Amjad Khan] became one of the most popular stars" (Eleftheriotis and Needham 2006: 325). The cult reputation of *Sholay* has also affected the remake *Aag* (aka *Flames*), albeit adversely – it has gained it the unenviable reputation of one of the worst films ever.

There is no reason not to see *Sholay* as an example of cult cinema on a par with Western cult classics. If audiences and critics of cult cinema would accept the complications of their reception contexts the way they accept those of *Casablanca* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it probably would be. Yet when confronted with Bollywood, different conditions and strategies appear to apply, and one of the most stubborn of these is that for Asian films Western audiences in particular do not appreciate ambiguities of popularity the same way they appreciate them for other forms of cinema. To put it in the words of Hills – for Bollywood any homology is not yet accepted.

A similar attitude underpins cultists' worldwide appreciation of obscurity. Even when there is little evidence of continued fandom or subcultural appeal, Western critics and audiences are keen to identify instances of Asian cinema as cult. This is for instance

the case with Philippines and Thai horror movies, and a score of exotic genre cinema from East Asia (Tombs 1997; Tumbocon Jr, 2003; Knee 2005). In these explorations the emphasis is not on the cult following of these films, but rather on the discovery, for Western audiences, of a form of cinema hitherto hidden. As such, these studies have both a pioneering and an orientalizing function: they make available new kinds of films to curious cinephiles and potential fans (thus enabling a cult following) while also framing these films as perennial "curiosities" – stripping them of any possibility to present themselves as "normal," even within their own cultural perspective, let alone on the global stage. Typically, for the perspective of obscurity individual titles of films matter less in such studies than groupings of them as "weird" and "exciting" – and in that refusal to individualize films lies of course another orientalizing element. It is a variation of orientalism that has come under some criticism (Espinosa 2009; Imanjaya 2009).

There are only few exceptions to the model that treats Asian cinema, and non-Western cinema in general as either obscure or popular but culturally over-specific for global cult audiences. Such exceptions have in common that the films and their receptions address the West (and its values) reflexively – the same way the term otaku, or Hong Kong's cinema, were said to address the West, namely through a combination of appropriation and alienation. Examples of such exceptions are *Lady Terminator*, an Indonesian horror critique of Western modernity's influence on traditional Indonesian culture, with a possessed female killer castrating men who seduce young Indonesian girls (Gladwin 2003: 227–228), and *Ong-bak*, a Thai martial arts film that "challenges the Hong Kong action model" (Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Chan 2005: 2–3). These films' cult status is partly the result of the stand they take against Western or globalized business practices, in particular issues of cultural ownership, copyright, and exotic tourism. In offering resistance against such practices, these films have occupied a rebellious position among viewers, who feel they offer an exit out of suffocating cultural routines.

Notes

1. We owe gratitude to Nathen Clerici for his expert advice on these recent developments concerning Asian cult, and we regret that we are not able to expand on the phenomenon of the cult appeal of the "kogal" (the "blue sailor suit girls") and the "take-it-easy" attitude; we refer to the essays of Hiroki Azuma for further reading on this.
2. The in-quotes are from Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara's *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia*.

12

Religion and Utopia

The previous chapters have emphasized how cult cinema is marked by deep alignments between fans and films, but also by performances of such alignments. In this chapter we would like to extend our exploration of these issues through a link with the religious meaning of the term. We touched upon the religious origin of the term "cult" in our introduction. Here, we will look more closely at areas where discourses on cinema cultism and religious cultism collide in an attempt to determine if any of the seriousness (and indeed graveness) with which religious cultism is associated is also found in film cultism, or if frivolity has replaced it altogether. Throughout, our focus will be on films depicting religion and religious cults from a minority position – in the margins or in opposition of institutionalized religion.

Discourses on Cultism and Religion

For William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark (2003: 60), religions are "social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain, and exchange supernaturally based general compensators [sets of beliefs and prescriptions for action that substitute for the immediate achievement of the desired award]." By comparison, cults are "social enterprises primarily engaged in the production and exchange of novel and exotic compensators." This means that not all cults are religions, and that they often do not offer general compensators – they promise more immediate rewards (epiphanies or healing). When cults that refer to magic evolve towards more general compensators (such as eternal life, or otherworldly benefits) they become "cult movements," which Bainbridge and Stark (2003) define as: "social enterprises primarily engaged in the production and exchange of novel and exotic general compensators based on supernatural assumptions."

The type of cult that comes closest to cinema cultism falls under what Marvin Harris (1987: 268) calls "communal cults." Bainbridge and Stark call it the "subculture-evolution model of cult innovation." They are either organized around rites of passage or rites of solidarity. The model assumes that cults can emerge without authoritative leaders, as expressions of developments and consolidations of novel cultures often inspired by essentially accidental factors (2003: 67). As an example, Bainbridge and Stark give the subculture of juvenile delinquency that caused so much upheaval in the 1950s. This example invites a link between ways in which lower-class backgrounds, forms of deviance, and religious cultism are viewed by society. We will come back to this link further on.

Matt Hills (2002a: 117) has warned that comparisons between the kind of discourses surrounding film cults and religious cults are "absurdly insensitive to cultural and historical contexts." Drawing upon work of Emile Durkheim, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, Hills nevertheless outlines a number of similarities and connections between developments in cult discourse from the perspective of studies of religion, and discourses on cult in media and film studies. For Hills, there are three main components to any comparison between cult cinema and religious cultism. The first is their marginalization: both religious cultism and film cultism seem to present an "embarrassment" to

Cult Cinema: An Introduction. Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton.
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enlightened culture (2002a: 119). They exist in the margins of what is deemed acceptable in society. The second is what Hills calls the "practical unconsciousness" of the cultist: "the things that fans do not know . . . but which nevertheless still allow them to 'go on' in their subcultural and subjective activities" (2002a: 123). One function of this practical unconsciousness is the ability of otherwise rational people to engage in "discursive mantras" and to submit to the surrendering of "proof" in favor of an affective communal faith that brings about a "relaxation of rationalizations and justifications which fans may otherwise be called upon to produce" (2002a: 122). Hills sees this component as important in disabling the potentially awkward "why on earth are you a fan of this?" question. The third component is the increased individualization of cult beliefs, a development observed both in religious cultism and in film cultism.

There is little or no dispute over the first component: every description of cinema that utilizes its connection to religion and religious cults stresses that it is a position in the margin of cultures. At their most generous such descriptions describe cults as "mini-cultures" and "protocivilizations." Often they are less generous. There is also little disagreement with regard to the third component. It is extremely tempting to see the evolution to increased individualization in religiosity and religious/cult experiences in parallel with the rise of attention for cult movies – especially the midnight movie. In fact, one could position cult cinema's history as an indication of an evolution towards individualist religiosity. It is an evolution neatly captured in what Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have called a shift from "cult movements" to "client cults" and "audience cults," the former being more strictly organized and the latter more loosely based on the consumer activity of participants who "often do not gather physically but consume cult doctrines entirely through magazines, books, newspapers, radio, and television" (1985: 26). To these media Douglas Cowan and David Bromley (2008: 89–90) add the internet; and we could add film, cult films to be specific. We will encounter examples of both the first and third component in the historical instances of the collision between religious cultism and film cultism further on in this chapter.

But there is some debate around the second component, because by concentrating on how cultists avoid being asked about the essence of their cultism, Hills himself avoids addressing the substance of the cult experience: what *kind of experience* exactly are cult audiences after that could possibly be in line with religious cultism? Overall, critics and scholars of cult cinema are vague about this component. The quasi-religious characteristics of late night screenings frequented by repeat viewers looking for epiphanies and "whiffs of immortality" are not lost on Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1991: 16) when they describe midnight movies, but they resist going into too much detail: "Emile Durkeim's description of the positive cult is a virtual prediction of the sort of behavior observable any weekend night", they write. Danny Peary (1981: xiii) refers to some form of religiosity when he writes that "cultists believe they are among the blessed few who have discovered something in particular films that the average moviegoer and critic have missed", but he fails to specify what that "something" is. In "Confessions of a Cultist," Andrew Sarris (1970: 13) describes his initiation into New York's film cult scene as one that was "pure" because it was "poor" – an apt summary of the marginalized position of cults across history. Sarris stresses how much his position was akin to that of religious cultists: "I realized that the quasi-religious connotation of the term was somewhat justified for those of us who loved movies *beyond all reason*" (our italics). One of the reasons for this vagueness is that it portrays the film cultist as a naive, poor soul, unable to marshal the abilities to deal with films in an equally sophisticated way as middlebrow audiences, someone hopelessly lost, over-invested in aimless searches for deep answers.

David Lavery (1991: 187–199), offers one attempt to look beyond the "discursive mantra" and answer the "why are you a fan of this?" question. In Lavery's argument, the role of the discursive mantra is played by "cool" cynicism, and by semiotics and intertextuality (the idea that films are chains of signs, often towards themselves). For Lavery, such constructions stand in the way of what cult cinema and its audiences really want, namely glimpses of "cosmic meaning," the kind of feeling of collective belonging that the individualization, commodification and enculturation of belief-systems is said to have pushed out of people's everyday reach. Lavery observes such an underlying desire in films such as *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *Repo Man*,

Liquid Sky, and *Man Facing Southeast*. If one tracks the tropes and motives of such cult movies, Lavery argues, they share a common ground with early Christian Gnosticism, a religious philosophy stemming from ancient heresies that stress an escape from this world through the acquisition of esoteric knowledge (Lavery 1991: 193–194). Gnosticism has multiple incarnations. Lavery focuses on a variation that relies on the writings of Hans Jonas (who stresses the transcendental conception of salvation from a world that is essentially one big accident), Jacques Lacarriere (who emphasizes that Gnostics believe themselves to be "autochthons of another world"), and A.O. Lovejoy (who stresses "otherworldliness").

Lavery's argument is specific and speculative, but it is not unique. There is common ground between a view of cult cinema as rephrasing age-old esoteric, philosophical and spiritual questions, and one that stresses its marginalization in society, and it is caught up in a larger cultural development of the commodification, individualization, and secularization of religions and religious cults. In order to sketch this common ground we will outline a few concepts from the history of religion and cult movements. We will frame the characteristics of these moments in function of the semi-religious inspiration cinema cultism draws upon – as points of comparison but also as proxy explanations for the investments cultists make.

The Cult of Dionysus: Wasted Time and the Orgy

Our first point of interest is the cult of Dionysus, probably the most often-used metaphor for critics attempting to illustrate film cults and its affiliated social experiences through a link with the history of culture and religion. The cult of Dionysus is only one of many cults that qualify as exemplar. John Mikalson (2010: 53–65) lists seven Western cults that address the origin of culture with regard to the sacred, the divine, and that stress mystic rituals. There are numerous more from outside the West. However, because of its prominent place in the history of visceral, wild, and physical cultism and because of its permanent marginalized position in relation to legitimate cultural systems, this chapter uses the cult of Dionysus as a model.

The original function of cults was to offer people an encounter with the foundations of life untied to rules of everyday governance. The encounter was supposed to obliterate enculturation in an effort to "return" to or "elevate" into a "direct understanding." The tradition goes back to the pre-religious ways of worshipping, and especially to the tenth century BC cult of Dionysus in Near Asia. According to local lore, Dionysus was a demon who, suffering from holy madness, hid in the forest hills, where he lost himself in delirious chases in an attempt to become one with nature *as a whole*. Followers of the cult would gather at night in the woods, and engage in wild orgies, with music rousing them into dances, trances, and sex, until their hunger for a literal union with all of life would lead them to sacrifice – originally a random human, later a carefully selected animal like a goat or bull (Otto 1965; Kerényi 1976; Burkert 1987; Mikalson 2010). The ecstatic communion of the sacrifice and the devouring of its flesh would transfer divine powers to the worshipper, and would give the deepest possible pleasure of feeling united with all forms of existence (feeling *wide awake* and *alive*). In short, the Dionysian cult offered communities a way to grasp, through tacit, physical experience, the terrifying yet wonderful nature of life in all its forms (beginning and end, night and day, season after season), worship and appease the forces that control it (storms, fearsome animals, vast landscapes), make bearable through commemoration the many traumatic and horrific events that would threaten them, and celebrate the very fact they are alive, and life itself.

Centuries after its original run, the Dionysus cult has remained influential as a metaphor for a worldview in which the celebration of cosmic meaning is linked to everyday life, and not alienated from it and in which the cultic experience was essential to a full life, not a marginal addendum. One example comes from Harvey Cox (1969), who uses the Dionysian festival and the medieval festival of the Feast of Fools as a model to explore the potential of the cultic experience (and its connection with lower-class populations, which he stresses) to address core values of humanity without conforming to hegemonic systems. For Cox, the concepts of festivity and fantasy, which he sees very much in the activist and eschatological sense of Antonin Artaud (who is discussed at length), offer an alternative model through which the cultic experience (rituals, dance,

comedy, drunkenness, radicalism) can act as an agent of social change in everyday life. Another example, in line with Cox's aims to offer alternatives to individualization and commodification, is Michel Maffesoli (whose work we detailed in Chapter 1). For Maffesoli, the figure of Dionysus is a model for the celebration of everyday life because its modes of activity ignore "productivity," "efficiency," and "purposefulness." This conceptualization sees Dionysus as a core element of phenomenal experience – of cult but equally of life as a whole. For Maffesoli, what society and economy call a "waste" is exactly what a Dionysian model cherishes.

Two key aspects of the metaphor of Dionysus resonate with the kind of experience film cultism is said to include, namely the experience of time ungoverned and the visceral experience of sexual energy. For the first, the convenient shorthand is that of "wasting time," for the second it is the "orgy." Both are commonly regarded as superfluous, frivolous, and unproductive forms of conduct, and that is exactly why they resonate with cultism. The aspect of wasted time reflects on the unwillingness of cultism to slot itself into a conduct of time as prescribed by society. Instead, the Dionysian experience is essentially presented as one in which one loses oneself and in which time, as a tool that measures experiences, becomes useless. Philosophical studies of the governance of time from a variety of approaches, such as Henri Bergson (Totaro 2001), Stephen Kern (1983), Eric Alliez (1996), or John Zerzan (1994) often share a distinction between "proper" uses of time and "resistant" uses of time. The Dionysian experience, like the cult cinema experience, is seen as resistant. Mathijs (2010a) uses this parallel to argue that: "one main implication of all the modes, tools and instances of media cultism, and indeed the purpose of the epiphanies cults chase, is the subversion of a steady progression of time." Among the examples Mathijs mentions are the numerous instances of "ruptured time" in cult films (*Donnie Darko*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, etc.) as well as cult receptions' improper uses of time – watching films repeatedly, ritually, at midnight, outside of the proper time frames. To those can be added aspects of nostalgia, and of re-imagining repeat viewings as if experienced "for the very first time."

The aspect of the orgy as a contentious yet core component of cult cinema and cult receptions, is something we have alluded to a few times in Chapter 9 and 10, where we discussed within the framework of the challenging of taboos and the performativity of non-normative sexuality. The specific aspect of the Dionysian orgy in itself has been the subject of much philosophical debate. For Georges Bataille (Botting and Wilson 1997), violent eroticism is the full acknowledgement of life into death. It is primarily lustful, uninhibited, and exuberant, and only remotely concerned with procreation. It is forceful and violent in that it transgresses borders. For Friedrich Nietzsche (1968) too, the Dionysus cult stressed a vital connection between violence and sexuality that goes to the core of being alive, being human. For Leopold Flam (1973) and Hubert Dethier (1994–2002), who studied centuries of heresy and heterodoxy, the Dionysus cult, and indeed all cults, primarily concern the carnal solidarity between humans as the ultimate way to find solace and belonging. The sexual orgy is the main method towards this ever-fleeting moment of utmost satisfaction.

With regard to cult films, the references to sex and violence are often more tempered. Yet, in addition to several of the films mentioned in Chapters 9 and 10, they inform discussions of avant-garde cinema as cultist (especially *Flaming Creatures*), and they also feature heavily in debates of the cultism surrounding films such as *Häxan* and *Un Chien Andalou*. The visceral component of cultist viewing also informs a number of reception studies. Using a phenomenological perspective, Vivian Sobchack (2004) has made reference to "sensuous experiences" and "carnal modalities" to describe viewers' embodied reactions to representations of, among others, sex, violence, and death. Among the examples she uses are *Crash* and *La jetée*, both of which have received cult receptions. Sue Turnbull (2007: 181–189) analyzes cultist viewers of *The Lord of the Rings* who insist on "descriptions of affect registered in and through the body" that go as far as to count the physical "experience" of the film as the most important aspect of it, establishing what Turnbull calls a "felt connection."

The metaphor of the Dionysian orgy has even influenced some professional training. With regard to the link between film and audience, for instance, Artaud often blamed Aristotle's notion of catharsis, and other concepts of drama for that matter, for

replacing audience involvement with passivity, for exchanging performance with observation (Bermel 1977: 34). Known as the actor in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, but most notably famed as a theater theorist, Artaud called for a "cruelty" that would directly affect, and alter, the state of the audience, and through rituals would eventually obliterate the border between performance and audience. Cinema in its raw state, wrote Artaud, "emits something of the atmosphere of trance conducive to certain revelations." It is "really the real in its entirety" (Artaud 1928, in Hammond 2000: 103–104). In the 1960s, Fernando Arrabal, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Joseph Beuys launched similar proposals (Auslander 1997: 13–27). They drew a lot of criticism from acting coaches. Lee Strasberg called their wish to "return to some mystical womb" laudable, but the impact on the audience to which he was witness "disappointing" (Strasberg 1987: 178–182). One can read into Strassberg's comment the view that the religious conviction and ritualistic repetition that is necessary to arrive at the state of epiphany and gasp should really only survive as a "method," one that "softens" the suddenness of the experience, and that clearly separates practitioners from audiences – a method to make cult into culture.

Utopianism

The second concept we would like to isolate is utopianism. We would like to follow a largely historical argument to sketch the intersections between cult cinema and utopian thought. As the Dionysus cult spread across the Mediterranean area, its visceral and radical elements were exchanged for more moderate routines in a Hellenistic version of the cult that treated the state of exceptional experience as an embellishment of, or even inconvenience to, everyday life. In the variation ascribed to Orpheus, there was no longer an organic union through sex or slaughter, nor an abandonment of time, but rather artfulness and asceticism were proposed as means to achieve the same results. Of the Hellenistic cult of Dionysus, Robert Turcan (1996: 296) writes:

> the Dionysian mysteries preserved some features of the ancient orgy. Their liturgy incorporated the gestural, vestmental, emblematic, symposiac, even omophagic appearances of classic Maenadism: dances, rhythmic swaying of the body, and prophecies, drunkenness and music, garments of animal skins, the brandishing of staffs wreathed in ivy.

But he also adds that the symbolic ritualism was a few steps removed from the actual, original orgies. By the time of Socrates and Plato, most of the legacy of the Dionysian cult had been sublimated into systems of representation (theater), belief (religion) and knowledge (philosophy, history).

This change caused a shift in emphasis. Emile Durkheim (1915/1995) for instance, distinguishes between cults on the basis of their rituals: "negative" cults were based on rituals of prohibition (such as exclusion or asceticism), and positive cults were based on rituals of exhibition (such as sacrificing or mourning). The ancient Dionysus cult was very much an example of the latter; the Hellenist cult of Dionysus, the moderate cult of Orpheus, and many of the organized religions, were part of the former. From the moment the original Dionysus cult was overtaken by newer, negative ones (who inevitably isolated themselves), and by efforts to build large monolithic cultural worldviews, cults ended up in the periphery of culture, persecuted and sidelined, and the positive connotations of cultism (experiencing all of existence, commemorating the union with nature) were lost. The term "cult" became equal to "outsider" – outside the normal circuit of culture and outside of modern life, unable to keep up with it.

This outsider status facilitates links between cultism and utopian thinking, usually via references to specific movements. Scholarship on cinema cultism occasionally refers to movements such as Sufism, Taoism, Catharism, Paganism, and Manichaeism to express the position of philosophical marginality associated with cultism, as well as more revolutionary movements such as the Taborites, or folkloric or erotic pantheism. These references often appear in relation to *El Topo* – a film that seems to attract such discussions. Through these references some other components of cultism emerge, in particular the class-background and utopianism at work in cultism. Lavery's reference to Christian Gnosticism is one example of this. Lavery is interested less in the religious elements of the

Gnosticism and more in its socio-economic make-up because this paints a more accurate picture of the film cultist, as someone at odds with the mainstream in an ideological sense *and* within a socio-economic framework. It is in this sense that we need to understand Lavery's (1991: 194) reference to the work of Karl Marx.

Let us look at one example of the connection between cultism, class and utopia more closely. In their analysis of the reception of *Judge Dredd*, Martin Barker and Kate Brooks (1997: 289–291) are discussing the class backgrounds of fan-boys of the special effects in *Dredd*, when they use the work of sociologist Karl Mannheim on the cultist utopianism of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists and of "orgiastic chiliasm" as a point of reference. In *Ideology and Utopia* (1936) Mannheim distinguishes between four forms of utopianism: orgiastic chiliasm, liberal-humanism, conservatism, and socialist-communism. Chiliasm, also known as millennialism, is a belief that holds that a penultimate age of a thousand years (hence the millennium reference) will occur right before the end of the world, in which the heavens and earth will merge, and a battle with Satan will occur, before the Last Judgment. On a somewhat broader scale it holds the belief that periods of time (such as a millennium) are book-ended by huge calamities. It is tempting to use this concept as a metaphor for some of the apocalypticism in cult cinema, but there is more. For Mannheim (1936: 190), chiliasm is associated with the Dionysian cult through its investment in "orgiastic" practices of abandon, trance, reverie, and revolution – all of which put it at odds with ruling culture, and indeed present it as a danger to society (though often more by reputation than by fact). Mannheim uses the example of the Anabaptist movement of Thomas Münzer (which speaks of "storm and vitality and a new lawless and consequently free world") to press this point, and to illustrate how orgiastic chiliasm is a more radical form of utopianism than the other three models, closer to anarchism, more embedded in "presentness" (1936: 196). Barker and Brooks pick up on this element to suggest that the special effects fan-boys of *Judge Dredd* are being painted in the same corner as the chiliasts: as lower-class members of a cult that threatens routines of cultural consumption: "as chiliasm was attacked, suppressed, and misrepresented as 'irrational', 'dangerous', and 'heretical', so delight in 'violent' films is feared, condemned, and misrepresented" (1997: 290).

Another factor that emerges in comparisons between marginalized religiosity, utopianism, and cinema cultism is the concept of idolatry. It is in this sense that Walter Benjamin (1936) uses the term "cult." Benjamin is inspired by Karl Marx's use of the term "cult-value." Marx employs it to signal an alternative to use-value and exchange-value, namely fetishistic value. That is the value a commodity (or event, or expression) has that cannot be measured in currency or labor, but only in the value irrationally accorded to it by its consumers – who often feel like participants rather than clients (Marx 1976). It includes attitudes such as "idolatry," "superstition," "loyalty," solidarity," "self-effacement" – attitudes that accord a value to a good or event that is often only visible through the religious rituals surrounding its consumption. In the eyes of the capitalist society Marx analyzes, the cultic experience was outmoded and useless. It obstructs ideas of progress by treating time as an impression of the human body instead of a universal, linear concept, and by resisting the notion of advancement over time – cults do not "project" or "prophesize" the way religions do (their moment of revelation is too near to remain un-falsifiable), nor do they promote the concepts of "acceleration," "productivity," "growth," and "accumulation" (faster, better, more) that are essential to trade. Cults are all the more pathetic in a context that increasingly preferences what Durkheim called "the cult of the individual" over collective and communal celebrations (Chriss 1993). Benjamin (1936) argued that idolatry and fetishism are particularly present in the world of art. Traditionally, the cult of a work of art pivots around its "aura," its sense of uniqueness, which is revered and worshipped. But with the rise of mechanical means of reproduction (print, photography, film), this aura had come under threat. Benjamin observed that the cult moved from the material properties of the object to the ways in which it could mobilize emotions usually felt during worship and communion. The idolatric cult of stardom is a good example of such a displacement.

Marx's and Benjamin's application of the term "cult" to commodities and art, and Durkheim's "cult of the individual," show that the term "cult" was, in their

times, no longer uniquely reserved for religious worship. It referred to all kinds of worship that contained, either directly, or remotely and symbolically a longing for some deep emotional connection – through rituals with a celebratory and orgiastic exponent – with the profound meaning of human existence, and the union between the self and all other forms of being. By the beginning of the twentieth century much of that behavior was frowned upon, and condemned as unprogressive, or silly. Though they noted the cult behavior of audiences of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Rudolph Valentino, and Charlie Chaplin, Benjamin and colleagues such as Siegfried Kracauer (1926) or Harry Allan Potamkin (1933) had little patience with such low forms of culture, and they dismissed them as false forms of emancipation. "Not until the audience ceases being part of the ritual does it become an audience," Potamkin writes (2008: 217). At the time when film cults began to develop the term "cult" was enjoying a far from enviable reputation.

In the 1960s much of cultism's negative reputation was challenged. Concurrent with the advent of midnight movies, and parallel with the increase in individualized religiosity, countercultural movements arose, and sensibilities associated with cults were rediscovered and resurrected. Festivals such as Monterey, Woodstock, or the disastrous Altamont attempted to reclaim ancient rituals as "progressive" and "transcendental," and free love and drugs were – at least rhetorically – promoted as tools towards a connection with life's mystery (documentaries of those festivals have become cult films: *Monterey Pop*, *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter*, see Chapter 16). At the same time, scholars showed renewed interest in utopian thought and in the function of religious rituals in the organization of culture, especially those referencing sex and violence.

Within this context, various thinkers argued for a reappraisal of the cultic experience and a revaluation of utopian thought. Herbert Marcuse (1966) saw the regulation of sexual impulses and instincts as the key to establishing civilization and culture. According to Marcuse, repressing our desires inflicts a suffering upon humans, but produces the benefits of culture. "The sacrifice has paid off well", he added, "in the technically advanced areas of civilization, the conquest of nature is practically complete, and more needs of a greater number of people are fulfilled than ever before" (1966: 3). But Marcuse saw a danger in over-regulating repression, because it could lead to *surplus-repression*: the repression in a society that goes beyond what is needed to maintain order and that exists only to protect the power and privileges of the establishment (1966: 37). Marcuse's fear was that this might lead to what he called a "one-dimensional man," an uncritical and conformist acceptance of structures, norms, and behaviors as dictated by power-elites (Marcuse 1964). Though written decades earlier the eschatological work of Ernst Bloch (1918, 1949) on utopia and the dialectic between "being" and "being able to" received renewed attention. Often, utopian thought moved to discussions of how people could find truth in rituals. As we saw in Chapter 10, Mary Douglas (1966) pointed to the essential roles rituals played in the identification of cultural taboos and, hence, the organization of society. Mircea Eliade (1961, 1963), who developed the concept of "hierophany" (which splits the human experience into a profane experience of space and time and a sacred one), regarded rituals as equally commemorative and participative in hierophanies. René Girard (1972), on the other hand, saw rituals such as sexual and violent sacrifices as means to regulate unchained "mimetic violence," a struggle of everyone against everyone fueled by desire (Mathijs and Mosselmans 2000). Religious rituals prevent random violence, and substitute it for violence against one person, "a scapegoat." In the initial, radical version of the Dionysus cult this could be anyone but in subsequent variations this soon became someone whose symbolic death several people could unite around. After a while, argued Girard, the celebration of unison no longer requires the actual defeat (the sacrifice). Instead, rituals *representing* the act will replace the actual violence. In other words, the participative element disappears in favor of pure commemoration.

Midnight Movies and Satanism

In parallel development to many of the ideas described above, and also actively *using* them, ran increases in appreciation for instances of religious cultism surrounding films that were being described as cults – as if their cultism was not just the result of midnight screenings and devoted fandom but of their religiosity itself.[1]

Crucial in that development were perceptions of initiation into a "secret society," and of outsidership towards "mainstream" culture. Hoberman and Rosenbaum's remarks about Durkheim and religion need to be seen in this light. So does Sarris's invocation of cultism and religion quoted earlier in this chapter. In that quote we find the passion ("beyond all reason"), the thirst for direct connection ("purity"), the subversion, and the battle against intolerance that had characterized the position of cults since the advent of monolithic systems of philosophy and religion. Sarris's views also exemplify the need for a unifying figure (Bazin as the substitute for Dionysus), the importance of the rituals of festivals as sites of celebration, and the desire for advocacy. It equally stresses cultism as a conscious minority position a few isolated figures embark upon but no one else. Sarris's confession also takes the mystical/religious experience of film viewing itself, and the ritualistic way in which this is organized, as the core elements of his cultism – it is *through* his experience during the ritualistic encounters that he felt a powerful connection with being alive and becoming a cultist. Films about cultism and religiosity can be said to not only channel that connection, but to enable it.

The most visible expression of this development is the midnight movie (see Chapter 1). To their detractors, midnight movies were degenerated exploitation; to their defenders they offered opportunities of "awe and enigma" and the unique opportunity to experience all of life's thrills in one initiation. The advent of the midnight movie circuit around 1970 captured the *moment* when the inspirations from the Dionysus cult, the various marginalized (and working-class) cults of utopia through the centuries, and the more recent development towards idolatry and individualized and commodified experiences of religion *all* became a central component to certain ways of appreciating certain films. Prominent to this moment were movies in which rituals stood central: *Häxan* and *Freaks* were re-released for late night audiences in the late 1960s because they included, among other things, cultism as a theme within their stories. *Freaks*' "one of us" chant and *Häxan*'s meticulous descriptions of persecutions of cultism and marginalized religious beliefs were centerpieces of such themes (Stevenson 2006). Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Matthew*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Medea* started a trend of films that re-examined elements of well-established and institutionalized religions and myths in function of their representations of marginalized lower-class peoples, their ritualistic aspects, and their utopian and revolutionary potential – triggered and enhanced by sex and violence (Macdonald 1969).

Other films of the time were even more ambitious in their religious connections. Among these were two films of Alejandro Jodorowsky and two of Fernando Arrabal, two figures instrumental to the art collective "Panic Movement." The best known of these films was Jodorowsky's *El Topo*, generally regarded as one of the most prominent midnight movies. *El Topo* was said to evoke a "spiritual epiphany ... to the chosen" (Havis 2008: 59). *The Holy Mountain* was a more conscious attempt at a systematic criticism of organized religion that simultaneously promoted – at least in its receptions – alternative forms of religiosity. *Viva la muerte*, directed by Arrabal, was inspired by the Dionysian figure of Pan and Artaud's theater of cruelty. It contained explicit sex, a violent sacrifice, and multiple surrealist tableaux. Arrabal's next film, *I Will Walk Like a Crazy Horse*, was less rooted in political reality but in its taboo-breaking imagery it was all the more an attack upon organized religion and Western society.

In a variety of films religious cultism was effectively promoted. Most prominently among these are the films of Kenneth Anger, especially the ones that presented occultist Alisteir Crowley's religious philosophy of "Magick," a form of Gnosticism that flirts with Satanism, and which exists in various degrees of formal organization, even occasionally regarded as a proper religion (for more on Anger, see Chapters 6 and 14). Prior to the late 1960s, Anger had already directed the "luciferian" *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, a film poem attempting to visualize some of the ideas of Crowley through the representation of a number of rites attributed to Egyptian and Babylonian legends. Of crucial importance to Anger was that the part of the Whore of Babylon be played by occultist Marjorie Cameron (see Schreck 2002: 250). Anger's best-known midnight movie, *Invocation of my Demon Brother*, specifically references satanic rituals. It pulled much of its inspiration from Crowley's pop-cultural appeal with contemporary celebrities, such as John Lennon, Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page, and heavy metal band Black Sabbath (Lachman 2001). The film itself showcases a hypnotic mix of pop-cultural icons,

Satanic symbols, orgies, sexual violence, and metaphors of various religious cults. *Invocation* featured a performance of self-declared Satanist Anthony LaVey (as Satan), and it starred Bobby Beausoleil, a friend of the Manson Family.

In *Lucifer Rising*, which was started before *Invocation*, but which continued as an unfinished project until it was released as a 30-minute film in 1980, Anger elaborates further on the philosophy of Alisteir Crowley and the cult/religion of Magick, exploring it through a range of occult symbols and metaphors, and making explicit connections to the Dionysus cult and ancient Egyptian religion. The film stars Miriam Gibril and Donald Cammell (co-director of *Performance* and *Demon Seed*, and collaborator on *The Man Who Fell to Earth*), and also features Marianne Faithfull. Beausoleil composed the music (from his prison cell, where he was incarcerated because of his involvement in the murder of Sharon Tate, see further). The receptions of *Invocation* and *Lucifer Rising* propelled Anger to the forefront of occultism in cinema, a status reflected in a high degree of critical attention. Though only few fans or critics take Anger's ideas seriously, *Invocation* and *Lucifer Rising* were used within networks of cult reception as provocative samples of a willingness to mix popular culture and religiosity in opposition to established churches, and to promote cultism as an exciting alternative. Rob Cohen's documentary *Mondo Hollywood*, which tried to analyze the appeal of esoteric cultism in Hollywood in the late 1960s, offers a glimpse of this excitement (Rowe 1974; Huag 1996; Brottman, Rowe and Powell 2001; Brook 2006).

Contemporaneous to Anger's explicit address of religious and satanic cultism a high number of films emerged that addressed Satanism either as a theme or a stylistic motif. To some extent, these films can be seen as a subgenre of production-line horror movies and an attempt to exploit what seemed like a niche sensibility with mileage. Most Satanic horror movies that received cult reputations followed in the wake of *Rosemary's Baby*, a film about a pregnant woman who believes her baby will be seized by her husband and be given as a sacrifice to Satanic cultists. *Rosemary's Baby* became a cult after director Roman Polanski's own pregnant wife Sharon Tate was among the victims of the Charles Manson Family killing spree in 1969 (De Piciotto 2003; Havis 2008: 52–55). This sad event triggered a myriad of tangled reception tales linking the Manson Family to Polanski's film, to the murder of his pregnant wife, to other figures in "Satanic film cultism," all of which resisted "normal" comprehension in favor of receptions that thrived on tangents, wild explorations, and myth-building. The Polanski case briefly turned Satanism (and cultism itself) into a "cool" viewing attitude that, in acts of fandom performance, many viewers were proud to declare themselves fans of in order to distinguish themselves from other types of viewers. With the performance of Satanism in demand, dozens of films took Satanic rituals as a key motive. They ranged from *Witchfinder General*, *I Drink Your Blood*, *Le Diable est parmi nous*, *Cry of the Banshee*, *Race with the Devil*, *Santa Fe Satan*, *Mariken Van Nieumeghen*, to *The Wicker Man*. The most successful culmination came with *The Exorcist*, which presented the rituals of the Catholic Church as a form of cult.

Contemporary Performances of Religious Cultism

Explicit explorations of Satanism and religious cultism in cinema continue to appear frequently in films, even thought the context has changed much since the early 1970s. Examples with sizable cult reputations include *Prince of Darkness* and *Prophecy*. The 1980s saw a short revival of the theme of voodoo in cinema, and some of the films of this wave linked it to Satanism. It brought cult reputations to films such as *Angel Heart*, *The Believers*, and *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. In a similar vein, a few films about fallen angels received cult receptions, most notably *Wings of Desire*. Around the year 2000 a stream of millennialist apocalypse and endtime films was released, some of which stretched connections between religion, cultism, and postmodernity (see Negra 1999). Probably the best example of this stream is *The Matrix* franchise, the fandom of which, according to Marc Corcoran (2009: 123–129), is a perfect illustration of how fans switch constantly between sacred and profane planes of hierophany (he calls it "cinéphanie"). In spite of *The Matrix*, however, the receptions of these films were characterized more by their ineptness as explorations of marginal religiosity (their failure in other words) than their honest interest

in religious cultism. As such then, these films' receptions might be a further indication of a move within cult receptions towards ironic, performative celebrations of rituals that serve only to commemorate, nor participate in, some form of religiosity.

In each of these cycles, Satanism and religious cultism appear in opposition to institutionalized religion, and in that opposition they are either portrayed ironically, or dismissed as unequivocally evil and bad. The fundamental criticism of organized religion in *Life of Brian*, a film by the Monty Python comedy team about an innocent poor soul (Brian) whom everyone believes is the savior, is neutralized by the explicit parodic tone of the film. Though *Life of Brian* was banned in several regions, it had its release obstructed more because of the disrespectful tone of its humor than its presentation of alternative forms of religious cultism.

Since the 1990s, only a few films have managed to combine a sincere or non-antagonistic approach to religious cultism with a cult reputation of their own. Among the best-known examples are the obscure cult surrounding *Begotten* and the huge but controversial cultism surrounding *The Passion of the Christ*. *Begotten* makes perhaps the most serious attempt to visualize elements of Dionysian orgiastic cultism in combination with Gnostic and pagan myths. Bypassing narrative and traditional stylistics, the film features a collection of scenes with ritualistic and symbolist overtones in stark black and white colors. Among the scenes are a burial, a resurrection, an impregnation scene, the rape of the impregnated woman by a group of nomads, and a flowering of plants from a burial site. *Begotten* has long been difficult to obtain on DVD or video, and theatrical screenings are very rare. This has created an underground bootleg exchange circuit for the film, which in turn enhanced its cult reputation.

The Passion of the Christ became known for its purist approach, insisting on the explicit presentation of graphic violence, detailing the rituals of "the passion," and using sources from outside the established canon. Pushed by grassroots Christian movements, and promoted through a papal approval (though John Paul II's "it is as it was" can also be seen as a *performance of an approval*), *The Passion of the Christ* became the highest grossing non-English language film of all time. Within that mass-appeal also lingered a number of cult receptions at odds with the vox populi. Those receptions linked themselves explicitly to the film's proto-evangelical Christianity or "sectarian Catholicism." Through that controversial aspect, *The Passion of the Christ* has become a cult film that has allowed viewers a wide diversity of interpretations, a stubborn strand of which even focuses on its depiction of Satan (by Rosalinda Celentano). For Graham Holderness (2005), the film provokes audiences by putting them in the position of attendees of a liturgy. For David Fenner (2008: 250), it separates its audiences into devoted (devout) followers, and "those interested in what all the hubbub was about." In other words, part of the cultism around *The Passion of the Christ* is seeking to break the discursive mantra of the majority view and pull the film away from a fixed meaning by utilizing its open references to Satan, violence, rituals, and, even here, irony.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have tried to show how the major components of the connection between cult cinema and religion (marginalization, discursive mantras obscuring a thirst for cosmic meaning, and individualization) are complicated by the ritualistic, orgiastic, utopian, and fetishist ideals and routines that influence it. The refusal, or inability, of cultists to fully answer the question of *what kind of insight the cult experience brings* is tied up in its connection with conceptualizations and philosophies that refute the very existence of "explanations of experience." The closest one can come, it seems, is through the adoption of discourses on cultism and religion that suggest that film cults, like other forms of cultism, try to celebrate the breaking free of societal constraints by imagining a life unbound, untamed, and untimed that would provide direct knowledge of all existence. Thus, cult receptions set themselves up in opposition to society in ways that are similar to historical forms of cultism.

In its literal form, the desire towards unbound, untamed and untimed life is largely unobtainable and unwanted. Therefore the performance of rituals of the film cult experience offers a placebo. That placebo is invoked through constellations of togetherness, initiation gestures, shouting, dancing, noise, shock, astonishment, references to (or use of) illegal substances, imaginings of the dawn of time and the origin of culture, approximations of sex and violence (and both),

midnight attendance, and an advocacy for "purity" "beyond all reason." Only in a few guises would such a myriad of ritual activities be condoned without sanction. Film cultism is one of them. It would be tempting to conclude that this implies a move from *slogans to mantras* – to borrow the phrase with which Stephen Kent (2001) described a contemporaneous social development from counterculture activism into religious cultism. Such a conclusion would presume that none of the ideas surrounding the Dionysus cult, or historical forms of utopian cultism, or theories on liberation and repression that explain the essence of desire and the significance of rituals, would be valid, or viable anymore. Perhaps this is true.

But if the observations of Barker and Brooks (1997) on chiliasm, or Lavery (1991) on Gnosticism, and several similar claims (such as those of Maffesoli in Chapter 1) are anything to go by then it is much more likely that mantras have not replaced slogans altogether and that their coexistence means that utopianism, liberation theories, and Dionysian desires for orgiastic release are still embedded within cult receptions and the cult experience of cinema. In that sense, the link between religion and cinema cultism still pertains to an experience in which co-occur simultaneously the small details of one movie, and an impression of the breeze of the bigger scope of all movies, all of culture, all of human existence.

Note

1. This development is far from unique to cult cinema. It is also articulated in theater and performance art, areas in which artists such as Genesis P. Orridge, Hermann Nitsch, Joseph Beuys, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, and several others explore the crossroads between religiosity, cultism, and utopianism through the tools of violence, orgy, and rituals. Several of these artists have made films, some of which have obtained cult status, and their work is occasionally cited by film cultists as an indication of a closeness with their own community.

Part II

Themes and Genres

13

Exploitation and B Movies

If you browse the web in search of cult film sites, you are likely to encounter a predominance of exploitation-oriented material. In fact, you may form the impression that cult cinema is actually synonymous with exploitation cinema. We would like to counter that assumption, as is indicated by the wealth of non-exploitation titles that permeate this book. Nevertheless, exploitation filmmaking undoubtedly forms a key component of the somewhat broader category of cult cinema. B movies, which also figure in many a cult film list, are often conflated with exploitation films, though strictly speaking there is a difference between the two forms. More generally, though, there are also overlaps between the two, hence their incorporation into this single chapter. As so many of these films feature within cult film lists and articles, we think it is necessary to think about some key historical and conceptual issues related to their development, as these in turn feed into their prominence within cult cinema discussion, while also contributing to a firmer understanding of the terms themselves.

B Movies and Classical Exploitation

While Roger Corman has gained the status as "King of the Bs," he was fond of pointing out that he did not actually make B movies (Gray 2004: 48). Yet he, along with other exploitation figures, tends to be associated with B movies.[1] The main reason as to why Corman – along with figures like William Castle, Samuel Z. Arkoff and David F. Friedman – are not technically producers of B movies is that the majority of the work they are associated with hit cinemas after the B movie had ceased to exist. The B movie was a film paired with a bigger "A" picture and positioned firmly on the lower end of a movie theater program. This type of film flourished during the 1930s as, in a bid to recapture dwindling audiences during the Depression, many theaters began to adopt double-bill screenings in order to provide improved value for audiences. (While the B movie became a staple in various countries it has been most documented in the United States and is thus our primary focus in this chapter.[2]) Both major studios and smaller, independent "poverty row" studios produced these cheaply made pictures in response to the flourishing demand during the decade. This practice began to die out during the 1950s, though, as changes in the US industry – such as the rise of television, the move to the suburbs, increasing costs and a shrinking rate of studio productions – dictated against this exhibition strategy. As Doherty notes, the types of qualities that characterized B movies were now likely to appear on television, and thus lost their cinematic appeal. The consequence of these shifts was that many smaller theaters lacked product. A number of low-budget filmmakers then stepped in to fill the void with the production of exploitation pictures (Doherty 2002: 28).

Before focusing on the 1950s further, it is sensible at this point to rewind a little, for exploitation pictures also existed before the decline of the B movies. Summarizing the similarities and differences of exploitation and B movies during the same period will aid understanding of the later period of exploitation filmmakers and films. The B film, according to Taves, has

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several characteristics that distinguish it from the A picture. First, and most obviously, it filled the bottom half of the bill at cinemas; secondly, it featured leads with "moderate, questionable or unknown box-office appeal"; thirdly, budgets and shooting schedules were more limited, so it was produced more rapidly than an A picture; fourthly, running time was often shorter, usually around 55–70 minutes (Taves 1995: 314). Nevertheless, Taves notes there was a certain degree of fluidity between the A and B picture, that "there are no clear lines of demarcation" (1995: 314). For example, if a B picture turned out to be an unexpected success at a theater, it could make its way to the top of the bill; likewise, a top-billed audience failure could be demoted to a B slot (1995: 315–316). While there were differences between the lower budget B films made by "poverty row" studios and the more prestigious studio productions, there was an aesthetic quality evident in a number of these films, argues Taves. As B films were shot cheaply and quickly, there was minimal consultation between various production personnel; sets were cheap and often sparse, while lighting tended to be uniformly high key, as there was little time available for elaborate lighting set-ups. Films tended to rely on formulaic, often repetitious, narratives with many of them drawing from pulp fiction, and they tended to highlight "pace and thrills" over "mood, coherence and characterization" (Taves 1995: 334). Nevertheless, Taves also points out that within the limits of B productions, there were opportunities for resourceful filmmakers to experiment with lighting, editing, and camera set-ups (1995: 334).

The low-production values, greater latitude for experimentation and the general "low" status of the B movie in relation to the more prestigious A picture has undoubtedly fed into the cult status of a number of such productions. In particular, small, "poverty row" studios – such as Republic and Monogram – were admired for their contribution to cinema by a number of influential French film critics associated with *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s; Jean-Luc Godard even dedicated his debut feature, *À bout de souffle* (1960), to Monogram Pictures. The stance by many such critics/filmmakers was cultic in that it singled out areas of production generally considered unimportant within cinema history and staked a claim for their importance. There were also particular B films and filmmakers that gained reputations for transcending their production origins and gained cult followings. These include Edgar G. Ulmer's influential road movie *Detour*, the criminal couple movie *Gun Crazy*, Val Lewton's horror/mystery productions for RKO (such as *Cat People* and *I Walked with a Zombie*), and many of the low-budget films directed by Sam Fuller. Both *Detour* and *Gun Crazy* are often termed as film noirs, one of the most "cultic" genres (or series) of the classical period, and one which was applied retrospectively by French critics to a body of films that were often (though not always) low-budget, B pictures (the term was coined by Nino Frank in 1946, see Frank 1999). Many noirs appealed because they were perceived as challenging the norms that characterized much Hollywood product, particularly in their expressionistic lighting and mise-en-scène, and their often cynical, sometimes fatalist tone.

In contrast to B films, a number of characteristics defined exploitation pictures, which Eric Schaefer has exhaustively detailed for the period 1919–59 (which he terms "classical exploitation"). In terms of production, these films existed even below the poverty row B productions: they tended to be run by extremely small numbers of people, had less money to spend on filmmaking, and did not own their own plants (Schaefer 1999: 5, 47). Eric Schaefer describes how in exploitation cinema "the division of labor was not always as strict as it was in the classical Hollywood cinema's mode of production," adding that the multitasking this implies often meant that "those who labored in exploitation films usually had not had the opportunity to hone their skills to a degree comparable to those working in mainstream pictures" (1999: 46). Still, while Schaefer acknowledges that "watching a few exploitation films might lead one to conclude that their producers were fly-by-night operators who were more accomplished at evading creditors than shooting movies" (1999: 44) he is also quick to point out how much pre-1960s exploitation cinema adhered to business models used by Hollywood's B-studios such as Monogram and Republic. Exploitation producers outside the United States emulated such practices, as is evidenced by the routines and protocols of Hong Kong's Golden Harvest, Ernst Hofbauer's *Schoolgirl Report* productions, and the sleaze turned horror company Cinepix (Fay 2004). They operated in quite

flexible ways, but their core business emulated Hollywood's practices.

In order to cover up lack of skill and low production values, exploitation movies often reverted to "recycling." Schaefer points to this technique as one in which footage from other films, preferably of a shocking or astonishing nature, was borrowed to complete a certain atmosphere. Clips from *Häxan: Withcraft through the Ages* were used as inserts in *Maniac*; Ed Wood as well as Kenneth Anger used footage purchased from libraries or stock newsreel footage; Radley Metzger was known to revert to library music for the soundtracks of his porn chic films. The carry-over of characters between films meant not just a familiarity on the side of the audiences, but on that of the performers as well, eliminating expensive rehearsal time (Schaefer 1999: 57). The use of Bela Lugosi and other actors in Ed Wood's productions is exemplary in this respect. Roger Corman was not beyond adding a few extra shooting days and footage to a film that had already been released and releasing it again as if it was new; blaxploitation failure *The Final Comedown* thus became the equally unsuccessful *Blast!* (Gray 2004: 107). Repeat techniques and references to other films were later also portrayed as "allusions" (Carroll 1998). Ironically, recycling later became a key production value in the eyes of cult audiences, which led to its revaluation as a form of homage, intertextuality, or reflexivity (see Chapter 21). It determined the acting, effects, and production design of the films of Dan O'Bannon (*Return of the Living Dead*) or the neo-gothic wave of the early 1990s (especially *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, which heavily referenced exploitation techniques) and helped turn them into veritable cults of pastiche (Austin 2002: 116–119).

Exploitation movies were distributed in two main ways: first, on the state's rights system, where the producer sold the exclusive film rights to an independent exhibitor within a particular territory for a specified period (usually 3–5 years). The exhibitor would then be responsible for presenting the film, which meant that sometimes the title could be changed or footage subtracted. The second main exhibition strategy was *roadshowing*. This entailed either a single person (sometimes the producer) or a small number of units, transporting the film from territory to territory in order to exhibit it. Either they could hire out a theater for a period (known as "four walling") or, occasionally, they could set up temporary large tents in which to screen films (Schaefer 1999: 96–101; Stevenson 2000: 24). Perhaps the most distinctive nature of "classical exploitation" pictures, however, was their content and promotional strategies. The films often dealt with forbidden topics, such as sex, vice, drugs, nudity, and anything considered to be in "bad taste." As these films were made on extremely low budgets, dealing with such lurid material was a way to give them an edge, in that they were providing material that could not be found in other types of films. The name of exploitation stems from the fact that filmmakers exploited such material in their promotional campaigns, moving beyond typical film trailers, posters, and ads. They would play up the sensational aspects of their stories, and often complement screenings with extra-filmic practices such as lectures, slide presentations, sales of related materials, as well as gimmicks (such as the presence of uniformed nurses to help in case anyone fainted during screenings) (Schaefer 1999: 4–6).

Schaefer also outlines some of the predominant aesthetic features of exploitation films, which were closely linked to their economic status. Like B films, they are marked by an "impoverished" look, though to an even greater degree, with spare sets and minimal decoration frequently characteristic. In addition to low budgets, the speed of production and paucity of skilled actors and filmmakers led to a recurrence of stiff acting, bad lighting, and continuity errors (1999: 47–48). Though a number of "post-classical" exploitation films have gained more solid cult followings than their classical counterparts, there are a few classical exploitation films – such as *Narcotic*, *Maniac,* and *Tell Your Children,* aka *Reefer Madness* – that have built up cult reputations (Figure 13.1).

While – like B films – their marginal production status feeds into such reputations, these cult films are not celebrated so much for transcending their economic origins as testifying to them in a manner which spilled over into the ridiculous. That is, they tend to be enjoyed for their incompetence and unintentional hilarity, which marks them out as "bad" films (see Chapters 3 and 8 for more on the celebration of bad films).



Figure 13.1 *Reefer Madness*, a classical exploitation film.

As previously mentioned, the B movie died out during the 1950s, at least in its original form. The use of the term has continued partly because many of the exploitation films made during this period, and beyond, shared a number of features with these movies. They were shot quickly, on low budgets, usually without recognizable stars, and often relied on formulaic narratives as well as an emphasis on pace and action over coherent narratives. Doherty notes that, during the 1950s, two main features distinguished the new range of exploitation pictures from the older B films: the subject matter became more exploitation-oriented with films aimed more at teenagers (Doherty 2002: 30–31). In one sense, the older exploitation pictures and B films merged somewhat in this decade, as was evidenced by Monogram's (an independent provider of B films) move towards exploitation tactics towards the end of the 1940s (Tzioumakis 2006: 139–41). In another sense, exploitation cinema would splinter into many different generic and sub-generic shards from now until the 1970s at least.

Teenpics and Youth Culture

Doherty has identified a number of key types of teenage exploitation pictures produced in the 1950s. The main categories were the "juvenile delinquent" film, the rock 'n' roll teenpic, the "clean" teenpic, and the "weirdies" (cheap horror and science fiction films that catered to the youth market). A number of independent film companies produced increasing amounts of such films in order to meet the demand for product created by the studios' drastic reduction in output.[3] Doherty mentions that, in response to the threat of television, cinema could deliver two main things that its little rival could not: first, larger images and expensive sets; secondly, controversial content (2002: 20). The independent companies were not in the position to provide the first of these, hence their move to specialize in, and exploit, controversial subject matter and to aim this at the audience that was going to the cinema more frequently during this period: teenagers. The three types of films were targeting this age group in a way that had not happened before. The juvenile delinquent picture, for example, exploited scares about teenagers causing trouble, which were increasingly prevalent within the media. While the need to avoid trouble from potential critics led producers of such films to provide overarching moral frameworks warning against delinquency, they nevertheless tended to wallow in the excitement that such behavior gave rise to. The rock 'n' roll pictures, meanwhile, often featured stories that dramatized the place of rock 'n' roll in the broader cultural fabric: a force loved by youth and condemned by parents. The "clean" teenpic was a safer type of film that depicted teenage life in a less controversial manner. Finally, the "weirdies," though less explicitly about teenage lifestyles, could be seen as metaphorically relevant to the alienation and bodily changes experienced by teenagers, particularly in the guise of the monster figure (as argued by Doherty 2002: 119). Occasionally, the "weirdie" would explicitly concern teenage life, as indicated by titles such as *Teenage Zombies* and *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*.

A number of new independent companies and figures emerged during this period, many of who are feted within cult circles. These include American

International Pictures (AIP), their sometime producer/director Roger Corman, William Castle Productions, Sam Katzman, and Albert Zugsmith, to name just a few. The exploitation nature of these companies is made clear through some of the tactics that they used. Katzman, for example, was alert to the appeal of *Blackboard Jungle* and immediately attempted to replicate its success. As the use of Bill Haley's "Rock around the Clock" at the opening and closing of the film was seen as particularly noteworthy, and as rock 'n' roll was popular with teenagers, he produced a teenpic entitled *Rock around the Clock* featuring Bill Haley and the Comets playing themselves. Not only was it a huge hit, it signaled the glut of exploitation teenage movies to follow (Doherty 2002: 57). Exploitation producers would survey the market for exploitable popular themes and build films around them. They were in a good position to jump on a topical wave because their rapid production schedules meant that they could get a film onto the market while the topicality of the exploitable element(s) was still current. The whole ethos of exploitation filmmakers during this period is summed up by AIP's approach to marketing, codified in the following principles:

> OBSERVE trends and emerging tastes. KNOW as much as possible about your audience. ANTICIPATE how you will sell your chosen subject. PRODUCE with prudence, avoiding expense for what won't show on the screen. SELL with showmanship in advertising and publicity. USE imagination. Have good luck: even if you do everything else right, you'll still need it. (Quoted in Tzioumakis 2006: 152)

Within this type of filmmaking, a concept and title would come first, while frequently the script was developed *after* the marketing campaign had been devised. As in the classical era of exploitation, the role of marketing often-controversial content was extremely important in the absence of selling points such as familiar stars. And this was no surprise in an age when teenagers, who constituted the prime exploitation market, were claiming trailers to be the primary reason they went to see a picture; while interest in the persuasive psychology of advertising was also on the rise (Heffernan 2004: 68–69). Thus, there was renewed emphasis on sensational, eye-grabbing posters, trailers, and other paraphernalia, plus ear-grabbing radio spots and a host of other extravagant gimmicks.

The rise in teenage exploitation pictures occurred in tandem with a number of exhibition patterns, which have also played a key role in cult movie lore. The main trend was the huge increase in drive-in theaters. While conventional "hard-top" theaters were struggling, drive-in theaters, or "ozoners" as they were commonly known, grew massively. Between 1946 and 1956, the number of drive-ins increased from 500 to almost 5000, a growth spurred by the move to the suburbs and the increase in car ownership (Taylor 2002: 251). The drive-in was cheap to construct and appealed to both families – who could take their children with them – and teenagers, who were often tempted by the romantic potentials of this exhibition context. Drive-ins tended to specialize in double-features (or sometimes more), which provided added value-for-money for customers, but also proved profitable for the exhibitors as the longer people were at the drive-in, the more concessions they purchased, which is where the real profits lay. The fact that many exploitation pictures were shown on double bills may have added to their "B" status, but these programs usually screened films on an *equal* billing. The double bill also became increasingly popular within "hard tops," as did the increasing tendency to show screenings later, thus planting the seeds of the "midnight movie" (which would become more frequent in the late 1960s and early 1970s).

Exploitation filmmaking continued to flourish into the 1960s and 1970s, but it did undergo some notable changes. Though exploitation films continued to be consumed by a predominantly younger audience, the *teenage* demographic itself broadened. In the 1960s "teen" culture was supplanted by "youth" culture; whereas the former was strictly delineated by age, the latter was, Doherty argues, an "experiential realm" (Doherty 2002: 190). Youth became a state of mind, a "concept" that, as the 1960s progressed, became very much associated with the counterculture (a term which itself began to replace "subculture" in its usage). Films themselves began to reflect the themes and tastes associated with the new counterculture: rock music, sex, drugs, and a new form of politicized rebelliousness. This mode of rebelliousness did not constitute a

radical break from earlier teenage alienation so much as an extension of it. Thus, Corman's *The Wild Angels* deals with themes similar to some of the "juvenile delinquent" films, but here the protagonists are not identified as teenagers: they are Hell's Angels and, as such, have joined a specific group and adopted a creed. Their anti-authoritarianism, symbolized most visibly by the police and the church, is less nebulous than that of their predecessors, but they still seem driven by a reaction against constraints that limit their hedonistic pursuits. They lack, unlike some of the countercultural protagonists that would follow in their wake, idealistic alternatives to the current system and thus seem content to remain a thorn in its side. This lack of any alternative dawns on Heavenly Blues (Peter Fonda) at the end of the film as he waits to be caught by the police, claiming that there is nowhere to go. (*Easy Rider*, a film indebted to *The Wild Angels*, ends on a similarly pessimistic note, though in this film the main protagonists do encounter alternatives before meeting their bloody end.)

Many exploitation films would draw more specifically on the politicized counterculture and feature protagonists seeking an alternative mode of living. In many of these films, youth is associated with hopes for a new age, with the elder generation represented as negative, greedy, and out of touch. Perhaps the apogee of such filmmaking is *Wild in the Streets*, which depicts a world in which a young pop star wins the presidency, lowers the voting age to 14, and decides to retire all people over 30 into special homes and force them to take LSD. The film draws on many of the recurring exploitative counterculture tropes – music, generational tension, drugs, and political alternatives – with obvious satirical intent, lampooning not only the cynicism of the establishment, but also the fascistic undercurrents of countercultural consciousness. Many movies depicting various countercultural movements and dramatizing the generational gap would follow, including *Psych-Out*, *Alice's Restaurant* and *Gas! – Or – How it Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save it*, all of which have featured in cult lists and discussions.

Many of these teen and youth exploitation films have gained cultist reputations. At the time that they were released, they were being lapped up by younger viewers in particular, and could therefore be considered cult because they were appealing primarily to a "deviant" subculture who believed these films were communicating with them. Of course, much of the status of "delinquent youth" was constructed through exaggerated press reports, but this nevertheless led to *perceptions* of deviant groups consuming deviant films (films which were often considered tasteless by more conservative social factions despite their ultimate moral tone). A number of such films still continue to enjoy cult status, mainly through being part of the broader exploitation repertoire that serves as such an important mode of production in cultist circles. Some of these may be still loved for being innovative films which communicate ideas that contemporary audiences respond to; others may be enjoyed in a more mocking way, as "bad" films (see Chapter 24) which hold particular interest for how they depict social tensions within a specific era.

Nasty Trash: Exploitation in the 1970s

Not all exploitation fare in the 1960s and early 1970s directly concerned the counterculture, however. A number of different genres and cycles marked the period, including sexploitation films, beach party films, and mondo films. The latter were ethnographic documentaries that portrayed strange rituals and practices from around the world (the generic label stems from the film *Mondo Cane*, which established the blueprint for later such films). Often featuring liberal doses of violence and nudity, as well as a number of reconstructed scenes, these "shockumentaries" were often criticized for supposedly prioritizing sensation over education. (Goodall 2006). Most of these films hailed from Italy, pointing to another trend in the 1960s: the rise of exploitation films from other countries. In fact, there have long existed exploitation films from around the world, though the sheer number of films produced in America, and the wealth of research on American production and the reception of films in this country, has inevitably led to our current survey of exploitation cinema being skewed towards this country. Nevertheless, recent work has started to redress this imbalance (e.g. Tombs 1997; Mathijs and Mendik, 2004; Schneider 2003), while DVD labels such as Mondo Macabro are uncovering

international exploitation fare for Western audiences. Currently, though, the most recognized non-American exploitation films are those that established themselves in the American marketplace. Italy is a key purveyor of non-American exploitation due to the size of its market as well as the links forged between American and Italian film companies (as well as between Italian and UK companies) from the late 1950s onwards. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Italian film industry was in a position of considerable strength, which aided the international distribution of many of its films (Eleftheriotis 2001: 103–108), and a number of films from this period have established themselves as cult movies. Filmmakers, including Dario Argento, Mario Bava, and Sergio Leone, established themselves in this period, as did cycles such as the spaghetti western and the peplum. It is arguably the horror film, however, which has proved the most enduring mode of Italian filmmaking to international cult audiences. There has also been a growing body of work emerging around the British postwar exploitation film, particularly regarding horror (e.g. Wathen 1994) and sexploitation (e.g. Hunt 1998), and focusing on the work of cult directors such as Pete Walker (Chibnall 1998) and producers such as Tony Tenser (Hamilton 2005).

The 1960s and 1970s saw the horror film move in new, nastier directions and it became the most prevalent exploitation genre. Sexploitation also continued to be a key exploitation production area as increasingly explicit material screened in public cinemas. Previously considered outside of the exploitation market because it was limited to private or underground settings, pornography hit the public cinema screens during the 1970s with the development of the "hardcore narrative feature" (Schaefer 2002). The biggest porn hit was *Deep Throat*, which caused a sensation when it was released, though other films – such as *Behind the Green Door* – were also popular during the "porn chic" phase and continue to attract a cult following (see Chapter 10).

The 1970s also saw the emergence, and rather rapid disappearance, of several other cycles of exploitation. In each case, controversies or scandals surrounding a more or less respectable but risqué art house production gave rise to numerous attempts to cash in on the more exploitative elements of these films (the ones the film got in trouble for) and address through these elements cultist audiences. Nunsploitation tried to capitalize on the upheaval associated with *The Devils*; nazisploitation attempted to cash in on the scandal around *The Night Porter*; *Deliverance* led to some examples of hicksploitation; notable scandal-films from specific regions such as Canada (*Cannibal Girls*, *Shivers*), continental Europe (*La grande bouffe*), or Spain and Latin-America (*El Topo*) led to subgeneric modes such as canuxsploitation, Eurotrash, or latsploitation. It provoked cult reputations for films such as *Killer Nun*, *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*, *My Bloody Valentine*, *Successive Slidings of Pleasure*, and *The Cannibal Man* (we examine some of the tropes and politics of representation of these cycles in Chapter 10).

One of the most notable exploitation cycles was that of Blaxploitation films. After it became clear that a significant African-American audience existed who were willing to pay to see productions concerning black protagonists, a glut of black-oriented, exploitation films flooded the market. Melvin Van Peebles' low-budget *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is generally considered the key film which kick-started this trend, though this film's experimental aesthetic was not indicative of subsequent films following in its wake. Many films, utilizing familiar themes and images – most notably crime and drugs, pimps and private eyes, action scenes, sexually assertive protagonists, ghetto locations, and the use of soul and funk music on the soundtrack – emerged in the early 1970s. Both Hollywood majors (such as MGM and Warner Brothers) and independents (in particular AIP) produced a number of such films, which include *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, *Blacula*, *Black Caesar*, and *Foxy Brown* (Figure 13.2).

Despite the huge glut of blaxploitation films that flooded the market, the success of *Shaft* and *Super Fly* was rarely repeated, despite these films spawning sequels such as *Shaft in Africa* and *Super Fly T.N.T.* Black audiences were apparently more interested in attending "event" movies such as *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist,* hence signaling an end to the short-lived, yet influential, exploitation cycle in the mid 1970s (Cook 2000: 265). Nevertheless, a number of blaxploitation films – such as *Coffy*, *Black Caesar*, and *Super Fly* – can be considered cult films as they still attract devoted followers even though they may fall beneath



Figure 13.2 Pam Grier as the sexually assertive protagonist of blaxploitation film *Foxy Brown*.

the radar of many filmgoers' choices. In particular, the films' soundtracks (as evidenced by a number of blaxploitation compilations released over the past decade), and their now "retro" styles and attitudes, have contributed to their niche appeal.

Exploitation in the Video Era

Since the 1980s, the exploitation market has changed and become somewhat murkier. The traditional exhibition outlets, such as drive-ins and grindhouse theaters, began to disappear, which made it more difficult to get cheap films shown in cinemas. Video created a new market, yet while cheap exploitation filmmaking certainly existed to fill this market, straight-to-video titles rarely become cult hits. This is perhaps because such films tend to slip beneath the net of many people's radar. Nevertheless, there is a small, yet growing, trend for people to laud straight-to-video, trashy films on the net, particularly low-budget sequels such as *Starship Troopers 2: Hero of the Federation* or *Freeway Mad II: Confessions of a Trickbaby*. The situation in Japan is somewhat different in this regard: more respect for the video market (known as "V-cinema") is perhaps a reason why more cult films emerge from this sector. One of the most prolific and lauded cult directors, Takashi Miike, has made numerous films for this market, including *Full Metal Yakuza* and *Visitor Q*. Contrastingly, in Nigeria, the video market has fed into a growing industry, as video technology has greatly reduced both production and distribution costs. Cheap, "trashy" films based around voodoo and witchcraft are popular and are now gaining a dedicated following in the United States, giving what is interchangeably called Naija Cinema or Nollywood, and equipping films such as *Mortal Inheritance*, *Living in Bondage*, and *Owo Blow: The Genesis* with burgeoning cult reputations (Gray 2003).

The proliferation of sequels is certainly a notable characteristic of contemporary exploitation filmmaking. It is important not to overstate the "newness" of sequels, as they have existed for a long time in various guises. Nevertheless, modern exploitation filmmaking sometimes spawns franchises with unlikely longevity. Two striking examples are the *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, which between them have produced twenty films, if the film that combined their two anti-heroes – *Freddy vs. Jason* – is included (and there is another *Friday the 13th* film in production). In the case of these films, the main characters become such cult objects that they are capable of generating a proliferation of products, though fans do not receive all of these warmly. More recently, some figures are setting themselves up as exploitation filmmakers in a particularly self-conscious manner, referencing and revisiting older exploitation pictures and in the process heightening their cultural value. Eli Roth and Rob Zombie are particular examples of such filmmakers, though this tendency reached its apotheosis with Tarantino and Rodriguez's *Grindhouse*, which was packaged as a double-bill and even included fake trailers in between the two features (*Planet Terror* and *Death Proof*). If Bogdanovich, Scorsese, Coppola, *et al.*, were the original movie brats – drawing on, and often referencing, cinema history in their filmmaking – then Roth *et al.* could be thought of as exploitation brats, a second generation of self-conscious (and self-appointed) film viewers turned makers who largely draw on less respectable areas of cinema history. (See Chapters 6 and 22 for more on self-conscious authorship.) The fact that many of the more "classical" movie brats actually started out making exploitation films adds a somewhat ironic twist to the contrast.

One other notable trend in exploitation filmmaking is the art film/exploitation crossover. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon. Betz (2003),

Heffernan (2004), Hawkins (2000), and Wilinsky (2001) have all, in various ways, drawn attention to the ways in which these spheres have previously overlapped and are less distinct than formerly assumed. "Art films," for example, have notoriously been subject to exploitation marketing strategies and editorial interference, so as to play up their angles of nudity, sex, or violence. Exploitation films, too, have drawn upon art cinema because of creative reasons and/or a need to differentiate themselves from other exploitation fare. Over the past decade, however, a trend in European cinema to make art/exploitation hybrids does seem apparent and distinctive. This is particularly the case with French cinema – what James Quandt terms the "New French Extremity" (Hagman 2007: 32–33) – and includes films from Catherine Breillat (e.g. *Romance*), Gaspar Noé (e.g. *Irréversible*), Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*, 2001) and the film *Baise-moi* (which is perhaps more egregiously exploitation-oriented and less art-inflected than the others). Hagman (2007) has argued that such exploitation tactics are increasing within "art house" films as a way of drawing attention to product in a global marketplace. Alex Cox's (2006) contention that funding bodies and film festivals are encouraging the incorporation of greater amounts of explicit sex and violence would seem to support this argument. Nevertheless, one should not overestimate the extent to which this trend is new: Argento, Cronenberg, and Pasolini are all directors who have previously explored such hybrid territory.

Conclusion

Exploitation filmmaking continues to enjoy currency as a concept within contemporary cinema cultures, though it is arguably a less distinct area than it once was. The contours of the exploitation film have never been secure, but demarcations between the exploitation film and a typical studio production did previously exist. Paul Watson has argued that Hollywood's contemporary promotion of concepts and promises is evidence that exploitation has become part of the mainstream (Watson 1997: 79–80). This does seem to be the case with modern blockbusters, though we should also be aware that this does not constitute the totality of Hollywood cinema. We should also be careful not to overestimate the newness of this trend, as Hollywood has often been involved in exploitation. For example, in the 1950s a major company such as Warner Bros was investing in "weirdies" such as *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and *Them!*, and releasing them on a saturation basis alongside aggressive advertising campaigns (Heffernan 2004: 35). We should also remember that major studios produced and/or distributed a number of blaxploitation films. Perhaps we can argue that Hollywood previously only dabbled in such exploitation tactics, whereas now they are central to its operations. Yet this points to the dual nature of exploitation cinema as a concept. First, and more broadly, it stems from a purely commercial manner of exploiting a property for as much money as possible. In this sense, all commercial cinema is, and always has been, exploitation cinema. Secondly, as a category circulating within film culture, exploitation more specifically relates to a *type* of cinema that existed on the fringes of the mainstream, dealing with themes and images that the mainstream would not tolerate and exploiting taboo topics as a key appeal of the films. It is this form of exploitation cinema that tends to be most relevant to cult cinema due to its taint of outsiderness and danger (dealing with content in ways that the mainstream still tends to avoid). Today, there are still filmmakers attempting to capitalize on sensational material that pushes the limits of acceptability. At the same time, Hollywood is often willing to capitalize on such themes and images if they prove popular, hence the constant shifting and slipperiness of "exploitation cinema" as a concept.

Notes

1. This is even implied in McCarthy and Flynn's 1975 collection, *Kings of the Bs*, even though they distinguish between "classical B" pictures and the "exploitation B" pictures. They do, however, only tentatively call the latter

types B films, occasionally calling them "B-type pictures" (see McCarthy and Flynn 1975: 13–43).

2. More recent work is now expanding knowledge of the B movie beyond the United States. For example, Chibnall (2007) has recently written extensively on the British B film. Nevertheless, the "A" and "B" distinctions did generally have greater currency within the United States.
3. The studios did not entirely ignore such pictures, producing a few "adult" pictures, including *Rebel without a Cause* and *Blackboard Jungle*; while *The Wild One* was distributed by a major. Doherty does not really go into any detail as to why the majors did not produce more pictures along these lines.

14

Underground and Avant-garde Cinema

Cult cinema is often considered to be a different entity than underground and avant-garde cinemas, but these two spheres commonly intersect. The majority of cult films may tend to be more populist than the esoteric marginalia frequently associated with avant-garde and underground film, yet a number of key films belong to both domains. Perhaps of greater importance, the viewing contexts established by avant-garde film cultures bled into underground cinema and, subsequently, became important sites in which some cult films established their reputations. The avant-garde and the underground, then, are crucial components of cult cinema on the level of both particular films and the broader arena of film culture.

Avant-garde and underground cinemas are often difficult to distinguish, though the underground is generally thought to be a development of, but also a slight deviation from avant-garde film, which fully emerged in the 1960s within the United States and which soon spread to other countries. It is very much associated with the social and sexual liberation that characterized the more libertarian factions of the 1960s, and a move away from the more rigorous, politicized avant-garde that characterized the interwar period (O'Pray 2003: 7). In response a new, even more rigorous avant-garde formation emerged in the 1970s (especially associated with structural filmmaking), which often became housed within academic institutions and later became a staple of gallery exhibitions. While this distinction is certainly crude (and necessarily has to be because of the actual ways in which these terms often overlap), it does point to the key ways in which they have been distinguished. The underground currents of the avant-garde were of greater importance to cult cinema, so it is this area, along with its avant-garde antecedents, which we will primarily cover here.

Cult and the Avant-garde of the 1920s

Cult viewing practices are frequently linked to the emergence of art house and repertory cinemas that flourished in the late 1950s and 1960s within the United States. For example, Jancovich writes that "Cult movie fandom and academic film studies may have historically diverged into relatively independent scenes, but they both emerged through the art cinemas, college film societies and repertory theatres of the post-war period, and hence employ similar discourses and reading strategies" (2002: 308). This is true to an extent, but overlooks how these postwar developments were themselves building upon foundations instituted in the interwar period, when a number of film societies and repertory cinemas were established in various parts of the world. These viewing spaces, which offered alternatives to the majority of mainstream commercial cinemas, were themselves heavily linked to avant-garde film culture.

The main areas in which avant-garde or "alternative" film cultures emerged were in the major metropolitan areas of Britain, France, Germany,

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Holland, Japan, the Soviet Union and the United States, although selected activities also occurred within other countries. The types of activities usually overlapped, though there were also differences that marked them. For example, one of the main differences was between societies that took a predominantly aesthetic orientation in regards to film, and those that took a more political line, in that they saw films as tools for use towards left-wing political goals. In reality, while arguments were often exchanged between political film societies and broader, artistically oriented societies, there were areas where such boundaries blurred. For the purposes of this chapter, we should stress that we will focus on the societies that were not explicitly organized for primarily political purposes (such as workers film societies, which were widespread by the 1930s), as it is the broader film societies that fed more directly into cult viewing contexts. Nevertheless, many of the so-called aesthetic societies also screened films that were political in the sense that they challenged broader social mores and ideologies.

The emergence of film societies in the interwar period was a key factor in the development of cult cinema. It is here that a broad number of people began to band together in order to create a passionate cinema culture that explicitly aimed to offer alternatives to the dominant ways in which film was promoted and consumed. Around the establishment of these societies, or "cine-clubs," emerged a series of other cultural activities in which people discussed artistic issues in relation to film: the publication of film journals, magazines, and program notes; the organization of conferences and lectures on film culture. This flurry of cultural activity around various parts of the globe marked the first sustained and systematic attempt to establish cinema as an extremely important new art form, and to promote a wide variety of different approaches to filmmaking. Thus, these societies distinguished themselves from commercial cinemas through screening films not according to a purely commercial agenda. Instead, they would program films that: first, exemplified what they regarded as the most artistic films; secondly, represented interesting experiments on the fringes of, or outside of, the commercial industry; and, thirdly, represented interesting moments of film history. This was, therefore, the first real flowering of cinephilia, an intense love for film which has often been associated with cultism.

It was France, and more specifically Paris, where cinephilia most extensively flourished during the interwar period – and remains the capital of cinephilia even to this day (Hagener 2007: 79). Following the publication of specialist film journals in the latter part of the 1910s, cine-clubs began to appear in the early 1920s. The first major club was CASA (Club des amis du Septième Art), established by Riccioto Canudo in 1921, and this led to the establishment of "specialized" cinemas such as the Vieux Colombier, established by Jean Tedesco in 1924. (Specialized cinemas were commercially run cinemas that nevertheless attempted to balance art and commerce in favor of the former more than mainstream venues; film clubs or societies were, on the other hand, usually member organizations and therefore run through subscription fees.) London was the venue for the long-running Film Society, a members-only organization that began in 1925, while New York film society activity started in the same year when Symon Gould established the Screen Guild (Horak 1995: 20). By the end of the 1920s, a number of film societies and small, specialized commercial cinemas had been established in several countries.

The establishment of these film societies and specialized cinemas were important precursors to the emergence of the phenomenon of cult cinema for a number of reasons. First, this was a time when people were creating a cultural environment for like-minded people to view films they were passionate about, and to extend this passion for films through discussions, writings, and other extra-filmic events. In this sense, they were going against the dominant trend of films as ephemeral objects to be consumed and then forgotten about, and instead establishing films as enduring cultural objects. The importance ascribed to specific films, in tandem with the communal cultural spaces created to view films, can be related to Telotte's contention about cult films "speaking meaningfully to a select group" and to his point that the cultist's love for film speaks of *difference* from, for example, "normal marketing practices and viewing customs" (Telotte 1991a: 7).

Although it was not employed frequently during this period, the term "cult" did occasionally feature in

writings to describe audience behaviors. American critic Harry Allan Potamkin discussed "film cults" in an article on prominent taste patterns evident among cine-club patrons. He used the term in a predominantly negative sense, suggesting that the "herd-like" behavior intellectual cineastes often accused the "mass audience" of also marked various trends within their own circles. Thus, for Potamkin, a number of "fads" marked cult audience behaviors and some people were too keen to latch onto the latest cult – which here included Charlie Chaplin and Mickey Mouse among others – in an "unthinking" manner. Thus, for Potamkin, film cults were marked by snobbery, laziness, and a lack of intellectual substance (Potamkin 2008: 28). In a similar manner Kenneth Macpherson, editor of the British film journal *Close Up*, excoriated Parisian cinephiles for "intellectual kowtowing" (1930: 2). What these interventions demonstrate is that, while these cine-cultures established in various parts of the world were generally supportive of one another, they were not devoid of tensions. The ways in which Potamkin and Macpherson attempted to distinguish themselves from other currents within alternative cine-culture, anticipate the broader and more fragmented in-fighting that has often characterized cult fan cultures. In contrast with the tendency for the word "cult" to be used positively in more recent fan discussions, it was used negatively in these instances. Such distanced critiques of cult viewers, including Potamkin's accusation that cults are never self-critical or objective (2008: 28), could nevertheless be seen as foreshadowing the more Bourdieu-inflected analyses of distinctions among cult audiences within academia (Jancovich 2002).

It is reasonable to label films that gained particular adoration in these cultural circles as the first examples of cult films: cinephiles hailed such films because of their assumed importance, part of which emerged from their *difference* from the mainstream. Even if a film itself was a product of a commercialized industry, it could still become a cult object if its aesthetic properties represented a divergence from commercial norms and pointed to new artistic routes. In the 1920s, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Figure 14.1) was perhaps the biggest cult film and was labeled "the cult *par excellence* of the little cinema" by Potamkin (2008: 27). Initially, the film was released on the commercial (or mainstream) circuit and was successful in the United States, but it later became resurrected when small cinemas emerged in the mid 1920s (Thompson 1990: 139–149). In Paris, Louis Delluc had to overcome an exhibitors' ban on German films by sponsoring a single screening of *Caligari* as part of a Spanish Red Cross benefit program at the Colisée cinema on November 14, 1921 (Thompson 1990: 151). This led to the film becoming a popular success within France, before emerging as a staple on the cine-club circuit where, as Thompson points out, a "devoted fan would have been able to see it almost every year throughout the decade" (1990: 157).



Figure 14.1 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was described as "the cult *par excellence*" by critic Harry Allan Potamkin.

Another film made within a very different industrial context but which was also subject to intense cinephile devotion was Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. The film's status benefited from the increased interest in Soviet films both across West Europe and in the United States in the late 1920s, which were becoming increasingly available for viewing. Many of these, particularly films by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Vertov, represented examples of advanced cinematic art for a number of cinephiles. It was *Potemkin*, however, which tended to be hailed as the greatest example and it was screened repeatedly within film societies. While the film today is canonized as a prime example of respectable cinema, this was not the case at this temporal juncture, which points to the ways that previous films' reputations can shift over time. In the late 1920s and early 1930s it even had the cachet of being a "forbidden" film, banned as it was in many countries.

Many societies were able to circumvent such legal restrictions because their members policy meant that they were not, strictly, public screenings. Nevertheless, in Britain, while the prestigious London Film Society was permitted to exhibit *Potemkin*, the London Workers Film Society was twice refused permission to screen it. The London County Council thought that the film would have been politically inflammatory if shown to working-class audiences in a way that would not affect the more bourgeois audience members of the Film Society. Even the Film Society screenings aroused suspicion from the government, though, which led to a discussion of the Society's activities within the House of Commons (Sexton 2008a: 28).

One other film particularly worthy of mention that was first screened within the international cine-club circuit is Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali's *Un Chien Andalou*. The film was planned to outrage and shock, though it largely failed to do so, much to Buñuel's chagrin (Koller 2001). The ability of a film to confront taboos and cause a public scandal is a key contributor to cult status, yet was more successfully achieved by the film that Buñuel and Dali made next, *L'Âge d'or*, which led to audience protests and soon found itself banned (Williams 2000). Nevertheless, *Un Chien Andalou* arguably attained a greater cult status through its longevity, as it was repeatedly screened in a number of contexts. Not only did it enjoy an eight-month run in Paris (Koller 2001), it has continued to play within niche viewing contexts across international spaces at different times. For example, in the United States it was screened on a number of occasions at Amos Vogel's Cinema 16, a key postwar film society that would feed into the 1960s underground circuit. The underground circuit itself would then play a key role in the rise of the midnight movie phenomenon, where *Un Chien Andalou* continued to play, often paired with features such as Tod Browning's *Freaks* (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 295). Thus, though the film may have failed to outrage audiences at the time of its release in the way it intended, it has continued to matter to different audiences existing on the margins of the mainstream. Its confrontational power is undiminished, with its eye-slicing scene still managing to make many contemporary viewers wince.

The American Underground of the 1950s and 1960s

While Manny Farber used the term "underground film" in 1957 to refer to low-budget adventure films (Farber 1998), a new group of critics and filmmakers actively challenging mainstream norms of film production, distribution, and exhibition, would soon appropriate the concept in a more determined fashion. The key figure within this movement was undoubtedly Jonas Mekas, a Lithuanian who emigrated to the United States in 1949 and became a passionate spokesperson for a new cinema. Mekas established the journal *Film Culture* in 1955, which would become a key promoter of underground cinema, and wrote on film for the New York paper *The Village Voice*. While initially hostile to experimental work, Mekas soon began to champion it and in 1960 formed the "New American Cinema Group." This primarily supported a number of filmmakers working on lower budgets, who wanted to produce features of artistic interest outside of the Hollywood "system." Within its orbit were filmmakers such as John Cassavetes, Richard Leacock, and Shirley Clarke. The group's first statement forthrightly declared its intention to go against mainstream cinema, seen as glossy and insincere. In contrast, the new cinema claimed to be authentic, truthful, and spontaneous: "We don't want false, polished, slick films," it announced, "we prefer them rough, unpolished, but alive; we don't want rosy films – we want them the colour of blood" (New American Cinema Group 2000: 83). The group also adopted a firm anti-censorship stance, proposed to create a cooperative distribution center, and announced that the New Yorker cinema, the Bleecker Street cinema, and Overbrook theater in Philadelphia, had already agreed to exhibit their films (2000: 81–82).

The establishment of the New American Cinema Group was not an isolated phenomenon, but emerged in tandem with a flurry of small-scale film production, distribution, and exhibition. Lightweight 16 mm cameras became easy to get hold of as surplus war equipment was sold off and the amateur film market exponentially grew. Cheaper film stock and an increase in film laboratories meant that

filmmaking was open to more people, while the affordability of 16 mm projectors led to a proliferation of cine-clubs and college film societies. At first, Mekas and the New American Cinema Group were trying to differentiate themselves from the precedent set by Amos Vogel and Cinema 16, the film society that ran from 1947 to 1963. Whereas Cinema 16 typified an avant-garde ethos, the New American Cinema Group attempted to forge a path that lay somewhere in between the micro-budget short film and the Hollywood feature. This would be a short-lived movement, however, and it was superseded by the more enduring, and influential, Filmmakers' Cooperative, formed in 1961.

After the establishment of the Filmmaker's Cooperative, Mekas began to champion much lower-budgeted avant-garde and experimental films. Unlike the earlier American avant-garde, though, the underground avant-garde of the 1960s became associated with a less rigorous attitude towards filmmaking. The Cooperative was a distribution facility that aided the exhibition of small-scale films and, unlike many previous alternative distribution units, did not have any selection criteria (a policy shared by San Francisco's Canyon cinema). As Paul Arthur has noted, Mekas began to reject tenets of professionalism; in contrast, he regarded ignorance and poverty as positive terms and associated them with authenticity and spontaneity (Arthur 2005: 18). As the 1960s unfolded, this low-budget, "anything goes" ethos became connected, in particular, to the broader social counter-culture as well as a camp aesthetic. In relation to the former, it appealed to, and was taken up by, many people involved in campaigning for greater freedoms, be they sexual (e.g. the rise of gay rights), artistic (e.g. freedom of expression), or sensory (e.g. the right to partake in illicit substance consumption). A camp aesthetic (Chapter 8), meanwhile, became an important artistic thread running through many of the films made within the underground milieu. As opposed to the earlier American avant-garde's modernist rejection of popular culture, many films now began to engage with a range of populist works. These included Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, and Mike Kuchar's *Sins of the Fleshapoids*.

The movement towards populism and away from professionalism came under attack from many for abandoning any standards whatsoever. The critic Parker Tyler, who had previously practiced a camp approach to film criticism, was one of the most vociferous critics of the underground and voiced his complaints at length in his *Underground Film: A Critical History*, first published in 1969. For Tyler, many of the films being shown within this milieu were marked by a self-indulgent infantilism and retarded the efforts made by previous avant-gardists to create new cinematic art. Greg Taylor has argued that Tyler's criticism failed to acknowledge how Mekas and the underground were actually challenging restrictive aesthetic freedoms:

> Underground freedom was more than simply freedom from repressive moral standards. It was also freedom from taste conventions and aesthetic niceties, the freedom to appreciate without criticizing, to enjoy all culture, and on one's own terms. These were radical and unabashedly vanguard ideas. Mekas was brazenly liberating the artist and spectator, throwing out the old guidelines for effective art, throwing into question the very importance of valuative criticism. (Taylor 1999: 112)

This argument ignores, however, the extent to which Mekas did actually erect discriminatory criteria; it was just broader and of a different order. If he completely abolished all such criteria then he would not have been so damning of Hollywood productions. Within the underground, Hollywood was acceptable when it constituted material to be plundered and transformed through a low-budget lens, but it was to be opposed on the level of *practice*. This broad "us against them" criteria fueled the alternative community and marked many underground currents as cult, as indicated in the following quote by Greg Taylor: "Less important than the formal or hermeneutic sophistication of a particular film was its existence as an experience to be shared, praised, explored" (1999: 99). Taylor also argues that cultist and camp approaches in the writing of critics such as Farber and Tyler, were evident in the filmmaking of underground filmmakers. Cultism, for Taylor, is characterized by a selective reading of popular culture and a transformation of that culture into a more exclusive form of cultural connoisseurship; while he argues that camp is similar but less selective: it "celebrates *any mass object* that is capable of being re-created aesthetically" (1999: 16).

If the underground constituted a film community of outsiders, then a fraternal spirit was consolidated by police raids of various screenings. These, in turn, aided the cult status of the actual films involved. *Flaming Creatures* and *Scorpio Rising* arguably constitute the two main cult films that emerged from this culture and both were subject to police interventions. Shot on outdated army surplus film stock, which gives it a washed-out, otherworldly feel, *Flaming Creatures* depicts a transvestite bacchanalia. Director Jack Smith gathered friends and constructed a cheap set on the top of the Windsor cinema in New York. With its attempt to mimic exotic Hollywood B-movies on a threadbare budget, the film embodies a kind of junk-shop glamour. This aesthetic is important to the film's cult reputation, but its controversial reception is undoubtedly central in this regard. Screenings left audiences stunned; as Ken Kelman wrote, after one of the first shows at Bleecker Street Theatre:

> When the first show was over, a clique, a claque of six or so, back on the west side applauded. And I, all alone, east of the aisle up frontish, applauded, amid the numb and blind. Amid the tame, I halted, oppressed by their inertia, paused, vacillated, considered for two beats of silence or three, before I clapped solo and thus no doubt branded myself a clappy pervert, crap happy degenerate, slobbering sadist, or, even, perhaps Jack Smith. (Kelman 1970: 284)

Kelman's description captures a key aspect of the midnight movie, and of the cult reception trajectory: the sense of a truly unique, forbidden experience that would pitch oneself against the rest of the world; a countercultural feeling. Soon controversy followed. In December 1963, the Tivoli Theater in New York refused to screen the film on the evening that Smith was to be presented with *Film Culture*'s Independent Filmmaker Award, due to pressure from the city's bureau of licenses (the film had not been submitted to the New York State Board of Regents for licensing). As we have noted in Chapter 3, controversy surrounded the film again shortly afterwards when an experimental film festival in Knokke-le-Zoute in Belgium refused to screen it. It was then, along with Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*, subject to a crackdown by New York authorities in 1964 as they attempted to clean up the city's image in preparation for the World Fair taking place later in the year. Police often raided cinemas screening the film, impounding it along with projector equipment, while theater staff were sometimes arrested and jailed. This placed the film and the underground movement more generally within broader cultural debates and further politicized the movement. As Arthur has noted: "the *Flaming Creatures* affair briefly placed avant-garde film on the cultural map, stimulating support from quarters previously oblivious to or even hostile to the movement" (2005: 10). *Flaming Creatures*' cult reputation arguably endures: it has never enjoyed an official DVD release so that people wishing to view it have to obtain low quality bootleg copies or watch it through specialist websites such as UbuWeb.

It was into this melting-pot atmosphere that Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* was released. A homoerotic collage of biker subculture images and pop music, it was reported to be "the most widely seen experimental movie of its time and the most frequently rented title in the repertoire of the Filmmakers' Cooperative" (Suarez 2002: 115). The film premiered at the Gramercy Arts Theater in 1963 and went on to play in a number of different venues, including art cinemas and more mainstream outlets (Suarez 2002: 115). While it is not as explicit as *Flaming Creatures*, it still did not sit well with the authorities. The film therefore was subject to legal proceedings: Mike Getz was charged with screening an obscene film at the Cinema Theatre in March 1964, because of a brief flash of frontal male nudity (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 60). Unlike *Flaming Creatures*, however, the film's status as obscene was eventually overturned. While controversy certainly informs its cult credentials, other reasons also inform this reputation, including Anger's broader cult status, its aesthetic originality, and its coverage of marginal subcultures.

Andy Warhol is possibly the only filmmaker connected to the underground who has a larger cult following than Anger, though this is due not only to his filmmaking but to his larger profile within the art world. Warhol's films range from his early, extremely minimal works such as *Sleep* and the extremely long *Empire*, to the double-screen, more situation-driven *Chelsea Girls*, and into more narrative-focused works that Paul Morrissey directed under Warhol's aegis, including *Flesh* and *Trash*. Warhol's celebrity

reputation, allied with his often very challenging films and the fact that they have become difficult to actually see, have imbued most of his films with cult value. Warhol withdrew his films from public circulation in the early 1970s and they were not publicly available until after he died (in 1987). Even since then they have been quite difficult to see: they appear sporadically on VHS and DVD, often through obscure labels (such as the Italian label RaroVideo), while public screenings are still rare. As such, they continue to attract considerable public interest, despite the challenging nature of the material. A film such as *Empire*, meanwhile, has the cult value of being a long, live experience, something that not too many people are able to endure (an eight-hour, static view of the Empire state building), so that it becomes a communal experience for those that do (Mathijs and Mendik 2008b: 4).

Warhol was fixated on stars as cult objects (Chapter 7), as was evident in many of his screen prints as well as his screen tests; and he himself managed to foster a kind of alternative star system through his film production. Joe Dallesandro and Edie Sedgwick are two of the most well-known examples of Warhol stars who themselves became cult figures. Dallesandro was a former hustler and model who went on to appear in a large number of Warhol's films, including films that Paul Morrissey made under the Warhol moniker (Figure 14.2). He became a kind of underground sex symbol in the late 1960s/early 1970s and went on to sustain an acting career, albeit mostly in smaller roles.



Figure 14.2 Joe Dallesandro became a cult figure primarily through his appearances in Paul Morrissey's films made under the aegis of Andy Warhol.

His cult reputation has been heightened by his appearance on record covers: his crotch formed the basis of the Warhol-designed sleeve for the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* (1971), while a still of him in *Flesh* adorns the cover of The Smiths' (1984) eponymous debut album.

Sedgwick was a particular favorite of Warhol's, at least around the mid 1960s, as he saw star potential in her. Making her debut in *Vinyl*, she appeared in a number of Warhol films around this time and became one of the most glamorous underground figures. Despite wanting to break into larger acting roles, she became increasingly beset by drug and mental health problems, which led to her early death in 1971 at the age of 28. Her last film, *Ciao! Manhattan* has proven to be a fascinating document because Sedgwick's real life is mirrored in the character that she plays (Susan Superstar), who is a washed-up star suffering from mental illness.

Underground Goes Overground: The Midnight Movie

A particular reason why US underground film culture during this period is important is that it fed into the rising popularity of midnight movie screenings, at which many cult films attracted their dedicated followings (see Chapters 1 and 12 for discussions of midnight movies beyond their relationship with the underground). Mekas himself ran weekend midnight screenings at the Charles Theater in Manhattan, where he programmed a number of underground movies before the cinema closed in 1962 (it reopened in 1963 as a more conventional operation) (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 42). Mekas then started another series of midnight film screenings entitled "Underground Midnights" at the nearby Bleecker Street cinema in 1963 (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 46). Midnight screenings were not new, but the 1960s saw them enjoy an unprecedented popularity and this carried on into the 1970s, a decade generally regarded as the heyday of the midnight movie. Samuels, for example, has written that the rise in midnight screenings was kick-started by the underground and the huge amount of films made on low budgets. By 1972, it had "become an established part of

theatrical film exhibition" with an estimated $35 million a year being collected at midnight screenings (Samuels 1983: 10–11).

The move from underground to overground is worth noting, yet despite this trend, many of the big "hits" of the underground circuit are still considered to be underground and/or avant-garde, including *El Topo*, *Pink Flamingos*, and *Eraserhead*. In a sense, the midnight movie phenomenon, while becoming hugely popular, was still marginal in the sense that many of its audience members felt outside of mainstream culture in various ways (through sexual orientation, political beliefs, etc.). The midnight movie explosion in the 1970s saw a number of independently made films gaining a cult following through repeated viewings. Many of these, though, were of feature length as opposed to the shorts that had (albeit not exclusively) characterized underground filmmaking in the 1960s. In a sense, the avant-garde/underground of the 1960s splintered into two broad pathways: first, a more serious, rigorous direction typified by "structural" filmmaking; secondly, the more populist, narrative-centered, yet occasionally experimental direction typified by the films mentioned above. Such films in many senses are difficult to categorize because they straddle numerous boundaries: they could be called underground, independent, or sometimes (as with *El Topo* and *Eraserhead*), avant-garde.

It is the second direction that is most appropriate to cult cinema because the former strand generally remained somewhat too restricted to gain cult followings. Thus, while underground and avant-garde screening venues and distribution networks proliferated on an international scale from the 1960s onwards, it is difficult to establish cult films within such environments for two particular reasons. First, many films screened within such venues quickly vanish; secondly, unlike the US underground of the 1960s, documentation of these underground nodes is sparse, so it is often difficult to establish screening and viewing patterns with any precision.[1] It is only when underground films emerge from micro-niche environments and impinge upon broader cultural radars that they begin to gain cult value. This can happen in a number of ways, but perhaps the most important are controversy and exceptionality. Controversy can link a film to current social debates (as with *Flaming Creatures*) and lead to debate within mainstream media channels; exceptionality can see a film play so many times within micro-niche settings that it becomes recognized by outsiders and will then play other types of venues, or be spread throughout a wider niche community (often beyond a national border).

The Underground Today

The lack of extant documentation on underground viewing contexts complicates a proper sketch of more recent activity in this area. Suffice it to say, there has existed from the 1960s to the current day a great range of underground screening outlets, distribution networks, publications (e.g. zines, manifestoes, web sites), festivals and other initiatives around the world. Many have led transient existences, though others have managed – despite great practical challenges – to attain longevity. This is complicated further by the looseness of the term itself. Of course, it was never a simple concept but in hindsight at least, the US underground of the 1960s is associated with the term in a relatively unproblematic manner, mainly because it constitutes a kind of fulcrum point to which subsequent instances refer. Generally, though, it now refers to any film not picked up by a distribution company for a conventional theatrical release, as is argued by Hall (2004: xiv). Others would suggest, however, that there should be some form of radical, perhaps even transgressive, attitude embedded within the film. The controversial filmmaker Nick Zedd, a New York underground filmmaker, openly states that "To me it's not underground unless it's transgressive" (Sargeant 1999: 75; see also Chapter 9 for more on transgression and cult cinema). While it is not possible to fully freeze the concept, we can posit that underground films attempt to challenge through various means (e.g. through attempts to shock, attempts to challenge on the level of form, attempts to propose radical political ideas), and do not enjoy conventional cinematic releases (they either bypass mainstream cinemas and art houses, or they perhaps play them either sporadically or long after they are initially released).

Since the 1960s, a number of underground films have gained cult status, but it is only possible in the remainder of this chapter to mention some of these

and how they moved from mere underground films to underground cult films. Controversy, which has been linked to underground cults throughout this chapter, is still a chief factor in leading to cult status, though it must be mentioned that controversy alone will not guarantee such a reputation. Low-budget films, because they are not designed to play at mainstream theaters and are rarely submitted to formal censorship boards, often have greater latitude to deal with extreme or risky material. The Japanese film *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, for example, has gained a cult following due to its controversial content, which depicts children condemning their parents to death for depriving them of sexual freedom and features sexual acts between children and adults. The 1971 version of the film (a longer 1976 version also exists) was produced for European audiences and played in a number of underground venues. It has continued to garner interest, with rock group Stereolab releasing an album named after the film in 1995, and its controversial content imbuing it with rarity value. More recently, the web has increased chances of seeing this film; not only can one find DVD-R copies for sale, but it is also possible to see the film on UbuWeb and clips of the film on YouTube. Similar reception contexts exist for films such as *Nekromantik* and *Begotten*, which stand out because they try to offer a transcendental as much as a phenomenal experience through grainy, distorted, and blurry depictions of violence and transgression. In doing so, they reinforce the impression that underground cinema's cult appeal is also one that evokes a religiosity. Elias Merhige's *Begotten* carries the motto that "a time is depicted that predates spoken language, communication is made on a sensory level." Jorg Buttgereit's controversial *Nekromantik* movies have gained a cult status following their controversial reception in Germany. *Nekromantik* was released directly into cinemas without submission to the coding board and while not immediately subject to external restrictions, it was subsequently banned after *Nekromantik 2* was deemed illegal to watch, own, or screen (Blake 2004: 195). The films subsequently gained a cult following in other parts of the world, especially the United States, and are now available to purchase on DVD (though not through mainstream channels such as Amazon, which adds to their cult cachet).

Today the number of underground films produced, and the venues in which they can play (in particular the rise of specialist festivals), has continued to increase. The internet has also provided a new platform for the dissemination and screening of underground films through specialist sites such as Underground.com, while the relatively low cost of issuing DVDs has allowed a growing number of such films (as well as older underground films) to disseminate in this manner. The rise of films produced, though, will mean that more and more films will struggle to gain recognition, let alone become cult films. Nevertheless, the ever-shifting and increasingly digital mediascape will afford new routes and opportunities for the next underground cults to emerge.

Note

1. For example, the London Filmmakers' Co-Op, formed in 1966 has been well documented, though it is doubtful that any film emerging within this milieu subsequently attained cult status.

15

Cult Cinema and Drugs

A high number of cult films have links to drugs, either through featuring drugs in the plot, by referencing them abundantly, or by gaining a reputation for ideal viewing in a drugged state.[1] There are some important connections between drugs and their users on the one hand, and cult films and their audiences on the other. For example, cult film viewers have often differentiated themselves from mainstream film viewers and, by extension, mainstream society as a whole via attachment to films expressive of such difference. Bruce Kawin has written of the cult film "as a deviant or radically different picture, embraced by a deviant audience" (1991: 18), while Jancovich *et al.* have argued that the cult film is formed through a "subcultural ideology" that places films and/or filmmakers and/or audiences in opposition to the mainstream (2003a: 1). Drugs have also played a crucial role in many sociological accounts of deviance and subcultures (see Chapter 5). In various, often youthful, subcultural groupings, different drugs have often played important roles as agents of altered consciousness that can erect barriers between "us" and "them" (i.e. "straight," conventional society). This was particularly evident within the various hippy or "head" subcultures that emerged in the 1960s. In his ethnographic study of hippies, Paul Willis wrote that "the importance of drugs did not lie in their direct physical effects, but in the way they facilitated passing through a great symbolic barrier erected over against 'straight' society" (1976: 107). In particular, it was hallucinogens – most notably marijuana and LSD – that facilitated an appropriate altered state far removed from dominant cultural rhythms.

Hippie subcultures had their roots in the earlier beat generation, another subcultural movement that used drugs – along with literature, jazz, and Eastern mysticism – to place itself against straight society in favor of extolling expressivity, spontaneity, and creativity (Brake 1980: 91). It is perhaps no coincidence that the beats had connections to underground film culture, which established midnight movie screenings as a cult ritual. Amos Vogel, for example, has described midnight viewers at the Charles Theater as a "properly bedraggled beat audience spitting in the face of the bourgeoisie" (quoted in Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 42). Many of the films connected to the underground were also examples of Beat Cinema and include: Alfred Lesley's *Pull my Daisy*, which was narrated by Jack Kerouac and featured Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso; Ron Rice's *The Flower Thief*, featuring poet Taylor Mead; and shorts by beatnik artist Harry Smith. Midnight movie screenings became popularized throughout the 1960s and 1970s, established on the 16 mm college circuit and in repertory theaters, whose audiences were heavily represented by students (Austin 1981a: 44). Many involved (either centrally or tangentially) with the hippie culture were also either students or student dropouts, whose dope-smoking proclivities were permitted within a number of such venues. Therefore, a significant overlap between the audiences associated with midnight movies and hippie subcultures existed, which resulted in the elevation of films with drug connections. We should make it clear, then, that this chapter is significantly concerned with drug films connected to midnight

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movie viewing, youth countercultures in the 1960s and 1970s, and hallucinogenic drugs, as this triumvirate of factors interlocks to constitute the most significant body of drug cult films. Nevertheless, a number of important films exist outside of this remit and we will consider some of these in the latter section.

Cult Movies and Drug Depiction

Films depicting the use of drugs stem back to the earliest days of cinema. In 1894 Edison made a 30-second kinetograph (a film that could be viewed on a kinetoscope, a pre-cinematic viewing device) entitled *Chinese Opium Den*, which featured opium smoking (Starks 1982: 13). Up until the 1920s, when Hollywood began to take measures to defend itself against outraged moralists – leading to the advent of the Production Code in 1930 (not strictly enforced until 1934) – and with drug laws less prohibitive than they would later become, drugs featured in many films. The effects of drugs (such as the experience of being under the influence of opium) sometimes provided an excuse to indulge in experimental shots, including superimpositions and unusual angles. Not until we get to the 1930s, however, do we encounter films that would subsequently gain a cult status. In particular, some films released by exploitation producer Dwain Esper would gain cult followings in the 1970s.

Esper was among the many exploitation film producers who emerged after the Production Code was passed (see Chapter 13 for details on exploitation cinema). Esper's first film as an independent producer was *Narcotic*, the story of a doctor who becomes addicted to both opium and heroin. While the film was framed as a moral tale – with the doctor eventually committing suicide – it nevertheless wallowed in its graphic presentation of drugs, as well as sex. According to Stevenson, the film played over two thousand engagements before it hit the road-show circuit, where it played sporadically into the 1950s (Stevenson 2000: 25). Esper later purchased and reissued a film he titled *Reefer Madness*, which would become a huge cult favorite. He had purchased the rights to the film, originally titled *Tell Your Children* and produced by an LA church group (directed by Louis Gasner). While the film did not enjoy much success in the 1930s it was revived in the early 1970s on the midnight movie circuit, where it gained a real following among pot-heads, who took ironic pleasure from the film's almost demented anti-drug propaganda.

Between the 1930s and 1950s, films about drugs tended to be exploitation pictures sensationalizing the impact of drugs and warning of their dangers. As the 1950s progressed, however, things began to change as the Production Code was gradually relaxed. A key moment in the celluloid depiction of drug use came with the 1955 release of Otto Preminger's *The Man with the Golden Arm*. The film, starring Frank Sinatra as a heroin user, and produced by a major studio, was released without a seal and yet widely screened. Fearing the loss of authority, in line with a number of other films challenging its mandate, the PCA appended the Code in 1956 to allow treatments of drug addiction, prostitution and child birth as long as they were "treated within the careful limits of good taste" (Stevenson 2000: 38). As the stringent Production Code gradually eroded in the late 1950s and the 1960s, there emerged a number of more daring cinematic depictions of drug use, many of which would become cult films. Of particular importance was the emergence of a youth market.

The youth market came to prominence in the mid 1950s, particularly in the United States, but also in other parts of the Western world. At this stage, audiences for movies began to drop with the rise of television, the middle-class exodus to the suburbs, and a host of other competing leisure activities. Major studios started to produce fewer films as a result, which meant that some theaters lacked sufficient product. To fill the gap, a new batch of independent filmmakers stepped in with films that were often "cheap, regular and exploitable" (Doherty 2002: 28). Around the same time, the rise of the teenager as an identifiably distinct, self-conscious and affluent category had emerged (Doherty 2002: 34), so a number of these exploitation films were catering to this audience. As many of these films exploited controversial themes, it was no surprise that some of them featured drugs, such as *The Cool and the Crazy* and *High School Confidential!* Many of these films, like their exploitation forbears, were moralistic in nature, but in other ways looked forward to a number of more important drug films that emerged in the 1960s.

Counterculture, Drugs and the "Head" Film

If teenagers constituted a broad subculture in the 1950s, then the 1960s saw an extension, but also a splintering, of this phenomenon. In particular, a marked self-conscious generation gap and anti-institutional attitudes fed into a burgeoning counter-culture, in which drugs became a symbol of pride and subversion. Hippie factions, as mentioned above, were so conspicuous (through media reportage) that it was only a matter of time before films were made to capitalize upon some of the tropes associated with them, one of which was drugs (mainly LSD and marijuana). With the media increasingly reporting upon the consumption and (often-supposed) effects of LSD around the mid 1960s, a number of exploitation films featuring this drug subsequently appeared. Like a number of the older drug exploitation films, many of these films were moralistic at core, poaching hysterical tabloid reports about LSD (that it led to suicide, psychosis, murder) and reveling in the excess of the condemned antics that transpired: such films included *Hallucination Generation* and *The Acid Eaters*. Other films utilized the spurious reports that LSD lowered inhibitions to embed druggy frolics within sexploitation comedies: for example, *Alice in Acidland* and *Wanda, the Sadistic Hypnotist*. It was not long before Hollywood entered the fray, most notoriously with Otto Preminger's outrageous LSD comedy *Skidoo*, starring Jackie Gleason, Mickey Rooney, and Groucho Marx among others. This disastrous comedy has since become a cult film, though is not currently easy to get hold of, probably because it has always been a source of embarrassment to most people involved in its production.

Some of the above movies featured small scenes translating the supposed effects of an LSD trip onto the screen, but such scenes did not often constitute a substantial proportion of the films' running time. The cult status accorded such films often relates to their campy nature, an outrageousness of tone and a failure to achieve any kind of "authentic" expressiveness. On the other hand, a number of films have achieved cult status through either implicitly or explicitly representing some of the experiential properties of drugs such as LSD, or sometimes marijuana. Such films tend to be labeled "head" films, as well as "headsploitation" films (Haas 1983). Benshoff has summed up the head film as:

> a type of movie that is either specifically produced to be experienced on drugs or that has subsequently become identified by drug users as a film that can be pleasantly enhanced via the ingestion of mind-altering chemicals, most usually hallucinogens such as marijuana, LSD and their analogues. (Benshoff 2001: 31)

He goes on to add that head films emerge "through the ongoing discussion and experience of them within a community of drug-using cineastes" (Benshoff 2001: 31) Thus, a niche community – often with shared values – flocking around a film for a particular reason and with a ritualistic drug of choice to ingest for the occasion, fits comfortably into a movie cult. Moreover, within the "head" drug world, there are certain films that seem to capture cinematically the head experience and lock into the drugged viewer's perceptual apparatus. For example, Benshoff has argued that the head film can be allied to Gunning's idea of early cinema as a "cinema of attractions," a cinema that is more geared towards providing pleasurable visual moments rather than tight, linear cause-effect narratives (2001: 31). As hallucinogens tend to heighten spatial awareness and the immediacy of sensation, temporal matters are frequently downplayed; hence, for Benshoff, the head film often revolves around "spectacular aural and visual effects," focusing on color, movement, and abstractions (2001: 31).

A film that straddles the dividing line between the campy, moral exploitation drug picture and the more serious, exploratory head film is Roger Corman's *The Trip*. It was made for exploitation producers AIP but they were uneasy with the film because it was a positive depiction of LSD. In the film Paul (Peter Fonda), an advertising director having a mid-life crisis (disillusioned with his commercial work and undergoing marital problems), uses LSD in a therapeutic manner under the supervision of John (Bruce Dern), a figure modeled on real-life LSD advocate Timothy Leary. The manner in which the film depicted this trip as largely positive led to AIP placing a disclaimer about the dangers of taking drugs at the beginning of the film and an insistence that a cracked image be placed over

Peter Fonda's face at the end of the film, to indicate irreparable damage resulted from ingesting LSD. It still proved controversial: in the United States, many reviewers were outraged and its initial advertising had to be redesigned in order to placate broadcasters and publishers. In the United Kingdom the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) refused it a certificate after psychiatrists deemed it "meretricious, inaccurate in its representations and therefore dangerous" (Starks 1982: 60). Its controversial nature in the United Kingdom fueled its cult status even further as a *film maudit*: many more knew about it than were able to see it. (It was not granted a UK certificate until 2003 and was released on UK DVD in 2004.)

Despite this controversy, *The Trip* – released in 1967 – can be seen as opening the way for the growth of more positive depictions of drugs. It is also, in its rather loose plotting and emphasis on subjective drugged experiences, an important head film. Using a combination of techniques, such as liquid and carousel projectors, strobe lights, special lenses, superimpositions, focal changes and camera movements, this was one of the most sustained attempts to recreate subjective elements of an acid trip in an American feature film. Many of the effects are not actually representations of an acid state as such, more the creation of a type of generalized hallucinatory state. As psychedelics are capable of enhancing interest in abstract patterns, and of giving the impression of visual movement, abstract imagery therefore appears in a number of sequences.

The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period when youth countercultures with strong drug predilections were particularly marked, and which saw the emergence and/or extension of cult viewing spaces (drive-ins, grindhouses, art cinemas and midnight-movie screenings), it is therefore no surprise that this was the strongest period of the cult head film. Some head films explicitly featured drugs and would use the drugged experience of characters – particularly LSD – to create an audiovisual representation of the head state: films falling into this category include *Easy Rider* and *Performance*. However, films did not need to represent drug use in any explicit manner. Some films, for example, could imply the head state through knowing winks and resolutely non-linear plots: *Head*, featuring the pop band The Monkees, is a key example of this kind of film; obvious to those in the know, but perhaps working on a different level for those who do not cotton onto the drug references. (The key advantage of this type of "double entendre head film" is that it is less susceptible to censorship controversy.) Other films work in different ways: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for example, is perhaps not an intentional head film in the manner of *Head*. Nevertheless, its spectacular space scenes, often standing alone as immersive experiences irrespective of their narrative framework, created sequences analogous to the drugged experience and (for some) proved pleasurable to watch in such a state. In particular, the "Stargate sequence" was required viewing for viewers under the influence of LSD, due to its abstract depiction of a type of "cosmic consciousness" (Figure 15.1). In fact, because the film was about space, cosmic issues, and travelling beyond known perceptual realms, it was no surprise that it was appropriated as a head film. While Kubrick has downplayed the drug connection, it nevertheless fed into its marketing campaign, with one poster proclaiming it "the ultimate trip" (Castle 2004).

Some of the more abstract films that emerged within the US underground (see Chapter 14), notably films by Harry Smith, Jordon Belson, and James Whitney, undoubtedly influenced the Stargate sequence. A great deal of activity was occurring on the fringes of the cinema industry, as artists created personal, low-budget films. During the 1960s, a number of artists were creating films that either directly reflected their psychedelic experiences, or were perceived as psychedelic in nature. Harry Smith cited both marijuana and other hallucinogens as influences for a number of films that he made, including abstract and geometric

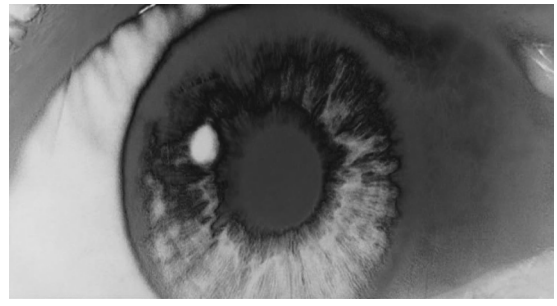


Figure 15.1 Still from the "Stargate" sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which became known as a "psychedelic" sequence.

hand-drawn films, as well as collage films. Whitney, meanwhile, made a few psychedelic films, such as *Yantra* and the more intricate, "mandala" film *Lapis*, whose raga soundtrack further lent it a drug-tinged edge. Whitney and his brother John were innovators in computer animation and *Lapis* was the first computer-aided film that James completed. Belson, meanwhile, made an increasingly complex set of abstract films based upon inner consciousness – sometimes drawing directly from his hallucinogenic experiences, but also upon meditative states – which he merged with "outer" space concerns to create a form of cosmic cinema. His statement regarding his 1961 film *Allures*, for example, demonstrates how his filmmaking would have appealed to "head cineastes": "It's a trip backwards along the senses into the interior of the being. It fixes your gaze, physically holds your attention" (quoted in Youngblood 1970: 160). Youngblood actually notes that *Allures*, and Belson's next film, *Re-Entry*, have similarities to the Stargate sequence in *2001*, although they both preceded the Douglas Trumbull designed sequence (Youngblood 1970: 162, 167). Youngblood has also claimed that many of the sequences in *The Trip* were inspired by abstract films being shown on the underground circuit (Benshoff 2001: 37). While these films would not have gained huge audiences, they did accrue smaller cult followings within the underground movie circuit which – as mentioned above – fed into a broader cult film culture via the establishment of midnight screenings in run-down inner-city areas; and they were an important influence on the head film.

There are a few psychedelic movies made outside of the United States that also seem to have developed cult followings in some quarters. One of the most notorious, and interesting, is Coffin Joe's *Awakening of the Beast*. Coffin Joe was the alter ego of José Mojica Marins, a Brazilian who had created a horror figure bedecked with a cape, hat, and particularly long fingernails. In *Awakening of the Beast*, Joe serves as a focus for four drug users who are being subject to a scientific experiment. Given doses of LSD, they descend into a psychedelic nightmare world hosted by Joe and signaled by a shift into color from black and white. This remarkable film, which is beautifully surreal yet distastefully misogynist, had its cult credentials boosted by its controversial reception; banned in Brazil, Marins found it difficult to work for some time. After fading into obscurity, his reputation has been recuperated by cult film fans over the past decade or so. Another film worthy of mention is Federico Fellini's *Toby Dammit*, a segment from the portmanteau of Poe stories, *Spirits of the Dead* he co-directed with Roger Vadim and Louis Malle in 1968. The Fellini segment is by far the most celebrated part of the film. Though not overtly mentioning drugs, it creates a psychedelic environment through which its addled protagonist (played by Terrence Stamp) stumbles, created by the stylized use of light, sound, framing, and mise-en-scène. Fellini himself told Stamp that his character should act as if he had been at a drug and sex saturated party the night before and had been given a large tab of LSD in the morning (Lebbing and Van Der Put 2000: 156).

When the cult of midnight movie screenings flowered in the early 1970s, they often allowed people to smoke dope within their premises and also screened a number of head films. As such, many films attained cult status through their popularity within such contexts. These include, among many others, *Performance*, *El Topo*, *The Harder They Come*, *200 Motels*, and *Magical Mystery Tour*. It is no real surprise, considering that head films are often based around spectacle and non-linear elements, that many of these films feature prominent use of music and contain musical set-pieces (see Chapter 16). This would fit in with Timothy Corrigan's assertion about cult films more generally as containing a "proleptic rock video form":

> Anticipated by older musicals and anticipating television shows like *Miami Vice*, these narratives often seem to undermine their own narrative structures through loosely connected nonnarrative events whose excessive display either of the visuals or the music becomes a perceptual or aural format for the audience's own performance. (Corrigan 1991: 31)

With the rise of the VCR, the midnight-movie phenomenon began to wane, but people could continue to take drugs and watch films in the more secure environment of their own homes. More recently, it has been marijuana more than LSD that has been the drug of choice to accompany film viewings. This is reflected in guides such as *Baked Potatoes* (Hulme and Wexler 1996), which provides a guide to some of the

best films to watch stoned and includes a marijuana-leaf rating scale plus a key to the type of film reviewed (e.g., "Best watched alone," "Feel-good movie," "Subtitled"). Related to stoned viewing is the phenomenon of "stoner films," which often revolve heavily around the use of marijuana (usually in a positive fashion) and thus appeal to dope-smoking film buffs. The series of Cheech and Chong comedies – most notably *Up in Smoke* – are archetypal examples of this type of film, which is often comic in tone. More recent examples include Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* and the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski*, both of which have steadily built up a cult following after initially disappointing performances at the box office.

Beyond Psychedelics

The head film mostly appealed to stoned perception, and occasionally LSD-aided states. Marijuana in particular is well suited to watching films: a relaxant, it aids contemplation and immersion. No other comparable subgenres exist; for example, there do not seem to be any film cycles aimed at the viewer under the influence of heroin or amphetamines. These drugs tend to aid conscious states that are either below or above the threshold suited to watching films. This is not to say that people do not watch films under their influence, but it does partly explain why no cycle comparable to the head film exists in relation to other drugs. Nevertheless, some movies do attempt to approximate other drug states, while there are a number of cult films that feature different drugs.

The use of heroin in particular has featured within a few cult films of note. Importantly, the films of Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey often featured heroin use (frequently in tandem with other drug intake). Morrissey's *Trash* is one of his most sustained depictions of heroin addiction. The film depicts the lives of two junkies: Joe (Joe Dallesandro) and Holly (transvestite Harold Danhaki), who aimlessly drift from one situation to another. The film is significant because, as claimed by director Paul Morrissey, it was a riposte to the glamorization of drugs evident in many of the 1960s head films. While there is not a heroin equivalent of the head film, this film could perhaps constitute the basis for such a subgenre. With its directionless plot and a main character (Dallesandro) who blankly seems to sleepwalk through the entire movie, it can be seen as a filmic analog of the heroin state (disinterestedness, lack of motivation). The camera also aids this tone by steadily documenting the unfolding performances without the aid of any flashy embellishments. In this, Morrissey continues the aesthetic example of his mentor, Andy Warhol, who was noted for his blankness and an "affectless gaze" (Shaviro 2004: 138). Whereas the head film, then, was often trying to capture the sensational pleasures of drugs via spectacle, Morrissey here downplays spectacle in preference for the mundane, and rejects subjective illustration in favor of an objective gaze. Thus, in a similar manner to how fellow Warhol-affiliated group the Velvet Underground differentiated themselves from the peace and love philosophy espoused by hippy musicians, so Morrissey's film seems to hint at a comparable nihilist sensibility within cinema.

A further factor in the cult status of *Trash*, at least in the United Kingdom, is the controversy surrounding it. The BBFC initially refused to grant the film a certificate in August 1971 because of its possible impact upon susceptible minds, in particular fearing that its explicit drug-taking scenes may prove instructive. The Greater London Council also denied the film a local certificate in September of the same year. It was not until November 1972 that it was passed "X"-rated, though on the insistence that nearly three minutes of material be cut from the film, one of which was the first heroin injection scene. A further twist was added to the saga when distributor James Vaughan added further cuts before it was theatrically released, so that the version British cinema-goers saw was eleven minutes shorter than Morrissey's cut. This was the version that made it to video in 1982, and it was not until 2005 that British film viewers could actually see a full cut of the film when it was released on DVD by Tartan (Lapper 2005). Such a troubled trajectory, partly related to its drug content, further fueled its cult status.

Despite Morrissey's avowed intention of making an anti-drug film, this was not entirely clear in the finished product, as evidenced by the nervousness shown by the British film censors. If the title "Trash" was meant to denigrate the characters within the film, viewers enamored by the sleazy, anti-authoritarian antics depicted could just as easily invert its meaning.

Much like the way hippies adopted the negative term "freak" and wore it as a positive badge of difference, likewise with "trash." In this sense, heroin films can have a wider appeal beyond mere users of the drug; they can also appeal to anyone who feels dissatisfied with the conventional parameters of everyday living. Arguably, such factors feed into the cult status of a film like *Drugstore Cowboy*. This film *does* attempt to convey some sense of the junkie's subjective drug experience, though the broader appeal of the film is arguably linked to a humanist depiction of an outsider community. While it does not glorify heroin users, it nevertheless expresses some of the excitement of choosing, and living, an alternative lifestyle. The appearance of cult writer William Burroughs in a cameo undoubtedly heightens its cult credentials. Other cult films featuring heroin use include Shirley Clarke's documentary satire *The Connection*, which involves a filmmaker attempting to film junkies making a deal; *The Panic in Needle Park*, which stars Al Pacino and Kitty Winn playing two addicted partners; *Christiane F*, Ulrich Edel's stark film about drug addiction; and *More*, Barbet Shroeder's bleak depiction of a young couple's descent into heroin (kicked off by a lighter tone and lighter drugs), which features a Pink Floyd soundtrack. The most recent cult film depicting heroin addiction is *Trainspotting*, the adaptation of Irvin Welsh's novel that caught on with British youths in the mid 1990s. Though it was primarily concerned with heroin use, though, the film also featured the use of other types of drug use (alcohol, amphetamines, ecstasy, and marijuana). Its cult success is explainable partly by how it incorporates a story concerning heroin use into a broader canvas that appealed to the then thriving youth club cultures. A story shot in a strikingly stylistic manner, concerning a bunch of young people taking drugs, feeling they are social outsiders, and with a soundtrack merging older "indie"' hits and newer club sounds, was obviously meant to appeal to a broad range of younger people (elder teenagers and upwards); and in this it succeeded.

Other types of drugs also sporadically feature within a number of disparate cult films. In particular, many blaxploitation films featured narcotics as a central plot component: drug dealers and drug gangs populated many of these films, such as *Super Fly*, *Gordon's War*, and *Foxy Brown*. While some of these films adopted a condemnatory stance against drugs, others, such as *Super Fly*, were more ambiguous. That film's ending, in which a cocaine dealer roams free, led to much criticism from the more socially active strands of the black community (who often criticized blaxploitation films for their lurid and stereotypical depictions of black people). Nevertheless, the soundtrack by Curtis Mayfield lends a critical tone that counterpoises the unfolding action on the screen. A later breed of black, urban-set films echoed this earlier cycle, though crack cocaine replaced "straight" cocaine, and there tended to be a less sensationalist approach to the subject matter. Films such as *Boyz N the Hood*, *New Jack City*, and *Clockers*, all exemplify such a move.

Conclusion

The affinities between elements of the cult audience and certain drug users has resulted in a number of drug-related films becoming cult items, a trend that is likely to continue. The changing modes of film viewing and sociality, as well as broader social trends, will inevitably affect how and why viewers celebrate certain films. For example, the heyday of the "midnight movie" occurred in run-down movie houses at a time when cinemas often tolerated drug consumption, a situation that very rarely occurs today. Currently, drug use is more likely to occur at home, where new technologies have enhanced the experience of film viewing in the domestic space, as well as the variety of films available. Social sharing of drug film viewing, then, is likely to occur at a relative micro-scale now, though the variety of platforms available through the internet enable broader, virtual forms of social connectivity to exist (and thus offer new spaces where talk about drugs and films can be found). Wider social developments, also, play a part: different forms of subcultural communities emerge in response to changing socio-cultural conditions, and the types of valued drugs within subcultures change.

Cult movies featuring prominent drug use do not appeal merely to drug-using subcultures, however. Often, they will have broader appeal, and the presence of drugs within certain films may be an incidental quality for some. For others, though, such presence

may constitute a central appeal. When drug films connect with drug subcultures in a particularly resonant manner there is sometimes a marked cycle of cult films with drug connections. The period of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the emergence of the head film was undoubtedly the most significant of such cycles to date. The stoner film is perhaps the next most important cycle, though one that spans a longer duration and is still current today. In fact, stoner comedies such as *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* and *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* are modern attempts to update the *Cheech and Chong* cycle. The presence of broad, identifiable, drug-associated subcultures does not always lead to a significant corpus of related cult films, however. The rave and club cultures that emerged in the 1990s did have a few films that were latched onto by frequent clubbers – such as the aforementioned *Trainspotting*, *Human Traffic* and *Groove* – though not perhaps as many as would have been expected. (There were a lot more made that did not seem to attract a substantial audience.) *Human Traffic* is one of the most notable in its relation to rave culture as it was actually premiered at the Homelands dance festival, which took place a few miles outside of Winchester, UK, and was attended by around 20,000 people. The film played in a tent with about 200 attendees, many of whom had taken ecstasy and who would talk back to the screen and sometimes dance along to the on-screen dancing (Sorfa 2000: 258). Yet this was a generally rare occurrence of a film tapping into the rave/ecstasy culture which was a significant phenomenon in the 1990s, particularly within Britain. Whether this was down to the properties of the drugs involved (mainly ecstasy and amphetamines), the social constitution and habits of the subcultures, broader industrial and social factors, or the "quality" of the films, is a subject that would require further investigation.

Note

1. We use the term "drugs" here in the meaning of illegal mind-altering substances. We exclude alcohol and other legal drugs from our overview, as well as some of the more specialist performance enhancing drugs that feature in the professional sports and entertainment industries. In a sense, then, we are dealing with drugs as understood by their subcultural reputation.

16

Cult Cinema and Music

Academic coverage of music and film has expanded rapidly over the past decade or so, but consideration of music within cult films is still relatively scant. This is surprising, bearing in mind the number of cult films in which music performs a key role. There are many links between film and music: industrially, a number of film and music companies belong to the same parent conglomerate, and cross-promotional tie-ins between the two media forms are common. In this sense, the music and film industries often partake in active attempts to encourage cross-media consumption. Music artists do not only provide soundtrack material for films, they also sometimes appear within films as actors. Films themselves often feed into music lyrics, titles, and videos, while film actors and other personnel occasionally move into music production. These interactions are certainly not comprehensive, but they do point to the strong links between these two forms and these are often particularly marked within the world of cult cinema.

Rock Movies

The most obvious examples of music-related cult films are movies which primarily attract a following due to the cult reputation of the musical artist(s) who feature within the film and/or provide a significant contribution to the soundtrack. Thus, if a particular group or artist enjoys a dedicated fan base, this may in turn constitute a core audience for a particular film title heavily connected with said group/artist. In his survey of midnight movies in Lexington, Kentucky, between 1980 and 1985, Gregory A. Waller (1991) found that such films were a frequent staple of this mode of exhibition (which is crucially interlinked, though certainly not synonymous, with cult cinema). Waller uses the term "rock movies" to account for a number of films in which rock music serves a crucial role, and which include: rock music documentaries and concert movies; films based on music albums; films featuring actual musical performers; and films which feature fictional rock performers. The most popular films in this survey that have gained a cult status on a broader level drew on the huge fan base of the artists involved. They include Led Zeppelin's *Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same*, a concert film incorporating fantasy sequences; *Pink Floyd: The Wall*, based on, and featuring music from, Pink Floyd's album of the same name; and *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia*, both based upon concept albums by The Who.

The concert film and/or music documentary based around a particular artist/group, is most reliant on an already existing fan base for its appeal. A concert film of a single band, for example, is unlikely to attract many viewers who are not particularly interested in that band unless other factors enhance its appeal. While *The Song Remains the Same* may have attained a cult status because of the huge popularity of the rapidly disbanding Led Zeppelin, a film such as *Stop Making Sense* accrued a reputation not merely as a Talking Heads concert film, but because of the imaginative stage designs and choreographed routines that set it apart from "routine" concert films. In this sense, while it

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primarily appealed to Talking Heads fans, it also managed to interest others who were not particularly familiar with the band's music (and who may have become interested in the band through the film). Films based on the music of particular artists, however, will often attempt to target a broader audience than the band's fan base, even though this group may constitute the most dedicated audience for such films. *Quadrophenia*, in particular, is a film that certainly appealed to a number of The Who fans, but its cult status was not solely dependent on this particular segment. Rather, the film was a historical document of British mods in the 1960s, and thus appealed to those who were involved, or interested in, this phenomenon. It also tapped into a burgeoning "mod revival" in late 1970s Britain, and has been credited with feeding the growth of this revival (Catterall and Wells 2002: 177–179). A 1997 re-release of the film intermeshed with the latter stages of the partially mod-inspired Britpop phenomenon to find a new audience. *Quadrophenia* appealed not only to fans of The Who, but also to successive generations affiliated with the "mod" (or neo-mod) subculture, and more broadly to alienated youths for its depiction of young people disaffected with conventional social life.

The importance music plays in cult films often relates to the manner by which films appeal to recognizable subcultures. As Gina Marchetti has noted, documentaries such as *Monterey Pop*, *Gimme Shelter*, and *Woodstock* appealed to the subcultures depicted in them, providing the subcultural audience "with a chance to see their favourite rock group on the big screen" (Marchetti 1985: 74). A number of different musical acts appeared in *Monterey Pop* and *Woodstock*, alongside other activities surrounding the festival, including substantial footage of concertgoers. These films were able to connect with a general countercultural audience in which a variety of different music importantly linked with a lifestyle that was opposed to dominant American ideology of the time. *Gimme Shelter* was more focused on one particular act (the Rolling Stones), though it did also feature other acts and was, more importantly, documenting an event (the Altamont music festival) that for many symbolized the dark side (and perhaps the death) of the 1960s counterculture. These films are all associated with direct cinema, a style of documentary filmmaking that attempted to capture events spontaneously through utilizing lightweight equipment and available light. Another direct cinema film, *Don't Look Back*, is also a key cult film. Following Bob Dylan on his 1965 tour of England, its main appeal is undoubtedly among Dylan's substantial (and often very passionate) fan base, though its presentation of Dylan as a hip and savvy iconoclast also presents Dylan as a kind of representative symbol of a particular generation (as well as documenting the attendant strains of being perceived in such a manner).

The intersection between cult films and identifiable subcultures arguably stems from the rise of youth-oriented exploitation films in the 1950s (see Chapter 13). This was a period when "youth," at least when combined with "delinquency," constituted a subculture in itself. Importantly, music – in the form of rock and roll – was a chief signifier of how youths differed from their elders. Following *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rock around the Clock*, a slew of rock and roll "teenpics" emerged, including *Shake, Rattle and Rock!*, *The Girl Can't Help it*, and *Love Me Tender*. The latter was one of the many Elvis Presley vehicles produced until 1969, most of which now enjoy a cult status because of the huge cult surrounding Elvis himself, but also because they enjoy a certain "kitsch" appeal (see Chapter 8). The success of films based around musical artists would continue into the 1960s, and importantly includes the Beatles' films *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!*. Richard Lester's direction in these films has been credited with creating a number of audio-visual sequences that presage the aesthetics of the music video (Smith 1998: 159), which further bolsters their appeal as innovative texts.

In the latter part of the 1970s another recognizable youth subculture – punk – also impacted upon filmmaking and created a few notable cult films. Film such as *The Blank Generation*, *The Decline of Western Civilization*, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, *Jubilee*, *Repo Man*, and *Smithereens* all, in different ways, represented punk subcultures. Some of these films – such as *The Blank Generation* and *The Decline of Western Civilization* – are documentaries which gained small cult followings among those interested in the musical scenes represented; *Repo Man* is a film that features

punks within it, and which is fueled by a punk attitude, but which is not centrally about punks and gained a cult following outside of punk subcultures. *Jubilee*, on the other hand, is a film that gained a cultish following among some "underground" audiences but which was also vilified by some punks. Other films, like *Repo Man*, had cross-cultural appeal. One example is *The Harder They Come*, a film based around the music industry in Jamaica and which appealed not only to Rastafarians but also to punks (as well as skins) in late 1970s/early 1980s Britain. This reception was boosted by the actual connections forged between some punks and Rastas in Britain during this period: Rastafarianism appealed to elements of the punk subculture through its militantly rebellious stance (Hebdige 1979: 62–70). Another cult film with cross-cultural appeal is *Space Is the Place*, a low-budget science-fiction film based around the philosophy of maverick jazz musician Sun Ra. Ra was influential on some punks because of his uncompromising, DIY approach to music (he self-issued a large number of records). He has also intersected with a wide range of other musical cultures including proto-punk (playing a concert with MC5), funk, and hip hop. While *Space Is the Place* was not widely seen on release, it has since become a cult film primarily among Sun Ra fans (see Sexton 2006), but also because of it being viewed as a seminal film related to Afrofuturism (a blending of science fiction and African American politics). If Rastafarianism imagined the future as a return to roots (African heritage) and if punk was declaring that there was "no future," Afrofuturism posits African Americans using technology to engineer a more positive future.

Cult Cinema and the Visual Economy of Rock Music

Lawrence Grossberg has argued that rock itself is a visual form, in that its fans often encounter it through live or mediated performances, or through the visual containers of record sleeves. He also notes how different types of rock fans will often adopt specific dress codes and other stylistic markers. It is this visual economy within the world of rock, he further argues, that adds to its power within the lives of its fans (2002: 83). In studying the performances of glamrock, Philip Auslander comes to a similar observation. The visual aspects of the performers such as David Bowie, Bryan Ferry, and Suzi Quatro go well beyond those of their real selves as individuals or musicians. They add layers of characterization and role-playing to the music so that posturing and posing develops into little narratives to which the music is a witness as well as its source (Auslander 2006).

The visual nature of rock music perhaps meant that its incorporation into cinema was inevitable. More importantly, this cinema/rock combination created a powerful combined force, directly appealing to fans with particular musical tastes and in the process generating a number of cult films. Rock music, for Grossberg, is a site where ideological and affective maps intersect (2002: 91). If this is the case, the transposition of rock music into films could doubly intensify the ideological and affective power of such music, through not only attaching these sounds to more concrete ideological narratives, but for placing them in a context with particularly affective potentials. According to Kevin Donnelly, non-diegetic sound and music can physically affect viewers; this power relates to its status as something both a part of, yet apart from, the filmic world, imbuing it with a kind of supernatural presence (2005: 13).

Rock music arguably enjoyed its most ideologically loaded period in the 1960s, and this combined with its visual and affective dimensions to create a rather powerful cinematic tool, contributing to a glut of 1960s cult movies in which rock music took center stage. One of the most iconic of such movies is *Easy Rider*, a studio-released feature rooted in low-budget, exploitation production (Chapter 13). *Easy Rider* employed rock music that reflected its countercultural attitude. At times, particularly in the scenes where the two main characters are travelling on the road, music dominates the attention and provides added meaning in the absence of narrative drive. Importantly, the film's soundtrack was also popular and paved the way for the use of popular music as a means to identify and tap into pre-existing taste cultures. Yet that film followed a number of other independent, exploitation pictures, such as *The Wild Angels*, *The Trip*, and *Wild in*

the Streets. All of these films used rock music as a symbol of countercultural attitude, even though these were songs written for the movies (as opposed to *Easy Rider*'s compilation of largely pre-existing songs). *Wild in the Streets* centrally incorporated music into its plot: the main character, Max Frost, is actually a rock singer turned political figure. He ultimately manages to lower the voting age to fourteen, consigns everyone over 35 to concentration camps and forces them to ingest LSD. Music, drugs, and youth here all combined into one heady, subcultural brew.

One of the most interesting 1960s films to use pre-existing popular music, however, was the "underground" film *Scorpio Rising*, directed by Kenneth Anger. Predating *Easy Rider* by five years, the film is often cited as a key moment in discussions of the "pop compilation" score in feature films (e.g. Smith 1998: 160). Whereas the films mentioned above used rock music – whether specifically produced for the film or already present within the cultural landscape – in order to reinforce and expand the subcultural nature of the films, Anger used songs that cut against the images and created an almost alchemical audiovisual collage. As the film itself features no dialog, and no inner sense of unfolding narrative, the songs help to provide a vague sense of semantic commentary. Images of leather-clad bikers are not driven by rock 'n' roll but by an audacious blend of melodic pop, including such well-known staples from the erstwhile hit parade as the Shangri-La's "Leader of the Pack" and Martha and the Vandellas' "Heatwave," as well as songs with strong sexual innuendo, such as Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" and Kris Jensen's "Torture." At times, this music does seem to bolster image events, but elsewhere it combines with the visual track to create meanings that may not have been otherwise apparent. In particular, the death, danger, and fetishism glimpsed in the visual sequences imbue these "innocent" songs with a dangerous edge, revealing, according to Philip Brophy, "that which has been covertly inscribed underneath their labelling, exposing a universe of transgressive desire" (2004: 206–207). Importantly, the use of music by Anger in this film would inspire Martin Scorsese and its influence can be detected within Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, as well as David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, films which themselves have also gained a place within cult canons.

Cult Cinema and the Musical

Not all cult films with strong musical support are dependent on rock music, however. A number of musicals have gained cult status, including *Footlight Parade, The Wizard of Oz*, *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Sound of Music*. The cult appeal of musicals can vary, though nostalgia and camp are key concepts often associated with the genre. The former in the sense that many of these films are "classical" cult films (Telotte 1991a): films from the classical era that were exhibited conventionally, but which have retained cultural currency among certain viewers because they evoke pleasurable memories. While all classical cult films are potentially valuable in this sense, the musical could be considered a particularly cultish classical genre because it belonged to, yet pushed against, classical narrative conventions through its emphasis on spectacle. And, as musicals are often self-consciously artificial, they are prominently associated with a "camp" aesthetic (Sontag 2008; see also Chapter 8).

Ian Conrich has written that the cult film and the musical share a number of common characteristics such as "performances of extravagance and exuberance, obvious energy and ability, open emotions, fantasy and sudden explosions of spectacle" (Conrich 2006: 115). As such, it is perhaps no surprise that one of the most written about cult films, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, is also a musical, albeit one that is informed by rock music. It is in this respect that its appearance in yet another musical, *Fame*, makes sense. In fact, the scenes in which students of the Fame school attend a *Rocky Horror* screening give a good indication of the difference between mainstream and cult usages of music. While attending the *Rocky Horror* screening (presided over by Rocky über-fan Sal Piro), the students strip their clothes, smoke pot, shout and cheer, and improvise on-stage chorus dancing. The on-screen audience is very much part of the set up. The contrast with the "normal" scene spliced in between the two *Rocky Horror* scenes is telling: it shows a lonely musician gently singing a love song in his room to no one in particular. More recently, following the "participatory" nature of *Rocky Horror*'s cult screenings, a number of musicals have been screened as part of a performative "package" in what are called

"Sing-a-Long" events. Stemming from a "karaoke"-type screening of *The Sound of Music* at the 1999 London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, these events encourage people to dress up and sing along with the film, with the song lyrics being displayed at the bottom of the screen (Conrich 2006: 117). These shows have expanded beyond London and other parts of the United Kingdom to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Belgium, and Malaysia. Films shown at such events include *Annie, Hairspray*, *The Sound of Music*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. Conrich himself, though, debates the extent to which such events can be thought of as constituting a cult phenomenon:

> while *Sing-a-Long-a Sound of Music* has seemingly become the contemporary model of the cult film musical experience, the event is highly staged, manufactured, packaged, and controlled. Beyond the core venues, such as London's Prince Charles cinema, the film is often consumed in a conservative manner, the apparent conformity of the audience members challenging the notion that at such screenings the audience is essentially spontaneous and transgressive. (Conrich 2006: 118)

The assertion that London audiences are less conservative than those living outside the capital is problematic; there is no explanation how this decision was arrived at (with the possibility that this is merely an assumption), or in what sense they are considered to be more conservative. It is also questionable to claim that these events are not cult because of their commercial nature, leading to a conformism which cuts against a supposed "spontaneous and transgressive" audience. This argument conveniently downplays how even audiences at midnight screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* were often marked by levels of conformity and control: even if they did initially emerge spontaneously, such spontaneity was soon overtaken by more structured participatory activity in which newcomers to such screenings had to follow strict rules (Weinstock 2007: 38–39). It is noticeable how in the *Rocky Horror* screenings portrayed in *Fame*, the audience obeys various rules with minute precision. Events that are "manufactured, packaged, and controlled" should not necessarily be regarded as negating cult value. As will be argued in Chapter 22, cult is a concept which has infused a wide range of commercial practices, and it may now be more sensible to think of cult, following Matt Hills' argument (2008a: 449), as a kind of "generic contract" between promoters/publicists and audiences/consumers. If this is the case, the audience still needs to play its part within this contract, to make up its own minds whether to accept the cult "invitation."

Conrich has also looked at a number of more modern, self-consciously "cult" musicals, such as *Joe's Apartment*, *Alfred Packer: The Musical*, and *The Happiness of Katakuris*, all of which combine elements of horror with the musical. The latter in particular is interesting as it is the product of cult Japanese director Miike Takashi and is partially inspired by *The Sound of Music*, which some promotional images for the film deliberately invoked as did the tagline: "The hills are alive with the sound of screaming!" (Figure 16.1).

A number of other musicals fit into Conrich's more "self-conscious" cult variety of films and are worth mentioning. These include *Rock 'n' Roll High School*, which features The Ramones, often cited as the first punk band; *Streets of Fire*, which features among others The Blasters; and the eccentric *Forbidden Zone*, directed by Richard Elfman and featuring the music of his brother Danny (who also plays Satan). Both *Rock 'n' Roll High School* and *Streets of Fire* reference the rock 'n' roll exploitation narratives of the past, especially the 1950s (*Streets of Fire* announces in an opening statement it is set in "another time, another place"). In that sense they are very much in tune with what in Chapter 17 we identify as the nostalgic fabrication of history (also see *Grease*, below). The images of The Ramones and The Blasters as bands also rely on that reference. Yet in both cases the nostalgia is offset by an edgy, subcultural tone that shows protagonists, music, and the rock bands themselves still in firm opposition to law and order (even if they are morally on the right side), and a narrative based around the subcultural appeal of rock music as a symbol of youth resistance against adult restriction. These offsets are aided by the cult credentials of *Rock 'n' Roll High School* producer Corman (and his screenwriter Joe Dante) and *Streets of Fire* director Walter Hill (whose *The Warriors* had already obtained a firm cult status). *Forbidden Zone*, on the other hand, is a bizarre film based upon The Oingo Boingo band's theatrical shows, which blended

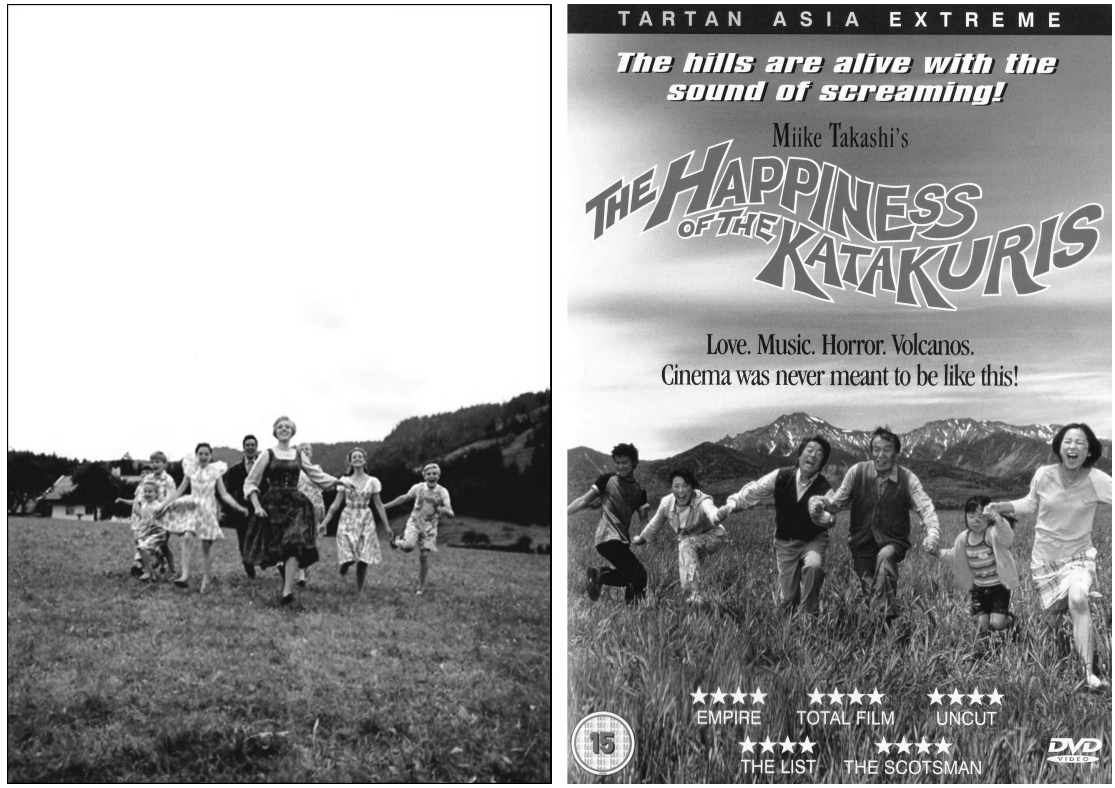


Figure 16.1 A still from *The Sound of Music*, and a DVD cover of *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, the image and wording of which clearly draws on *The Sound of Music*, which famously includes the sung words "The hills are alive with the sound of music".

gothic comedy visuals with a broad repertoire of musical styles, including cabaret and punk. Danny Elfman's subsequent status as a distinctive soundtrack composer for cult-related fare including *The Simpsons* and the films of Tim Burton and Sam Raimi, also provide this film with a post hoc cult dimension. Another cult figure, John Waters, has made a couple of musical films. *Hairspray*, set in 1962, revolved around a teenage dance show and featured a number of dance-based set pieces, though not in the traditional "song and dance" sense. The film built up a cult following on video and then spawned a Broadway musical and then a more conventional, and expensive, musical film remake in 2007. Waters' next film *Cry-Baby*, which starred Johnny Depp, was a more conventional musical (it featured song and dance numbers) that parodied earlier musicals and teenpics, most notably *Grease*.

Grease, a fantasy-like recreation of the 1950s as a utopian playground of sounds and images, has itself developed into a cult. The film was a huge success on its release, particularly among teenage girls, with the associated music singles from the film also selling extremely well. For a hardcore group of original fans, the film has continued to play a key role in their lives. Therefore, a film that was originally nostalgic about an imagined past has now itself become an object of nostalgia for a personalized past. Furthermore, the film continues to attract new fans, as shown by the sales of its DVDs and connected memorabilia. If *Grease* is a "mainstream cult," then *Grease 2* has become a cult film via a more recognizable – and some would argue more "authentic" – trajectory. Critically panned and a box office failure on its original release, the film has steadily gained a following of fans who claim it a superior movie to its more famous predecessor, and

who have formed a "Son of Grease" web site and fan group.[1]

Cult Soundtracks

While musicals do not enjoy the status that they did in their heyday, the increasing use of popular music on film soundtracks, as well as the rise of music video culture (symbolized by the arrival of MTV in 1981) has led to the proliferation of "musical moments" (Conrich and Tincknell 2006: 1) within many films. These are sequences of explicit musical performance within the film, or segments when the highlighting of soundtrack elements may, in relation with visual style, temporarily disrupt the linear momentum of the narrative. A particularly vital area of filmmaking that featured such moments is the phenomenon known as blaxploitation cinema, which flourished briefly between 1971 and 1974 (see also Chapter 13). In order to appeal to African-American audiences, these films very much relied on established musical artists who already enjoyed popularity. Thus, the soundtracks of many of these films was an area where potential audience attractions could be located, and indeed such music has often constituted the most lauded aspect of the films themselves. As Kodwo Eshun has noted, "the musical presence of *Shaft* and *Super Fly*, for example, completely overshadows that of other, more lauded genres of the period" (Eshun 1995: 53). Prestigious artists such as Isaac Hayes (*Shaft*, 1971), Curtis Mayfield (*Super Fly*, 1972), Marvin Gaye (*Trouble Man*, 1972) and James Brown (*Black Caesar*, 1973), were hired to create new music for these films, and the respective soundtracks bolstered their mood and attitude, in which a proud assertion of "blackness" was paraded. Many of the musical sequences in these films have become iconic, such as the theme song in *Shaft* accompanying John Shaft's walk down a New York street. The music becomes an immersive aural fabric, both for the audience and the character, denoting the laid-back cool of the lead character. Somewhat different is Mayfield's score for *Super Fly*, which lyrically counterbalances the main character Priest's actions, critiquing them and thus producing a dialectic in which music/vision intersect in contrasting ways.

While blaxploitation films employed well-known artists, they nevertheless featured newly recorded scores. A number of more recent cult films, by contrast, have tended to rely upon music already in public circulation. One particular cult director who has exploited such music in particularly noteworthy ways is Quentin Tarantino. Although Tarantino's music has differed in its use and range from film to film, it has tended to rely on an eclectic range of music that mostly dates from before the 1980s. Ken Garner has pointed out that many of Tarantino's characters not only discuss music, but also select particular music at certain moments (for example, on a jukebox) (Garner 2001: 190). This not only highlights the importance of the music for these characters, but for Tarantino himself. While music-dominated scenes within Tarantino films often become memorable, they also tend to serve different purposes. The infamous ear slicing scene within *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, is a prime example of effective juxtaposition in that the brutal image is underpinned by a sugary pop song, whose lyrics then take on new import. The beginning of *Pulp Fiction*, however, uses Dick Dale's "Misirlou" as an effective audio-adrenalin rush, plunging the viewer into the midst of the filmic world without mercy. At other times, Tarantino's music can serve as a referential aid, nowhere more so than when he uses music from other soundtracks, so that particular film genres or individual films are evoked. An example is the use of Bobby Womack's "Across 110th Street" in *Jackie Brown*, which was used in the 1972 film of the same name and is indicative of how the film draws upon blaxploitation (strengthened by the appearance of Pam Grier in the lead). The referentiality of Tarantino's music, in conjunction with his tendency to use songs of a certain age, also combines with visual iconography to create an atmosphere of analog fetishism. Characters within his films tend to play music on vinyl or cassette, or select tracks from a jukebox, as in *Death Proof*, which is his own personal item. The fact that the more recent songs on Tarantino's soundtracks tend to avoid overt digital markers, in line with broader characters' discussions about digital technology as cold and soulless (see again *Death Proof*), may partially explain why he needs to keep revisiting older genres more generally: he is mired in a past world, nostalgic for that which has already slipped away.

A cult film that also recalled a past world, but which conjoined this with the present in particular through its musical soundtrack, was the British film *Trainspotting*. To some, the sophisticated marketing that fueled the promotion of the film – the manner in which its different posters and its musical numbers, for example, targeted a range of key audience sectors – has, for Catterall and Wells, placed doubt upon the cult status of the film. They write:

> *Trainspotting*'s promoters pushed all the right buttons. They colluded with its target audience in a way few British cult films had done before, utilising already homogenised cults – such as those surrounding Britpop, the burgeoning Retro craze, the Rave scene and Irvin Welsh's novel – to add a synthetic veneer of cultish credibility. (2002: 234)

However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, this ignores the extent to which cult has infused marketing and promotional discourses. When the market value of cultism is recognized, it is not a surprise that it becomes adopted by commercial agents. Nevertheless, a film being marketed towards particular demographics does not guarantee the adoption of the film by such audiences as important, meaningful texts. Cattterall and Wells's use of the phrase "push the right buttons" downplays how many films may be promoted in "savvy" ways and yet be refused by the targeted audiences.

Trainspotting's music track, as Murray Smith has pointed out, actually cross-references a number of musical periods, which may have helped in its appeal to different audience types. Smith notes how the film makes connections between dance and guitar music, as well as between different decades (the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s), and between the United States and Great Britain (2002: 66). He also notes how important this music is to the film's aesthetic in that, rather than providing mere "aural wallpaper," "the film makes the music itself palpable. It would be hard to overestimate the 'value added' by the songs to the meaning and emotional force of the film" (Smith 2002: 65). Similar mechanisms underpin at least part of the cult appeal of *Donnie Darko*. In this case, the film itself stood outside the cultural context of the music's appeal: the film was American, its music mostly British. Yet that did not prevent a cult connection. After *Donnie Darko* had failed to attract good business as a film, its soundtrack became popular at British campuses and among teenagers interested in its retro-sound of the 1980s (featuring Tears for Fears, Echo and the Bunnymen, and Duran Duran). This popularity helped propel the film's cult revival. Since then, films such as *24 Hour Party People* and *Control* have deepened the interest in British pop as a cult of nostalgia. Certainly, the variety of the music used in these films, and the ways in which it draws upon a range of cultural associations and blends these with visuals and narrative, can be seen as crucial ingredients in their cult appeal.

It is not only soundtracks created from pre-existing popular music or created by already established pop musicians that can add to a film's cult appeal. A number of artists have actually gained reputations predominantly for their soundtrack work and have themselves gained cult followings as recording artists. Specific soundtracks can also become cult items, cherished by dedicated collectors of soundtracks or through becoming particularly influential within specific cultural communities. There is often a pronounced transnational nature to soundtrack collecting, in which the exoticism of the music is often valued. Examples include the Romantic spiritualism typifying German group Popol Vuh's soundtracks to Werner Herzog's movies (such as *Aguirre, Wrath of God* and *Heart of Glass*), or the Buddhist-influenced minimalism of Philip Glass's score to *Koyaanisqatsi*.

One country that has been the subject of much cult interest in terms of film soundtracks is Italy; in particular, Italian exploitation cinema (or *filone*, a word used to refer to populist genre films) from the 1960s and 1970s (a productive period for Italian film production). Composers such as Fabio Frizzi, Bruno Nicolai, Riz Ortolani, Pierre Piccioni, Nino Rota, and Piero Umiliani, as well as the rock band Goblin, have all gained followings from soundtrack collectors. In line with the rapid production of the films themselves, these composers created a large number of scores for a range of genre films including horror, police thrillers, sci-fi, sex films, and spaghetti westerns. Despite the limitations of having to produce so rapidly, the work of these composers has been celebrated by a growing number of soundtrack collectors for their

innovative blend of avant-garde, pop, rock, jazz, and other musical styles. While some of the soundtracks they have created are for films with established cult reputations (e.g. Frizzi's score for *Zombie Flesh Eaters* or Ortolani's score for *Mondo Cane*), others are more regarded than the actual films that they accompanied and it is sometimes easier to obtain the film soundtrack than it is the actual film itself.

By far the most regarded of such composers, though, is Ennio Morricone. While Morricone eventually went on to compose for larger Hollywood pictures and also modified his style to fit into a more classical tradition, his prolific output for Italian *filone* has gained a particular reputation. His work for directors Sergio Leone and Dario Argento is probably his best known within cult circles, yet the number of releases of his soundtrack work – including compilations which collect recordings from different films – testifies to his cult reputation. In addition to specific film soundtracks and compilations based around a composer's work across films being released, there are also a number of broader compilations linked to Italian exploitation cinema of this period, which include *Beat at Cinecitta* (three volumes), *Delirium of the Senses: Psychedelia in Italian Cinema* and *Italia Violenta: The Best Music of the Italian's Police Movie* [sic] (two volumes).

British horror cinema – particularly between the late 1950s and the 1970s – is another area of exploitation filmmaking linked to soundtracks that have gained a cult following. Hammer's horror films, in particular, have gained a following within areas of soundtrack collecting, with the work of James Bernard being most prominent, but also including the soundtracks to *Quatermass and the Pit* (Tristram Carey) and *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* (Basil Kirchin). Carey and Kirchin are among the relatively obscure composers who have more recently gained a following among a number of musicians interested in British soundtracks, electronic and folk music, and a number of other – often horror-related – cultural artifacts. In terms of soundtrack collecting, this interest is most saliently represented by Trunk records, a small British record label that releases TV and Film soundtracks from yesteryear and other obscure music. Its releases include the soundtracks to *Blood on Satan's Claw* (Mark Wilkinson), *Psychomania* (John Cameron) and *The Wicker Man* (Paul Giovanni). Its release of *The Wicker Man* has been seen as especially important for its influence; while the film had already gained a cult following its soundtrack had never officially been released before Trunk released it (as its first release) in a limited edition in 1998 (it was further issued by the label Silva Screen in 2002). Since then, it has itself become subject to fan devotion and the original pressings of the vinyl album have become rare collectors' items within the second-hand marketplace. It has also been credited by many musicians as sparking an interest in folk music and has thus been implicated in the recent resurgence of folk music, including subgenres known as "neofolk" (emerging from the post-industrial music scene and usually with interests in ancient paganism and the occult), and the "Freak folk" movement (which combines psychedelic influences with inspiration from British folklore) (Pitzl-Waters 2007).

A number of other cult films contain soundtracks which have themselves been subject to cult followings. These include Vangelis's ambient, synth-led score for *Blade Runner*, the cult of which was spurred by its unavailability until 1994, at least on an official level. In lieu of the official release a number of bootleg recordings of the soundtrack proliferated, and these continued to do so after the official release as they contained extra material. In 2007 a new, three-disc edition was issued that contained extra tracks and outtakes, though there were still grumbles among some fans that this edition still left out material. *A Clockwork Orange* is another cult film whose soundtrack has accrued its own cult reputation in its own right. Composed by Wendy Carlos (at the time named Walter Carlos) it made extensive use of the Moog synthesizer (still relatively new in the early 1970s), an instrument she had helped popularize with her 1968 *Switched-On Bach*, which featured covers of Bach played on the electronic Moog. The recordings for *A Clockwork Orange* led to two albums: the first was a mixture of Carlos's tracks with other classical tracks and Gene Kelly's "Singin' in the Rain"; the second, released in the same year, contained solely material recorded by Carlos, some of which was not used in the film. The soundtrack's future-oriented synthetic sounds had a pronounced influence on 1980s New Wave synthpop music such as The Human League and Heaven 17 (whose name comes from the name of a fictional pop group from *A Clockwork Orange*).

Both *Blade Runner* and *A Clockwork Orange* are cult films which have also attained a level of critical appreciation. Other cult soundtracks, however, may attain a greater respect than the actual films that they stem from (and in turn play a major part in cultifying the film itself). This is arguably the case with *Forbidden Planet*; while the film is reasonably well regarded critically, the status of the soundtrack has far outstripped that of the film itself. The main reason behind its cult status is that it is seen as particularly innovative: composers Louis and Bebe Barron were early pioneers of electronic music and the soundtrack is considered to be the first all-electronic soundtrack. Creating their own electronic circuits and drawing inspiration from Norbert Weiner's work on cybernetics, the Barons created dissonant, otherworldly sounds which had a large influence on many areas of electronic music that emerged in its wake. Another soundtrack whose status perhaps surpasses the film which it is attached to is *Vampyros Lesbos*. Although not actually recorded specifically for the film – music was taken from Manfred Huber and Sigfried Schwab's *Psychedelic Dance Party* (1969) and *Sexadelic* (1970) albums – the music gained a cult following when it was issued as the soundtrack under the title *Vampyros Lesbos: Sexadelic Dance Party* in 1995. Its blend of Eastern instrumentation and kitsch pop fitted into the vogue for easy listening "lounge music" in the late 1980s/1990s and was frequently used to soundtrack people's own parties.

It is also worth mentioning that there are some directors who have also gained a cult following for creating music for their films. One of the most notable here is John Carpenter, a cult director who has composed a number of his own soundtracks. It is his earlier, sparse synthesizer-based scores which have gained most of a following, including *Assault on Precinct 13* and *Halloween*, both of which have been extensively sampled by a number of hip-hop and electronic artists. Herschell Gordon-Lewis is another director whose own soundtracks have something of a cult following. While Lewis's soundtrack work is not often regarded as great music, the homemade, sparse music for *Blood Feast* and other tracks that he created for his films were released on a compilation in 2002 as *The Eye Popping Sounds of Herschell Gordon Lewis*. Finally, it is worth mentioning David Lynch as important in this regard. Lynch's soundtrack to *Eraserhead* (which he created with Alan Splet) was an arrangement of found sounds mixed into a suitably harsh flow of drones and hisses. Meanwhile, one of the actual songs composed for the film, "In Heaven" (performed in the film by "The Lady in the Radiator") has been frequently covered by musical artists including Bauhaus, Devo, and The Pixies. Lynch's films have since become notable for their soundtracks by Angelo Badalamenti, which themselves have a cult following, though Lynch himself has continued to be closely involved in soundtrack work and has written music and lyrics for a number of tracks featuring within his films The ability to get hold of different soundtracks or to access information about them has undoubtedly increased over the past decade or so. Web sites about soundtracks, blogs devoted to them (some of which upload actual albums from the blogger's collection) and specialist soundtrack sellers are easy to access online, while a new wave of specialist labels are emerging to cater to the increasing interest in this area. It is not, therefore, only the use of pre-existing music with subcultural appeal which is important to music and cult cinema; there is also a following for work that is specifically made for, or at least primarily connected with, a particular film. This can either gain a status through its association with a film that has already gained cult status (and may be an integral component of such status), or – as is increasingly becoming common – soundtracks can gain a kind of independent cult status regardless of the film they were produced for.

Musical Performers and "the Musician" in Cult Cinema

A number of films featuring musical performers playing lead characters have also gained cult status. These can include performers as their selves – as in the previously mentioned Elvis and Beatles pictures – or as fictional personae. As Ben Thompson has pointed out, many attempts by pop stars to forge an acting career have been the subject of ridicule (1995: 33). Occasional performances have captured the imagination of viewers, though, and this is often when the pop star is actually playing a version of their extant celebrity persona. A particularly striking example here is Mick Jagger's role in Donald Cammell and Nicholas Roeg's

Performance, in which he played a washed up rock star. Combined with its psychedelic trappings, its nonlinear editing and speculations on identity and performance, the film has proved to be an enduring cult and has even fed into subsequent pop music culture, having been sampled on Big Audio Dynamite's "E=MC2" (1985) and the Happy Mondays' "Mad Cyril" (1988). Nicholas Roeg also directed another cult film featuring an international pop star: David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. In this film, Bowie's androgynous and alien-obsessed persona, combined with his acting inexperience, imbued his performance with a sense of remoteness that suited the role of an actual alien. A sense of remoteness also characterized the performances of James Taylor and Dennis Wilson in Monte Hellman's cult road movie *Two Lane Blacktop*. The musicians' inexperience was once again expertly employed by Hellman here to convey a sense of existential anomie and was contrasted with actor Warren Oates more exuberant performance.

One particularly interesting cinematic employment of pop artists is within films that are about the music industry. Such depictions are often rather critical about the machinations of the music business, stretching back to the early days of the "rock 'n' roll film." Ben Thompson has written that there was never an "age of innocence" regarding the rock 'n' roll film, that it emerged fully cynical, possibly because "the idea of a new branch of the entertainment industry more venal than itself was just too good to resist" (1995: 38). Two noteworthy cult films about the music business and featuring musical artists certainly fit this bill: *Head* and *The Harder They Come*. The former was The Monkees' audacious deconstruction of their own manufactured image: a nonlinear, psychedelic attack on the inauthentic pop world (and a stake to move forward into autonomous artistry). Unsurprisingly, it alienated their fan base and confused many, but developed its own niche following. The latter was Perry Henzell's Jamaican film in which Jimmy Cliff starred as an artist exploited by the ruthless record companies and ended up a criminal. The film mirrors the very real exploitation of many reggae artists and highlights the social ills that many experienced in Jamaican life.

Films highlighting the cynical operations of the music business contain critical elements that tap into broader ways in which cult films (sometimes) speak to marginalized groups. Disaffection with the music industry can be representative of broader social alienation and this can combine with cult musical appeal to heighten a film's cult potential. One film about the music business deserving mention, but which does not quite fit into this cynical mould is *This Is Spinal Tap*, which featured fictional rather than real music artists. *Tap*'s cult status is due much more to its comedy value than for any social attitude. While it does share the distance of the more cynical films mentioned above, it uses this distance in a more loving manner to mock the antics of a heavy metal band and their travails. Ethan de Seife has noted how the film parodies both rock 'n' roll *and* "the semi-parasitic people and industries that have emerged to promote and valorise it" (2007: 100). In this sense, it does not take sides but treats all characters as worthy of humor. It also, importantly, adopts a mock documentary style that, in line with its acutely observed characters and surrounding paraphernalia, creates a rather uncanny effect (to the extent that some musicians have thought that some of the movie's ideas were stolen from them).

Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that music is an important contributor to many a cult film's appeal. This can work on a number of levels: the music used on the soundtrack; the ways in which music (especially the music industry) can become the subject matter of the film; or through actual musical artists appearing within the films. Musical appeal can also cut across forms and genres: from the documentary to the musical, from exploitation to avant-garde, and from drama to comedy. The cult status of a musical artist can feed into a film to create cult value, though such cult value will often increase if the actual film contains a number of common cult film traits. Though these can never be exhaustively categorized, in music-related films these tend to include: nostalgia; alienation and deviancy; kitsch and camp qualities (Chapter 8); irony and parody (Chapter 21). They will also tend to provide immersive, affective spaces that the cult viewer can become lost in and moved by, as embodied in films that privilege spectacle and performance, such as the musical or the concert film, or within the "musical

moment" of innovative audio-visual synthesis. Or films may be largely forgotten about bar the continued interest in their soundtracks, the influence of which can far outweigh the overall products they were once only a single component of.

Note

1. Their web site is at www.sonofgrease.org, while they have a Yahoo fan group at http://movies.groups.yahoo.com/group/sonofgreasefanclub.

17

Classical Hollywood Cults

Even the narrowest interpretations of cult cinema cannot ignore the cult movies Hollywood produced during its classical era, roughly between World War I and the 1960s. In their list of only thirteen films that confirm to a tight sociological definition of cult cinema Kinkade and Katovich (1992) still include three classical Hollywood productions: *Freaks*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*. There is no clear-cut definition of a classical Hollywood cult film, but there are plenty of films that have had that label bestowed upon them. An illustration that comes close to a definition is offered by Danny Peary, the critic who has given the most attention to Hollywood movies as cults:

> the typical Hollywood product has little potential for becoming a cult favorite because it is perceived by everyone in basically the same way ... Although *Gone with the Wind* and *Star Wars* have fanatical followings [they still] attract the masses rather than devotees on the fringe of the mass audience; the word *cult* implies a minority, and the studios are well aware that *Gone with the Wind* and *Star Wars* still attract the *majority* of the movie audience. Once these two pictures join such films as *All About Eve*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Casablanca*, and *The Wizard of Oz* – all popular with the mass audience but today distributed primarily for their hardcore fans – on repertory theater schedules and on the midnight movie circuit, they, too, will be classified as legitimate cult movies. (Peary 1981: xiii)

The main complication that faces classical Hollywood cults is that it concerns films that seem, at the same time, mainstream and marginal, center and periphery. Peary excludes *Gone with the Wind* as a cult film because as the ultimate classic it is too popular, and its fandom is too much that of regular moviegoers ("the masses"). The qualification of having a hardcore base of followers *within* a mass audience is important, as it delineates a distinction between the audience as a collective and the audience as an aggregate of individuals. For Peary, it is the feeling of being part of a collective that makes a community a cult. *Gone with the Wind* would be a classical Hollywood cult as long as someone would identify its hardcore fandom as a cultish community. J.P. Telotte (1991a: 9) does exactly that when he argues that the appeal of *Gone with the Wind* lies in the way it unites an otherwise heterogeneous audience around "a fondness for conventions."

In this chapter we will discuss a variety of routines and themes that have led to cult reputations for films from Hollywood in its classical era. Our first point of attention will be nostalgia, which we identify as the overarching characteristic of classical Hollywood cults. Next, we will devote attention to a few forms of labor within Hollywood that have attracted cult receptions. We will also analyze the tropes of intertextuality, gaiety and violence as contributing to classical Hollywood cults. In conclusion, we will

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elaborate on aspects of cultism towards classical Hollywood after its demise.

Nostalgia

"There's no place like home", sighs Dorothy (Judy Garland) at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*. Much of the appeal of classical Hollywood cult films comes from an elusive sense of "home," a home carrying only the good characteristics of the term. As Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 3) observe, cult receptions are drenched with a nostalgic yearning for an idealized past, a sense of belonging that can only be located outside of the present reality. For Mathijs and Mendik, this nostalgia is the result of two factors: the emotional impression of nostalgia that is part of a film's reception, and nostalgia as a component of the film's story.

The storylines of most classical Hollywood cults embody a strong yearning for a past, better time. In *The Wizard of Oz*, that past includes Dorothy's home, and – in her search for it – her innocence. In *Gone with the Wind*, it is the yearning for Tara, the manor of the family. In *Casablanca*, it is the time before the German troops marched into Paris. Peary (1981) points out how Rick's (Humphrey Bogart) initially cold and callous attitude gradually changes to reveal a "sentimentalist" view on life when that past Paris returns in his life (in the form of Ingrid Bergman's Elsa), more powerfully every time he hears the song "As Time Goes By". In *It's a Wonderful Life*, the nostalgia is for the missed chance of enjoying what one has in life while being preoccupied with other plans. In *Harvey* it is the longing for a time away from reality altogether. As Elwood Dowd (James Stewart) puts it: "I've wrestled with reality for 35 years, and I am happy to state I've finally won out over it." In *Singin' in the Rain* it is the longing for truthful entertainment, which means the recognition of skill and talent over celebrity status. In each of these films, characters get a second chance, and in most cases they take it. Only in classical Hollywood cults from the mid 1950s and later (*Rebel without a Cause*, *The Searchers*, *Touch of Evil*) is no such choice available, or it is not taken. It is as if with the mid 1950s nostalgia stops having an impact on the present and from then on only relates to the definite past.

Frequently, the sense of nostalgia is reinforced by time travel. Characters travel literally through time (*It's a Wonderful Life*), or are pulled out of the normal passage of time (*The Wizard of Oz*). Locales are presented as timeless (*Top Hat*), or stuck in limbo while for the rest of the world time goes by (*Casablanca*). Any straightforward passage of time is furthermore interrupted by frequent stops (for a song or for elaborate flashbacks), and within the mise-en-scène numerous props and atmospheres refer to multiple ages and eras; it is almost as if the surroundings of circuses, cabarets, or theater stages, littered with assorted materials from bygone eras clutter the story to the point it can no longer progress functionally (*Meet me in St. Louis, Touch of Evil*).

Another recurring characteristic of the nostalgia in classical Hollywood cult films is its suspicion of modern technology and progress. It is a characteristic shared with many forms of secular and religious cults. Technology is represented as an obstruction to happiness, bringing only anxiety and alienation, and tearing communities and families apart. As is the case in *Miracle on 34th Street*, but also in *Casablanca*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Harvey*, *Touch of Evil* and many others, nostalgia is frequently inhabited by a gentle but persistent criticism of capitalism, consumerism, commodification, and the pinch these have put on close-knit communities. New York, as embodiment of capitalism, frequently gets a bad rep in these films. The classical Hollywood cult film that encapsulates this sentiment best is *Meet me in St. Louis*. In the film, the Smith family finds new means of transport, communications, and artificial lights threatening their cohesion as a family, in their home, in their trusted corner of the town. It takes the combined antics of the female family members, especially young Tootie (Margaret O'Brien), to persuade the father to change his mind. The structure of *Meet me in St. Louis* is that of seasonal cycles, not of progress. It offers in the song "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" a rationale for nostalgia as an embrace of the repetition of the past (Kaufman 1994).

The nostalgia of these films is paralleled by the nostalgia in their receptions. On a very particular level, the nostalgia that accompanies the reception of classical Hollywood cults is partly that of the audience's yearning for a form of film consumption that has passed, namely that of the cozy inner-city neighborhood theater where young and adult couples could catch

double bills, matinees, and premiere-evenings alike. As Wheeler Winston Dixon observes: "one went to the movies to see the stars, but also to be with one's friends . . . You would see your friends and neighbors a few rows down and wave to them" (Dixon 2006: 181). Next to that, the element of nostalgia in the receptions of classical Hollywood cults is one that lifts audiences out of specific conditions of time. According to Telotte (1991a: 9), films such as *Casablanca* and *Rebel without a Cause* display a "remarkable ability to live on through and, in effect, outside of history." They are unstuck in time. Telotte links this displacement in time to the nostalgia with which cult audiences approach these films. At its simplest, this nostalgia is the yearning for the initial impression the film left on the viewer, or, a little broader, a desire for a "first time" exposure to a film – the part of the phenomenal experience of viewing that regards every session as "original" (Barker and Mathijs 2007; Card 1991: 66). The ability to position the viewing as a continuous "first time" with all its emotional impact and aura of uniqueness intact, and to embrace the nostalgia that memories of such a first time evoke, is what sets classical Hollywood cult viewers apart from other cultists. Simultaneously, the nostalgia in the reception of classical Hollywood cults operates as a desire for innocence, or for an indefinite "other" time where the day-to-day troubles that occupy daily routines do not exist. Classical Hollywood cults "represent what Christopher Lasch has termed 'ego-ideals': 'admired, idealized images', in a most fundamental sense, *loved ones*" (Telotte 1991a: 9). Such images offer not only consolation to audiences, they also provide an imaginary release from the tensions of real life.

In combination, the re-creation of a "first time" and the search for innocence and idealized icons keep much of the nostalgia in the receptions of classical Hollywood cult films free of irony. In that sense it is different from the receptions of many other types of cult film. The combination also creates legends of receptions, whereby particular instances are singled out as markers for a "true" capture of a film's meaning. These instances become directives for moments of nostalgia in subsequent receptions. This was the case with several instances in the immediate reception of *Rebel without a Cause*, after the death of its star James Dean, and amid some upheaval over the film's place in a controversy over how it was contributing to the corruption of "deviant youths" – a perception that led to the film being banned in France (Biltereyst 2005). After the shock over Dean's death had passed, and moral panics about deviant youths had subsided, the long-term reception of *Rebel without a Cause* was accompanied by a nostalgia for that initial reception – when it seemed to matter to watch the film (McKelly 2005; Shary 2005; Springer 2005).

At its broadest, the nostalgia surrounding the cult reputations of classical Hollywood also transfers into a cultism for much of the period of classical Hollywood, and for the cultural certainties and excitements it is said to offer. Classical Hollywood *itself*, with its image of glamor, stardom, and glory, but also with its perceived decadence, abuse, and sleaze, has a cult reputation. Of course, many eras attract their own nostalgic reminisces. But what sets the classical Hollywood period aside is that the nostalgia for it is often expressed through the same media of film and television that helped to establish this cultural mythology in the first place. It was mainly in films from the 1980s that the consumption of nostalgia took on a cultist quality in its own right, expressed and fueled by films such as *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, and *Dirty Dancing*. For Vera Dika (2003), such nostalgia is in effect a fabrication of history, and part of the 1980s mode of "recycled culture." Mathijs (2007) argues that the cultism surrounding 1980s films recycling cultural consumption patterns of the 1950s is part of a broader development wherein audiences' longing for a better future has given way to a yearning for a better past. Both Dika and Mathijs stress how with this development nostalgia for Hollywood cultism is transformed into a consumption pattern itself – exactly what the original classical Hollywood cults implicitly criticized.

Routines of Labor

There is a certain relationship between nostalgia as the overruling concept for classical Hollywood cults, and some of the routines of labor associated with the system of classical Hollywood, specifically kinds of labor (and perceptions thereof) that are prone to attract fan

devotion through their imperfect fit within, and challenges to, the system.

In Chapters 6 and 7 we analyzed the cult appeal of stars and auteurs. Let us add to those considerations a few Hollywood-specific elements. The most significant observation is that discussions of the labor of stars and auteurs with cult reputations of the classical era are drenched with the impression that they stand for a "truer" kind of professionalism, sophistication, glamor, or charisma from a time when such qualities were said to be of a more pure constellation. Larry Vonalt (1991: 59) calls it "artful glamour." It is an observation repeated in virtually every biographical study of Humphrey Bogart, Judy Garland, or James Dean. Such repetitions of a mantra amplify much of the nostalgia surrounding classical Hollywood cults. A second observation is that the labor of stars and auteurs with cult reputations in classical Hollywood would be labeled as "maverick," because they often evidence a less-than-smooth and fractured career – a career cut short by adversity, disrepute or early deaths.[1] Actors and directors with liberal political profiles, such as Abraham Polonsky or John Huston, or stars and directors with high-profile careers in disreputable genres such as horror, such as James Whale or Tod Browning, would also often be considered mavericks (Curtis 1998; Herzogenrath 2008). While cultism of classical Hollywood stars shows equal interest in male and female stars (though there can be much discussion over the kinds of properties cultists wish to accentuate in their fandom of male or female stars), cultism of classical Hollywood maverick directors is almost uniquely male-centered (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of female cult auteurs). At the same time, however, the masculinity of the mavericks is contested. Many have had gossip about their sexual identity become part of their reputations. The ambiguity accompanying these stories helped solidify their cult reputations.

Stars and auteurs aside, excellent examples of cults that have arisen around instances of Hollywood labor include crew whose profession invites perceptions of daredevilry, risk of bodily harm, and "street credibility," such as stunt people (immortalized, for instance, in *Singin' in the Rain*), athletes, and special effects artists (see Chapters 2, 18 and 19). One category of labor in classical Hollywood that pushed that perception of conflation between the professional and personal the furthest, and thus also received the biggest cult appeal particularly in terms of the nostalgia it incited, was that of the child actor. As Diana Serra Cary, also known as 1920s child star Baby Peggy, observes in *Hollywood's Children* (1979), the 1920 to 1940s can easily be described as the era of the "child star cult." The situations these actors ended up, or maneuvered themselves in, oscillate between "dreams" and "nightmares," swerving from boy wonder or America's sweetheart over stubborn genius to perennial exile – but never are they just simply mainstream. Child actors have always been a point of fascination for film audiences. There is nothing more universally adored than a child star. At the same time, there is a sense they are out of place, their physical and mental well-being endangered by the machinery of Hollywood. Conflicts between perceptions of child labor (exploitative, slave-labor, exhausting, damaging, and so on) and perceptions associated with children (pure, naive, innocent, playful, cute, asexual, impulsive, cruel etc.), put child acting outside of normality and open films with such acting up to wide-ranging interpretations and comments, leading to unstable receptions. Frequently, such debates have fueled cult reputations in which admiration for child acting is precariously negotiated against concerns about labor conditions. These concerns permeate the cult reputations of Jackie Coogan, Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney, Deanna Durbin, Nathalie Wood, the many other child actors in *Meet me in St. Louis*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *Night of the Hunter*, and *The Sound of Music*, and, most famously, Judy Garland (see Chapter 8 for an elaboration on the Garland cult).

The most commonly mentioned classical Hollywood cults combine high degrees of exceptionality of production and reception with presentations and conditions of labor deemed unusual for the Hollywood system – hence provoking production and reception legends or even spark entire mythologies. A perfect example is *Casablanca* (Card 1991). Umberto Eco (1986: 197) refers to its production as "a hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly," with incredible characters and mannered acting. Because of this, Eco adds, it is "a palimpsest for future students of twentieth-century religiosity" (1986: 197). In terms of reception, there was equally much confusion over the kind of film *Casablanca*

wanted to be, and what it eventually became. Films now regarded as evergreens, such as *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Wizard of Oz*, too, were seen as exceptional to Hollywood (Higashi 2005: 73; Maland 2007: 243–244). Ultimately, the superstructure of Hollywood, its collection of rationalizations and self-beliefs endorsed by the corporations leading it and publics consuming its product, has managed pretty well to contain these films and explain them away as one-time exceptions. As such, they present not an alternative to Hollywood, but oddities within it.

Intertextuality

On the basis of Hollywood's system of routines it would seem logical to assume that genre plays an important role in the characterization and reception of classical Hollywood cults. But that does not mean it is a cinema of genre. Like cult films in general, classical Hollywood cults relate closely to issues of genre in that they consistently strain, over-play, or ridicule notions of generic categorization while simultaneously relying heavily upon formulas and conventions of genres. Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 2) name *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sound of Music* as examples when they argue that cult films "shatter all existing genres." Eco asserts that Hollywood films that mix genres are likely to have cult followings. *Casablanca* is his favorite example (Eco 1986). Alex Cox too observes "a tendency to slosh over from one genre into another" (Cox and Jones 1993: 1).

Instead of being generic, then, classical Hollywood cults are meta-generic, or, intertextual. Intertextuality has connotations that stretch well beyond genre and classical Hollywood. We explore those in Chapter 21. Within the context of classical Hollywood cultism the concept of intertextuality is usually understood along Eco's definition, as a framework of data-structures (such as a film) that consists of "stereotyped situations derived from preceding textual traditions and recorded by our encyclopedia" (Eco 1986: 200). Intertexuality consists of macroscopic textual situations and stereotyped iconographical units, the latter more or less the equivalent of formulaic imagery and narrative, immediately recognizable by audiences. By breaking up genre in a number of situations and acknowledging their travel across texts, intertextuality avoids discussions of genre as "accomplishment." According to Stam (1999: 201), intertextuality surpasses the problems of taxonomism and essentialism that the concept of genre tends to become embroiled in. But it retains, and indeed highlights, the importance of how films relate to other systems of representations through clichéd or stereotypical formulas.

Classical Hollywood cults are highly intertextual in two ways. First, they are intertextual in their self-conscious application of clichés. It creates the impression that these films use as well as subvert or deconstruct the very situations they are setting up (Peary 1981; Cox and Jones 1990, 1993). The intertextuality of classical Hollywood cult movies thus becomes a way of bypassing the conditions of quality genre imposes – a way of not having to live up to the pressure of having to "be" a good genre film, but to be appreciated on "another level." A staple example is the use of story backgrounds such as the circus or the theater backstage that function as ready-explanations for eccentric behavior (which consequently does not need to be addressed through character development or plot). Among the most frequently mentioned such films are *Freaks*, *Footlight Parade*, *Hellzapoppin'*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Singing' in the Rain*, *All about Eve*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *A Star Is Born*, and *Imitation of Life*, all of which are set in the world of entertainment, where "stereotypes," "stock characters," and "sudden changes" are not only to be expected, but through their full display also become motors to the narrative and its meaning. The framed worlds in films such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Meet me in St. Louis*, or *Touch of Evil* too have been analyzed as highly intertextual. Through their intertextuality classical Hollywood cults offer audiences a way of enjoying what would otherwise be either less than fully accomplished genre exercises, or merely just good genre films.

Secondly, intertextuality invites audiences to "make up" interpretations that add to the film's richness, and its cult reputation. Audiences can use intertextual prompts to mine films for references and connections they might not even knowingly contain. The various references to *Casablanca* in *À bout de souffle*, *Play it Again Sam*, or *When Harry Met Sally* have fortified the cult reputation of *Casablanca* by adding interpretations beyond the film's intentions (Maltby 1996). A famous

example, researched by Barbara Klinger (1994), concerns the films Douglas Sirk made with Rock Hudson, which found renewed followings, and renewed cult receptions after the actor had died of AIDS in 1985, and audiences started to revisit his films to look for clues and cues for his homosexuality. Another example is the renewed cult followings for Joan Crawford triggered by the release of *Mommie Dearest*. This audience-driven intertextuality has had significant repercussions for classical Hollywood cults' long-term receptions. We have mentioned in Chapter 1 how reception contexts are known for their obsession with details, and their interconnectedness. This mining is a sign of this. It really became a part of cult readings of cinema from the late 1960s onwards, concurrent with the demise of classical Hollywood. In the years since, as classical Hollywood cults gradually lost their original audiences, they were replaced by audiences trained to look for ulterior motives and symptomatic meanings, for bits and pieces of intertextual referencing films carried unknowingly, that were simply added on to the films, or that were only noticed after they had been spoofed or referenced by other, newer films. As such, intertextuality, and its use by audiences, offers explanations as to why some classical Hollywood cults remain cult films, while others have disappeared.

Gaiety

When classical Hollywood cults are described in terms of nostalgia it is often noted that they offer a "gay ole' time." The term "gay" has changed meaning over the course of its application in the receptions of classical Hollywood cults. That change reflects a development many classical Hollywood cults experienced.

Initially, the term refers to a mood that stresses frivolous, flirtatious atmospheres in enclosed, artificial settings that highlight their entertainment and leisure functions – such as hotels, bars, ballrooms, dressing rooms, luxury estates, yachts, casinos, theaters, or film studios. Gaiety abounds most visibly in stories that upset "cheery problemless world[s] where gentlemen have valets and dress in top hats and tails and ladies have maids and dress in evening gowns" (Peary 1981: 103). The genre most commonly associated with gaiety is the musical. Among the most commonly listed Hollywood cult musicals are *42nd Street* and *Footlight Parade*, *Top Hat*, *Meet me in St. Louis*, and *Singin' in the Rain*. Gaiety also informs much of the appeal of sentimental fantasy films such as *Harvey* and *It's a Wonderful Life* – films in which the joy of living forms the main drive for the narrative. These films owe much of their cult appeal to the joyful mood they establish with their audiences, to their relentless belief in a fun time, and to the self-reflexivity of "a story inside a story inside the industry" (which functions as an intertextual tool through which the joyful mood is established).

Several critics argue that the cult appeal of gaiety lies in how it presents a world that does not gel well with reality. *Top Hat* seems oblivious to the real-life Depression. Rick's Café in *Casablanca*, the backdrop of the theater in *All about Eve*, or the background of the film industry in *Singin' in the Rain* appear disconnected from reality, consciously so (Peary 1981: 4–8; Higashi 2005). Often, there is a tension between the high-society entertainment setting and the working-class backgrounds of the characters – stuntmen, chorus dancers, piano players, bartenders, pirates and outlaws – who are presented as quasi-egalitarian collectives of guys, gals, and pals. Conflicts remain lighthearted, and are carried with a smile – as if life is merely a frivolity.

In its more modern meaning, the term "gay" also carries overtones of camp and queer sexualization. The above-mentioned films often contain "battles of the sexes," with sexual identity at stake. Such battles are accompanied by a "pratfall" – a fall from grace of the protagonist that forces him to abandon his disavowal, acknowledge his attraction to the heroine, and give up his roving ways.[2] Because these films address both a leisurely and a sexualized connotation of the term "gay" the phrase has become representative for a turn in the modes of reception of films with gaiety – a turn that has affected the long-term cult receptions of these films. Since the 1960s, savvy audiences have been more vocal in identifying or attributing queer or lesbian subtexts to Hollywood films, in particular with regard to musicals, screwball comedies, and swashbucklers. Anything from the male bonding between teens in *Rebel without a Cause*, the flirting and cross-dressing within the vaudeville troupe in *Sylvia Scarlett*, the reversal of

dominant gender roles in films with Marilyn Monroe, Joan Crawford, or Rock Hudson, or the restrained, domestic tensions in some of the films of Douglas Sirk (*All that Heaven Allows* in particular) have been reinterpreted along this sexualized understanding of gaiety (Peary 1981; see Klinger 1994 for a study of Sirk's reception). As camp and queer readings became more prevalent parts of cultism (see Chapter 8), gaiety gradually became understood as a reference to queer or promiscuous subtexts, planted and hidden in films in order to bypass the strict self-censorship of Hollywood, but detectable for those with the right arsenal of subtextual implications and inferences.

The change in application of the term "gay" illustrates a change in the long-term reception of classical Hollywood cults. This change is often reflected upon in nostalgic reflections as a perception of a loss of innocence. The cultist reattribution of the motive of gaiety in musicals, swashbucklers, and screwball comedies was paralleled by Hollywood audiences' abandonment of these genres. However, in the case of the musical such nostalgic reflections mix with camp and queer readings without too many obstructions. This mix has made the model of the musical an almost uniquely cultist type of film, especially in the period after the demise of classical Hollywood. *The Sound of Music* is generally considered the end-point of the classical musical. Its current cult reception is characterized by sing-a-longs that highlight audience participation, what Ian Conrich (2006: 117) has called "karaoke cinema" (also see Chapter 16). Fittingly, this reception, and the comments of "silliness" it elicits, can be regarded as a struggle between the initial understanding of "gay" (as frivolous fun) and the post-1960s queering of it (as repressed sexuality being outed).

Violence

Many cult films present instances of violence as a way of opposing mainstream modes of representation. Violence is also abundantly present in classical Hollywood cults, often in the guise of perpetual anarchy, toughness, or frontier liminality – in fact we can say that in classical Hollywood cults violence is routinized, made part of the fabric of storytelling and style.

Routines of violence are a particular characteristic of the zany slapstick film and its unattached, uncivil tramps and wanderers. As Harry Allan Potamkin (2008) noted, the 1920s slapstick film used to form a cult all onto itself, celebrated exhaustively by the surrealists (see Chapter 4). Because of the quantity, size, and speed of gags (pie fights, chases, crashes) within these films, and the ridiculing of figures and institutions of authority, the zany slapstick film was often seen to contain a political subtext of anarchy. Many of Chaplin's films end with the tramp setting off on the road, to nowhere in particular. The overt links between violence and zaniness in the films of the Keystone Cops, Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers (especially *Duck Soup*), and several pirate films (notably *Captain Blood*) gave them solid cult reputations. In 1941, *Hellzapoppin'* encapsulated the traits of zaniness in an overtly intertextual and self-reflexive tale about filmmaking that paved the way for parodies (see Chapter 21).

Routinization of violence is also prevalent in the hardboiled *film noir* with the femme fatale. Such films have frequently been called nihilist, for their preference for dodgy locales (in bars, cabarets, on the road, in halfway houses of low repute), their avoidance of the presentation of women in fixed routines and domestic environments, and their violence against women (comedic or not) – in these films, men are dangerous, women are lethal, and adventures are doomed. The most visible instances of such routines of violence were far more concerned with formalisms and mannerisms of violence (such as menacing poses or sudden outbursts, like Lee Marvin's infamous hit in *The Big Heat*) in shabby locations than with plot-driven storytelling. Among the most frequently mentioned hardboiled cults are *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, *Detour*, *Out of the Past*, and from the fifties, *Gun Crazy*, *The Big Heat*, *Kiss me Deadly*, and *The Killing*. *Touch of Evil* is usually regarded as the epilog of the hardboiled cult. Each of these mostly low-budget films is noted for its expressions of physical and emotional violence (often against women), for its labyrinthine plots of betrayal, and for an overall tone of cynicism, factors that gave them a heightened sense of liminality, and contributed to their cult reputation.

The most renowned routinization of violence in classical Hollywood cults, however, is the kind

associated with the frontier. A metaphor for the edge of civilization, the frontier stands as a key component of the kind of cultural mythology Hollywood is said to promote (the American Dream and its "wide horizons"). In classical Hollywood films with cult followings any crossing of the frontier appears to be impossible. Instead, characters and stories get stuck on the frontier – they linger in no-mans' lands. As a consequence violence is everywhere. Steven Schneider describes the eponymous city of *Casablanca* as "hovering" in between worlds and cultures, stalemated by the war (Schneider 2006: 91). The border town in *Touch of Evil* or the observatory in *Rebel without a Cause* are also locations in which characters are stuck and violence ensues.

The forms of classical Hollywood cult that push this notion of the frontier furthest are the exotic adventure film and the western. In the figure of the "frontier hero" simmers a dilemma between civilization and wilderness: the hero is unable to function within the civilized world but equally unable to live in the wild. That conflict inevitably erupts in violence. The biggest cult reputations are for adventures and westerns whose entire narrative is set in the frontier zone, where violence becomes a mode of existence rather than a functional tool. In the pre-Hays Code adventure film this violence is often linked to sexual attraction. In *Tarzan and his Mate* and *King Kong* love is expressed in a very physical way, as befits their position of "uncivilized" beings. With regard to the western, the frontier violence is probably most iconically illustrated through the image of Ethan Edwards at the end of *The Searchers*. Peary (1981, 1989) lists the following films as cult westerns: *My Darling Clementine*, *Johnny Guitar*, *The Searchers*, *Man of the West*, *Rio Bravo*, and *Ride the High Country*, and the Randolph Scott westerns *The Tall T* and *Ride Lonesome*. Most of these westerns are called revisionist, from the period near the end of classical Hollywood when the genre started to shed its blind loyalty to the myth of the conquering of the frontier and, instead, films such as the above-mentioned get stuck on the border. In a sense, this intertextual exposition of the genre's constructedness, expressed in an increase in formal mannerism, ignited its downfall. It helped destroy some of the mass appeal of the western. At the same time, the formal subversion helped the genre gain a cult reputation.

The cults of the zany slapstick, the hardboiled film, and the Hollywood western are largely a thing of the past. Peary aside, very few studies of cult movies even refer to Hollywood western cults (Cox and Jones 1990, 1993 is an exception). But some traces of their cult are carried over into the present in the form of homage. Contemporary films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Crash* eagerly reference the hardboiled femme fatale and the western, thus enshrining their routines of violence into cult fandom. The best example of this are European spaghetti westerns such as *Django*, *A Bullet for the General*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, *The Big Silence*, or *Once Upon a Time in the West*, or post-classical westerns such as *The Shooting* and *The Wild Bunch*. These films' routinization of violence goes a few steps further, especially in their focus on the spectacle of indiscriminate violence and on the collectivity of its perpetrators. More men than ever before get stuck in the frontier zone, and not even the most extreme violence gets them out. Their cynicism actually turns these films into send-ups of violence. It has given these films greater cult reputations than their Hollywood predecessors, ones that persist to this day. At the same time, the spaghetti western's appeal virtually erased any cult followings for classical Hollywood westerns (for more on the spaghetti western, see Chapter 20).

Classical Hollywood Cults on Television

Rio Bravo and *The Sound of Music* are often listed as the last examples of classical Hollywood cults. As we have outlined above, the cult of the violent spaghetti western erased the cult of the Hollywood western. The increasing tendency to mine musicals, screwball comedies, and melodramas for their camp and queer subtexts – and to see every mention of "gay" as something else – drastically changed their cult appeals too. In general, nostalgia for classical Hollywood pushed specific cult followings for nostalgic films out of the spotlight. But on television, classical Hollywood cults found a new home. From the 1960s onwards, and particularly through the 1970s and 1980s, television gradually replaced the repertory theater: its reruns of beloved films made re-releases superfluous. Network

television became the quintessential form of family entertainment, and it also became the medium classical Hollywood cults migrated to.

In fact, television perpetuates the cult of classical Hollywood through the nostalgia it embraces. The major proof for this is what can best be described as seasonal cults: the fervent cultism around specific, recurrent periods and dates in the year linked to cultist behavior and to specialist television programming involving classical Hollywood cults. This is how Peary introduces *The Wizard of Oz*:

> I flashed back to the fifties when *The Wizard* entered the lives of us children across America via annual television screenings that we watched religiously year after year after year. Few of us can deny how important to our lives *Wizard* was; its annual TV presentation was as comforting as our birthdays, holidays, a cup of hot chocolate (with a marshmallow), and even the opening day of the baseball season (Peary 1981: 390).

The Halloween period has a special significance for the horror film, as a dedicated release date, but also as a slot for classical Hollywood horror on television (Mathijs 2009). Valentine's Day too has, through *Casablanca*, become a slot with cultist overtones.

The most important seasonal cult is the *yuletide cult*, the avid following for, and ritualized viewing of, a group of classical Hollywood cults broadcast on television during the end-of-year celebrations (Mathijs 2010a). Among the most frequently programmed films are *Holiday*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Meet me in St. Louis*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *Miracle on 34th Street*. These films share an emphasis on family union, intimate song and dance routines, and naive beliefs in love and happiness. They provide mild criticisms of capitalist modes of consumption and distribution. They are also characterized by the prominent presence of children in the story – *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Bishop's Wife* even cast the same child actors. Above all, they transcend cynicism by highlighting maudlin sentiments, feelings of nostalgia for "olden days of yore," as Esther (Garland) puts it in "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

Perhaps more than *Miracle* or *Meet me in St. Louis*, *It's a Wonderful Life* is the quintessential yuletide cult film from classical Hollywood (Figure 17.1). Its message of



Figure 17.1 Championing family and community values over capital gain: the yuletide cult of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

championing family and community values over capital gain and ruthless business is mirrored in its reception trajectory. The film had not been a success when it was originally released. Ever since its copyright lapsed, and it became public domain, it had been cheap for networks to put it on their holiday season schedules. This enabled regional television stations to program the film, and these localized appearances helped solidify the film's reputation as a "small town" favorite, a film that demonstrated the robustness and indispensability of closely knit communities. In larger cities, broadcasts would be supplemented with fervently attended theater screenings (Peary 1981: 162).[3]

Seasonal television re-runs, and occasional theatrical re-releases, add to the already nostalgic-heavy long-term receptions of classical Hollywood cults. Two means through which this added value is expressed are crying and imagining. As with *Miracle*, the long-term receptions of *It's a Wonderful Life* abound with references to weeping and crying. As Peary remarks: "There is no shame in crying while watching *It's a Wonderful Life*, admittedly one of the most sentimental pictures of all time" (Peary 1981: 163). Eric Smoodin (2004: 183–199) details how inmates of the San Quentin prison referred extensively to crying and, indeed, anticipations of crying (being "ready-for-the-river") when discussing a screening of *It's a Wonderful Life* in January 1947. Similar observations, usually of anecdotal nature, can be found in the long-term receptions of *Singin' in the Rain*, *Casablanca*, and *Harvey*. Even more hard-nosed classical Hollywood cults do not seem immune to it. Sue Harper and Vincent Porter (1996)

have argued that crying at the movies, and indeed at certain movies ("weepies") needs to be seen in the context of immediate postwar society, as a mechanism to be understood not just in relation to the film being screened but to the wider cultural atmosphere and its audience's sensitivities. Both Smoodin and Harper and Porter allude to the fact that crying is connected with audiences' re-imaginations of history. What crying at the seasonal re-runs of classical Hollywood cults indicates, then, is the performative – though not less sincere – articulation of nostalgia.

Conclusion

As classical Hollywood cults moved from the theater to television, new cults occupied the slots they left open at inner-city repertory theaters. Even staunchly traditionalist bastions of classical Hollywood reverence, such as cinematheques or film museums, saw themselves gradually open up their schedules to newer cults. When home-viewing media made their entrances, they drew on fringe and niche specialist cults at the expense of classical Hollywood cults. By and large, classical Hollywood cults remained stuck in the television medium. Since 2000, prestige up-market editions of classical Hollywood cult films have propelled a wider availability, but this has not yet led to a systematic revival.

The consequence of this development has been a gradual disappearance of classical Hollywood cults from studies of cult cinema. Peary's first volume of *Cult Movies* (1981) lists 41 classical Hollywood films, out of a total of 100. In his subsequent collections that ratio declined drastically. Umberto Eco's (1986) seminal essay on *Casablanca* was still largely aimed at classical Hollywood cults. A few years later, J. P. Telotte (1991b) balanced discussions of the classical cult film (*Casablanca*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Beat the Devil*) with that of midnight movies. So did Anne Jerslev (1992), who drew equally on *The Big Sleep* and *Pink Flamingos* to argue her case that cult movies are intertextual.

Over the last decade, overviews of cult cinema have tended to further reduce their attention to classical Hollywood cults. Apart from *The Wizard of Oz*, *Casablanca*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Rebel without a Cause*, *The Sound of Music*, and a few others, there remains little or no consensus about classical Hollywood cults among recent studies and overviews of cult cinema. This narrowing of the perspective also affects how some of the themes classical Hollywood cults highlighted, such as gaiety, or nostalgia, are remembered.

As a result, we should perhaps worry for what Svetlana Boym (2001) has called the limited "future of nostalgia." The danger exists that classical Hollywood cults will soon be cast out of considerations of cult cinema altogether. Before long, the current nostalgia *within* classical Hollywood cults may soon be replaced by a longing *for* classical Hollywood cults.

Notes

1. One of the most recent directors of classical Hollywood to receive a European cult following is Edgar Ulmer (Isenberg 2004; Herzogenrath 2009; Rayns 2009). Ulmer's cult status has led to an annual convention, the *Ulmerfest*, in his hometown in the Czech Republic.
2. Probably the most notorious example is one of Cary Grant's outbursts of frustration in *Bringing up Baby* (the film can be seen as one extended pratfall). Forced by circumstances to wear a lady's negligee, he bumps into a respectable, elderly woman who confronts him with the peculiarity of his outfit and asks him why he is wearing these "idiotic clothes." He shouts: "Because I just went gay all of a sudden."
3. When the Pickwick Theatre near Chicago invited one of the child actors to a screening of *It's a Wonderful Life*, 3000 people attended.

18

Cult Horror Cinema

The term "cult" is probably at its most mobile, and in the most danger of being over-used, when it is discussed in relation to the horror genre. As a descriptive or critical category, a historical tradition, or a set of routines, "cult horror" is simultaneously a very slippery concept as well as a site of partisan entrenchment. In this chapter we will try to offer accounts of both, conflicting, positions, by approaching cult horror from three angles: cult horror as a subcategory within the horror genre (i.e. as a label that some horror films receive); cult horror as a specific historical tradition and cultural sensibility with repercussions for both the horror genre and the concept of cult (i.e. as a moment within the history of both cult cinema and horror cinema); and cult as an asset of a number of ways in which viewers have used opportunities created by producers to cultify certain horror films (i.e. as a sort of elevation of the cultural status and value of horror movies).

Cult Horror as a Subgenre of Horror

Approaching cult horror as a subdivision of horror, as a distinction within the genre, creates a big complication, namely that for a lot of vernacular surveys, overviews, and reports, the terms cult and horror are almost synonymous – even if this is not always articulated explicitly. There is a historical aspect to this conflation between cult cinema and the horror genre, that goes back to the early 1920s and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. As we have seen, Potamkin (2008: 27) calls it the "cult film par excellence." Peary (1981: 48) praises it as the "first *horror* film of real, lasting quality." To many, *Caligari* is horror because it is cult and cult because it is horror. The controversies it caused in several markets etched its reputation as a "wretched story" deep into the minds of viewers who felt at odds with mainstream cinema. When surrealist René Crevel wrote on his admiration for *Caligari* in 1927 the phrase "Caligari's madness" had sunk into both cult and horror parlance. (Hammond 2000: 57–58).

Ever since *Caligari*, numerous other conflations have persisted, with the confusing result that sometimes there is no longer a distinction between "horror" and "cult." The conflation is not helped by the fact that academic studies of the effects and impacts of horror films on viewers employ arguments and language that are also used to describe cult audiences – both in negative views (that see these viewers as addicted victims) and in positive ones (that see these viewers as empowered agents). Moreover, hardly ever do such studies appear to offer examples of horror that are not also widely recognized as film cults. A cursory look at web sites, blog sites, and online criticism delivers a plethora of illustrations of the continued presence of this conflation.[1]

If we look at attempts that place cult horror within the genre of horror as a subdivision that does not conflate with the entire genre, two interconnected characteristics appear: cult horror films are bad and break taboos. For Bartlomiej Paszylk (2009), cult horror films are a "genre within a genre," or horror outside the mainstream of horror. Their uneasy fit within formats, failure to provide programmatic pleasure, and lack of easy availability makes them

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cult. Paszylk also notes that cult horror film punishes viewers "by reveling in its own vulgarity or badness" (2009: 1). For Welch Everman too, cult horror films are first and foremost "bad horror films" (1993: 1), which he initially sees as an aesthetic judgment of under-achievement coupled with low production values and small budgets. Yet he immediately adds that some cult horror films are so bad they are good, and that much of the badness lies in how they subvert politics of representation. He thereby moves the focus from the aesthetic quality of the picture to its political position.

Like so many critics and scholars, Everman asserts that most horror films are essentially conservative in their message. Monsters are threats to cultural order and they must be destroyed through extreme means. Cult horror films, however, add subversions, ambiguities, and contradictions so that it becomes unclear whether or not restoration of the order is a good thing, or the ends justify the means, or the film itself is actually siding with its story. Decades after its original release, Siegfried Kracauer used this line of reasoning to attack *Caligari* for its reactionary ideology (Kracauer 1959: 66–67). Although Kracauer's interpretation was later nuanced, it decalibrated the status of *Caligari* for a long time. In his analysis of horror, *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King (1981: 154–230) arrives at the insight that cult horror movies have conflicting political leanings; their politics are not tabloid editorials but rather muddled, confused utterances. Paszylk, Everman, and King devote considerable attention to illustrations of how cult horror films push the boundaries of taste by breaking taboos. For King, they are "a sort of picture that doesn't want to score political points but to scare the hell out of us by crossing certain taboo lines" (King 1981: 156). For Everman, this means that these films are "all kind of offbeat, kind of weird, kind of strange" (Everman 1993: 1). Or even "too weird," as Paszylk remarks (2009: 1).

The focus on breaking taboos is also a central element of other uses of the term cult horror. Such uses most frequently occur in the margins of works on extreme horror cinema. Their appearance in these works illustrates the close affiliation between high degrees of explicit violence, fear, and bodily mutilation and the cult status of a horror film – the more radical a horror film's depictions of bodily harm, and the bigger the taboo it is breaking (or the "weirder" it is), the more likely it is to attract a cultist audience and be labeled cult. A good example is Mikita Brottman's (1997) analysis of "cinema vomitif," which concentrates on extreme horror films that have elicited a visceral reaction from audiences. Although Brottman argues for a distinction between the offensive films she analyzes and "cult bad movies," the way she approaches case studies such as *Freaks*, *Blood Feast*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Cannibal Holocaust* nevertheless positions these films as cults. Similar approaches can be found in David Kerekes and David Slater's (2000) critical overview of "death cinema from mondo to snuff." In fact, the application of superlative adjectives such as "shocking," or "nasty" has become a proxy indication of the cult status of some horror films.[2] Publishing houses such as Creation Books, Headpress, and FAB Press, and fan magazines such as *Fangoria*, *Cinefantastique*, *Ecran fantastique*, and *Gorezone* employ the term cult regularly when discussing taboo-breaking horror.

Cult Horror as a Historical and Cultural Sensibility

A more specific use of the term cult horror refers to one period in the history of horror cinema that has become a cult in itself. This period runs roughly from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s. During this time horror cinema developed such a rabid cult reputation that it caused a radical change in the components that characterize the general term "cult." At the same time, it was a period in which the horror genre as a whole was so visibly prominent within popular culture discourse (yet so reviled) that it almost became a synonym for cult cinema in general. Following Lawrence O'Toole's (1979), this period is often described as the *cult of horror*.

The cult of horror comes out of a sensibility that is strongly linked to the 1960s counterculture. Vilified by reviewers, eschewed by large theaters, and most difficult to distribute, films such as *Carnival of Souls*, *Blood Feast*, *Rape of the Vampire*, and *Night of the Living Dead* appeared in niche markets seemingly out of nowhere. The independent origin of these films, produced in defiance of industry routines and

practices, gave them a flavor of countercultural resistance, which was bolstered through their alignment with campus radicalism and the burgeoning subculture of comic books.

Through the 1970s, this alignment developed into the cult of horror. It was spearheaded by a relatively small cohort of high-profile controversies, in particular those involving *Night of the Living Dead*, *Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Shivers*. Facilitated by increasingly lenient censorship regulations, these films presented themselves as radical, political, and independent-minded. Their horror involved starkly realistic depictions of the detailed, explicit, and abusive violation of bodily integrity – with rape and cannibalism taking a prominent place. One of the most powerful elements of the films spearheading the cult of horror was that literally anyone could become a monster, within an instant, and most characters would at some point become monstrous. This meant that audiences had no recourse for their emotional investments into characters (there were no heroes to save the day), which added a very bleak tone to the films' endings. The stories ceased to be about defending normality (white, middle-class, individualist, capitalist, patriarchic, monogamous, meritocratic society) against an outside threat (often a seductive, egalitarian, hereditary, communal collective, such as a sect, a coven, an orgy, or socialism). Instead, stories emphasized the defense of oneself against a threat within, which often led to sacrificial death or suicide.

As Robin Wood (1979) has remarked, such presentations of violence appeared to claim direct cultural relevance for a generation of viewers that wanted their anxieties about the Vietnam war, civil rights riots, the breakdown of the nuclear family and traditional role models, and the uncertainties caused by the economic crisis, addressed in uncompromising terms. In all their directness these films remained ambiguous – with open endings, undefeated monsters, unresolved trauma, and an overall tone of despair about the possibility of survival in a world gone mad. In addition, much screen time was devoted to building a close attachment to the monster (and its values of unrepressed desire and sexuality), and to showing in precise detail its crimes and destruction. In films such as *Suspiria*, *Day of the Dead*, or *City of the Living Dead* explicit imagery of death and flesh wounds, aided by special effects, emphasized every detail of the violent abuse of the human body, and the literal violation of bodily integrity (the last frontier of humanity) – thus blurring the border between good and evil, man and monster. On top of this, these films added the assumption that the source of evil was directly connected to historical and contemporary forms of waste, such as warfare, pollution, excess, over-consumption, gluttony, and greed – combating the idea of progress. The fact that these films were also rife with references to the legacy of the genre gave them a reach beyond any immediate appeal.

At least as important as their content and style was the way these films found their audiences. Without elaborate publicity campaigns, and distributed outside regular markets, they shocked audiences because they appeared out of nowhere, at matinees, inner city theaters, on the midnight movie circuit, and on college campuses. These sudden receptions provoked reactions from authorities that led to political backlash, bans, and police seizures. Before long, each of these films acquired a huge cult reputation (Peary 1981; Skall 1993: 307–309; Staiger 2000; Heffernan 2004; Mathijs 2003a: 109–126).

These films caused a paradigm shift for both the horror genre and the concept of the cult movie. All of a sudden, *Daughters of Darkness*, *The Blood Splattered Bride*, or *The Wicker Man* were no longer merely exploitation movies, but explorations of modern man's paranoid victimization by a civilization gone berserk. The change led to numerous imitations and a drastic shift in modes of practice towards much more grisly realist and cynical horror with a single-minded investment in mutilating normalcy (Holthof 1980). Above all, it gave horror cultism a pressing purpose and cultural mission, aligning it with counter-cultural dissidence as well as aesthetic vanguardism. By the end of the 1970s, at the time when O'Toole coined the phrase "cult of horror," the change had impacted on all of popular culture. O'Toole argues that North America was "hell-bent for horror," and that the popularity of the scary movie genre reached gigantic proportions: everything from *Halloween*, through *Suspiria*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *The Brood* to *Alien* seemed a big success and also appeared to touch a cultural nerve, especially with younger generations of

avid moviegoers, devouring horror with insatiable appetite. Beyond movies, horror imagery found public release, and wide fandom, through comic books, heavy metal music, punk rock, and literature (Stephen King, Ann Rice). Nor was the change limited to a few countries. American, Italian, Canadian, and French horror may have stood out because of the international distribution of the films of George Romero, John Carpenter, Dario Argento, Lucio Fulci, David Cronenberg, and Jean Rollin, but markets around the world were affected by the new development. O'Toole even connects the cultist adoration for horror with contemporary religious cults (like the Jonestown one, but also underground gatherings of real-life vampires), and threats of real horror (Skylab falling from the sky, industrial pollution, nuclear meltdown, cancer), inferring that they are signs of a society looking for certainties where there are none. For O'Toole, that fear explains much of the appeal of horror *as a cult*. He quotes Romero: "the rationale is, since this is the way we're going why not celebrate it" (quoted in Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 259). O'Toole sees as the cult of horror's main components the emphasis on body horror (the monster comes from inside, or near you), the refusal to provide a comforting ending (either everyone dies or there is a "big question mark"), and the exposition of fanaticism (not just in the portrayal of characters, but also in the relentless drive of horrific events happening on screen – there seem to be no more rest points).

Throughout much of the 1980s, this arrangement of subculture, counter culture and popular culture around horror extended into a veritable cult industry. New production, distribution, and promotion practices, combined with innovative modes of reception, helped establish a worldwide fascination with the horror genre that spawned celebrations of the most diverse kinds. Companies such as New Line Cinema produced wildly successful franchises. New Line first made its name distributing *Pink Flamingos* and *The Hills Have Eyes* across campuses throughout the 1970s, then distributed the splatter cult phenomenon *The Evil Dead*, and finally became "the house that Freddy built" – producing the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise. The rise of video saw specialty labels such as Vipco make horror even more widely available. Many distribution companies started out in video, such as Vestron, which started out by releasing films such as *House on the Edge of the Park* on VHS. Hollywood studios followed suit, financing the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* franchises and bankrolling a score of Stephen King adaptations. There was also a dramatic increase in specialist festivals, such as those of Sitges, Avoriaz, Porto, and Brussels (see Chapter 3). These festivals became instrumental in extending the reach of the cult of horror and giving it a historical grounding through the re-appraisal of older horror films (thus appropriating much of the genre's legacy into the cult, without much distinction in terms of quality, as the newfound cult appeal of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* testifies). Fanzines such as *Fangoria*, *Gorezone*, and *Halls of Horror* became hugely popular, partly as outlets that defended the cult of horror against its detractors (especially policymakers anxious to regulate the video market), but also as platforms on which distinctions within the cult of horror would be explored. Ian Conrich observes how disagreements between fans of monster characters such as Michael Myers (*Halloween*), Freddy Krueger (*Nightmare on Elm Street*) and Jason Voorhees (*Friday the 13th*) would be fought out in the same magazines that promoted the cult of horror, and how this combination of discourses is a sign of the cult-ness of all horror of the time (Conrich 1997, 2000). Similarly, Kate Egan (2007: 106–109) notes how a newcomer fanzine such as *The Dark Side* would place itself and its readers in opposition to other fanzines (such as *Fangoria*), thus establishing what she calls a "reader/editor collective."

Fan publications also promoted interest in aspects of production culture previously under-appreciated. The most important of these was the craft of special effects. Within the cult of horror special effects became the most celebrated production value, a logical consequence of the cult's investment in explicit depictions of injuries and bodily mutilations. Their elaborate effects made films such as *Suspiria*, *Scanners*, *The Beyond* or the remake of *The Thing* objects of cult fascination. Make-up and creature artists such as Tom Savini, Rob Bottin, Dick Smith, or Chris Walas became heroes of the cult of horror (Mathijs 2010c). The cult of horror furthermore extended into areas usually unaffected by cultism, such as academic scholarship. Spurred on by fanzines' aesthetic vanguardism scholars and critics started to bestow auteurist interpretations upon

directors such as Argento, Cronenberg, Craven, or Romero. In 1979, the festival of Toronto was among the first to hold a horror-film retrospective (during which directors debated scholars). Soon, other festivals followed suit. By the middle of the 1980s academic presses were printing scholarly essays and books on the "new horror film" (Grant 1984; Brophy 1986).

By the second half of the 1980s, sequels, remakes, television spin-offs, and highly mannerist exercises in gore began to overshadow the subcultural and countercultural aspects of the cult of horror. Extremely violent and highly intertexual homages such as *Re-Animator*, *Return of the Living Dead* or *The Hitcher* continued to attract cultist receptions, as did attempts to re-radicalize the politics of the cult of horror through films such as *Hellraiser* or *Nekromantik*. But by the beginning of the 1990s the cult of horror had largely dissipated across numerous niches and subgenres, such as zombie horror, voodoo horror, body horror, giallo horror, Euro trash, serial killer and slasher horror, neo-gothic horror and postmodern pastiches of horror, some of which, such as *Edward Scissorhands* and *Man Bites Dog*, would *still* find cult followings.

The impact of the cult of horror continues to skew debates. Its ferocious appropriation of the history of the genre has made it difficult to assess the cultural contexts of cult horror prior to the 1970s. Its long tail of sequels, remakes, pastiches, and re-imaginations has added an emphasis on reflexivity to cult horror discussions (as we will see further on), but also an impression that it is virtually impossible to escape the framework of the cult of horror even after it passed its prime.

Cult Monsters

In between a perspective that sees cult horror as a subgenre engulfing part of the horror genre, and one that sees cult horror as one specific moment in the history of both cultism and the horror genre, lies an angle that attempts to pinpoint modes of operation and reception that the horror genre and cultism share, and which would explain why certain horror films gain cult reputations and some do not. The issue in identifying these modes is less one of aesthetic or cultural analysis, and more one of isolating the uses viewers make of opportunities offered to them by the practices (of films) that give them the chance to identify a film as cult horror. Sometimes, the study of these uses and practices offers only acquaintance-knowledge, but occasionally it offers deep insights in the kinds of processes that equip certain horror films with (degrees of) cult reputations. We will start with uses and practices that are usually more closely associated with the textual properties of films, namely modes of monstrosity, and modes of reflexivity and hybridity, and then move on towards more reception-oriented ones.

One of the defining traits across all instances of cult horror is the attention that fans and critics give to its monsters. Visit any horror fan convention or festival and invariably the monsters achieve most of the attention and praise. Cosplay and costume dress parties accentuate that appeal in very visible ways. There is a lot of mileage in discussing particular instances of representations of monstrosity and the specific cult reputations they achieve separately, especially since over the decades there have been wildly different responses to them, which have often been linked to either specific aesthetic innovations or particular cultural anxieties. Examples of the first instance are the cult appeal of the acting performances of Lon Chaney ("the man of a thousand faces"), whose portrayals of disfiguration and madness in films such as *Phantom of the Opera*, *The Unknown* and *London after Midnight* caused furor (Havis 2008: 6–8), and the cult reputation of a film such as *I Walked with a Zombie* that did not contain a marketable monster, and that was almost void of explicit violence, showcasing instead long, dreamlike and silent passages with lyrical background ambiance rife with sexual suggestion (Havis 2008: 26–28). Examples of the second instance are the cultist adoration for dehumanized creature monsters such as those in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Godzilla* or *Them!* as symbols of social fears and reflections of Cold War anxieties and xenophobia (Hentzi 1993; Jancovich 1996), or the cult appeal for depictions of monstrosity such as those in *Videodrome*, *Man bites Dog*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Ringu*, or *Paranormal Activity* that focus on the complicity of audiovisual media, especially user-friendly video cameras, in determining what exactly constitutes a monster. As Brigid Cherry (2010: 185–199) points out, the marketing of these films via social network media that rely on roughly the

same technologies as the ones on display in the films appears to make the very consumption of these films an accomplice in the processes of representation they are critiquing.

While such monster-specific interpretations certainly help explain specific cult receptions, it is equally useful to look at what holds all of these appeals together, and to investigate which kinds of processes underlie all modes of use and practice involving monsters that lead to assignations of cult for horror films. Generally speaking, there are six kinds of monsters that are regarded as significant in triggering cult reputations: "creatures," "werewolves," vampires," "serial killers," "zombies," and "the media." What all of these share in their monstrosity is that they desire to consume humans. They literally threaten the disintegration of the human body through anthropophagy – the act of being devoured by another human body. As we saw in Chapter 9, it has frequently been argued that such moments of abjection – instances of violent penetration *and* metaphors for sexual penetration – are key to any cult reputation of movies. What we would like to add with regard to their occurrence in horror films is that the way in which the consumption of humans is portrayed by monsters – for instance through the biting of humans by vampires, zombies, or werewolves or the "sliming" of humans by creatures –makes the act of devouring humans the center of attention in the uses and practices that lead to cult horror reputations. It becomes the dominant mode, cue, or clue around which cult status is organized. We noted in Chapter 1 how cult receptions are often arranged around contentious nodes of extrinsic and intrinsic references. "Consumption of humans" is one such node, of overriding importance.

This is most infamously the case with a slate of Italian mondo films that depict or suggest cannibalism quite directly. The most notorious of these is *Anthropophagus*. It features a scene in which a serial killer strangles a pregnant woman, pulls the fetus (actually a skinned rabbit) out of her womb and devours it. The scene landed the film on the "video nasties" list (Egan 2007). It also fueled speculations that the film was a snuff movie. This controversy greatly aided its cult reputation. A number of cannibal-mondo films, such as *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Cannibal Ferox*, have become renowned for their radicalism in special effects (which are unusually convincing for films with such small budgets) (Goodall 2006).

Even in less radical form the trope of consumption of humans tends to dominate modes of practice and use – it simply cannot be pushed to the side of a story without viewers picking up on it and making it the centerpiece of interpretation. The cannibalistic motive in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* overruns several other tropes of violence, disability, and sexual violence in the film, and, as Brottman (1997) shows, in doing so it pushes to the fore an interpretation of the film as a criticism of how industrial modes of production push rural communities out of business and into abjection – an interpretation that even achieves portraying the violent family as victims of progress. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* has become paradigmatic in setting the tone for such interpretations. Similar considerations have also affected the cult receptions of *The Tenderness of the Wolves*, *The Cannibal Man*, and *The Fan*, to give a few examples that demonstrate that this is not a region-specific mode of usage – even if it can be explained as such (Hantke 2005; Mathijs 2006).

A motive that often occurs in connection with the consumption of humans is that of the serial killer. Mark Seltzer (1998) discusses how serial killers negotiate (or fail to negotiate) a "leaky self" through the possession and consumption of humans. In doing so, Seltzer shows how the phenomenon of the serial killer – and the public's fascination with it – needs to be seen in the wider context of the perception of the public sphere as pathological, dominated by the development of impersonal and inhumane "machine violence" unleashed by industrialization. Seltzer notes how serial killers move in the margins of such developments – on the borders of rural and urban centers, dependent on systems such as assembly-line labor, fast-food chains and postal systems that are simultaneously modern and outdated. Brian Jarvis (2007) makes the link between consumption, serial killers, and cannibalism more overtly, and stresses how it affected the ways in which the *Hannibal* films, *Se7en*, and *American Psycho* were read by audiences, and how these readings led to the cultification of these films. In his analysis of German serial killers' American reputation, Steffen Hantke (2005) develops a similar argument. Much of the cult reception of *The Hitcher*, too, focuses on the parallel

between fast food (a burger) and cannibalism (a finger in the burger), both of which it cleverly links to the mutilations of bodies through torture.

Various instances of cult horror demonstrate how uses and practices of the mode of consuming the human body can be widened to include self-consumption, media consumption and capitalist consumption (and even greed), and the parallels between these (Guerrero 1990; Mathijs 2003b; MacKinnon 2005). For some critics such practices and uses amount to tangents and conjectures rather than insights. But the backgrounds of distinction, taste, and connectedness against which these uses and practices operate are instrumental for how cult reputations are arrived at. To put it bluntly, *even* if an interpretation of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* as a metaphor for AIDS would be incorrect epistemologically, the very existence of such interpretations, and indeed their prevalence, is evidence of how discourses surrounding certain horror films are cultified – affected by processes that draw them into connections and link them with beliefs that become true through the very fact that they are made and defended. Such practices and uses have influenced – for instance – interpretations of *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead* (Heffernan 2004; Loudermilk 2003), and helped them achieve cult status. Similarly, they have helped werewolf movies such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* become a cult (Jancovich 1996); and they have aided the cult reputations of vampire films such as *Near Dark* (Powell 1994).

There are numerous complications affecting the mode of the monster's consumption of humans – for instance the degree of humanity a monster is given. Often, monsters are given human-like emotions, or made to look romantic, lonesome, and tragic rather than merely menacing. Such complications can feed or obstruct the processes described above. It is also worth noting that processes pushing a mode of practice and use occasionally wear off, or become hyperbolically reflexive or even parodic. This happened in the wake of films such as *Twilight* and *Shaun of the Dead* and books such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Grahame-Smith 2009). In such instances, however, processes of determining the degree of cult of a horror film move into a different frame of reference, namely reflexivity and/or hybridity.

Reflexivity and Hybridity

A second mode of uses and practices governing the degree of cultism assigned to horror films that we want to single out concerns reflexivity and hybridity – or the self-conscious ways in which horror films that comment upon their own status as horror plays a role in the kind of cult appeal they have.

The point of departure here is that horror films obtain and maintain cult reputations by stretching and bending categories and by alerting audiences that they are doing this. Sometimes it seems such stretching and bending is merely a form of going against expectations. Vampire and werewolf subgenres, for instance, go through cycles of stagnation and innovation, with cult status bestowed upon films interrupting the flow of development – *Rape of the Vampire* and *Ginger Snaps* are two cases in point. It is important to note that the vitality of discourses surrounding these perceptions of interruption is more important to the cult reputations of the films than the degree of accuracy they contain. In other words, there only needs to be a discussion about how and if films are effectively rupturing the flow of development, but that discussion does not require either a resolution or indeed a change in assessment in comparison to prior discussions. Argento and Fulci's films remained associated with the giallo even after they had moved away from it, and their increasingly uneasy relationship with the giallo enhanced their cult status. Similarly, the *Friday the 13th* series remained for many cultists *the* totemic slasher franchise, even after it had started incorporating supernatural elements – and even crossed over into the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise with *Freddy vs. Jason* (Hills 2007). The *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise, on the other hand, increased its cult potential by overloading its sequels *Freddy's Revenge* and *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* with queer subtexts or self-reflexivity (Benshoff 1997: 246–249). Equally, films such as *Snuff*, *Faces of Death*, and *Gimme Shelter* are forever fenced together as "snuff" even if their differences outrank their similarities, and the evasiveness of the very category snuff adds to their cult status.

At the same time as stressing their contested place within microscopic niches, most critics also note the generic hybridity of horror films known as cult.

While conforming to standards of subgenres and factions within the genre the cult horror film also appears to cross over between these subdivisions. This is best illustrated by what Joan Hawkins (2000) calls "art-horror," namely films produced and received as art-cinema *as well as* genre cinema. In many cases, the term art-horror relates to the inability of – mostly non-American – films with features of the horror genre to fit within existing routines of marketing, distribution, and reviewing.[3] Their isolated appearance in the market greatly reduces, and sometimes eliminates, the canvassing functions of these routines, giving audiences "unprepared" and "direct" access to the movies, thereby enhancing their chances of attracting uses and practices that show characteristics of cult receptions. Examples of art-horror go back to the very beginnings of horror. In the immediate wake of *Caligari* several European films with expressionist styles and horrific themes received cult reputations. *Nosferatu: Symphonie des Grauens* and *Häxan* attracted special attention for pushing boundaries in representing the macabre (their characters Dracula and Satan were deemed particularly grotesque), for their explicit sexuality and cruelty, and for their strong suggestions that evil was grounded in nature at large. The surrealists adored *Nosferatu* and *Häxan*. Because each of these films also played fast and loose with their source materials, controversies quickly arose, leading to bans, cuts, and confusions over final versions of the films. This only added to their cult appeal (French and French 1999: 151; Hammond 2000: 154; Stevenson 2006).

Hawkins further isolates film such as *Freaks*, *Eyes without a Face*, and some films by Paul Morrissey and Jess Franco, as key examples of mixes of horror and the avant-garde. *Freaks*, in particular, refused to be pigeonholed. Its seemingly classic story-within-a-story portrayal of a troupe of circus "freaks" enacting revenge upon their bullies caused outrage, inverted so many production standards, and was so politically volatile that it caused a controversy that led to numerous bans, until a rediscovery as a midnight movie at the end of the 1990s. *Freaks* went further than all other horror films of the time (and many years later) by distributing aspects of physical monstrosity across virtually all characters in the film and challenging the audience to decide for themselves if any of the ensuing violence can be justified.

As Kevin Heffernan (2004, 2007) observes, Mario Bava's films *Black Sunday* and *Lisa and the Devil*, and Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* also cross over between various subdivisions of the horror genre. This made it much more of a challenge to market them. It also proved a hurdle for reviewers, who often dismissed them. As a result, these films gave the impression they happened upon audiences, which further aided their cult reputations. A similar hybridity affects the status of films such as *Baise-moi* or *Salò*, which in spite of protest by critics are co-opted into cult horror because of their extreme imagery and taboo-breaking themes. In some instances, this hybridity has been used as a conscious strategy by filmmakers, to help films stand out from the rest of the market. A good example of this is *Daughters of Darkness*, whose cult reputation comes from being repeatedly labeled the most artistic vampire film (Everman 1993: 68–71; Mathijs 2005b).

Cult horror is further known for its extreme relationship to reflexivity, a mechanism associated with hybridity. It has been abundantly argued that reflexivity is a staple characteristic of horror that comes with the high degree of formulaic-ness and genre-mixing found in the genre (Wood 1979; Brophy 1986). In general, a horror film is more likely to be received as cult when it digresses from the contemporary degree of reflexivity. Cult horror is therefore usually either highly reflexive, or has a very low degree of reflexivity. In the latter case the emphasis is instead on the realism or directness of the horror – which amplifies the impression that the film is breaking taboos. It invites receptions of the film as even more shocking. Examples include the early receptions of *Night of the Living Dead* and *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*. These films do include reflexive moments (think of the camcorder scene in *Henry*) but such instances were ignored in receptions that saw the films as shockingly realistic. High reflexivity is often regarded as a key characteristic of sequels, prequels, spoofs, remakes, and franchise features. The quintessential example here is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, whose reflexivity is so recognizable that the film ceases to be seen as horror at all. Other examples include *Return of the Living Dead*, *Man bites Dog*, and *Tesis*. In many cases, discussions about the cult status of a horror film revolve around the degrees of reflexivity that can be attributed to it, at various points during the

reception trajectory of the film. Janet Staiger found, for instance, that many of her students viewed *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as a highly reflexive film, even treating it as homage to *Psycho*, whereas earlier receptions had treated it as a misogynist and insensitive critique of changing labor relations in rural America. As Staiger concludes, both receptions are not in opposition with each other. Instead, they typify the cult status of *Chainsaw*'s status, with the reflexivity acting as a *mediator* of the initially strongly received offensiveness of the movie (Staiger 2000: 179–187).

Reflexivity is applied in cult horror films in two major ways: as a framing of the narrative as a story-within-a-story, and as the presence of media reflecting on media. Examples of the first, which found its ways into the horror genre from *Caligari*, include *Freaks*, *Snuff*, and *Cannibal Holocaust*. Early examples of reflexivity through the presence of media include the film crew in *King Kong*, and a late-night bill of cheap movies in *The Blob* (Kawin 1992: 247–253; French and French 1999: 36). Frequently, cult horror films combine framing with media reflexivity. A good example of an in-depth exploration of this combination is *Videodrome*. Its cult reputation is largely dependent upon its reception as a treatise on reflexivity and media (Lucas 2008). At its broadest, reflexivity features the use of clichéd characters or the use of cameo roles, such as Barbara Steele in *Piranha* or *Shivers*. At its most specific – and most challenging – it features the use of objects planted for detection by committed fans. Masks and chainsaws are among the most totemic props.

Cult Horror Receptions

In conclusion we will look at some of the reception uses and practices that govern the labeling of horror films as cult. As the above discussions demonstrate, the role of the audience in determining the cult status of horror films is high, even in efforts that only want to consider cult horror through its textual properties.

Above all, cult horror receptions are noisy. The release of horror movies that go on to develop cult appeal is often met with outrage and controversies, be it for their crude depictions of monstrosity or their threatening, absurdist, or nihilist atmospheres. This has been the case from *Caligari* over *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to *Ichi the Killer* (Budd 1990; Peary 1981; Mes 2004). Such aversion is in no small way helped by the fact that horror cinema in general remains reviled by moral majorities, eschewed by policymakers, and dismissed by critics. Partly in reaction to this, fans' appreciations of horror have become more exclamatory and superlative. There is a historical distinction here that needs to be addressed. Until the 1970s, this procedure of adversity, often followed by rallies to a film's defense, was a major mechanism through which horror films achieved cult status. It gave fans the chance to proliferate themselves as a subculture, with its own taste formations and canons independent of the impositions of mainstream culture. With the acceleration that became known as the "cult of horror" in the 1970s and 1980s, however, and in the wake of the far-reaching controversy over video nasties (see Egan 2007), these reactions and subversive attitudes became so entrenched that they led to a systematized cultism that no longer existed uniquely in a playful opposition to mainstream culture, but that also acted as a counter culture that held up a mirror to hypocrisies in society – especially those regarding moral panics, gender struggles, and xenophobic fears. The economic viability of the cult of horror also meant cultist appreciation of horror could function on itself, separate from the mainstream, which it did not need anymore. Before long, however, the same mechanisms that had once separated cult horror from mainstream horror were being replicated *within* the cult of horror, with subgenres and subdivisions pitched against each other as much as in reaction to objections and moral panics from outside horror culture. To some extent this means that cult horror receptions mimic receptions of genre, and that issues of "purity" and distinctions between "hardcore" and "pseudo" fans – distinctions between center and periphery in other words – continue to be performed on the smallest possible levels of mirco-cultism. The loud rhetoric used by fans to separate "gore" and splatter from each other is a good indication.

Secondly, and as a consequence, cult horror receptions refuse to disappear. After their initial noisy receptions, subsequent generations of fans reassess and celebrate the cult status, either by highlighting its formal qualities in defense of any reactionary criticisms, or by isolating newly found subtexts with

political and cultural significance. The fact that cult receptions remain volatile for long periods of time aids such re-evaluations. Re-releases for niche markets and retrospectives at festivals accompany them. For instance, around the time when the midnight movie phenomenon started gaining momentum thanks to *Night of the Living Dead*, *Freaks* and *Häxan* were also being re-released. About a decade later, New Line Cinema, which had its finger on the pulse of campus cults, captured the rights to redistributing *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, exactly at a time when these films were being recognized as inspirations for the cult of horror.

The endurance of cult horror's receptions ultimately enables canonization, and the referencing of these films' iconography as homage in newer horror films. Again, it was at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s that significant accelerations in this process occurred. The popularity of horror in the burgeoning video market, but also the birth of numerous horror festivals, helped establish mechanisms for continued reassessment that immortalized numerous cult horror films. Television, too, helped a great deal to sustain cult reputations. Decades after their initial releases many of the 1950s creature movies saw their cult status reinforced as a result of late-night cable television programming. For American audiences, the show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (or MST3K) became instrumental in resurrecting horror exploitation from the vaults and reintroducing it to new generations of fans. MST3K hosts provided voice-over commentaries of the films, mocking them for their badness while praising their audacity. Before long, "MST3K" became a marker for the cult reputations of 1950s and 1960s exploitation horror.

Thirdly, horror cultism is very recognizable, because of the steadfastness of its symbols, and the visibility this gives to its fandom. Cult monsters, an important set of symbols, are instantly identifiable. Vampires, werewolves, mad doctors, phantoms, zombies, serial killers, giant bugs, and knife, razorblade, and chainsaw wielding maniacs like Freddy, Jason, Michael Myers, and Leatherface have spearheaded an array of monster designs easily marked by a small number of defining accessories such as fangs, fur, or masks. In other words, there are fixed templates for most cult horror monsters, most of which received a set identity – and matching talents and looks – before the 1960s. These templates have also given cult horror fandom a high visibility, not only in illustrations in fanzines but also at conventions, festivals, fan gatherings, or rereleases, where costumes, accessories, and paraphernalia mimicking favored monsters are celebrated through dress-up contests and vampire balls (Van Extergem 2004; Hills 2010b), and even within popular culture in general, where these monsters and their iconography have received shorthand recognition (if not always respectability). In general, cult receptions are more strongly associated with horror films that have established templates for monsters (the original *Frankenstein*), or that have deviated ostensibly from such templates (*I Walked with a Zombie*, or *The Bride of Frankenstein*, especially in its representation of "the bride"). Once more, the period of the cult of horror changed the parameters of this recognizability, as horror films that took chances in renewing the iconography became attractors for cult appreciation (Nakahara 2010). Films such as *Martin* and *The Brood* owe a great deal of their cult reputation to the ambiguity that was the result of blurring representations of monstrosity with realistic features. This left the original Universal horror films with the respectful status of "elders of the tribe" – a respect that is neatly illustrated by the enduring appeal of the label "Universal horror," an admiration for the original actors (Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, Elsa Lanchester), and an absolute reverence for "original Frankenstein" or "original Dracula" dresses at costumed galas at festival and conventions (Van Extergem 2004). Ironically, the enduring cult reputation of the original monsters had the effect that many of the films in which they appeared are now excluded from cult horror overviews, often with the excuse they are too popular.

Finally, horror cultism has a distinct ritual quality – a tradition of repetitiveness that has clichés eagerly anticipated and loudly cheered, but that also has a distinct thrill of "newness." This is exemplified in cultist reception traditions such as the "initiation viewing" experience, "sleepover scary movie" traditions, and "midnight" events. The cult status of films such as *Last House on the Left*, *I Spit on your Grave*, *Cannibal Holocaust*, *The Evil Dead*, and *Ringu* depends on the sustained re-establishment of such instances across generations of horror viewers. This repetitiveness has

led researchers and policymakers to express concern over the effects of repeatedly watching horror. Rape-revenge movies and mondo films in particular have consistently been under scrutiny for allegedly promoting misogyny, misanthropy, and violence. So have films whose viewing has been associated with violent crimes (such as *Child's Play III*) (Hill 1997; Goodall 2006; Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 371–372). In his overview of horror theories, Matt Hills (2005) challenges this form of criticism profoundly. Andrew Tudor (1989: 212) argues that to blame horror films for violence in society would be "pernicious scapegoating, since . . . we simply do not live in a world in which discrete cultural experiences have dramatic measurable effects. We live, rather, in elaborate interlocking systems, the elements of which are in constant interaction." The latter part of Tudor's reasoning stresses exactly the function repetition has played in cult horror. The repetitiveness of its receptions has enhanced the recognizability and, therefore, cultural sedimentation and canonization of sub- and countercultural viewing strategies of cult horror into near-mainstream practices, perpetually enhancing opportunities for an enduring visibility of cult horror. A good example of this is the cross-generational passing on of the cult of horror. As the editors of *Cineaste* put it in 2009: "The illicit thrill of the macabre unites the generations weaned on *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine and pre-cable telecasts of the legendary Universal pictures of the Thirties with the generation that grew up on *Fangoria* and DVDs of Michael, Jason, and Freddy" (*Cineaste* 2009: 1). Through mechanisms associated with repetition, cult horror amplifies both the potential for desensitizing effects and the ability to take charge of complicated networks of meaning across generations.

Notes

1. The fast-changing nature of many of these sites and online presences makes it difficult to single out examples, but here are a few: monstersatplay.com (accessed July 26, 2010), the online debate on cult horror movies hosted at helium.com (accessed July 26, 2010).
2. See, for instance, books by Curci (1996), Schoell (1985), Godin (1994), and Balun (1992).
3. We acknowledge there is a competing use of the term art-horror, as proposed by Noel Carroll (1990). Because Carroll's discussion of art-horror refers exclusively to textual properties and is geared more towards a systematic understanding of the aesthetics of horror, we do not include it in our debate here.

19

Cult Science Fiction Cinema

Along with the horror film, science fiction cinema is a genre that has often been closely connected to cult cinema. Rather than delve too deeply into the quite complex issues related to definitions of the science fiction film, we will here include films that have largely been received as science fiction texts (although it is not always the case that films are categorized within one particular generic framework). We will nevertheless emphasize a few important traits that have distinguished science fiction as a distinctive genre before moving on to more specifically cult-related issues. Science fiction is commonly associated with speculative fiction based around current scientific theories and/or technologies; it is concerned with themes including space exploration, time travel, alien encounters, and humans' relationships with machines. It can also be concerned with questions about what it is to be human (Telotte 1995) or attempts to reconcile man with the unknown (Sobchack 2001: 63).

The first part of this chapter will also treat fantasy as a related genre, especially with regard to the public presence of both science fiction and fantasy. Even though fantasy has sometimes been distinguished from science fiction in the sense that the former deals with impossible worlds while the latter deals with possible worlds (Grant 1999: 17), they nevertheless share a number of overlaps, not just on a textual level (their status as speculative fiction) but also on the broader cultural level (many awards ceremonies, festivals, and fan conventions will cover science fiction and fantasy). We will further address some of the other elements of fantasy in Chapter 20, when we analyze the story worlds of blockbusters.

Dedicated Followers

Science fiction and fantasy have become heavily associated with dedicated followings by a number of fans, perhaps more so than any other genre (with the possible exception of horror). While fandom in general is covered in Chapter 5 (with references to *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*), it is necessary to add some details of the relation between science fiction and fandom here. While our focus is on cult film, science fiction is nevertheless a genre that has given rise to fandom across other media platforms, including fiction, comic art, gaming, and television, and these sometimes overlap. Joe Sanders has noted that English-language science fiction fans had organized into communities by the 1930s, creating networks with their own publications, social norms and vocabularies (cited in Karpovich 2007: 7). Publishing ventures among science fiction fans led to the development of a number of fanzines, and then to the establishment of conventions, both of which emerged in the 1930s (Hansen 1994; Bacon-Smith 2000: 12). Today a large number of science fiction conventions exist, including those that address the genre across different media (such as the *Worldcon*, which started as a literary convention but has broadened to encompass other media), or those that are based around a particular media platform (such as the network of European Fantastic Film Festivals discussed in Chapter 3). There are also those which address a specific title, such as *Star Wars* conventions (e.g. *Star Wars Celebration Europe*), and some revolving around a particular segment of science fiction fandom

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(such as *Wiscon*, a festival devoted to feminist issues within the genre).

Conventions and fanzines have long provided visible manifestations of science fiction fandom: the former in allowing fans from different areas to convene in a common location to attend events and converse, the latter in providing a platform for fan expression and knowledge (see Chapters 4 and 5). The large amount of fanzines related to science fiction have been supplemented by a number of more "professional" magazines, whose market presence also testifies to a dedicated fan base wanting to gain information and opinion related to the genre. Fanzines have been produced regularly within the science fiction community and have often included content such as articles, reviews, fan art and letters. In their dissemination of knowledge and opinion they have demonstrated a passionate commitment to the expression and sharing of expertise. As Michelle Pierson has argued in discussing the fanzine *Photon* (devoted to the "fantastic" film and running between 1963–1977): "Cultures of connoisseurship and fandom cultivate an attentional complex in which it not only becomes important to 'pay attention' at the movies but also to attend to discussion and evaluation after the fact" (Pearson 2002: 71–72). The sense in which many science fiction and fantasy fans have not only treated cultural objects with avid seriousness, but have done so within a generic area that has traditionally been held in low esteem by the critical establishment, has heightened the cult aura sometimes attached to this broad and loose community. As Tulloch and Jenkins have pointed out, science fiction fans have often been "pathologized" within mainstream media and the academy (1995: 10–18). This can lead to the strengthening of bonds between like-minded fans, though this should not disguise the fact that many subgroups exist within the science fiction fan community.

One important area in which science fiction (SF) cinema has gained close fan scrutiny is the field of special effects. Within formal critical circles special effects have often been dismissed or overlooked as filmic moments less central than more conventional critical topics such as narrative, drama, and character development. Within serious SF and fantasy publications, such as *Photon* and *Cinefantastique* (1967–2006), however, there developed a close analysis and appreciation of special effects work. Out of this, visual effects creators could gain a reputation; one of the most prominent in the history of science fiction and fantasy cinema has been Ray Harryhausen, who even had a fanzine devoted to him (*FHX*, which ran for four issues between 1971 and 1974). Other notable effects creators who have contributed distinctive work to SF films include Dennis Muren (who co-directed monster movie *Equinox* before supervising the miniature special effects for *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park*), John Dykstra (who worked most notably on *Star Wars*), Douglas Trumbull (*2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) and Stan Winston (*Aliens*, *Predator*). Much of the close scrutiny of visual effects among segments of fan communities would eventually feed into an increasing tendency (both within academia and, to a lesser extent, among critics) to treat special effects work as a serious aesthetic realm in its own right. Such attention has grown in tandem with both the movement of SF cinema towards a more central position within mainstream cinema production, and an increasing respectability for the genre (which still, nevertheless, sometimes carries with it the taint of disreputability).

Even as science fiction filmmaking has become a more prominent staple of mainstream cinema since the 1980s, fans can still play a crucial role in maintaining a cult following by distinguishing their understanding and appreciation of the text from those more "mainstream" elements which tend to be associated with consumerism and which are perceived as catering to a more general audience. As Nathan Hunt has argued in analyzing the reception of *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* within the fan-oriented magazine *SFX*, fans could create ownership of the film "through supposedly superior textual and extra textual knowledge of the film, and this ownership was itself used to distinguish the magazine's appreciation of the film from that of mainstream publications" (Hunt 2003: 190–191). A text can thus become the site of both mainstream success and enjoyment, yet still retain a cult following through a more particular following by fans utilizing trivia and connoisseurship to distinguish their appreciation from more "general" pleasures. On a more obvious level, some SF films can accrue cult value through a clear identity outside of the mainstream in terms of their budget and box office, by gaining smaller

followings from people who may claim that such films offer greater intellectual and/or emotional rewards than their mainstream generic counterparts.

One particular field in which fans have been able to proudly proclaim their obsessive knowledge and expertise is in relation to Japanese *anime* science fiction, which has gained particular cult followings in America and Europe. Anime in general has given rise to large numbers of specialist clubs, fanzines and networks devoted to the mode, with many fans trading information and materials. Science fiction anime films are a particularly significant component of this mode of production. *Akira* generated a particular cult following and triggered an international fan base for the medium, despite the fact that it was a commercial flop on its original release in Japan. *Ghost in the Shell* is another notable cult sci-fi anime entry, a cyberpunk adaptation of Masamune Shirow's manga which also spawned a sequel with a cult reputation, *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (for more on anime and its fans see Chapter 11).

The possession of expertise and the participation in fan-based activities can also extend to the production of "fan art," which includes fiction, paintings, songs, and other related creative artifacts. Of particular importance to this chapter is the increase in fan films, which often use favored texts as springboards from which to spin new fictions. These films are very much cult-flavored in that they are not only (often) expressions of love for a particular film, but are also made for a like-minded community. Fan films, which according to Gwenllian Jones have existed since the early 1970s, tend to be shown at private gatherings, conventions and, more recently, online (2002: 169). Online distribution of fan films – in line with the increased access to film production via relatively affordable digital filmmaking tools – has increased the previously limited networks by which such films gained exposure. Henry Jenkins (2003) has argued that the Web "has made it possible for alternative media productions of all kinds to gain greater visibility and to move beyond localized publics into much broader circulation." While online fan films remain largely seen by other fans, some can cross over to a broader audience through the buzz surrounding them on the Web. Films that do this are cults not merely in their relation to a source text (or texts) and dissemination amongst a community, but also through gaining their own cult followings as "small" films that gain enthusiastic audiences principally via word-of-mouth. Two particularly notable fan films that have achieved this status are the *Star Wars* fan films *Troops* and *George Lucas in Love*. Both films employ intertextuality in order to create parodic effects: *Troops* mixes *Star Wars* with references to the television documentary *Cops* in order to create "an ironic explanation for events that remain enigmatic in the original film" (Brooker 2002: 185), while *George Lucas in Love* mixes parts of Lucas's biographical history with *Shakespeare in Love* in humorously speculating on the creative origins of *Star Wars*. The success of both films led to Kevin Rubio and Joe Nussbaum entering the industry and working in a "professional" capacity, a process that, according to Will Brooker, many fans aspire to, thereby conceiving of their films as "calling cards and potential springboards to careers in the movie industry" (Brooker 2002: 175). Thus, although the science fiction community constitutes the core audience for such films, this community is never hermetically sealed from the broader culture and can feed into it in important ways. A mainstream film such as *Galaxy Quest* takes the fan adoration for science fiction as the core point of its narrative – with *Alien*'s Sigourney Weaver reprising her role as the strong female astronaut (a role she also resumes in *Avatar*).

Pulp Fictions

While many science fiction films were made previous to the 1950s, their actual status as science fiction is sometimes debatable as they would not have been termed as such at the time; thus Christine Cornea labels such pre-1950s films "proto science fiction" (2007: 9). The 1950s witnessed the first real "boom" in SF film production, particularly in the United States, where it tended to have a reputation as a "lowbrow" genre. Many such productions were low-budget pictures, though there were exceptions to this: medium and larger budgeted science fiction pictures – such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *The War of the Worlds*, and *Forbidden Planet* – were produced by the studios, for example. On the main, however, such productions were generally expensive risks for the studios. Low-budget science fiction pictures, alongside horror pictures, could often count on an eager teenage

audience and proved a more reliable source of revenue (Doherty 2002: 118–119). It is because this first sustained wave of science fiction films was generally associated with negative qualities – low budgets, cheap sets and effects work, wooden acting – that a number of films which emerged from it have come to be loved as cult objects. Much of the cult attachment to these films, then, is connected to celebration of enjoyably "bad" films, a phenomenon which is covered more fully in Chapters 3 and 8.

Enjoying "bad" science fiction films from the 1950s can be attributed to a number of factors. Obviously, the idea of celebrating marginal products condemned by the mainstream may well be one crucial factor: it is, for example, common for such films to be celebrated in a generally condescending manner, as texts that can be laughed at as opposed to culturally "worthy" objects (though there will be exceptions to this). Other factors may include the gulf between reality and fantasy that feeds into these films in particularly marked ways. A number of science fiction texts can be seen to revolve around a fantasy/reality axis, but in many of the cheap SF films of the 1950s this tension becomes overtly evident: it is inscribed upon the product not just on the level of content, but also economically. That is, attempts to create an audiovisual world of the imagination conflict with the financial realities of production, and in many films this gap between practical reality and imaginary fantasy is emphatically underscored by, in particular, cheap mise-en-scène and effects work. Hence the cult affection for films such as *The Giant Claw*, the Sam Katzman production in which a giant alien bird is realized through a rather clumsily controlled puppet; or for the now infamous *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, which marries its low-budget with emphatic incompetence, and by doing so has provided ironic pleasure for many. The affection for such low-budget SF fare may also be related to nostalgia: for a period when imagining the future was more quaint and innocent, or before science fiction had fully entered the mainstream and turned sophisticated and serious.

Both the above films' cult status is heightened by their relation to auteur figures (see Chapter 6), even if Ed Wood and Sam Katzman have gained a status for their incompetence and opportunism more than for their artistry as such. Other auteur figures can help to raise the profile of cheap SF films through being centrally involved in their productions. Roger Corman is one of the most notable examples here, helping to elevate the status of films such as *Day the World Ended* and *Attack of the Crab Monsters*. In the 1960s, however, Corman began to produce and direct slightly more ambitious movies that, while still modestly budgeted, gained more respect as serious works. Thus, in 1963 he made the acclaimed *X: The Man with the X-ray Eyes*, which starred Ray Milland as a scientist whose experiments led him to see through objects. Later, in 1975, he produced the cult SF satire *Death Race 2000*, which revolves around a race in which drivers run over pedestrians in order to gain points. Edgar G. Ulmer is another B-movie "auteur" who is judged to have created some distinctive films despite the rather paltry budgets he often worked with. Though more noted for his horror film *The Black Cat* and, in particular, his bare-budget noir *Detour*, he also produced a number of science fiction films including *The Man from Planet X*, *The Amazing Transparent Man*, and *Beyond the Time Barrier*. Unlike a figure such as Wood, both Corman and Ulmer have often been judged talented creative figures, particularly when the budgets of their films are taken into account. Thus, while Ulmer's science fiction films are not typically heralded as great works, moments from them can be extracted by critics and presented as evidence of his talent, which manages to make itself felt even when handling the most hackneyed material. For example, Erik Ulman writes of *Beyond the Time Barrier*:

> Ulmer uses the insistent triangles and inverted pyramids of the interior of Texas State Fairgrounds to invent consistently interesting compositions and environments. In addition, Allison's arrival at the ruined base is beautifully shot, and its genuine desolation creates an interesting contrast with the unreality of Allison's first view of the citadel. (Ulman 2003)

There are other low-budget SF films from this period that have gained a more canonic place within film culture but which nevertheless assumed such a position through first gaining attention in more cultish circles. One particularly notable example is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which began life as a drive-in movie and became, in the words of Michael Sragow, "one of

those tribal teenage totems . . . that got passed from town to town through pop cultural osmosis" (2008: 75). From such humble beginnings the film became an important entry into science fiction cinema, its status elevated in line with Siegel's subsequent auteur credentials and three remakes that are often unfavorably compared to the more modestly budgeted 1956 version (Philip Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Abel Ferrara's *Body Snatchers*, and Oliver Hirschbiegel's *The Invasion*).

Siegel's film concerns the story of human beings being replaced by aliens, who assume the outward appearance of the bodies they have colonized. It has been interpreted both as an anti-Communist parable *and* as a text critical of the red scare mentality pervasive during the Cold War climate when it was both produced and initially released. These "contradictory" interpretations are an important reason why the film gained cult status (Peary 1981: 157) and they point to how significant social events can often produce interpretive frameworks by which films are valued and contested. It is also the case that there is an ambiguity at the heart of the film: a textual indeterminacy that aids fan speculation and can be considered a contributory factor to its cult status. In addition to it being read as a Cold War parable, it can also open out to more general speculation that is not so rooted in a particular historical context. The themes of paranoia and conformism which run through the film, for example, can relate to a number of fears that individuals experience within variable social contexts, and these have arguably become more relevant in contemporary social life.

Science Fiction Spaces

One particular appeal of SF films is the creation of detailed environments that are strikingly different from those that we experience in our daily lives. As Vivian Sobchack has argued, science fiction enjoys "particular representational freedom as a genre of the fantastic" and "concretely 'real-izes' the imaginary and speculative in the visible spectacle of a concrete image" (1999: 124). The creation of imaginary spaces can lead to cultic followings through inducing a sense of wonder and leading to subsequent investigations of such spaces through re-readings, in which the detailed mise-en-scène excites "reflection or speculation about the diegetic reality and the text's underlying ideas" (Britton 2009: 344). As Matt Hills has written in relation to the cult response to *Blade Runner*: "Its hyperdetail also textually incites a desire to see more – to identify the mass of design objects jumbled within the frame; to catalogue and comprehend special effects sequences" (Hills 2011). The "hyperdetailed" worlds created by particular science fiction films may therefore engender a push-and-pull between being awed and overwhelmed by the audiovisual spectacle, and a mastering of that world in order to better understand how its magic is materially produced (Figure 19.1).



Figure 19.1 The "hyperdetailed" world of *Blade Runner*.

The dystopian space of the future is one of the most important types of alternative world-making within science fiction films, and characterizes a number of cult films emerging from the genre. One particular type of dystopian city is the "dark city," as outlined by Janet Staiger (1999), which characterizes a strain of science fiction filmmaking that intersects with film noir. Staiger argues that such films are also marked by a sense of postmodern conflation – that is, they incorporate motifs relating to the past, the present and the future – and decay (1999: 100). Perhaps most importantly, she notes that the darkness and generally chaotic design of many such filmic environments "permit labyrinthine cities where only overhead schematics provide a sense of orientation" (1999: 100), a point that relates to the idea of a "hyperdetailed" world. Further, Staiger also notes that science fiction films using dark cities are often critical of consumerist lifestyles: space in many such films is often presented as commodified (littered with advertising boards and screens, and corporate logos). Such broad social commentary may

also contribute to the cult status of some of these films, in that cult cinema has often (though not always) been connected to anti-establishment themes and appeals. Three films featuring "dark cities," which have also gained a substantial cult following are the aforementioned *Blade Runner*, *Brazil*, and *Dark City*. *Brazil* is set in a futuristic (or possibly alternate), Orwellian universe marked by clunky technology and a complex bureaucratic structure which leads to general chaos and inefficiency. Its status as a cult film was very much heightened by the tussles Gilliam had with Universal over its decision to release a truncated and lighter version of the film in the United States, and this was further heightened by a five-disc Criterion laserdisc release of the film, which featured two versions, documentaries and a host of other material (this was subsequently released on DVD). *Dark City* features a world that cannot be fully grasped because it is subject to alteration by a group of beings called The Strangers. The Strangers not only alter the environment, they also control the lives of the inhabitants of a city that is always dark because people fall unconscious during daytime. *Dark City* was also a film that suffered cuts and, partly in response to its cult following, was subsequently released on DVD in a "director's cut" version.

Many dystopian, hyperdetailed SF films have been linked by critics and commentators to *Metropolis*, a film that has gained a cult status for its seminal position within the history of science fiction cinema, and which could be considered a "canonical" cult film. While it has enjoyed a prestigious position within cinema as a whole (not just within the science fiction genre), it has accrued added cultic values through the following means: as a film that is often referenced within a large number of texts including films, television programs and music videos (in addition to its numerous mentions within reviews); as a film which many science fiction/fantasy followers feel the need to refer to and watch as a crucially important part of their generic heritage; and as an "incomplete" film that exists in a number of different versions. The version of the film which premiered in Berlin was considered too long and so edits were subsequently made for its theatrical release. Different versions have since proliferated, but more recently new footage was discovered in an archive in Argentina, leading to a restoration project and the creation of what many excited film buffs are anticipating as the "definitive" version. The film's mise-en-scène, in particular its effects work and architectural designs, continues to fascinate numerous viewers and filmmakers to this day and is undoubtedly a crucial factor that has led to its cult position.

For Sobchack, science fiction films can not only visualize the impossible or the speculative, they can also envisage things that exist yet which are beyond the confines of normal vision, such as elements that are too small or too distant:

> The SF film gives us images – even if manufactured – of the immense and the infinitesimal. Extrapolating from known and accepted science, these film images derive their power to induce wonder in the viewer not from the imaginativeness of their content, but from the imaginativeness of their stance and their scope. (Sobchack, 1999: 101)

The creation of such imaginative worlds can produce films which do indeed "induce wonder" in particular viewers, sometimes leading to repeat viewings and a desire to find out more about how these films were created. One such film is *Fantastic Voyage*, in which a team of specialists are shrunk in order to enter a scientist's brain and perform an operation. The film creates a speculative environment of an enlarged brain, through which characters have to navigate. This inner geography was created through miniatures, wirework, and light displays; the latter drew from the psychedelic light shows gaining popularity within countercultural environments and which were used in clubs and rock concerts.

An interesting cult film which provides a speculative insight into what could possibly lie beyond the confines of normal human vision is John Carpenter's *They Live*. In this film, construction worker George Nada (Roddy Piper) finds a box of sunglasses and, after taking a pair, finds that they enable him to see the world in new ways: subliminal messages on magazines and billboards are revealed (such as "obey," "consume," "marry and reproduce"), while he is also able to detect that a number of human beings are actually aliens in disguise. *They Live* also, crucially, provides a very blunt anti-consumerist, anti-authoritarian message which is a

frequent theme across a number of cult SF texts. Made in reaction to the Reagan administration that was in power at the time of production, the film allegorizes the conformist, consumer-driven ideology of Reaganism as an alien invasion which has succeeded through subliminal brainwashing techniques.

Other cult SF films notable for their creation of virtual spaces include *Tron*, which takes place inside of a video game and *eXistenZ*, which takes place within a virtual reality (VR) environment. *Tron*, though a flop at the time, has since become appreciated within specialist circles for its imaginative visual look but was considered too unusual at the time of release to be embraced by large audiences; while *eXistenZ* can be considered cult because of its director's broader cult standing.

Art/Independent Science Fiction

While we have mentioned how the low status of science fiction has often strengthened its cult pedigree, there are also a number of more serious and/or respected films that have been made within the genre "Art" films and/or films emerging from the low-budget, independent production sphere that may also gain cult status through various means. One such appeal, outlined by Cornea (2007: 74–102), is an appeal to countercultural sensibilities. She claims a cycle of "new art" science fiction films emerged in the wake of the success of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and that many of these films were influenced by a new wave of science fiction literature (including Michael Moorcock and J.G. Ballard). *2001* itself, while including a journey to outer space, also concerned the effects of such a journey upon consciousness, including experiential time-space disruptions, the inclusion of abstract effects, and ambiguous moments that led to a number of speculative interpretations. The film adhered more closely to conventions associated with "art house" cinema – such as its slow pace and its refusal to arrive at any neat conclusions – than it did to mainstream cinema, even though it was produced by a major studio on a significant budget. Kubrick is a director who has been recognized as creating an authorial art cinema from within the studios and this has enhanced his cult reputation. Two other SF films he made can also be considered cult films: *Dr Strangelove or: How I Stop Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* and *A Clockwork Orange*. The former transformed Peter George's novel *Red Alert* (1958) into a satirical romp and was embraced, in particular, by college audiences who enjoyed its absurd critique of Cold War politics. *A Clockwork Orange*'s cult value was heightened by its withdrawal from circulation in the UK by Kubrick himself, following reports of copycat violence in relation to the film. It could only be seen through illegal screenings and, later, through pirated video cassettes; it only became legally available in the UK for public viewing in 2000.

Another noteworthy cult SF art film released in the 1970s was Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, which starred David Bowie as an alien (Thomas Jerome Newton) visiting earth to set up a corporation so that he can fund the building of a rocket ship which can distribute water back to his drought-ridden planet. This story, however, increasingly fades into the background of a film which is more concerned with examining the mutual interactions between the alien and a few human characters. It is, as Justin Smith has written, an "example of an oblique, unorthodox take on the sci-fi genre" (2010: 146). The rather elliptical narrative and perplexing temporal transitions led to some critics dismissing the film when it was initially released, yet it has grown in status with age and through repeated viewings. The film's puzzle-like narrative and its lingering, poetic images fused with a consumerist critique in showing Newton's quest being undercut through succumbing to human vices such as alcoholism and media-addiction, the latter memorably visualized by a wall of TVs with which he surrounds himself. The cult status of the film is also enhanced by the inclusion of David Bowie, who appears in a role that gelled with his public persona at the time: an otherworldly and enigmatic presence.

A later film which shared *The Man Who Fell to Earth*'s focus on a human-looking alien attempting to adapt to life on earth is *The Brother from another Planet*. The alien, known as "Brother" (Joe Morton) is, like Newton, subject to the projections of the humans that he encounters in the film. As he is also mute, his identity is being constantly constructed by others throughout the film. As the film is set in Ellis Island – the official gateway for immigrants arriving in New York harbor

between 1892 and 1954 – and includes a multiracial cast of characters, it uses a science fiction framework to explore racial issues overtly. The Brother himself is black *and* an escaped slave (although it is established that there is no actual differentiation between skin colors on his native planet). The film has been embraced by many as an example of "Afrofuturism," the fictional blending of SF and the addressing of racial issues from an African-American perspective. Such interest has grown in order to counter the largely white nature of the majority of science fiction texts in the past. Another cult film which has been hailed as an example of Afrofuturism is *Space Is the Place*, a cheap film which was based around the world-views of, and also starred, the colorful and uncompromising jazz musician Sun Ra.

The Brother from another Planet is also notable for its rather unremarkable mise-en-scène: it is not a film that creates an elaborate spatial universe. Instead, the film uses recognizable and "realistic" settings and distinguishes itself as science-fiction through occasional, and often low-tech, special effects (the spaceship landing at the beginning, the Brother taking his eye out in order to use it as a monitor) and the presentation of other significant narrative information. A number of other films which include what could be termed "mundane" settings are also commonly identified as cult films. Often the mundane nature of the sets within such films is connected to budgetary restraints, which is also why they will often feature effects work only occasionally, if at all. Yet mundane sets can also play an important part within the film as a whole. Thus, in Jean-Luc Godard's typically perverse take on the genre, *Alphaville*, the future city portrayed looks exactly like 1960s Paris: this can be seen either as a deflation of utopian techno-futurist speculations, or/and it can act as a satiric critique of contemporary society, as Alphaville is a dystopian, surveillance-saturated metropolis in which emotion has been extinguished.

Repo Man also incorporates SF elements and takes place within a mundane, shabby part of Los Angeles. In fact, the unspectacular environment is a central motif of the film. The run-down neighborhood blocks and derelict spaces are bland geographical markers which impact upon the psyches of the characters, fueling, in particular, the nihilist aggression of the punks. The blandness of the environment is mirrored by the deliberate strategy to label all food and drink in uniform designs, shed of any brand names (also a sly critique of consumerism). The main character Otto (Emilio Estevez) finds a purpose in this environment through becoming a car repossession man, fueled by amphetamines and excitement, which places him apart from "ordinary" people (his mentor, Bud (Harry Dean Stanton), at one point exclaims "ordinary fucking people, I hate 'em"). This leads to him getting caught up in a plot involving a very strange 1964 Chevy Malibu (whose trunk contains mysterious properties, in a nod to *Kiss Me Deadly*, one of its many popular culture references) and ultimately acts as a time machine. Once again, the low-tech effects are highlighted here in that the Malibu's glowing properties were created through reflective paint. Another punk sci-fi cult film made around the same time, which like *Repo Man* became a popular staple of the early 1980s midnight movie circuit in the United States, is *Liquid Sky*. The film revolves around the New York "New Wave" scene, in which heroin consumption is rife. Among this junky scene lands an alien looking for its own heroin fix, but who finds its needs can be satisfied by a chemical released by the human brain during orgasm. As with *Repo Man*, punk lifestyles and attitudes are meshed with science fiction motifs to depict outsider lifestyles and embrace deviance.

A more recent example of a low-budget sci-fi with a "mundane" setting is *Primer*, which was made for a staggeringly low cost of $7000. (The production of this film is already becoming a part of its cult stature, made as it was on 16 mm film without hardly any wasted film because of cost restraints; it was nevertheless blown up to 35 mm for theatrical release and this added $30 000 to its budget (Taubin 2008: 80).) Arguably the most cultish component of the film, however, is the manner by which it creates a dizzying vortex of a narrative via its time-travel inside time-travel sequences, which cumulatively spiral into perplexing configurations and invite speculative interpretations. This links to two modalities that Hills has argued are recurrent across a number of cult films: first, "explicitly addressing questions of identity in a 'philosophical' or existential register" (through the proliferation of the same people existing in different temporal moments, which leads one to question if one version of a character is more or less "authentic"

than any other); secondly, the ability to "provoke moments of 'ontological shock' which can be, in one example, 'characterized . . . by plot twists reorienting the viewer's understanding of narrative events" (Hills 2008a: 444).

The use of time-travel as a basis to explore particularly philosophical questions can be seen as a key feature in many "art house"/cult sci-fi films, and a particularly renowned example is Chris Marker's *La Jetée,* which has shown daily within a Parisian theater to a small clique of dedicated fans for a number of years (Cohen 2003: 150). This short film –described by Marker as a "photo-roman" – consists of still pictures bar one exception. It concerns a man who is captured in a post-nuclear, underground world, and subject to time-travel experiments. It presents a narrative which includes speculation upon memory and identity, but also extends this philosophical tone to explore the paradoxes of time travel. As Jonathan Romney (2007) has argued, its narrative is "a Möbius strip, returning paradoxically to its point of origin to swallow its own tail and engender itself once more." And, of course, the meditation on time is formally explored in a manner that leads audiences to encounter cinematic time in a much different manner than they are accustomed to, through the slow unfolding of continuous still images combined with voice-over narration and occasional sound effects. This film itself inspired cult director Terry Gilliam's more conventional, yet still rather labyrinthine feature *Twelve Monkeys*.

There are a number of characteristics which recurrently feature within the independent and/or "art cinema" areas of cult SF cinema, some of which overlap with cult SF more generally. While not every such film will share all of these characteristics (that there is no exact textual formula for a cult film means that we have to allow for contingency), the frequent textual features that typify art/independent cult SF films are: mundane and realistic settings, which are often (in the lower-budget bracket of such films) related to budgetary constraints and can be signified through predominantly location shooting and/or through stripped-down studio sets, and also through cinematographic markers such as grainy footage, hand-held camera work, and/or monochrome film stock; philosophical speculations about problems such as the nature and future of human existence or the complexities of theoretical problems (e.g. the possibility and consequences of time travel); and a willingness to embrace narrative experimentation, particularly through a heightened *ambiguity* which can open the film to multiple interpretations.

Conclusion

As we have shown, science fiction cinema has been a particularly important genre within cult cinema. Yet, while we have pointed to a number of significant elements that have led to its embrace by fans and other avid viewers, it is not possible to pin these down in any definitive manner. Certainly, the speculative nature of SF filmmaking is important: it can create spaces for people to explore and map details, think through philosophical issues, and to become immersed in fantastical worlds. Yet not only can this occur in a variety of forms – both low-budget and high-budget, serious and camp – it also does not exhaust the processes by which cult status is secured. Not only do social, technological, and aesthetic developments lead to fresh avenues by which cultism can emerge, but cult cinema has always consisted of films that seem to buck general patterns, prove exceptions to norms.

Nevertheless, as science fiction is a generic mode that has been frequently concerned with technologies and their social applications, it is very likely that it will continue to be produced and consumed. As technologies continually change and, in their turn, impact upon social formations in complex ways, films will continue to reflect upon such changes through imaginative fictions. New technologies impact upon the field of production and consumption, generating new tools to produce and distribute films, and new modes of receiving films and networking with others in order to respond to them. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the notion of "transmedia storytelling" – in which fictional universes from one media form spill over into other media – is a particularly notable example that enables cult followings to materialize. It is expected that a number of new formations will also emerge in the coming future, though the shape of such configurations and their social consequences is perhaps best left to SF creators to imagine.

20

Cult Blockbusters

The tendency to include blockbusters in discussions of cult cinema is often at odds with more classical analyses of cults, and there is some debate about whether or not bringing blockbusters into considerations of cult cinema makes the whole enterprise redundant (Stanfield 2008). After all, if something as intuitively antithetical to cult cinema as a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster can be studied as a cult, then why not accept that all kinds of films can? Does it not invalidate the term cult as a category? This line of argument is often found among critics and scholars of cult cinema who limit their definition of cult cinema to certain periods (preferably the 1970s) or to certain offbeat properties of films (preferably those countering dominant tastes).[1] Against that stands a school of thought which asserts that if one takes into account some of the salient features of the production, content, style, and receptions of blockbusters, and study how these interact to form reputations and cultural statuses, we not only see the same mechanisms as with cult cinema, we actually observe cinema cultism at work. Matt Hills has repeatedly argued for the inclusion of blockbusters in discussions of cult cinema, as part of a particular process of "cultification." He writes:

> Cult responses can inhabit the "mainstream" (as do *Star Wars* fans), treating blockbusters differently, and living with them over time rather than merely occupying an evanescent moment of multiplex omnipresence. Fan devotion and "excess and controversy" need not be articulated, they can be two distinct lines of cultification. Cult is "in" the mainstream now; within its terms of reference even if the two labels haven't fully collapsed together. Supposedly "mainstream" films can become cultified by the "unfolding consumption" of online fans who anticipate a release, follow production rumors and news, attend screenings, download material, and then debate meanings, await DVD versions, and so on. (Hills 2008b)

As we have observed throughout this book, the term "cult" is no longer necessarily avoided by mainstream industries. More and more, producers openly court the status, hedging their bets on both mainstream and cult receptions, hoping it will bring in unexpected surplus revenue – unpredictable but equally welcome. For Hills, it does not make sense to create distinctions between the kinds of receptions classic cult films receive and the kinds some blockbusters get – both attract cultist celebrations, and the differences between them are more those between insistencies on categorization than between the characteristics of products or audience reaction. If one looks at the following of the *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, or *The Lord of the Rings* films there is, according to Hills, no reason to not see them as equally close to cult cinema than to traditional cinema. In fact, Hills suggests, one can even see internal distinctions within cult blockbusters, typified by attempts to separate "legitimate" cult blockbusters from hyped or inauthentic ones (Hills 2006b: 160–171).

Supersize Cult

One of the most visible reasons to bring blockbusters into a discussion of cult cinema, and to discern a type of

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film that would be the cult blockbuster, is their disproportionate size. This may seem counterintuitive. Usually, cult films are thought of as small in budget, tiny in their market share, and niche in their appeal. Blockbusters, on the other hand, have big budgets, a huge market share (often programmed to either swallow or avoid competition and to maximize exposure), and aim for the greatest common denominator with immediate availability to as wide an audience as possible. Small cult films demand to be liked by a few (and are often demanding in *how exactly* they would like to be liked at all). Blockbusters do not even require admiration or appeal, they merely want admissions and aggregates. Based on these oppositions there is no reason why blockbusters would become cults. Yet when discussions around blockbusters become dominated by a preoccupation with exaggerated size, to the extent that they are seen almost uniquely as deviant, obese monstrosities they have de facto become ready to be treated as cults. In short, blockbusters are big; cult blockbusters are too big.

A first issue here concerns budget and revenue. Blockbusters are expensive to make – this is part of the reason why they are called blockbusters. But when the size of the budget and the operation exceeds that of what is considered appropriate or acceptable, when boundaries of moderation and modesty in the making of a film are trampled and outstrip the rhetoric of efficiency – what Jerome Stolnitz (1960b) has called the "economy of action" – the production is often referred to as a "monstrosity." Similarly, blockbusters are measured according to their success – it is another reason to call them blockbusters. But whenever the achievements of a blockbuster surpass expectations well beyond what studios are anticipating (and that means beyond the kind of ready-statements of exceeded expectations studios are all too keen to release), when they do not just reach the top but go "over the top," or when the gross taking has become "too gross" (to use two preferred metaphors of industry commentators), they are prone to attract a kind of attention that is equal to cultism. This not only applies to successful films but also to those that have become disproportionate failures. The inability of films such as *Heaven's Gate*, *Last Action Hero*, and *Waterworld* to become the successes they were supposed to become has created cultist followings partly because of the magnitude of the failure, and of the way in which this failure was commented upon – often encapsulated in the phrase "just what were they thinking?" In sum, whenever budget and revenue take on grotesque characteristics, and can only be described in exaggerated terms, they become deviations from normal consumption and appreciation patterns. They become exceptional in much the same way smaller cult films do.

Beyond budget and profit, the culturally most tangible aspect of cult blockbusters' supersized-ness is that they are everywhere. They are what Thomas Austin has called "dispersible texts":

> the dispersible text is ... at the hub of a triple movement: a centrifugal dynamic of aperture and extension via satellite texts, mirrored by a centripetal force which refers consumers from these texts to the film, and a further impetus to buy spin-off goods after leaving the cinema. These processes of dissemination, recruitment, and ancillary consumption are anticipated and enabled by the particular construction of the dispersible text. [They] multiply and complicate the promises, interpretations, and invitations-to-view offered on behalf of the film (Austin 2002: 29–30).

In a "normal" reception the centripetal force eventually wins out, converging all views into a few preferential and acknowledged meanings, and consumptions, of a film. But in some cases the "talk" generated by the centrifugal dynamic of aperture and extension prevents such convergence. Research into films such as *Judge Dredd* or *The Lord of the Rings* (Barker and Brooks 1997; Barker and Mathijs 2007) has demonstrated the extent to which the centrifugal dynamic can take over a film's reception up to the point where the film itself seems to matter no longer and hype appears to perpetuate independently from feeders by the industry.[2] In the prefiguration of *The Return of the King* industry attempts to control the hype were met, and occasionally obstructed by a "chaotic diversity" of centrifugal discourses fanning out in all kinds of unexpected directions, each with its own high degree of investment (Biltereyst, Mathijs, and Meers 2007: 48–49, 57). Whenever the subsequent dispersion stretches beyond what is considered "hype," and a film's popularity is sustained beyond release-related periods of time, and whenever such chaotic diversity becomes a force equal to the efforts of the marketers

and producers, it becomes a strong indicator of a blockbuster's cult appeal. Again it is the extremity of the size of dispersion that makes the real difference. When the consumption of a blockbuster is not merely accompanied but in fact *constructed* through satellite texts and dispersed discourses it develops characteristics strikingly similar to those of cult viewing, such as multiple exposure, immersion, and the invitation to create interpretations far beyond the single film-text. In such a case, the dispersion is cultist.

Added to these mechanisms of dispersion are issues of length, of the film, the franchise, and of the audience reaction. Blockbusters are often longer in duration than regular films, which makes going to see them an endeavor of bigger proportions: queues are longer, and their visibility attracts more attention from other media, who are subsequently eager to label the phenomenon as a hype, a craze, or a cult. The effort to go see such a phenomenon is easily presented as one that requires "endurance," leaving much room for reflection on the physical aspects of watching such a film. Likewise, the aspect of immersion is described more often as "total." Amplifying those associations are marathon screenings or serialized franchises in which all of the episodes are viewed in succession, "extended" cuts with "new previously unseen" bonus materials, and the persistent or repeat viewing attitudes of audiences who return to see these movies more than once – an attitude confounded of course by the fact that blockbusters' bigger market share reduces the choice to go see other movies. As with budget, revenue, and satellite texts, the difference between a cult blockbuster and a "normal" one lies in the degree to which the size of the endeavor is one of the key features in its reception.

The supersized aspects of budget, revenue, dispersion, and length became tropes in the reception of blockbusters since the mid 1970s, and they have been eagerly linked to the films' contents. From early examples onwards, such as *Towering Inferno*, *Jaws*, or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, to so-called high-concept blockbusters such as *Die Hard*, *The Abyss*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Speed*, critics and audiences drew parallels between the size of the operation, their reception, and their content (big towers, big shark, big dinosaurs, big spaceships, big bus, etc.). It might not merely be a coincidence that one of the most popular scenes from *Jaws* contrasts the supersized shark with the boat hunting it: "You're gonna need a bigger boat" says a stricken Martin Brody (Roy Scheider) upon first seeing the shark. He even says it twice. A few years later, the X-wing fighters in *Star Wars* are equally direct in pointing to size as a marker of attention when they approach the enemy Death Star: "Look at the size of that thing!", one exclaims.

Until the late 1990s remarks about size were offset by other observations, so that the oversize trope did not come to dominate the discourse of blockbusters. But the late 1990s started a trend to have the size of some blockbusters become the *only* noteworthy point of attention. As we have observed above, it coincided with the introduction of cult blockbusters as a noteworthy albeit contentious part of cult cinema. This evolution is best characterized by the production and reception of *Titanic*, a film about a big boat and a big catastrophe, which was almost uniquely described along metaphors of its oversized dimensions, its mass. Kevin Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (1999: 1) single out size as the predominant factor of the phenomenon; in fact they use the term "most" four times in the first two sentences of their introduction: twice to refer to the size of the boat, and twice to refer to the reception of the film. In his discussion of *Titanic*, Martin Barker (2001: 88) describes it as a "bloated leviathan" before detailing its epic proportions. Before it was released, *Titanic* was predicted not just to be a flop but to become "the turkey to out-gobble them all" (Shone 2004: 251). When it became evident the film was an unparalleled box-office success, the tenor of comments changed, but not the metaphors or rhetoric: super-size still dominated the debates. The size of the audience and the size of its repeat-viewing appetite, the often-commented on super-inflated budget that required the collaboration between two major studios (20th Century Fox and Paramount), the size of the risk, and director James Cameron's triumphant shout "I'm the King of the World" when he picked up a record number of Academy Awards (biggest possible of any film awards), all contributed to this impression of oversized-ness. If we look at the long-term reception of *Titanic*, its oversized-ness has remained a key factor, now no longer in attempts to praise the film, but rather in efforts to diminish its significance: too long, too bloated, too self-indulgent, it is frequently

cited as one of the worst films ever exactly because of its gluttony – a sort of cult reception trajectory in reverse.

Retrospectively, the trope of supersized-ness also helps explain some of the cult reputations of films that have stood at odds with other cults: Hollywood films such as *Gone with the Wind*, or, outside Hollywood, *Metropolis*. Perhaps most symptomatic for this retroactive application is the cult reputation of *King Kong*, of which Cynthia Erb shows just how much it hinged on the motive of size, or "scale" as a contemporary critic referred to it: a mammoth of an ape, big showmanship, barnum promotion, and huge success (Erb 1998: 49–63).

Supersized-ness thus becomes a key identifier for cult blockbusters. Since *Titanic*, it has characterized the receptions of franchises such as the *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Harry Potter*, and films such as *The Dark Knight* and *Avatar*. Their receptions contain references to disproportionate size at virtually every level of debate, from the ones mentioned above (length, dispersion, revenue, and so on) to details such as the size of the appeal of a star (Johnny Depp and Heath Ledger), the expansion of a bosom (there were numerous discussions about the increase in size of Keira Knightley's chest in *Pirates*), or a segment of the audience (too young, too loud, too hyper). Above all other examples stands what is, next to *Titanic*, the XXL in cult blockbusters, namely *The Lord of the Rings*, a films whose epic scale of operation, exposure, length, and appeal eclipsed that of nearly every film before it. Fittingly, in an article discussing the upcoming release of the first *Lord of the Rings* film, the *Village Voice* connected its supersized-ness to its cult status when it remarked that: "hype easily self-assassinates, but *LOTR* may be immune to excess ... Because of its extra-cinematic life, it can't escape being a monument to its own built-in cult, which is roughly the size of humanity" (Atkinson 2001).

Content and Style of Cult Blockbusters

Cult blockbusters have in common with cult cinema that they present illogical, unhinged stories with lots of visual excess, offering manifestations that invite visceral instead of interpretive reactions. Because of this they are often called meaningless: void of relevance for our world, escapist or mere spectacle.

Let us start with the story-worlds, the fictional universes within which the stories unfold. Most movies known as cult blockbusters have what could be called built-in cult potential. In many cases this means that they are based on source materials that have already developed cult followings. Adaptations of comics and books are the most common examples, with *Batman*, *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* among the best-known cases in point. *Titanic* was based on the sinking of the actual ship *Titanic* in 1912, an event several critics have described as having a cult reputation in popular memory (Barker 2001; Kern 1983). *Pirates of the Caribbean* was based on a theme park ride which itself was inspired by the cults of pirates, Maroons, yardies, and Rastafaris. In the case of *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* inspiration was drawn from an amalgamate of sources, many of which had cult status – ranging from previous cult films (Kurosawa's samurai films, westerns, adventure movies of the 1930s, etc.) to comic books (*Tintin*). The adaptation of cultist source materials necessitates the compression, elimination, or addition of many elements of the original story-world for transfer to the screen. Debates about which parts of the source material are truthfully transferred, part of what we have labeled the centrifugal dynamic of the dispersible text, often expressed in public forums, ensure that the screen adaptation quickly becomes a feature of the cult of the original material regardless whether the adaptation efforts are appreciated or not. It sneakily penetrates it as it were – before the actual film is released.

The second aspect of the cult blockbuster's story-world that we would like to touch upon is its "mythical" nature. We analyzed the connection between cults and myths in Chapter 12, and we addressed story-worlds in science-fiction in Chapter 19, but some elaboration is required here. Cult blockbusters invariably hint at worlds – or world systems – that are lost in time, either locked in a certain historical era decidedly not ours, far in some fictitious past or future time, or outside conceptions of history altogether. Yet, at the same time, there is the perception that there is some spillover into the present, some ephemeral impact in that the story-worlds appear to present foundational narratives for our

world – the same way myths are foundational stories for the ideologies and morals of civilization. In attempting to achieve this spillover, these story-worlds weave a fair lot of history (and pseudo-history) into their fabric, especially of instances in which tensions between a largely disorderly but appealing world and a highly ordered but unattractive world run high. Through this method, cult blockbusters' story-worlds present an ideological framework that pertains to expose the problems of "our times" by offering purity of vision and by presenting a snapshot of unsullied time not yet tainted by real-politics. In terms of visual representation, the story-worlds are often shrouded in mystical symbolism. They consist of an amalgam of apocalyptic, utopian, and dystopian thought, an assembly of Western myths, legends, and religious beliefs (Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist in particular, but also various pantheistic beliefs), a mix of aesthetic heritages (romanticism, Greek antiquity, Gothic styles of the Middle Ages, expressionism), and a variety of political philosophies. With regard to politics, cult blockbusters' story-worlds show a preference for small-scale participative democracy and class collaboration, enlightened absolutism, ecologism, and tribalism. They favor a fair degree of anti-hegemonic sentiments (even anarchism), often in romanticized form, especially in the form of bands of pirates, rangers, or rebels. Generally, vast organizations and collectives such as empires and bureaucracies are seen as evil. Furthermore, people and groups are often reduced to the skills and functions they perform ("warrior," "priest," "pirate," and so on), which, incidentally, puts them in a skilled-laborer class. Selected individuals are often endowed with super-powers and magic ("the ring," "the force," "the grail," "the mark," etc.), aided by secretive, sectarian organizations who guard "true knowledge" – models of inspiration here include a wide variety of militia and orders, from the Praetorian guards and the Knights Templar over wandering samurai, the SS, and buccaneers, to Tibetan monks. These alternative universes are not uniquely populated by humans either; they frequently include alien creatures and part-human life forms, a further reference to mythological conceptions of the world, from before history began, when humans would still share the world with beings that are not human – dryads, nymphs, elves, fauns, satyrs, centaurs, titans, gods, demons, trolls, orcs, talking bugs, and shapeshifters.

Put together, these imaginings attempt to evoke a "past" or "future" time when "pure" instances of mystical experiences are possible, and they ask audiences to "imagine" the deep connection between these worlds and an "original" cult feeling, and experience, if only remotely, some of the exhilaration of being connected with "true life force." The films that go the furthest in shaping an entire alternative universe and a coherent world system (complete with alternative historiography) often get the biggest cult following. Examples are *Batman*'s Gotham City, *The Lord of the Rings*' Middle Earth, *Harry Potter*'s parallel Muggle and Wizard worlds, and *Star Wars*' Expanded Universe (which is also the name of all the licensed fictional background used in spin-offs, merchandise, and other media – an indication if ever there was one of the conflation between centripetal and centrifugal dynamics in the dispersible text that is the *Star Wars* franchise).

Many critics of cult blockbusters use the formulaic application of the above-mentioned inspirations, and indeed the implications these have for representations of groups of people as an argument against their acceptance as "legitimate cults." It is worth bearing in mind that this formula is not so much the result of the exhaustion of inspiration. Rather, it is the effect of the overly systematic use of a small array of textbooks that condense the diversity of myths into *monomyths*. This term describes the process of reducing the common denominator of known myths to one single narrative, in particular that of the "hero's journey." Eileen Meehan and Deborah Tudor (2010) argue that post-1990s cult blockbusters' reliance on monomyths is indicative of, and runs parallel with, the political perspective of neo-liberalism, reflected in numerous references to class distinctions, for instance in *Titanic*, *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

As important as their story-worlds' cult potential is the "look" of cult blockbusters. Generally speaking, cult blockbusters provide spectacle – and indeed make a spectacle of themselves – through visual excess or cinematic trickery, dazzling the audience by showing vertiginous, breathtaking imagery through camera pyrotechnics and special effects. According to theories of film aesthetics, excess is an element of style that falls outside the regular framework because it does not

occur in support of the story world or the plot (Thompson 1977). It works separately, often overshadowing other elements of a film. In the case of cult blockbusters, where regularities are already skewed because of factors such as size, the stylistic overkill produced by excess not only augments the story, it becomes its substitute, demanding a high degree of emotive involvement from the viewer. Reviewers often employ the metaphors of a rollercoaster or a car chase to refer to this mechanism. Aggregates of excess become spectacles. Just like the arenas of the theme park or the racing circuit within which the ride or chase happen, they connect to the wider affective range of experience and impression of excess, to its mode of reception. Cult blockbusters excel in spectacle. The canal chase in *Terminator II: Judgment Day*, and the flight from the Orcs in Moria and the Balrog on the Bridge of Khazad Dum in *The Lord of the Rings* are good examples. In each of these examples, movement, tricks, speed, and a quick succession of situations dictate a rhythm and pace that Murray Pomerance regards as all-engrossing. Here is how he describes its occurrence during a *Stars Wars* screening for a thousand-strong audience on Times Square:

> We are always sacrificing the progression of a story by succumbing to fascination. When the Millennium Falcon slips into hyperdrive, we choose to forget where we are, how we have come to be here, what has been happening, where we are going, all in the name of gaining the fullest possible consideration of the myriad stars stretching themselves swiftly into light beams against the black, black curtain of space ("WO!" screamed that audience, in unison) (Pomerance 2007: 22–23).

Such a description fits neatly that of the phenomenal experience we highlighted in Chapter 1. One or two such instances do not suffice to abandon attention for narrative progression for longer than a few moments, argues Pomerance. The "effects chain" of blockbusters, as he calls it, does not eliminate the story. With cultist viewers, however, who are already familiar with the story, who will take the spectacle not for what it stands for but as a goal in itself, and who might even have seen the film before, indulgence in vertiginous moments such as the one Pomerance describes *will* replace attention for the story as a focus of attention.

As can be deduced from Pomerance's example, the main tool here is the use of special effects, a core element of cult blockbusters ever since *Star Wars*. In Chapters 2, 18 and 19 we have devoted some special attention to the cult of special effects. Here, we will concentrate solely on the so-called "Big effects" that are so typical for cult blockbusters. Besides yet another reference to size, "big effects" are the kind that demand notice, not just for their quantitative presence, but for their dominance in the reception of the film they feature in. In their analysis of the unsuccessful blockbuster *Judge Dredd*, Barker and Brooks (1997: 283) observe how the young boy fans so dedicated to comic books and blockbusters appreciate just how much special effects are a "balancing act" that marries elements of the implied story-world with elements of the achievement: "[they] hover between being about the world their special effects imply ... and about special effects and the wizardry of the movies themselves." Further research on films such as *Titanic* and *Starship Troopers* suggests that the degree to which special effects dominate the reception of certain blockbusters is a key determinant in having them accepted as "big" – grand in size and certainly grand through their prevalence as a point of reference in the reception (Barker 2001). Overall, then, excessive demonstrativeness becomes a key attraction for cult blockbusters (Lichtenfeld 2007).

Turkey Plucking: The Critical Reception of Cult Blockbusters

At the Cannes festival of 1997, Bruce Willis caused uproar among the critical community by answering hostile comments on *The Fifth Element* with the suggestion that: "nobody up here pays attention to reviews ... most of the written word has gone the way of the dinosaur" (Boorman and Donahue 1998: 1). Besides yet another reference to size, Willis's reference to unfavorable criticism is a paramount element of cult blockbusters. With their supersized budgets and appeal, clichéd story-worlds, and overblown special effects cult blockbusters have been a particular target of reviewers, and, as such, their negative evaluations have aided their cult status. In

fact, as "turkeys," they have come to occupy a critical category of their own. As Tom Shone writes: "In an age of marketing overload, the plucking, basting, and roasting of turkeys would become something of a cathartic public ritual, somewhere between an exorcism and a witch hunt, with the press in the role of witchmaster general" (Shone 2004: 211).

The main characteristics of the negative reviews of cult blockbusters are a frustration with waste, a refusal to acknowledge creative input (especially with regard to directors as *auteurs*), and a view on its audience as illiterate, indiscriminate, and shallow. The frustration with waste is – of course – connected to the supersize and excess of the films, and to the belief that anything so overly big, plump, glitzy, or extravagant could be "efficient," "good," or "proper cinema." The prime example here is *Titanic*, which was being prepared for what Shone has called "critical snobbery at its most knock-kneed" months before it was released (Shone 2004: 261). The industry press lambasted it for half a year before it was released, because it was so big – with cruel puns on the size and fate of the ship linked to that of the movie. Critics were mildly hostile towards the plumpness of the narrative (describing it as a "predictable" film with no "surprises"), or downright condescending towards its popularity with teenage girls' repeat viewing – another form of waste. Even when *Titanic* turned out to be a grand box office success, critics would reflect on what a shame such greed was for "real cinema." In the case of films such as *Heaven's Gate*, *Last Action Hero*, *Cutthroat Island*, *Waterworld*, or *Catwoman*, which were not only critical but also commercial failures, dismal critical ratings are often regarded (rightfully or wrongfully so) as the catalysis of the lack of popular appeal, reflecting the vox populi. In such cases, criticism takes on something of a performative element, decorating its frustration with the film with trivia, witty observations, descriptions of anachronisms, and even campy elements that all function to humiliate the film. Notably, female performers in cult blockbusters are given harsh criticism; infamous examples include Sharon Stone, Geena Davis, and Halle Berry (for her role in *Catwoman* which won her a Raspberry Award, see Chapter 3).

Creative labor in cult blockbusters in general is almost never accorded critical praise. This is perhaps most acutely visible through "adverse auteurism," or the snubbing of directors of cult blockbusters. This criticism is a logical consequence of the frustration with waste. Instead of auteurs cult blockbuster directors are called "dinosaurs" or "moguls" (yet more references to supersized-ness). High-profile directors such as Michael Cimino, John McTiernan, Renny Harlin, Kevin Reynolds, and Kevin Costner, have repeatedly been ridiculed for their box-office failures. Even perpetually successful directors and producers such as James Cameron, Michael Bay, and Luc Besson, who have made multiple blockbusters with cult followings, are permanently struggling to receive recognition for their work. Their mode of operation is often considered aggressive, bullish, and dictatorial, and their aesthetics are regarded as overly simplistic, even fascist. This vilification has given these directors and producers cultist reputations as the "men you'd love to hate," and it has given films such as *Rambo* (for which Cameron wrote the screenplay), *Terminator II: Judgment Day*, *The Fifth Element*, and the *Matrix* trilogy notoriously unhinged long-term receptions. The DVD receptions of these films, for instance the discussions surrounding the "place" of Michael Bay's films on the cinephile DVD label Criterion, or Cameron's entitlement to awards (especially with regard to *Avatar*), have a key place in these continuous contentions. Ironically, this criticism helps instigate a fractured trajectory that characterizes the reception of cult auteurs.

Added to disdain for their size and make up, glee about their potential failure, and misrecognition for their makers, critics view the spectators of cult blockbusters with contempt. This contempt is most often expressed in remarks about largesse, illiteracy, and shallowness. Critics assume readily that whoever displays a cultist fascination with blockbusters has not (yet) met the "proper films." Such remarks about cult blockbuster audiences are often peppered with observations about the average age of viewers (not yet considered to be mature enough), about their attention span (supposedly shorter than every other generation's), and about their addiction to fads and hypes. In often highly charged language, critics view audiences of blockbusters as susceptible to films presented as "hot" but without the faculties to turn them into something "cool."

The Audience Reception of Cult Blockbusters

If we look closely at those films most often called cult blockbusters it becomes clear that part of their audience make up – *within* the mass appeal as it were – exists of a core of devotees and followers whose actions are very cultist – if not in nature or intention then at least in their perception.

To begin with, there is a striking gender-uniformity in the cultist audience celebration of blockbusters. In our examples on special effects we have alluded to the appeal of these production values with young boys. Similarly, we have observed in Chapter 10 how the cult following of *Titanic* has a gender-specific element in that it was "not the huge number of fans that might make [it] cult but rather the way in which it was celebrated through all-girl repeat viewings" (Mathijs and Mendik 2008b: 5). Within the most devoted audience segments of *The Lord of the Rings*, too, gender-uniform constellations of "spiritual journey ladies" and "lonely epic males" stood out (Barker and Mathijs 2007). The research of Barker and Brooks on the reception of *Judge Dredd* has become paradigmatic, at least methodologically, for several other analyses of types of fandom that show cultist features, in which issues of gender and class are isolated. Research on mainly male fans of the *Resident Evil* franchise, fans of Sylvester Stallone, and female fans of Sharon Stone confirm such gender specificities (Lay 2007; Huffer 2007; Feasey 2003).

To an extent, these observations on cultism and blockbusters match sociological research on the tastes of lower-class audiences as "univorous." The opposite of "omnivorous taste," univorous taste is arranged around a narrow pattern of strong preferences for very few products, with the function of solidifying a group-identity (Peterson 1992; Bryson 1997).[3] Univorous taste confirms the position cult blockbusters hold as among the lowest possible in terms of cultural standing (even among cult films). It is a position they share with other types of cinema and media known for their solicitation of extreme emotion (soap, family life oriented reality TV, porn, extreme horror, hyperbolic melodrama). Among the most visible articulations of the cultist reception of blockbusters symptomatic for univorous taste are repeat group viewing, "swooning" (fanning adoration, often in the form of fake fainting) and "posturing" (prominent positioning of the body to indicate an ease with and control over the immediate social environment). All three are seen as group activities associated with unsophisticated puberty behavior. This negative connotation is a legacy from the use of the term to describe 1950s and 1960s youth culture, when it was used in connection to unruly and deviant gang, crowd or mass behavior (Cohen 1972). From that legacy also comes a connotation with gender-uniformity: repeat-viewing groups are usually made up of same-sex pals; swooning is for girls, and posturing for boys. When such terms and connotations are adopted in current debates about girl groups repeatedly watching *Titanic*, teenage girls voicing their adoration for *The Lord of the Rings*, or young boys expressing their fascination with *300* or *Robocop* through posturing, those forms of celebrations are portrayed as a sort of disruptive behavior typical of hardcore cults, a threat to "normal" society even.

Much of the cultism around blockbusters is more elusive than the category of "univorous taste" leads us to believe, and it is extremely hard to research. The release strategy of blanket market saturation makes it hard to discern cultist activities during the first months of release. Only in the longer term, when prolonged runs at theaters are accompanied by reports of demographic oddities in attendance does cultism become a term of reference. Even then it remains difficult to assess, and in most cases evidence remains either anecdotal or impossible to separate from the cultural mainstream – as we remarked in Chapter 1, it led reviewers of *The Lord of the Rings* to comment that the oft-used term "geekdom" does not fully capture what is no longer a subculture "but a formative force in the cultural imagination of our times" (Biltereyst, Mathijs, and Meers 2007: 46).

There are only two real moments that enable the measurement of cultist receptions of blockbuster, and both are open to manipulation. The first preempts the film's general release. As we have outlined above, blockbusters try to attract extra attention to their upcoming release through a range of prefigurative initiatives. One such initiative with high cultist potential is the premiere. Blockbusters aiming for a



Figure 20.1 Fans of *The Lord of the Rings* dressed up to attend the premiere of the Firefly fanseries at the Norwescon 33 convention in April 2010. Photo by Michael Hanscom of Norwescon (www.norwescon.org).

cult following often receive unusual slots at multiplex theaters. In keeping with the legacy of cult cinema traditions these are frequently midnight screenings, occasionally coupled to marathons sessions of previous installments in the franchise. In the case of cult blockbusters such premieres are known to attract dress-up attendance, as has been the case with *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or *Indiana Jones* premieres. The combination of the midnight hour and the dress-up occasion gives audiences an opportunity to publicly display their cultism. The second moment occurs years after the initial release, at specially staged activities such as conventions or fan gatherings. Here too, screenings of the film are organized at times and venues already indicative of devoted following. Often it has members-only or exclusive access. Both moments have two characteristics common for cultist gatherings: they pair a common cause with a high degree of "camaraderie." Indeed, research on the networks of repeat viewers of *The Lord of the Rings* stressed "friendship" as a prime marker for cultist blockbuster viewing (Biltereyst, Mathijs, and Meers 2007: 57) (Figure 20.1).

One final aspect of the audience reception of cult blockbusters that deserves attention is its celebration through performative actions, including tongue-in-cheek parodies of fandom. These performances build on the public's general knowledge of, and ambiguous feeling towards, blockbusters to create outrageous and hilarious interpretations and re-imaginations. In a sense, these performances use the imagery of excess blockbusters are known for and give it a twist. As such, these performances of fandom build on the concepts of appropriation and bricolage singled out in Chapter 5. But, just like the blockbusters they use as their point of departure, they often go a few steps further in the hyperbole efforts – and their ridicule. The two most visible types of such outings are "queering" and "slash-fiction." We discussed queering in Chapter 10, as a cultist appropriation of meanings that enabled the performance of gendered receptions. Its main aim is to point to ambiguous portrayals of masculinity (and the ideologies these embed) in blockbuster cinema by using highly sophisticated strategies of interpretation on films that were purportedly single-minded, straightforward (with the pun on the word "straight" intended), and crude in their presentation of masculinity. As we have indicated in Chapter 5, slash fiction is, like fan fiction, the creation of fictional tales based on the characters, narratives and story-worlds of blockbusters. But it combines the reverent tone towards the original that is typical for much fan fiction with a mocking attitude and the rearrangement of meanings of the original through same-sex and pornographic innuendo. Since such alterations are often laid out in new products (online stories, prints, posters, re-edits of clips, etc., and even some newly shot work) there is a creative and productive aspect to slash fiction. Because slash fiction enhances visibility, adds to the liveliness of reception, and challenges taste norms and standards of industrial practice (including copyright) blockbusters that are frequently slashed are more likely to develop cult reputations – as if slash fiction uncovers their "dark side" and gives them a more rebellious attitude. Among the most consistently slashed are the *Harry Potter* franchise, *Star Trek*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Star Wars*. Each of these series has been criticized for its conservative politics, and in each case slash fiction has given it a somewhat more edgy and less conformist reputation.

Conclusion: Calculation and Spontaneity

The methods used by slash fiction and ironic performances are, of course open to endorsement or

adoption by the industry. This is often part of an attempt to gain some form of control over those forms of celebration, and to invite audiences of new work to accept it as cultist – but "cultist" as labeled by the industry instead of by audiences. In a sense, then, self-ridiculing instances in films such as *Men in Black* (where Will Smith is appalled to find his "super weapon" is actually tiny), or in advertisements in which director Michael Bay demands everything to be "awesome" (while blowing up his pool and barbeque), signal a continuation of struggles between the industry and audiences over the legitimacy of terms such as cult and blockbuster, and their combinations. It is even addressed in erotic spoofs of blockbusters, such as *Lord of the G-Strings* (Hunter 2006; also see Chapter 10).

This overt danger of reappropriation explains perhaps why, even amid the acrimony towards the cult appeal of some blockbusters, only a few of them are easily accepted into the cult canon. *Waterworld*, *Showgirls*, or *Judge Dredd* are such commercial disasters, and *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* have such devoted followings, and all of these are bathed in such visual excess and mythical story-worlds, that their cultist receptions cannot be ignored. Curiously, however, when faced with such evident cultism, most critics and fans appear to want to save themselves from the potentially negative connotations of the term "blockbuster," so they drop the term altogether and *only* employ the label cult.

Notes

1. Many of the contributions to *Cineaste*'s 2008 symposium on cult cinema expressed this concern.
2. Martin Barker has called such dynamics "ancillary materials," and Ernest Mathijs refers to them as "ancillary discourses" (Barker 2004; Mathijs 2005b).
3. We should note that research that identifies univorous taste is frequently methodologically ill-equipped to detect complex patterns of interpretation among audiences because it cannot probe beyond audiences' utterances, which might not always be perfectly formulated. It is a problem similar to the anxiety of cult consumption we observed in Chapter 10.

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Intertextuality and Irony

The last two chapters in this book discuss modes and themes that revolve around the self-consciousness of film cultism, as a knowing mode of engagement with both the film text and the audience that, frequently, leads to *performed* cultism. In this chapter we focus on intertextuality and irony. Both have appeared several times in the course of this book, most prominently as viewing positions or modes of reception that are significant elements in establishing cult status. We discussed ironic viewing positions particularly in Chapter 8, while intertextuality in classical Hollywood cults, in the cult of horror, and in meta-cultism is addressed in Chapters 17, 18, and 22. Throughout this chapter we will mainly focus on cult film texts (the films themselves), though we cannot totally extract textual workings from their contextual surroundings, so the role of the reader will still assume an important position.

Among the most prominent terms that play a role within cult cinema are parody, pastiche, irony, and related terms such as satire. These modes, to varying degrees, can be understood as forms of intertextuality: where one text refers to another text or, more frequently, to a number of other texts. For Umberto Eco, in a seminal essay on the cult film, this form of intertextual quotation was a crucial element of cult films: if a film is made up of a number of intertextual references it becomes a patchwork in which any part of that film can be dislocated from the whole. This process gives rise to the "glorious ricketiness" that Eco saw as a particularly important quality of the cult film (1984: 198–199). More recently, Matt Hills has argued that the self-conscious interrogation of genre conventions is one particular "modality" recurrent across a number of cult film texts, particularly through a "display of intertextual subcultural capital" (2008a: 44).

Let us start by outlining some of the terms that we will be using in this chapter: many of them are related, but they also have been distinguished in particular ways. *Parody* is a process of reworking a text, or textual elements, in a manner that attempts to mock the reworked text(s). As Dan Harries has pointed out, parody depends on an oscillation between similarity and difference: there needs to be a recognizable congruence between the text referred to and the new text for parody to function, but a disparity between the texts must be apparent for the parodic effect to be successful (Harries 2000: 6; 25). *Satire*, by contrast, tends to refer not so much to the mocking of aesthetic forms recurrent across prior texts, but of social attitudes and/or behaviors (Dyer 2007: 41). The terms need not be mutually exclusive, as parodic discourse can also be satiric: for example, an artwork may parody and mock a former text (or set of texts) *and* also critique social attitudes related to such texts. Another concept related to parody is *pastiche*: like parody, pastiche depends upon imitation of other texts and relies upon the reader to "get it" in order to fully work, but unlike parody it does not mock or satirize; it is, as Frederic Jameson pointed out, "blank parody" (1983: 114). *Irony* refers to a mode of discourse in which an utterance is double-coded: a conventional sentence may be spoken which actually means something else, but only an initiated audience will understand this other meaning, while the uninitiated may only interpret the overt meaning.

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Irony overlaps with parody, pastiche, and satire to the extent that all these processes involve transforming conventionalized codes into other codes, "an activity that results in the possible recognition of incongruity between the two codes" (Harries 2000: 30).

Cult Parody

It should be pointed out that the functions of parodic art can vary a great deal. Even though there has been a tendency for critics to focus on the subversive nature of parody it is, as Simon Dentith argues, "politically and socially multivalent" (2000: 28). Parody can be used for socially progressive or conservative purposes, or it may be wielded for primarily comic intent. Actually gauging the purpose of parodic content can itself be difficult, as such an assessment will need to be cognizant of the social context within which the work was produced and the intentions of the parodist(s). Furthermore, the purpose of the content may not always be successful due to the range of interpretive possibilities that any work can generate. Nevertheless, to parody another work, or other works, does often entail an evaluative stance towards the material being referred to, as it generally involves mockery. Within this mocking cultural mode there nevertheless exist degrees of criticism, from gentle mockery to acerbic ridicule. Such mockery can, however, exist alongside a more loving stance toward the object being mocked on occasions. An example of such loving mockery can be found in the cult film *This Is Spinal Tap*; while the film makes fun of some of the ridiculous aspects associated with heavy metal music, there is also an evident fondness for the culture and, in particular, for the characters. The film is, therefore, "mocking, yet reverent" (de Seife 2007: 9).

According to Harries, film parody creates an oscillation between similarity and difference through three central categories: *lexical*, *syntactic*, and *stylistic* (2000: 9).[1] The lexical refers to the iconographic elements of a film, such as setting, costumes, and characters; the syntactic refers to the plot and structure of the film; the stylistic refers to the expressive cinematic techniques used, such as camera movement, editing, sound. It is often the case in parody, Harries argues, that at least one of these category levels needs to be retained (in order to produce a resemblance to the parodied text), while at least one other level is altered. Similarity and difference can also occur within the same category, so that a dominant referent can be evoked and then disrupted. Harries provides an example of this in *Blazing Saddles* where a pack of cowboys riding through open plains (evoking, through costume and landscape, the Western) eventually come across a toll booth, a lexical unit incongruous with the genre and which therefore is intended to produce a comic effect.

Much of Mel Brooks's oeuvre relies on spoof and parody, and his earlier films in particular have garnered a cult status. His directorial debut, *The Producers*, undertook a typical cult journey in becoming a cultural phenomenon after initial hostile reviews and a disappointing box-office performance. Although the film is, overall, more of a farce than a parody, it does contain parodic components. In particular, the Broadway musical featured within the film, *Springtime for Hitler*, relies on the incongruity of generic expectations to create its comedy. The encasing of serious content (the Nazi invasion of Europe) within the syntactic and stylistic confines of a musical was, at the time it was made, comic because the manner in which it combined these generic units was considered to be outrageously inappropriate. After this film Brooks moved much more into a spoof-parody mode, in particular creating comic material out of specific genres (horror with *Young Frankenstein*, the Western with *Blazing Saddles*, science-fiction with *Spaceballs*), a particular mode of cinema (silent filmmaking conventions in *Silent Movie*) and techniques primarily associated with a respected film director (Hitchcock in *High Anxiety*).

Another Jewish American comedian with cult appeal who – at least earlier in his career – utilized parody on numerous occasions is Woody Allen (in particular, he has a solid cult reputation in France, with many small Paris cinemas regularly screening films from his catalog). Allen often incorporated parodic sketches both within his films at certain moments, and sometimes across whole films. In the latter category we could include both *Sleeper*, which parodies science fiction filmmaking, and also the "mockumentary" *Zelig*. The latter film concerns a "human chameleon" and inserts Allen's eponymous character into actual

documentary footage to provide a convincing illusion of his actual presence at historical events. The generic simulation is further enhanced by the inclusion of real public figures, such as Susan Sontag and Saul Bellow, providing commentary on the figure of Zelig. Allen had already used the technique of having a real, extratextual figure entering the narrative (and thus pulling the narrative out of its textuality as it were) in *Annie Hall*, a film Danny Peary (1989: 20) sees as Allen's most beloved cult picture. In a scene in which the philosophy of Marshall McLuhan is briefly discussed, an annoyed Allen stops the narrative, pulls McLuhan into the frame and asks him to give his view on the matter. Other Allen films are more diffuse parodies: *Love and Death*, for example, mainly targets Russian novelists such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, but also includes numerous references to other films, in particular the works of Ingmar Bergman; whereas the compendium film *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)* contains send-ups of a variety of different artists and forms, including Shakespeare, Antonioni and television game shows. *Stardust Memories*, which French and French (1999: 202) regard as the "key film in the cult of the Woodman" parodies the system of art house cinema, and puts the films of Federico Fellini, in particular his already self-reflexive $8^1/_2$, through the mangle.

Parody's importance as a cultic form of filmic expression is that it relies upon broader cultural knowledge to function effectively. In this sense, it can sometimes appeal to a prominent sector of cult cinephiles: viewers with an extensive knowledge about cinema as a whole, gained through heavy viewing and associated information seeking. Extensive use of parody will more likely be fully understood by such viewers, who will have an increased likelihood of spotting the allusions at work in a parodic text. This would indicate that there is an elitist dimension to parody and associated intertextual forms which rely upon knowledge of other texts in order to be fully understood. To some extent this may be the case, though it is a point which needs qualification. First, as Richard Dyer has argued in discussing pastiche (which we will come to later), this elitist dimension (which also applies to parody) does not overlap with elites as socially defined: pastiche (and parody) occurs as much in popular and mass culture as it does in middle and high-brow culture. It could be posited, then, that it is a kind of populist/popular elitism: this relates to a number of processes connected to cultism, particularly the ways in which cultism often revolves around substantial knowledge and understanding of a range of popular texts. Secondly, we also need to understand the ways in which an appeal to people who "get it" works by a matter of degrees. It is not often the case that one set of viewers "gets" a parody and another set doesn't. This is because there will often be a number of references to other works within a given parodic film, which means that the amount of references recognized may vary a great deal from viewer to viewer. It is often the case that many parodic films will tend to function in a manner that minimizes the exclusivity of their operations: this is achieved through scattering references so that a film does not necessarily depend on the recognition of one referent text, and also by creating scenes that can function effectively even if the parodic referent is not spotted. A typical instance of the latter case is to create a comic scene which parodies another film, but which also can be interpreted as comic by viewers who do not possess the knowledge of the parodied text. It may be the case that certain parodic functions may fail if a crucial referent is not identified: for example, would *Zelig* "work" without knowledge that it is parodying the documentary? Would *Blazing Saddles* "work" without any knowledge of the Western film? They would probably not, though we would not want to rule out the possibility that "naïve" appreciation of these films cannot occur. This process of "getting it" is, however, only an extension of the intertextual regime upon which everyday film viewing depends. If we do not possess broader generic knowledge then it may also be the case that we may not "get" "straight" genre movies, because genres depend on a set of conventions which "specify the ways in which the individual work is to be read and understood, forming the implicit context in which that work acquires significance and meaning" (Ryall 1997: 328). This itself is an extension of culture in general, because no text (whether it be a film, a piece of writing, even an everyday utterance) can be understood in isolation, but "always appears to us as emerging from some other text" (Iampolski 1998: 15).

Parody often draws attention to the generic codes that viewers often take for granted. Many parodic films

are created when particular generic conventions have become routine to the point of cliché. If, at the broadest level, parody operates by spoofing the most clichéd examples of generic formulae, one could postulate that "cult" parodic films will tend to send up more specialist material, or at least material that itself has a particularly marked relation to cult cinema. This is certainly the case regarding one of the most well-known cult films, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which contains a number of parodic references to cult films including *Frankenstein* and *King Kong*, as well as referencing a slew of cheap science-fiction pictures. It is also the case with *Play it Again, Sam*, which sends up the cult classic *Casablanca* and is all about the cultic fascination that the film, in particular Bogart's character, exerts on Allan Felix (Woody Allen). Inevitably, comic results are produced by the gap between what Allan is (a neurotic nerd) and what he aspires to be (tough and cool). John Carpenter's *Dark Star*, meanwhile, spoofs science-fiction cinema, including the portentous cult film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Nevertheless, the often unpredictable quotient involved in cult cinema means that, while lampooning other cult and/or obscure material may be more likely to lead to cult status, this is not necessarily the case.

Often, it is hard to tell whether the high amount of tongue-in-cheek plagiarism of story-worlds, costumes or props, characters, and broad narrative lines is the result of comic genius, an attempt to tap into the eagerness of cultist audiences, a form of homage to the original, or just plain laziness. The cult status of the films of the British comedy team Monty Python, especially *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (a spoof of the Arthur myth) and *Life of Brian* (a spoof of the life of Jesus Christ), has, over the years, been considered a mix of each of these components. For some, Monty Python is ridiculous, for others silly, for others yet it is ultra-clever, and for many it is all of that – cult because of how it unhinges notions of humor. Since the 1990s, films such as *Mars Attacks!*, *Men in Black*, and *Galaxy Quest* have proved that mainstream audiences can sustain and even celebrate mockery. Even the cheekiest spoofs, such as erotic spoofs of blockbusters, have adopted the parody mode. In fact, their existence, and the degree of fidelity, crassness, or lack of production-value can be regarded as an indication of the cult appeal of the blockbuster they are spoofing. Production company Seduction Cinema, which labels itself as "cult" in its marketing, has made a name for itself as producer of erotic spoofs. Among the most visible have been *Lord of the G-Strings*, *Spiderbabe*, and *Batbabe: The Dark Nightie* (see Hunter 2006).

Cult Pastiche

Pastiche is closely related to parody: both modes draw attention to the conventions of generic discourse through a combination of imitation and discrepancy. Yet, while the two forms often overlap and are sometimes employed similarly, pastiche does not tend to contain the satirical, mocking nature of parody. Richard Dyer (2007: 47–48) has argued that three main factors need to be taken into account when distinguishing between pastiche and parody: *paratextual* factors, which relates to how a film is presented (for example, advertising and critical reaction may point out that a film is a pastiche); *contextual* factors, where we need to work out, for example, what decisions informed the work; and *textual* factors. Of course, there may be difficulties in arriving at any straightforward decision even when considering these elements because contradictory evidence may exist: a film may be advertised as a pastiche while more commonly identified as a parody by critics; different people who worked on the film may provide conflicting information about the reasons behind particular imitative strategies; while, as Dyer has pointed out, the textual distinctions between pastiche and parody are often not clearly marked but are a matter of degree. Ultimately, Dyer argues that whether we treat a text as pastiche or parody is a matter of how particular readers draw upon paratextual, contextual, and textual evidence to construct valid arguments which illuminate the texts concerned (2007: 48).We should point out here, though, that Dyer himself draws a distinction between *pasticcio* and *pastiche* (the latter word deriving from the former).

Pasticcio refers to a work that incorporates a number of references to, or quotations from, heterogeneous works, creating a multivocal play of competing textualities. An example of this would be the conscious placing of generic clues and cues in a film in order to

provide a wink to the in-the-know audience. Two examples of this with great currency in cult cinema are rabbits and chainsaws. Over the years, the referencing of rabbits has become a key component of cult films, from *Harvey* over *Rabbit's Moon*, *Weekend*, *El Topo*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Night of the Lepus*, *Nekromantik*, *Akira*, *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, to *The Lord of the Rings*.[2] The genealogy of this reference can probably be traced, for instance, to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (see Brooker 2004) or performance artist Joseph Beuys' use of rabbits as symbolic figures (and many folkloric uses of the animal well before that), but that genealogy matters less than the interrelationships and associations these references generate. By the time *Donnie Darko*, *Gummo*, *House of a 1000 Corpses*, and *Inland Empire* referenced rabbits, the trope had become a key marker in cult cinema. With chainsaws, a genealogy runs from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, over films such as *Motel Hell*, *Scarface*, *The Evil Dead*, *Bad Taste*, and *The Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*, to *Pulp Fiction*, *American Psycho*, and *Chainsaw Sally*. In each of its appearances in these films – most of which are spoofs of some kind – the chainsaw signals a moment of pasticcio, of simultaneously acknowledging a solid place in a generic tradition started by *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (as is observed by Kermode 2001), yet also pulling it out of this narrow generification. In *Pulp Fiction*, the chainsaw is one of a series of weapons Butch (Bruce Willis) considers using to liberate someone from torture. In the end Butch settles for a samurai sword – a weapon with a similar function as pasticcio.

For the larger part of his study, Dyer focuses on a specific form of pastiche, where instead of specific tools or moments, the overall work itself is signaled as imitative of other work(s) in some way (2007: 9–48). One particular genre that Dyer characterizes as marked by pastiche, and which has also spawned a number of cult films, is the spaghetti western. He argues: "The very fact of a Western being made not in the American West or even North America, and at a time when Hollywood Western production was considerably diminished, may suggest that at the very least it is apt to be pastiche, to be not the real thing and evidently conscious of it" (Dyer 2007: 102). Many spaghetti westerns, he argues, produce displays of "generic form qua generic form" (2007: 102), characteristically "take a standard formal procedure of the Western and then exaggerate and intensify it, to the point that it is carrying most of the force rather than the action it is disclosing" (2007: 105). We can relate such remarks to the frequency of stylistic excess within a number of cult films, because many such films intensify standard generic Western traits, heightening elements such as violence and formal expressiveness (for example, exaggerated close-ups, music that incorporates "extra-musical" sounds such as gunshots and cracking whips). It is perhaps this playful renegotiation of traditional Western traits which led to the critical dismissal of these films at the height of their production (in the 1960s), but also led to them building up a cult following. They were dismissed on the one hand, but perversely appreciated on the other, for being mere stylistic exercises that stripped the western of its moral dimensions to create cynical, nihilistic works.

The works of Leone are the best known spaghetti westerns, and it is his rather lavish *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and, even more so, *Once Upon a Time in the West* that have, in particular, come to earn critical respect over the years while also maintaining a cult status. *Once Upon a Time in the West*, in particular, is a film built from the history of the American Western, but which transforms previous motifs, themes and moments into something distinctive. According to Christopher Frayling, the film "is an anthology of great sequences from the Hollywood Western, lovingly re-created before being turned inside out" (2008: 55): the film includes a large number of citations from other westerns, including *High Noon*, *The Iron Horse*, *Johnny Guitar*, *Man of the West*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *The Searchers*, and *Shane* (2008: 59–63). This citational pastiche running through the film also informs Morricone's score, which quotes from Mozart's *Don Giovani* and Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* (French and French 1999: 157). Spaghetti western producers themselves showed awareness of how their films were pastiches too. *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *My Name Is Nobody* used iconic actor Henry Fonda against type. In *Once Upon a Time in the West* Fonda's character is killed dramatically, in a duel, after it is revealed just how cruel he was. In *My Name Is Nobody* his demise is presented as much more matter-of-fact, a riddance without even the generic convention of a decent duel. Alex Cox (2010: 8) gives

a good illustration of spaghetti westerns' pastiche awareness folding onto itself in his discussion of the cult reputation of *Rita of the West*, a spaghetti western that was intended to emulate *Django* – and which introduced Terrence Hill (who would go on to *My Name Is Nobody*) to the genre. In *Rita of the West*, Django reappears as a character, as does a character resembling Clint Eastwood from Leone's films, mixed into a structure that is as much a musical (with Italian pop star Rita Pavone) as it is a western.

Dyer, in analyzing relationships between pastiche, genre, and history, also analyzes the concept of *neo-noir*: films that consciously rework the visual style and/or mood of the film noir of the 1940s and 1950 and which emerged in the 1980s. It was the first cycle of neo-noir that Frederik Jameson focused on in his discussion of postmodern pastiche. Neo-noir has continued to be used up until the current date, and a number of such films have gained cult status, including *Lost Highway*, *Memento*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Usual Suspects*, as well as the noir-inflected science fiction film *Blade Runner*. As film noir is itself a controversial genre – in that it defines a body of films that were never identified as such at the time of their release – the increasing appeal of neo-noir not only functions in cultifying films that serve as crucial reference points, but actually plays a part in strengthening the existence of film noir as a generic category. As Dyer argues, "pastiche contributes not only to fixing the perception of the genre that it pastiches but to identifying its very existence. Moreover, in the case of neo-noir, it contributes to making the case for something whose existence is in fact problematic" (2007: 128–129).

The director and production team of Joel and Ethan Coen, who enjoy a cult reputation, have been most drawn to noir as an influence in their filmmaking. The Coens are often identified with genre pastiche (e.g. screwball comedy in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, the gangster film in *Miller's Crossing*) and have included a vast range of intertextual references within their films. The noir-inflected crime film has, however, been one of the most prominent generic features of their work and informs, in different ways, *The Big Lebowski*, *Blood Simple*, *Fargo*, and *The Man Who Wasn't There*. While their debut feature *Blood Simple*, which established their reputation, was a fairly "straight" take on hard-boiled crime, their biggest cult favorite *The Big Lebowski* can be considered a noir in disguise (as a buddy comedy). *Lebowski* uses a noir-ish plot influenced by Raymond Chandler, and twists it into absurd, incongruous directions. As J.M. Tyree and Ben Walters (2007: 48) have pointed out, Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* had already updated Chandler by replacing the cool, cynical, witty detective typified by Bogart with the rambling, laidback, and rather dim Elliot Gould. Altman's film is among the Coen brothers' favorite and also informs their film, but *The Big Lebowski* takes the initial plot mechanics of Chandler further into uncharted, and comic, territory by placing the most incongruous and reluctant character at the heart of its story (the Dude, a dope-smoking slacker who likes to bowl). The film is very much informed by the twin processes of pastiche and incongruity. Situations, imagery, and characters that are often borrowed, share the same space without any apparent logic. For Tyree and Walters, though, the film is not merely an "empty" exercise in pastiche; rather, the film is actually about pastiche, for within the film many of the characters are not who they seem and "put on" an identity (2007: 38). In a similar way, *The Big Lebowski* is a film that "puts on" the surface accoutrements of a buddy comedy while structurally adhering to a noir-type thriller. Surface appearances throughout the film are deceptive, apart from the Dude and Walter, who end the film by going bowling, unchanged by their adventures in deceptive pastiche.

The Cult of Irony and "Smart" Film

One film director who has often used pastiche within his work is Todd Haynes, who established a reputation as a cult director with *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, a film that gained cult status after it was removed from public exhibition (due to infringing the copyright of the Carpenters' music) and went on to gain an enthusiastic following among those who exchanged bootleg copies of the film on VHS cassette (Davis 2008; Hilderbrand 2009). *Superstar* itself relied on intertextual irony through using a well-known children's toy product – the Barbie doll – to act out the life and times of Karen Carpenter (from mainstream 1970s chart-toppers The Carpenters). Haynes played upon the knowledge of Barbie's wholesome reputation by

inserting such dolls within a story that focused on bulimia and anxiety, thus producing a satiric comment on fame and beauty within American society. This cultish reputation has tended to stay with Haynes, and he has gone on to create films which very much draw on a variety of intertextual devices. For example, his Sirk-inspired *Far from Heaven* told a 1950s story in a style influenced by a number of 1950s Hollywood melodramas, but with a few differences – such as its explicit tackling of homosexuality, its swifter editing pace, its musical score (Dyer 2007: 175). Haynes also makes use of pastiche in his film *Poison*, both in the segment "Hero" – which pastiches documentary reconstruction – and "Horror," which recreates the stylistic ambience of a 1950s low-budget, science fiction/horror film. His music-themed films *Velvet Goldmine* and *I'm Not There*, meanwhile, use a number of pastiche moments to evoke the times that they recreate, such as music videos, references to David Bowie and Marc Bolan, and *Citizen Kane* in the former, and the Dylan documentary *Don't Look Back* in the latter.

Haynes has been linked to a mode of filmmaking that Jeffrey Sconce (2002) has labeled "smart cinema." Sconce argued that a number of recent American films, existing on the fringes of the independent and the mainstream industry (and which some would perhaps term as belonging to the hybrid territory of "indiewood"), are marked by a sense of ironic distance, as well as by a "predilection for irony, black humour, fatalism, relativism and ... nihilism" (Sconce 2002: 350). The importance of this "smart" corpus of filmmaking to cult cinema is through its mode of address. Sconce argues:

> To speak in an ironic tone is instantly to bifurcate one's audience into those who "get it" and those who do not. The entire point of ironic address is to ally oneself with sympathetic peers and to distance oneself from the vast "other" audience, however defined, which is often the target of the speaker's or artist's derision. (2002: 352)

These films, then, tend to create an "us" and "them" mentality, which extends to the way they are marketed: to young, educated "bohemian" audiences and contrasted to mainstream Hollywood fare (positioned as smarter). This very much fits into a cult mentality: an "us versus them" mentality incorporated into the texts and aimed at niche audiences. Such audiences may very well enjoy the privileged position that they assume when watching such films; these films may, in their "smartness," assure viewers that they are superior to the average audience (often labeled as mainstream).

Pastiche and the ironic distance that marks smart films are connected to the extent that both speak in a language of quotation marks. Though they are often perceived as symptoms of postmodernity, they are expressive techniques that have rich histories, stretching back long before the mid twentieth century. It has been argued, nevertheless, that ironic discourse has increased in more recent times: Nicholas Rombes argues that it has grown in tandem with the rise of television (2005: 73), while Harries contends that since the 1970s we have been living in an "age of irony" (2000: 21). The particular form of ironic discourse evident in a number of American independent films from the 1990s onwards is often (though not always) a sarcastic and cynical form of irony. Sconce, in his analysis of smart cinema, claims that many critics have linked this cynical, disenchanted ironic mode to "Generation X." Generation X was a term lifted from the title of Douglas Coupland's eponymous 1991 novel and which referred, in the early 1990s, to smart, highly educated men and women who had missed out on the economic growth enjoyed by baby boomers and who were accused by the older generation of laziness, cynicism, sarcasm, and of being apolitical. Such laziness and cynicism, however, was often linked to the fact that this generation saw their elders as selling out to the forces they once claimed to fight (Sconce 2002: 355). Distrustful of consumer capitalism yet also resigned to it, this generation were seen to practice a form of "ironic cultural consumption," in which popular culture was discussed in quotation marks: it could be enjoyed yet one could also distance oneself from it at the same time (Sconce 2002: 356). Among the films that drew at least part of their cult status from this, are *Slacker* and the slightly more hyperbolic *Office Space* and *Idiocracy* (all hailing from Austin, Texas; see Macor 2010).

One movie that would seem to encapsulate "ironic cultural consumption" is *Ghost World*. Adapted from Daniel Clowes's graphic story, the film concerns two

female school-leavers negotiating their identities, futures, and culture. Both Enid (Thora Birch) and Rebecca (Scarlett Johansen) approach almost everything ironically, through which they can express their disgust with contemporary culture, but also enjoy a modicum of sarcastic satisfaction. An example is their visit to a 1950s diner, an establishment that rather lamely attempts ersatz simulation and which ironically appeals to them through its "badness." However, when Enid and Rebecca have to get jobs they are placed much more within cultural milieus that they are used to mocking from a distance. This leads to a split between the characters: Rebecca starts to take her job more seriously in her attempts to save money to move out of her parents', and thus adopts a more mature, less ironic approach. Enid, though, continues to adopt her sarcastic mien, which leads to increasing alienation (she is sacked from a cinema she works at as such an attitude is not countenanced). Their friendship is further tested when Enid begins to hang around the elder Seymour, in whom she detects – with his love for old 78 rpm records and hatred of modern culture – an authenticity lacking in her current generation.

Ghost World concerns the difficulties that some people have relating to aspects of modern life, but also the difficulty in relating to aspects of it when surrounded by people who will knock you down for doing so. Ironic sarcasm can liberate people from such pitfalls, but it also offers its own problems, namely an inability to identify with anything and thus an increasing alienation from life. It is difficult to detect an ultimate standpoint of the film: while Enid's excessive irony is seen as problematic, it also offers its pleasures and the film would seem to side with her over Rebecca, whose increasing conventionality is presented as rather staid and unattractive. Seymour's retreat from modern life does not seem to offer an answer, either, as he ends the film by moving back with his mother. The film appears to adopt a somewhat distanced, even ironic, mode of narration itself, not identifying firmly with any figure, and perhaps hinting at the complexities of negotiating modern life.

The idea of "distanced" narration links with Sconce's assertion that many "smart films" employ a *blank style*: "an attempt to convey a film's story, no matter how sensationalistic, disturbing, or bizarre, with a sense of *dampened affect*" (2002: 359). Such a technique is evident in the work of Todd Solondz, whose work is typified by an aggressively sarcastic distancing from characters. Solondz presents his material in a thoroughly mocking way, to the extent that many of his films are drenched in irony. In *Happiness*, for example, distance occurs both among characters and between characters and viewers: through sarcastic remarks, awkward silences, character placement within frames, and through the "ironic" use of music (such as light, breezy muzak accompanying scenes that are often anything but light and breezy in tone). The effect is to undercut the positive surface sheen of suburban America as empty, alienating, and demoralizing (hence the ironic title of the film itself). While satires of middle-class suburbia are nothing new, *Happiness* intensifies many themes to a generally uncomfortable degree through its cruel humor and bleak outlook. This has led some critics to bemoan Solondz as nihilistic and misanthropic. Even in more tender moments, where we are perhaps meant to sympathize with characters, the overall tone is often infused with ironic distance. For example, when Allen (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and Kristina (Camryn Manheim) form a bond and dance, the potential tenderness of the scene is undermined through Air Supply's "All Out of Love" playing over the speakers. It may be the case that Solondz was not deliberately using this song ironically, but as a rather over-sentimental, 1980s ballad the song would seem to represent the rather gauche, middle-class values that he is attacking.

Solondz was increasingly referred to as a cult director within film magazines and other critical writing after releasing *Happiness*, a film which pushed smart cinema into particularly uncomfortable, cringe-inducing places and therefore gained extra cult kudos for its ability to disgust some audiences. The film invited a large amount of controversy (another factor common among cult reputations) for its pedophilia theme and this limited its distribution (Sundance Film Festival even refused to accept the film due to its controversial themes). Solondz was promoted as a nerd who was nevertheless cool and savvy, a figure who fitted into the "geek chic" trends that emerged in the late 1990s. He continues to create rather hermetically sealed filmic worlds that tend to relate to other films he has made: thus, the character of Mark Weiner from *Welcome to the Dollhouse* reappears in *Palindromes*, while Solondz's *Life*

during Wartime is a sequel to *Happiness* which uses different actors to play the same characters from that film.

Conclusion: Reflexivity and Anti-illusionism

During the 1970s and into the 1980s there emerged a kind of academic cult around reflexive films. One particular genre that made extensive use of the possibilities of reflexivity is the horror genre. Because of its peculiarities we have expanded on this particular application in Chapter 18. Reflexivity influenced cult cinema well beyond the horror genre, especially through the influence by the ideas of Brecht. Among sections of academic film studies there was an interest in left-wing politics and how film could be used in a "progressive" direction. Many academics considered a large percentage of commercial filmmaking ideological in the sense that it represented an illusory world that people were encouraged to become absorbed in for merely escapist purposes. It was against such illusory practices that reflexive strategies became of interest, as reflexivity was a process that drew attention to the film itself and therefore went against the general illusory processes at work in many narrative films. As Robert Stam has argued, "While illusionist art strives for an impression of spatio-temporal coherence, anti-illusionist art calls attention to the gaps and holes and seams in the narrative tissue. To the suave continuities of illusionism, it opposes the rude shocks of rupture and discontinuity" (1992: 7).

While theorists saw differences among particular reflexive strategies – between, for example, the stark "structural-materialist" films of Peter Gidal and the playful reflexivity of Chuck Jones's animated *Duck Amuck* – reflexive techniques nevertheless demanded attention because of their ability to disrupt the illusory flow of narrative fiction. As such, Hollywood films that were particularly reflexive accrued interest for the ways that they tapped into the concerns of the film studies agenda. One prominent mode – which would also have appealed to those studying film to the extent that it mirrored their own discipline – is films either about filmmaking or film spectatorship. *Sunset Boulevard*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Rear Window*, and *Peeping Tom*, for example, became important films in this respect, and could be classed as "academic cults" for the widespread analyses they inspired within university research and teaching. In *Rear Window*, Jeffries (James Stewart) is immobilized in a wheelchair and watches different people in the flats opposite. Jeffries is both a model of spectatorship because of his immobile gazing, but also a metaphor for the director in that he chooses different lenses to watch and chooses which scenes to focus on (Stam 1992: 46). *Peeping Tom* concerns the serial-killer cameraman Mark Lewis (Karlheinz Böhm) and probes into the sadistic, dark side of filmmaking. As a film that was critically mauled on its release and which later became acclaimed it also underwent a reception trajectory common to many cult films. Another cult film concerning filmmaking is Peter Bogdanovich's *Targets*. This Roger Corman production features Boris Karloff as an ageing actor (Byron Orlok – the surname recalling Graf Orlok, aka "Nosferatu") who feels that his films have become redundant in the modern, violent world. Intertwined with this plot is a story of a man who randomly kills people with his shotgun. At the end of the movie the two strands collide at a drive-in screening (of Karloff in *The Terror*), and the meeting of "old" and "new" horror come face to face, with Orlok eventually emerging triumphant.

While interest in reflexive techniques largely stemmed from a political interest in filmmaking, the 1980s saw a wider interest in reflexive techniques with the rise of postmodernism in the academy. As reflexive, intertextual, and ironic techniques proliferated, it became somewhat difficult to uphold a belief that such techniques were themselves necessarily radical or critical. David Foster Wallace bemoaned the increasing use of ironic techniques in relation to consumerist lifestyles within literature in 1993 as being empty rather than critical. Such techniques may have once proved critical devices that drew attention to the hollowness of consumer culture, but these devices had since been appropriated by that very culture: many advertisements, for example, employ a self-mocking irony (Wallace 1997: 52). Likewise, within cinema, the proliferation of parody and irony has led Harries to contend that we now live in a "culture steeped in irony; an era where postmodern activity has become more the norm than any sort of alternative practice," a

process he terms "ironic supersaturation" (Harries 2000: 3). It is clear, then, that in an age when parody, irony, and associated modes have become so common, such techniques will vary in status and intention: they will not necessarily become cult films, but some of them will; they are not necessarily going to be critical of the status quo, though the adoption of irony does not render them incapable of criticism.

Notes

1. He is here drawing on the work of Rick Altman (1986 and 1999).
2. For a list of almost 100 cult movies with rabbits, see the thread "rabbits and cult cinema," at: http://cultmediastudies.ning.com/forum/topics/rabbits-and-cult-cinema?id=2098248%3ATopic%3A7829&page=1#comments.

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Meta-cult

Our final chapter is an attempt to think about the ways in which "cult" has increasingly and consciously been used within various realms of culture – including reviewing, marketing, film production – so that cultural artifacts positioned as cult have become much more commonplace. In his book *Metaculture*, Greg Urban (2001: 3) writes that "metaculture is culture about culture," and argues that metaculture is important in aiding the circulation of cultural objects: it can, for example, draw attention to art works and help overcome the "forces of dissipation to which culture, moving through the world, is subject" (2003: 38). In a similar manner, we can think of the idea of "meta-cult" (used by Eco in his classic 1986 article, but here used in a slightly broader sense) as not only related to discourses which frame a particular work as cult, but also more generally to works which self-consciously draw on cult – *cult as performing cult* as it were. There has undoubtedly been an increase in such meta-cultural processes in recent times, and these can be grouped into three broad categories. First, the discursive uses of "cult" in relation to films by critics, academics, and other types of audiences; secondly, filmmakers who self-consciously draw on cult and who may also become important commentators on cult cinema; thirdly, industrial mechanisms which employ cult as a categorical and/or marketing tool. We will deal with these three issues in more detail before moving on to reflect upon some changes that have resulted in the emergence of these trends.

Cult Discourses

Historically, the term "cult" was employed sporadically in relation to movie-going as far back as the 1920s, usually to negatively describe particular audiences without relation to specific films. The actual term "cult film" (or "cult movie") began to be employed around the mid 1970s to describe films that were being watched repeatedly, usually at either college venues or at midnight screenings (present knowledge points towards this phrase being applied first within the United States, though more research arguably needs to be undertaken to investigate this issue).

This is also the time when the word "cult" itself became present in the marketing of films, as a tool to attract audiences and capture a place in the market (we addressed this partly in Chapter 2). *Harold and Maude*, for instance, had been dismissed by critics, but had managed to "hang on by word of mouth for two years in Detroit, and over three at the Westgate theatre in suburban Minneapolis, largely *because* the studio had invested little or no publicity in the film" writes Greg Taylor (1999: 119). He continues: "Encouraged, Paramount revived *Harold and Maude*, carefully marketing it as a cultist gem (starting with test-runs at New York's counterculture Thalia and Elgin)." That was 1974. Two years later, the poster for John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) announced it as the "cult film of the year".[1] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* too, was

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explicitly marketed as cult, as was the release of *Eraserhead*.

By and large, films that gained cult followings tended to be older films (which may or may not have been popular in their day) which had found a new audience, or newer films that had taken time to build up a small, devoted following. These processes reflect Telotte's distinction between the "classical cult film" and the "midnight movie" (1991a: 10–11), though this designation is slightly too neat, as Telotte focuses on once-mainstream Hollywood movies in the former category and low-budget, newer movies in the latter. This overlooks newer, larger budget films that gained cult followings (such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*) as well as more obscure, older films (such as *Detour*).

The 1980s were a period when the term was employed on a more regular, albeit gradual, basis. Alongside the increasing utilization of the phrase there was a gradual broadening of its application: this may have resulted partially from semantic circulation (i.e. the increasing spread of the term led to some using it in different ways than others, either through vagueness of explication and understanding, or through deliberately employing it in a novel manner), but we also need to be aware of the rise of home video during the 1980s, which offered a new platform by which films could gain cult reputations. Cult was now a process not merely limited to the public sphere of the cinema theater, but which had now spilled over into domestic space. This process further alerted some commentators to think about cult films in relation not just to video, but also to television. This was particularly so within the United States, where the variety of cable channels led to a number of specialized – or niche – channels. Thus, in 1984, *New York Times* critic Peter Kerr noted that the cable channel Bravo (formed in 1980) specialized in cult films (Kerr 1984: 28). Notably, he used cult to refer to "obscure" and "offbeat" fare, so that it signified a text's cultural status and broad textual qualities. This semantic expansion resulted from people observing how a number of films with cult reputations also shared certain qualities, thus leading to cult being employed in some contexts as a label describing a certain kind of film.

The 1980s was a period when a few academic studies of cult film emerged and this increased throughout the 1990s, alongside the continued proliferation of the concept more generally. This was also a decade that saw the emergence of two particularly important technologies which would impact upon the phenomenon of the cult film: the internet and DVDs. While the internet had existed for some time, it was only in the early 1990s – with the emergence of the World Wide Web – that it became available to the general public, though it would take time to filter into many people's lives. DVDs entered the consumer marketplace in the late 1990s and outstripped home video in terms of rapid take-up. Both the internet and DVDs would increase in popularity in the 2000s, a decade which gave rise to further developments that impacted upon the phenomenon of cult cinema. These include: increasingly fast broadband connections, which further led to a growth in file sharing; blogging; social networking sites; and YouTube, to name only a few examples. Discursively, the web has been host to an even greater proliferation of writings on cult cinema (mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5) which enables people to encounter such talk on a more regular basis (particularly if they are, as researchers, looking for cult film discussions), and therefore creates a kind of loop: the more that people witness a particular term being employed, the more likely it is to seep into their vocabulary and potentially infuse their talk.

Self-conscious Cultism

We use the term "self-conscious cultism" to refer to the ways in which filmmakers themselves can actively draw upon cult film history to imbue their own films with cult value. Such maneuvers may not necessarily guarantee cult status as it is traditionally conceived, but the continual mutations of cult cinema as a discourse should alert us to the importance of such processes. In this sense, cult film could be viewed as having moved beyond its origins as referring to particular receptions of films, shooting off in a number of different directions. As Matt Hills has argued, accounts which construct cult as merely a matter of audience response "fail to consider the duality of cult: that is, 'cult' status can arise both through audiences' discourses and through production or textual strategies" (2008a: 448). He goes on to claim that

cult's meanings have developed historically, and that we now need to consider its use as:

> a category and discourse by filmmakers and publicists, as well as its wider circulation as a discourse in scholarly and journalistic work. What "cult" demonstrates, rather well, is that a film category may emerge as an audience/critical discourse, but can then mutate into a form of generic contract, or a form of interpellative marketing, or a series of production/textual strategies. (2008a: 449)

In this sense, the self-conscious cultism of filmmakers should be considered an important part of the cult film phenomenon, marking a stage in cult cinema history whereby the term has infused film culture to a significant extent.

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 6, both Joe Dante and Tim Burton can be seen as notable examples of filmmakers who have self-consciously drawn upon cult cinema within their own work. They both, for example, employ references to a number of films that have themselves been considered as cult films. Dante himself has a background steeped in cult-related activities: he not only gained filmmaking experience working with cult auteur Roger Corman, he also wrote reviews for the *Castle of Frankenstein* – a journal devoted to horror film and related culture – in the early 1960s. His knowledge of a wide range of films, particularly more exploitation fare, has fed into his filmmaking practice. His first film was actually a compilation of clips assembled from films, commercials, and trailers, entitled *Movie Orgy*, and this compulsion to reference other filmmaking would feed into his later work. His first film for Corman's New World Pictures – *Hollywood Boulevard* (co-directed with Allan Arkush, 1976) – would continue this trend by pastiching low-budget pictures and incorporating stock footage from other films. Even when he made more commercial films for the studios, his parading of cult knowledge has continued: from *Innerspace*, a virtual remake of *Fantastic Voyage*, to the William Castle-inspired *Matinee*, and his regular employment of cult actors such as Dick Miller, Kevin McCarthy and Kenneth Tobey. As Martyn Bamber has written (2003): "Dante's love of movies – particularly B-movies – oozes off the screen and you get the sense that he wants to share that love with his audience as well."

This is also the case with Burton, another filmmaker who grew up loving exploitation films, many of which have since become associated with cult cinema. His short film *Vincent* was about his obsession with cult star Vincent Price, who would later appear in Burton's feature *Edward Scissorhands*, in what would turn out to be his last appearance. Christopher Lee is another cult actor who has appeared in Burton's movies, one of which – *Sleepy Hollow* – was a homage to the Gothic horror films produced by Hammer Studios. Burton would revisit his love for low-budget, disreputable sci-fi films in his *Mars Attacks!*, but it his more loving homage to cult director Ed Wood – *Ed Wood* – which perhaps stands as his ultimate meta-cult statement. Burton's films are not only infused with particular references to the cult films that he grew up with, they are also more generally permeated with "cultishness" on a textual level: his tendency to create strange, fantastical worlds (particularly notable at the level of design) and his thematic obsession with outsiderness, for example, are both features that have been considered important in many cult films.

A number of other directors can be seen as self-consciously cult in a similar manner. Quentin Tarantino, in particular, has drawn on his film-going experiences within his own work and peppered his films with a number of filmic references. In his more recent films, in particular, he has almost been engaged in a form of cult fan filmmaking on a large scale, from the martial arts-inspired *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, his homage to grindhouse cinema *Death Proof* – occasionally presented as a double "grindhouse" package alongside Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* – and his most recent *Inglourious Basterds*, a "revisioning" of Enzo Castellari's movie *Inglorious Bastards*. Tarantino also plays the part of the cultist more generally, in expressing his adoration for the phenomenal experience of watching cult movies:

> I always remember back in the days when I was a film-geek, hanging out with my friends, how we were always trying to see the sort of film that you couldn't see, like Jodorowsky's *El Topo*: it was completely out of circulation, there was no way you could see it ... One of us would get a copy, a horrible screwed up one – the more screwed up it was the cooler it was – we'd sit around and watch this bad copy, (oh man, so cool, get this ripped, crappy, old copy of *El Topo*, look at that, oh boy! You know!) (Tarantino 1995)

Tarantino also presents himself as a cultist by appearing in many documentaries on cult films and filmmakers: these include a documentary on Sam Fuller, *The Typewriter, the Rifle and the Movie Camera*, and a film about Australian exploitation cinema, *Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation!*. He has also set up a short-lived company in 1995, Rolling Thunder Pictures, with Bob and Harvey Weinstein, to release older exploitation films and market them to new audiences. Though this was short-lived – releasing a few films such as *Switchblade Sisters*, *The Beyond*, and *Mighty Peking Man* – the films were subsequently released on DVD with Tarantino's name and face on the covers. All these activities show that Tarantino himself is a meta-cult director: not only does he enjoy his own cult following, but through his films and other activities he attempts to draw attention to the cult movies that he admires and thus broaden their viewership. While this does not always work out as intended (hence the short life of Rolling Thunder Pictures), Tarantino is nevertheless an important figure who has the potential to draw attention to more obscure cult movies. In short, he can use his (large) cult status to further create cult auras around other (smaller cult) films. He is among a number of filmmakers who also comment upon, and therefore contribute to, the values associated with particular cult films. Joe Dante is a similar figure in this regard, having contributed to DVD extras of cult films: for example, he discusses the cult status of *Spider Baby* on MPI's 2007 DVD (in a featurette titled "The Hatching of Spider Baby"). Dante has also drawn attention to a number of older films – some already established cult films, others perhaps potential cults – through his *Trailers from Hell* web site, in which himself and a number of other directors (such as Eli Roth, Larry Cohen, and Allison Anders) introduce and comment on film trailers and outline the personal significance of the film under discussion.

Less established directors can also draw upon, and contribute to the field of, cult cinema, in a bid to gain an audience within a competitive film market. This is not an entirely new phenomenon – Richard Elfman's *Forbidden Zone*, for example, drew upon a variety of disreputable genre traditions and mixed them together in a particularly self-conscious manner – but it does seem to be increasing in line with the growing awareness of cult cinema. While it is not possible to exhaustively outline films which self-consciously draw on cult film, we will devote brief attention to three more recent examples. First, Don Coscarelli's *Bubba Ho-tep*, a film based on a story by a cult writer (Joe R. Lansdale), featuring an actor with a dedicated cult following (Bruce Campbell), and based around a dead star (Elvis Presley) with a huge cult aura. It draws on the horror genre but mixes this with very quirky humor and a bizarre form of alternate history: Elvis is still alive and living in a retirement home (having swapped identities with an Elvis impersonator) and then becomes involved in a battle with an evil Egyptian entity. In its genre mixing and incorporation of different cult personalities, the film seems designed to be "cultish." Secondly, *Viva* is a film that consciously mimics elements of 1970s sexploitation films, incorporating colorfully gaudy decor and costumes, deliberately campy acting, and drawing upon the work of directors such as Russ Meyer and Radley Metzger. The result is a pastiche that acknowledges the cult reputation that many films from this subgenre of filmmaking have garnered. It can thus be considered a film which reflects upon the cult of a particular type of film from a particular era, but in doing so also positions itself as a potential cult itself. Such positioning was certainly aided by its UK DVD release, which was released on the Cine-Excess imprint of Nouveaux Pictures, a label aiming to release cult films aimed at both the general consumer and the educational sector. Thirdly, *In Bruges*, the feature debut of theater maker Martin McDonagh, is a homage to numerous cult elements, most notably cult cinema's obsession with grotesque and disabled bodies (see Chapter 9). Jordan Prentice plays the role of a foul-mouthed, womanizing, and arrogant dwarf-actor in a European horror movie filmed in Bruges (very much in the tradition of *Daughters of Darkness* it seems), the shooting of which is upset by a war between Irish gangsters. In general, dwarves in cult films merely figure as "being there," but in *In Bruges*, the emphasis is instead placed on how non-cute and ill-tempered Prentice's character is. This makes *In Bruges* both a pastiche and a critique. Soon after its release, *In Bruges* was being touted as a cult film on the website "The Cult," the official site of *Fight Club* writer Chuck Palahniuk.

Cult Positioning

The idea of positioning or framing films as cult is the final important consideration that we will discuss in this chapter, and it is a process that is occurring on a number of different levels. First, "cult" is now being used by the industry as a term by which to promote and/or to categorize films. This can occur within the marketing of films for theatrical screenings and DVD release, as well as by retail outfits. The aforementioned *Viva*, for example, not only parades its cult references within the film text but also through associated promotional discourse. Thus, press for the film claims that: "VIVA is a cult freak-out retro 1970's spectacle ... VIVA is a highly stylized film that draws on classic exploitation cinema for its look and characters" (www.lifeofastar.com/viva.html). And to use a non-exploitation example as well: upon the DVD release of Peter Watkins's *Punishment Park*, Chris Fujiwara in the Boston Phoenix referred to it as a "cult hit waiting to happen," a claim that was promptly put on the cover of subsequent editions of the DVD.

The use of the term "cult" within promotion is certainly growing, as is the use of the term within critical reviews. If cult is designated by reviewers then this can itself feed back into promotional discourse. An example of this can be detected in the DVD release of *Christmas on Mars*, a low-budget science fiction film featuring music act The Flaming Lips. A film that only had a limited theatrical release, it was nevertheless positioned as a cult movie by *New York Times* writer Andy Webster, who placed it in a lineage of music-related films such as *Head* and *Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same*, and wrote that these "were endearingly ragged projects, destined for cult status" (2008: 10). Cult cinema was further evoked through referencing other cult films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Dark Star* and cult filmmaker David Lynch. The quote "destined for cult status" was then used on some of the posters that accompanied the DVD release of the film, while promotion for the DVD used the same quote as one of "3 reasons to buy this film."

It is not just films themselves that are subject to cult positioning: DVD companies, for example, are increasingly adopting cult as a category to use within their catalogs. Thus, one of the most prestigious DVD companies, Criterion – well known for its high-quality transfers and extra materials – includes a set of "themes" within its online catalog, one of which is "cult movies." The introduction to its range of cult movies claims that, with the wane of drive-ins and midnight movie screenings, the DVD has become a key means to access cult cinema, and continues to offer a short description: such films are considered to be "boundary-testing" and "delicately ride the line between pulp and art, always landing firmly in the latter camp." Criterion is a label that does not merely categorize films as cult, however: it is arguably a label that has itself become subject to a cult following. Many DVD collectors praise the label for the care that it puts into its releases and its reputation is reflected in the reliably high prices that it charges for its DVDs, a price that leaves those outside of the "Criterion cult" puzzled as to why anyone would pay so much. Thus, on an AV Forums discussion about rare DVDs, a poster comments:

> some peeps are just looney toons for the Crit label and will pay way above the odds for a version of a movie released by them just to add to their collection – doesn't matter if there's another version that's just as good/better available at a much lower price, it's the Criterion name that's all important! (Crazy Horse 2005)

It should come as no surprise that many of the DVDs cited as belonging to the rare – and therefore collectible and expensive – category are out-of-print Criterion releases. Further evidence of Criterion's cult status can be found in fan activities, which include a blog entitled "The Criterion Contraption," a series of writings based around the idea of watching every DVD in the Criterion collection, and an emerging trend to create imaginary Criterion DVD covers for films either not released in the series, or as alternate covers for those that have been released. Most of these can be found on Criterion's own forum, "The Auteurs," though they also appear on other forums and blogs, and have become a popular pastime among a certain section of cinema enthusiasts (Figure 22.1).

While other DVD companies may not enjoy the cult following enjoyed by Criterion, many do use cult, or cultish components, to either distinguish themselves and/or categorize products. This can take the simple

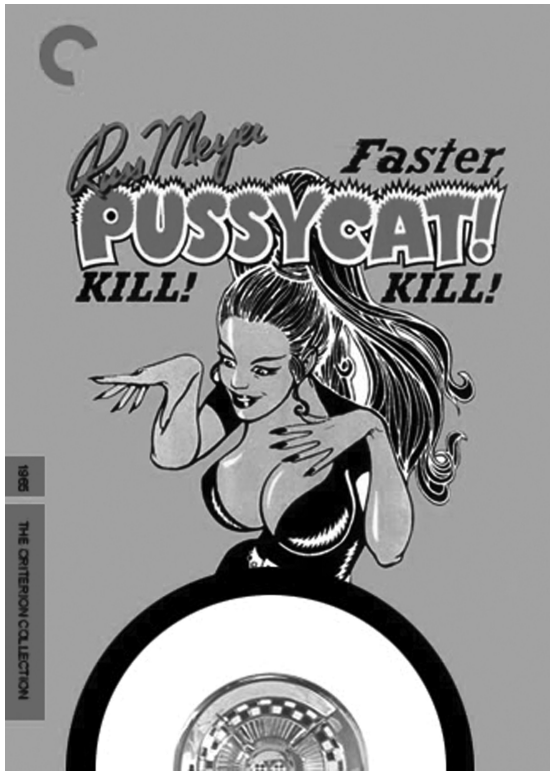


Figure 22.1 A piece of Criterion fan art: an imaginary cover for Russ Meyer's *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*

means of using "cult" as a generic category within their catalogs (this is used, for example, by Kino and Image Entertainment, both American companies), or it can take the form of companies that specialize in cult cinema, or have imprints that devote themselves to such fare. Companies such as Blue Underground (US), Mondo Macabro (US, with a UK arm), Synapse (US), Cult Epics (US), Fantoma (US) and Something Weird (US) can all be seen as specializing in cult cinema. Most of these companies specialize in lower-budget, exploitation films: Something Weird is dedicated to releasing obscure, unreleased titles from the 1930s–1970s; Blue Underground presents itself as continuing the tradition of grindhouse cinemas for a home movie age, though does not limit itself to a specific era of film production; Mondo Macabro focuses on global genre cinema, the majority of which is not well known by Western audiences. Not all films released by such companies are considered to be exploitation films, however: Fantoma, for example, has released films by Kenneth Anger; Synapse has released Leni Riefenstahl's controversial propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, and Cult Epics has released films by Fernando Arrabel and Jean Genet. While the word "cult" is not used by all of these companies, it often is: Blue Underground has a category entitled "Cult Classics"; Synapse has a range of films which it releases under the "Asian Cult Cinema Collection." Even when not explicitly used, it is hinted at in language that evokes cult.

There are also imprints of labels that attempt to position products as cult objects. These include, for example, Tartan's "Asia Extreme" imprint (UK, now defunct), and BFI's "Flipside" (UK). Tartan's "Asia Extreme" imprint grew out of its releases of *Ringu*, *Audition*, and *Battle Royale*, in 2001. After the films – in particular *Audition* – caused some controversial press responses, Tartan rebranded the films "Tartan Asia Extreme" in order to capitalize on such notoriety. This then led to a number of subsequent releases under the imprint, which by March 2005 constituted almost a third of Tartan's entire DVD output (Drew 2007: 53–54). Drew argues that Tartan targeted what it saw as an existing cult fan following for Asian genre films, but also marketed these films for "art-house" audiences (seen as favoring less obviously generic output and emphasizing stylistic appreciation, particularly through the lens of authorship). While these audience segments are not mutually exclusive, this twin demographic targeting could help maximize the films' appeal to specialized audiences within the UK. The BFI's "Flipside" label can also be seen as manifesting a growing awareness of the overlaps between cult/art-house audiences (Figure 22.2). The BFI has long been considered to be an institution that has nurtured the appreciation of film as art, but its recent DVD imprint focuses on obscure, and often eccentric, films from British cinema history. The press release for Flipside mentions "cult" twice and further illustrates how the BFI sees this series as broadening its audience by claiming that it "is likely to appeal to a diverse range of film fans, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the BFI's more traditional DVD and Blu-ray output."

While these smaller companies attempt to frame films as cult in order to appeal to a broader, albeit still "specialized" audience, major companies have also

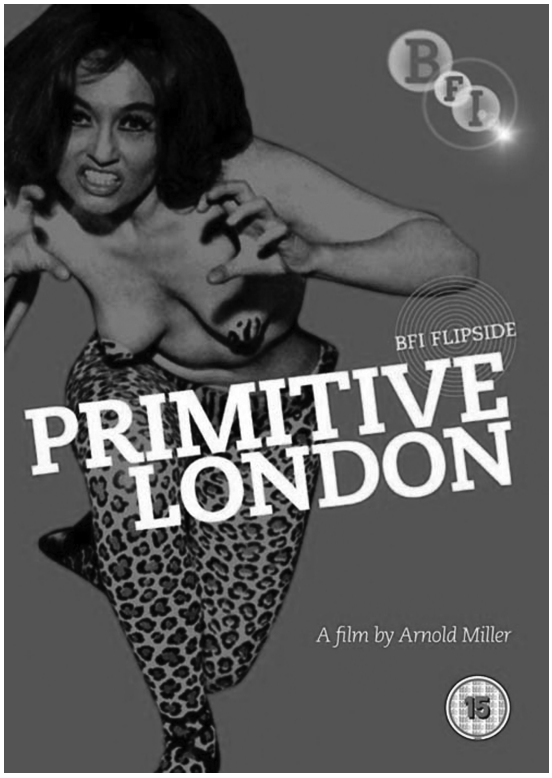


Figure 22.2 Cover of *Primitive London* DVD, part of the BFI Flipside DVD and Blu-ray collection. © 2009 BFI. Courtesy of the British Film Institute.

targeted films at cult film fans. These include: Universal's "Cult Cinema Collection," Warner's "Cult Camp Classics," and Twentieth Century Fox's/MGM's "Midnite Movies." The adoption of cult as a marketing strategy by major companies demonstrates a broader attempt to maximize audience appeal across their large range of titles. The majors will still pay most attention to marketing what they consider their "top" titles: contemporary, larger budgeted films, often featuring major stars. Nevertheless, it has been noted by many commentators that while such "hits" are still extremely important, there is now a growing market for "niche" cultural products, a phenomenon dubbed "The Long Tail" by Chris Anderson (2006). The growth of the internet has provided an ever-expanding network of online retail outlets which, because they do not need to store products in a single, physical retail outlet, can offer increasing amounts of goods (which people around the globe can order if they have access to the net and a suitable account with which to make payment). In addition to the proliferation of cultural information, the ability to share knowledge, and the emergence of recommendation suggestions (based on personal searches and purchases, on what other consumers have purchased in conjunction with particular products, and through consumer lists, for example), the internet provides enhanced opportunities to stumble upon a range of cultural objects.

Usually niches are heterogeneous and small. Anderson argues that because audiences are aware that pretty much everything is available to them at any time the aggregate of small sales can make a difference. He writes: "the combined value of modest sellers and quirky titles equals the sales of top hits" (2006: 1). The issue, then, becomes a matter of accessing audiences as "partners" in helping the marketplace distinguish between "kinds" of things wanted – to let the audience assist in selecting the categories of the catalog, and to allow for products to have a "long tail" and let them be available for extended periods of time, in small amounts. This comes very close to the situation of cult cinema, where there is constant demand in a relatively small market, and where there is a high insistence on self-selection of categories (such as underground, indie, countercultural, gore, splatter, camp, sex, chic, cool, hot, mondo, nasty, "head," "mindfuck," "rubber reality," etc.). Most online retailers have started marketing their "special interest" products in exactly these ways. Anderson argues that the "crap" that accumulates in this approach is necessary to separate the good from the bad stuff (a selection each audience segment makes differently), and because it gives recognition – it is as little fun to flip through a selection of films of which no one is even remotely familiar as it is to see only well-known titles (Anderson 2006: 116). "Niche culture" thus becomes increasingly important on both a cultural and an economic level: Drew (2007: 55) cites a Film Council report which claims that DVD sales of non-mainstream titles within the UK grew from 10 to 30% in 2005, a trend that is likely to continue. In such a climate, cult cinema could be considered a particularly notable concept through which the importance of niche culture is made sense of by consumers and retailers.

The "Midnite Movies" range of titles – drawing on a founding cult cinema exhibition context and usually

packaged as double bills – is another case of a DVD series gaining its own cult following. Not only has the series given rise to its own Yahoo discussion group – founded in 2004 and currently with over 700 members – but it has also led to a petition for reviving the series. In 2005, after a lengthy period in which nothing was released in the series, a petition was organized and advertised at the web site "DVD Drive-in." After almost 5000 online signatures were collected, Fox (who handle MGM's home video releases) decided to issue a new batch in the series in 2007 (making reference to the petition in a press release). No films in the series have been released since then, however, so the petition has been revived in order to request more releases (in the knowledge that a large number of titles owned by MGM have yet to see DVD releases). This process demonstrates the growth of what has been dubbed "consumer activism" (Jenkins 1992: 278), by which fans lobby media producers (or, in this case, distributors) to make changes in line with fans' wishes. Although such activities have long existed, the ability to connect with a large range of other fans over the internet has led to them becoming much more frequent. Companies may not always react to such activism in the ways that fans always wish, but there is an increased tendency to listen, and cater to, cult fans, particularly considering they are often heavy consumers of media consumables and early adopters of new technologies (Drew 2007: 61). Such awareness of the importance of the "cult consumer" is another reason as to why cult is increasingly incorporated into marketing strategies.

Alongside the growth of cultish DVD labels and series, cult is also utilized by some retail stores to categorize films, while many magazines and journals also position themselves as cult, or at least have cultish sections within their pages. While retail categorization is a relatively recent phenomenon, cult-inflected magazines and journals have existed for a long period. As mentioned in Chapters 4, 11 and 19, a number of fanzines were demonstrative of cult fandom, and such activities fed into a number of specialist prozines. Publications such as *Fangoria*, *Video Watchdog*, and *Asian Cult Cinema,* are just a small selection of specialist magazines which have catered to cult tastes for a number of years. In more recent times, a number of cult-related web sites have also emerged to expand such coverage. These include DVD news and review sites such as *DVD Drive-In*, *Mondo Digital* and *Eccentric Cinema*; a number of cult cinema blogs (e.g. *Mondo Esoterica*, *Moon in the Gutter*), plus ezines and ejournals which include a substantial focus on cult movies (including *Bright Lights Film Journal* and *Wormwood*). There also exist forums, discussion groups, and podcasts devoted to aspects of cult cinema that can be accessed via the web.

Conclusion

The examples of self-conscious cultist filmmakers, the rise in cult being employed as a discursive category within criticism and other forms of film writing, and the use of cult as an industrial category to position cultural products within the marketplace, demonstrate that cult has started to infiltrate film culture on a number of levels. As it has done so, its actual meanings have also broadened: this is because different agents may utilize the concept for different purposes (e.g. companies using it to market products; critics employing it to place a film within a specific tradition), and also because some will conceive of its meanings differently from others (so, for example, while some may use the term in a strict manner in an attempt to refer to a specific process, others may adopt it in a vaguer, looser manner).

Some critics and academics have expressed skepticism about the continued usefulness of "cult" as a concept because of these developments. In a 2008 symposium on cult film in the journal *Cineaste*, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Jeffrey Sconce, and Peter Stanfield all doubted whether the concept actually meant anything anymore. Stanfield, for example, writes:

> I am struck by how redundant the term has become. What once defined a rarefied, albeit often perverse set of critical practices that lay far beyond the purview of any officially sanctioned notion of "good taste," cult, like the now innocuous concept of "alternative" when affixed to a life style or consumption choice, is simply a term for any product or activity that can be pitched by commercial agencies as existing outside the mainstream. (2008: 49)

Such a comment, however, assumes that cult was never a commercial concept and that it is now merely a commercial category. While the concept has become increasingly used by commercial bodies to sell products, we hope to have shown that it is not *merely* a commercial term. And, while the commercialization of the term has undoubtedly intensified, it is historically inaccurate to claim that the concept has never previously been tainted by commercial interests. Such a view, also detectable within Sconce's comments in the symposium, suggests a nostalgic longing for a more "authentic" period in which cult cinema was the preserve of an elite few, and/or a more "personal memory" period that reflects the link between audiences' "moments of access" of certain movies and their own personal narratives (a parallel between critics' example of when cult films were "more authentic" and their teenage or college years is easily drawn).

We started our book with a discussion of the midnight movie as a paradigmatic exemplar of cult cinema. By the end of our book the picture regarding the midnight movie has become a lot more complex. Before jumping to the conclusion that the "golden period" of midnight movie screenings was a manifestation of a pure "bottom-up" process, whereby audiences themselves made a film cult without commercial influences, we should consider at least the following two processes. First, *Eraserhead*, now considered a seminal midnight movie, originally found it difficult to find *any* audiences: it was only because Elgin Theatre owner Ben Barenholtz continued to show it, that it eventually found an audience and developed a cult following. Without Barenholtz's role here, the film may not have become a cult film in the way that it did, thus alerting us to the importance not merely of audiences, but also of distributors, in the construction of a cult film. Barenholtz may have been an idiosyncratic, non-corporate business man, but he was a business man nonetheless. Secondly, *Pink Flamingos,* another seminal midnight movie, was marketed at midnight venues by its distributor New Line, and after it began to find an audience on this circuit New Line created a trailer for the film in which audiences were interviewed about their impressions of the film. A similar strategy underpinned New Line's re-release of *Night of the Living Dead*, a film it presented in its 1978 catalog as "that rare phenomenon, a film that found its audience entirely through word-of-mouth" (New Line Cinema 1978: 58).[2] Here, then, we can see that even by the late 1970s, films could be deliberately marketed at cult audiences and that such audiences could be "co-opted" for commercial purposes. The commercialization of cult may not have existed on the same scale as today, but then neither did the concept of cult circulate to the same extent as it does today. Its discursive proliferation and escalating commercialization have developed in tandem: we should not merely dismiss this and retreat into uncritical nostalgia, but instead seek to understand the increasing complexity of cult as a concept, the ways in which it is now used, in what contexts, and for what purposes.

We hope to have shown that cult is a term that now has more currency than ever, hence our assertion that we are now living in a "meta-cult" world, in which cult is used in increasingly self-conscious ways and in a number of different contexts. This is a process which does not extinguish its meanings but rather extends them and therefore requires of scholars further research into this important area of film culture.

Notes

1. With thanks to IQ Hunter for drawing our attention to this.
2. We would like to thank April Green and Dana Keller for their research into the New Line Cinema catalogs, and the University of Michigan's library for granting us access to that collection. This ongoing research project is supported by the University of British Columbia's Arts Undergraduate Research Grant RPB-12R46755.

Filmography

8½ (Fellini, Italy, 1963)
9½ Weeks (Lyne, USA, 1986)
24 Hour Party People (Winterbottom, UK, 2002)
The 36th Chamber of Shaolin (Liu, Hong Kong, 1978)
42nd Street (Bacon, USA, 1933)
200 Motels (Palmer/Zappa, USA, 1971)
300 (Snyder, USA, 2006)
2000 Maniacs (Lewis, USA, 1964)
2001: A Space Odyssey (Kubrick, UK/USA, 1968)
Aag/Flames (Varma, India, 2007)
The Abyss (Cameron, USA, 1989)
The Acid Eaters (Mabe, USA, 1968)
The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes (Brakhage, USA, 1971)
The Adventures of Baron Munchausen (Gilliam, UK/West Germany, 1988)
L'Âge d'or (Buñuel/Dali, France, 1930)
Aguirre, Wrath of God (Herzog, West Germany, 1972)
Akira (Ôtomo, Japan, 1988)
Alfred Packer: The Musical (aka *Cannibal! The Musical*) (Parker, USA, 1993)
Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves (Lubin, USA, 1944)
Alice in Acidland (Donne, USA, 1969)
Alice's Restaurant (Penn, USA, 1969)
Alien (Scott, USA/UK, 1979)
Aliens (Cameron, USA/UK, 1986)
All about Eve (Mankiewicz, USA, 1950)
All that Heaven Allows (Sirk, USA, 1955)
Allures (Belson, USA, 1961)
Alone. Life Wastes Andy Hardy (Arnold, Austria, 1998)
Alphaville (Godard, France/Italy, 1965)
The Amazing Transparent Man (Ulmer, USA, 1960)
American Psycho (Harron, USA, 2000)
Angel Heart (Parker, USA, 1987)
The Animatrix (Chung/Jones/Kawajiri/Koike/Maeda/Morimoto/Watanabe, USA, 2003)
Annie (Huston, USA, 1982)
Annie Hall (Allen, USA, 1977)
The Anniversary (Baker, UK, 1968)
Antonio das Mortes (Rocha, BRA, 1969)
Anthropophagus (D'Amato, Italy, 1980)
The Arena (Carver/D'Amato, USA, 1974)
Artificial Intelligence: AI (Spielberg, USA, 2001)
Ashes of Time (Kar Wai, Hong Kong, 1994)
Assault on Precinct 13 (Carpenter, USA, 1976)
Astro Boy (Tezuka, Japan, 1963)
Atamé (Almodovar, Spain, 1990)
Attack of the Crab Monsters (Corman, USA, 1957)
Audition (Miike, South Korea/Japan, 1999)
Avatar (Cameron, USA/UK, 2009)
Awakening of the Beast (Marins, Brazil, 1970)
Back to the Future (Zemeckis, USA, 1985)
Bad Taste (Jackson, New Zealand, 1987)
Baise-moi (Despentes/Coralie, France, 2000)
Barfly (Schroeder, USA, 1987)
Barbarella (Vadim, France/Italy, 1968)
Basic Instinct (Verhoeven, USA/France, 1992)
Batbabe: The Dark Nightie (Bacchus, USA, 2009)
Batman (Burton, 1989)
The Battle of Brazil (Matthews/Criterion, USA, 1996)
Battle Royale (Fukasaku, Japan, 2000)
Battlefield Earth (Christian, USA, 2000)
Battleship Potemkin (Eisenstein, Soviet Union, 1925)
Be Kind Rewind (Gondry, UK/USA, 2008)

Cult Cinema: An Introduction. Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton.
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Beat the Devil (Huston, USA, 1953)
The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (Lourié, USA, 1953)
Begotten (Merhige, USA, 1990)
Behind the Green Door (Mitchell/Mitchell, USA, 1972)
The Believers (Schlesinger, USA, 1987)
Belle de jour (Buñuel, France, 1967)
The Beyond (Fulci, Italy, 1981)
Beyond the Time Barrier (Ulmer, USA, 1960)
Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (Meyer, USA, 1970)
The Big Heat (Lang, USA, 1953)
The Big Lebowski (Coen/Coen, USA/UK, 1998)
The Big Silence (Corbucci, Italy, France, 1968)
The Big Sleep (Hawks, USA, 1946)
The Bigamist (Lupino, USA, 1953)
Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey (Hewitt, USA, 2001)
The Bishop's Wife (Koster, USA, 1947)
Black Caesar (Cohen, USA, 1973)
The Black Cat (Ulmer, USA, 1934)
Black Emanuelle (Albertini, Italy, 1975)
Black Mama White Mama (Romero, USA, The Philippines, 1973)
Black Sunday (Bava, Italy, 1960)
Blackboard Jungle (Brooks, USA, 1955)
Blacula (Crain, USA, 1972)
Blade Runner (Scott, USA/Hong Kong, 1982)
The Blair Witch Project (Myrick/Sánchez. USA. 1999)
Blast! (Williams, USA, 1972)
The Blank Generation (Kral/Poe, USA, 1976)
Blazing Saddles (Brooks, USA, 1974)
The Blob (Yeaworth Jr/Doughten Jr, USA, 1958)
Blood Feast (Lewis, USA, 1963)
Blood from the Mummy's Tomb (Holt/Carreras, UK, 1971)
Blood on Satan's Claw (Haggard, UK, 1971)
Blood Simple (Coen/Coen, USA, 1984)
The Blood Splattered Bride (Aranda, Spain, 1972)
Blow Job (Warhol, US, 1963)
Blue Steel (Bigelow, 1990)
Blue Sunshine (Lieberman, USA, 1978)
Blue Velvet (Lynch, USA, 1986)
The Blues Brothers (Landis, USA, 1980)
Body Snatchers (Ferrara, USA, 1993)
Bolero (Derek, USA, 1984)
The Boogeyman (Lommel, USA, 1980)
Born in Flames (Borden, USA, 1983)
À bout de souffle (Godard, France, 1960)
Boyz N the Hood (Singleton, USA, 1991)
Braindead (Jackson, New Zealand, 1992)
Bram Stoker's Dracula (Coppola, USA, 1992)
Branded to Kill (Suzuki, Japan, 1967)
Brazil (Gilliam, UK, 1985)
The Bride of Frankenstein (Whale, USA, 1935)
Bring me the Head of Alfredo Garcia (Peckinpah, USA/Mexico, 1974)
Bringing up Baby (Hawks, USA, 1938)
The Brood (Cronenberg, Canada, 1979)
The Brother from another Planet (Sayles, USA, 1984)
Bubba Ho-tep (Coscarelli, USA, 2002)
Bubblegum Crisis (Akiyama/Gôda/Hayashi/Obari/Takayama, Japan, 1987)
A Bullet for the General (Damiani, Italy, 1966)
Burden of Dreams (Blank, USA, 1982)
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Wiene, Germany, 1920)
Café Flesh (Sayadian, US, 1982)
La cage aux folles (Molinaro, France, 1978)
Caged Heat (Demme, USA, 1974)
Caligula (Brass/Guccione, Italy/USA, 1979)
Cannibal Ferox (Lenzi, Italy, 1981)
Cannibal Holocaust (Deodato, Italy, 1979)
Cannibal Girls (Reitman, Canada, 1973)
The Cannibal Man (de la Iglesia, Spain, 1972)
Captain Blood (Curtiz, USA, 1935)
Carnival of Souls (Harvey, USA, 1962)
Carrie (De Palma, USA, 1976)
Casablanca (Curtiz, USA, 1942)
Cat People (Tourneur, USA, 1942)
Catwoman (Pitof, USA, 2004)
Chafed Elbows (Downey Sr., US, 1966)
Chainsaw Sally (Burril, USA, 2004)
Un Chant d'Amour (Genet, France, 1950)
Chelsea Girls (Morrissey/Warhol, USA, 1966)
Un Chien Andalou (Buñuel/Dali, France, 1920)
Child's Play III (Bender, USA, 1991)
A Chinese Ghost Story (Ching, Hong Kong, 1987)
Chinese Opium Den (Edison, USA, 1894)
Christiane F (Edel, West Germany, 1981)
Christmas on Mars (Coyne/Beesley/Salisbury, USA, 2008)
Ciao! Manhattan (Palmer/Weisman, USA, 1972)
Citizen Kane (Welles, USA, 1941)
City of the Living Dead (Fulci, Italy, 1980)
City on Fire (Lam, Hong Kong, 1987)
Clockers (Lee, USA, 1995)
A Clockwork Orange (Kubrick, UK/US, 1971)

Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Spielberg, USA, 1977)
The Cobra Woman (Siodmak, USA, 1944)
Coffy (Hill, USA, 1973)
College (Keaton/Horne, USA, 1927)
Conan the Barbarian (Milius, US, 1982)
The Connection (Clarke, USA, 1963)
Control (Corbijn, UK/USA/Australia/Japan, 2007)
The Cook, the Thief, his Wife, and her Lover (Greenaway, UK/The Netherlands, 1989)
The Cool and the Crazy (Witney, USA, 1958)
Crash (Cronenberg, Canada/UK, 1996)
Cry-Baby (Waters, USA, 1990)
Cry of the Banshee (Hessler, UK, 1970)
Cube (Natali, Canada, 1997)
Cure (Kurosawa, Japan, 1997)
Cutthroat Island (Harlin, USA, 1995)
Dance, Girl, Dance (Arzner, USA, 1940)
Dark City (Proyas, Australia/USA, 1998)
The Dark Knight (Nolan, USA, 2008)
Dark Star (Carpenter, USA, 1974)
Dark Water (Nakata, Japan, 2002)
Daughters of Darkness (Kümel, Belgium/France/West Germany, 1971)
Dawn of the Dead (Romero, USA, 1978)
Day of the Dead (Romero, USA, 1985)
The Day the Earth Stood Still (Wise, USA, 1951)
Day the World Ended (Corman, USA, 1955)
Dazed and Confused (Linklater, USA, 1993)
Dead or Alive (Miike, Japan, 1999)
Deadly Weapons (Wishman, USA, 1972)
Death Proof (Tarantino, USA, 2007)
Death Race 2000 (Bartel, USA, 1975)
The Decline of Western Civilization (Spheeris, USA. 1981)
Debbie Does Dallas (Clark, USA, 1978)
Deep Throat (Damiano, USA, 1972)
Deliverance (Boorman, USA, 1972)
Demon Seed (Cammell, USA, 1977)
Desperate Living (Waters, USA, 1977)
Detour (Ulmer, USA, 1975)
The Devil in Miss Jones (Damiano, USA, 1973)
The Devils (Russell, UK, 1971)
Le Diable est parmi nous (Beaudin, Canada, 1972)
Die Hard (McTiernan, USA, 1988)
Dirty Dancing (Ardolino, USA, 1987)
Django (Corbucci, Italy/Spain, 1966)
La Dolce Vita (Fellini, Italy, 1960)
Don't Look Back (Pennebaker, USA, 1967)
Donnie Darko (Kelly, USA, 2001)
Dr Strangelove or: How I Stop Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb (Kubrick, UK, 1964)
Dracula (Browning, USA, 1930)
Driller Killer (Ferrara, USA, 1979)
Drugstore Cowboy (Van Sant, USA, 1989)
Duck Amuck (Jones, USA, 1953)
Duck Soup (McCarey, USA, 1933)
Dune (Lynch, USA, 1984)
East of Borneo (Melford, USA, 1931)
Easy Rider (Hopper, USA, 1969)
Ecstasy (Machaty, Czech Republic, 1933)
Ed Wood (Burton, USA, 1994)
Edward Scissorhands (Burton, USA, 1990)
El Topo (Jodorowsky, Mexico, 1970)
The Elephant Man (Lynch, USA, 1980)
Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals (D'Amato, Italy, 1977)
Emmanuelle (Jaeckin, France, 1973)
Emperor Tomato Ketchup (Terayama, Japan, 1971)
Empire (Warhol, USA, 1964)
Enter the Dragon (Clouse, Hong Kong/USA, 1973)
Equinox (Woods/Muren/McGee, USA, 1970)
Eraserhead (Lynch, USA, 1976)
Even Dwarfs Started Small (Herzog, Germany, 1970)
Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask) (Allen, USA, 1972)
The Evil Dead (Raimi, USA, 1981)
Evil Dead II (Raimi, USA, 1987)
eXistenZ (Cronenberg, Canada/UK, 1999)
Eyes without a Face (Franju, France, 1958)
The Exorcist (Friedkin, USA, 1973)
Faces of Death (Le Cilaire, USA, 1979)
Fascination (Rollin, France, 1979)
Fame (Parker, US, 1980)
The Fan (Schmidt, Germany, 1982)
Fantastic Voyage (Fleischer, USA, 1966)
Fantômas (Feuillade, France, 1917-19)
Far from Heaven (Haynes, USA, 2002)
Fargo (Coen/Coen, USA, 1996)
Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (Meyer, USA, 1965)
Female Trouble (Waters, USA, 1974)
Ferris Bueller's Day Off (Hughes, US, 1986)
Fight Club (Fincher, USA/Germany, 1999)
The Fifth Element, (Besson, France, 1997)
Final Fantasy (Sakaguchi, Japan, 2001)

The Final Comedown (Williams, USA, 1972)
Fist of Fury (Lo, Hong Kong 1972)
Fitzcarraldo (Herzog, Peru/West Germany, 1982)
Five Deadly Venoms (Cheh, Hong Kong, 1978)
Flaming Creatures (Smith, USA, 1963)
Flavia the Heretic (Mingozzi, Italy/France, 1974)
Flesh (Morrissey, USA, 1968)
The Flower Thief (Rice, USA, 1960)
Footlight Parade (Bacon, USA, 1933)
For Y'ur Height Only (Nicart, The Philippines, 1981)
Forbidden Planet (Wilcox, USA, 1956)
Forbidden Zone (Elfman, USA, 1982)
Foxy Brown (Hill, USA, 1974)
Frankenstein (Whale, USA, 1931)
Freaks (Browning, USA, 1932)
Freddy vs. Jason (Yu, USA, 2003)
Freeway Mad II: Confessions of a Trickbaby (Bright, USA, 1999)
Friday the 13th (Cunningham, USA, 1980)
From Dusk 'till Dawn (Rodriguez, US, 1995)
Fullmetal Alchemist (Mizushima, Japan, 2003-2004)
Full Metal Yakuza (Miike, Japan, 1997)
Galaxy Quest (Parisot, USA, 1997)
Game of Death (Clouse, Hong Kong/USA, 1978)
Gas! – Or – How it Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save it (Corman, USA, 1970)
George Lucas in Love (Nussbaum, USA, 1999)
Gestapo's Last Orgy (Canevari, Italy, 1977)
Ghost in the Shell (Oshii, Japan/USA, 1995)
Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence (Oshii, Japan, 2004)
Ghost World (Zwigoff, USA, 2001)
Gimme Shelter (Maysles/Maysles, USA, 1970)
The Giant Claw (Sears, USA, 1957)
Ginger Snaps (Fawcett, Canada, 2000)
Ginger Snaps II: Unleashed (Sullivan, Canada, 2003)
Ginger Snaps III: Ginger Snaps Back (Harvey, Canada, 2004)
The Girl Can't Help it (Tashlin, USA, 1956)
Glen or Glenda (Wood Jr, USA, 1953)
Go Fish (Troche, USA, 1994)
The Godfather (Coppola, USA, 1972)
The Gods Must Be Crazy (Uys, Botswana/South Africa, 1980)
Godzilla (Honda, Japan, 1954)
Gold Diggers of 1933 (LeRoy, USA, 1933)
Gone with the Wind (Fleming, USA, 1939)
The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (Leone, Italy/Spain/West Germany, 1966)
Gordon's War (Davis, USA, 1973)
The Gospel According to St. Matthew (Pasolini, Italy, 1964)
La grande bouffe (Ferreri, France/Italy, 1973)
Grease (Kleiser, USA, 1978)
Grease 2 (Birch, USA, 1982)
The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle (Temple, UK, 1980)
Grindhouse (Rodriguez/Roth/Tarantino/Wright/Zombie, USA, 2007)
Groove (Harrison, USA, 2000)
Gummo (Korine, USA, 1997)
Gun Crazy (Lewis, USA, 1950)
Habit (Larry Fessenden, USA, 1997)
Hairspray (Waters, USA, 1988)
Halloween (Carpenter, USA, 1978)
Hallucination Generation (Mann, USA, 1966)
Hannibal (Scott, USA, 2001)
Happiness (Solondz, USA, 1998)
The Happiness of the Katakuris (Miike, Japan, 2001)
Happy Together (Kar Wai, Hong Kong, 1997)
Hard Boiled (Woo, Hong Kong, 1992)
A Hard Day's Night (Lester, UK, 1964)
The Harder They Come (Henzell, Jamaica, 1972)
Harlis (Van Ackeren, Germany, 1972)
Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle (Leiner, USA/Canada/Germany, 2004)
Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay (Hurwitz/Schlossberg, USA, 2008)
Harold and Maude (Ashby, USA, 1971)
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Columbus, USA, 2001)
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (Columbus, USA, 2002)
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (Cuarón, USA, 2004)
Harvey (Koster, USA, 1950)
Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages (Christensen, Denmark/Sweden, 1922)
Head (Refelson, USA, 1968)
Heart of Glass (Herzog, West Germany, 1976)
Heat (Morrissey, USA, 1972)
Heaven's Gate (Cimino, US, 1981)
Heavy Metal (Potterton, Canada, 1981)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (Mitchell, USA, 2001)
Heimat (Reitz, Germany, 1984)

Help! (Lester, UK, 1965)
Hellraiser (Barker, UK, 1987)
Hellzapoppin' (Potter, USA, 1941)
Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno (Bromberg/Medrea, France, 2009)
Henry and June (Kaufman, USA, 1990)
Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer (McNaughton, USA, 1990)
High Anxiety (Brooks, USA, 1977)
High Noon (Zinnemann, USA, 1952)
High School Confidential! (Arnold, USA, 1958)
The Hills Have Eyes (Craven, USA, 1977)
Hiroshima Mon Amour (Resnais, France, 1958)
Histoire d'O (Jaeckin, France, 1975)
The Hitcher (Harmon, USA, 1985)
The Hitch-Hiker (Ida Lupino, USA, 1953)
Holiday (Cukor, USA, 1938)
Hollywood Boulevard (Arkush/Dante, USA, 1976)
The Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers (Ray, USA, 1988)
The Holy Mountain (Jodorowsky, Mexico/USA, 1973)
House of a 1000 Corpses (Zombie, USA, 2003)
House on Haunted Hill (Castle, USA, 1959)
House on the Edge of the Park (Deodato, Italy, 1980)
The Hudsucker Proxy (Coen/Coen, UK/Germany/USA, 1994)
Human Traffic (Kerrigan, UK/Ireland, 1999)
I Drink your Blood (Durston, USA, 1970)
I Saw What You Did (Castle, USA, 1965)
I Spit on your Grave (Zarchi, USA, 1978)
I Walked with a Zombie (Tourneur, USA, 1943)
I Was a Teenage Werewolf (Fowler Jr., USA, 1957)
I Will Walk Like a Crazy Horse (Arrabal, France, 1973)
Ichi the Killer (Miike, Japan, 2001)
Idiocracy (Judge, USA, 2006)
If.... (Anderson, UK, 1968)
Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS (Edmonds, USA/West Germany, 1975)
I'm Not There (Haynes, USA/Germany, 2007)
Imitation of Life (Sirk, USA, 1959)
In a Lonely Place (Ray, USA, 1950)
In Bruges (McDonagh, UK/USA, 2008)
In the Realm of the Senses (Oshima, Japan, 1976)
Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (Anger, USA, 1954)
Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (Spielberg, USA, 1984)
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (Spielberg, USA, 1989)
Inferno (Argento, Italy, 1980)
Inglorious Bastards (Castellari, Italy, 1978)
Inglourious Basterds (Tarantino, USA/Germany, 2009)
Inland Empire (Lynch, France/Poland/USA, 1996)
Innerspace (Dante, USA, 1987)
The Invasion (Hirschbiegel, USA/Australia, 2007)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Siegel, USA, 1956)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Kaufman, USA, 1976)
Invocation of my Demon Brother (Anger, USA, 1969)
The Iron Horse (Ford, USA, 1924)
Irréversible (Noé, France, 2002)
The Isle (Ki-Duk, Korea, 2000)
It's Alive (Cohen, USA, 1974)
It's a Wonderful Life (Capra, USA, 1946)
Jackie Brown (Tarantino, USA, 1997)
Jailhouse Rock (Thorpe, USA, 1957)
Jaws (Spielberg, USA, 1975)
Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Akerman, Belgium, 1975)
La Jetée (Marker, France, 1962)
Joe's Apartment (Payson, USA, 1996)
Johnny Guitar (Ray, USA, 1954)
Jubilee (Jarman, UK, 1978)
Judge Dredd (Cannon, USA, 1995)
Ju-on: The Grudge (Shimizu, Japan, 2002)
Jurassic Park (Spielberg, USA, 1993)
Justine De Sade (Pierson, France, 1972)
Kill Bill Vol. 1 (Tarantino, USA, 2003)
Kill Bill Vol. 2 (Tarantino, USA, 2004)
The Killer (Woo, Hong Kong, 1989)
Killer Nun (Berruti, Italy, 1978)
The Killing (Kubrick, USA, 1956)
Kimba, the White Lion (Yamamoto/Tezuka, Japan, 1966/1994)
King Kong (Cooper/Schoedsack, USA, 1933)
King Lear (Godard, USA, 1987)
King of New York (Ferrara, USA, 1990)
King Solomon's Mines (Thompson, USA, 1985)
Kiss Me Deadly (Aldrich, USA, 1955)
Koyaanisqatsi (Reggio, USA, 1982)
Lady Terminator (Djalil, Indonesia, 1988)
Lapis (Whitney, USA, 1966)
Last Action Hero (John McTiernan, USA, 1993)
Last House on the Left (Craven, USA, 1972)
Last Tango in Paris (Bertolucci, Italy, 1972)
Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same (Clifton/Massot, UK/USA, 1976)
Legend of the Overfiend (Takayama, Japan, 1987-1995)

The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires (Baker, UK/Singapore, 1974)
Life during Wartime (Solondz, USA, 2009)
Life of Brian (Jones, UK, 1979)
Lightning over Water (aka *Nick's Movie*) (Ray, Sweden/West Germany, 1980)
Liquid Sky (Tsukerman, USA, 1982)
Lisa and the Devil (Bava/Leone, Italy/Germany/Spain, 1974)
The Living End (Araki, USA, 1992)
Living in Bondage (Rapu, Nigeria, 1992)
London after Midnight (Browning, USA, 1927)
The Long Goodbye (Altman, USA, 1973)
The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (Jackson, USA/New Zealand, 2001)
The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (Jackson, USA/New Zealand/Germany, 2002)
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (Jackson, USA/New Zealand/Germany, 2003)
Lord of the G-Strings: Femaleship of the String (West, USA, 2003)
Lords of Dogtown (Hardwicke, USA, 2005)
Lost Highway (Lynch, France/USA, 1997)
Love and Death (Allen, France/USA, 1975)
Love Me Tender (Webb, USA, 1956)
Lucifer Rising (Anger, USA, 1980)
M (Lang, Germany, 1931)
Á ma soeur (Breillat, France, 2003)
Macabre (Castle, USA, 1958)
Mad Max (Miller, Australia, 1979)
Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior (Miller, Australia, 1981)
Mädchen in Uniform (Sagan/Froehlich, Germany, 1931)
Magic Boy (Daikuhara/Yabushita, Japan, 1959)
Magical Mystery Tour (Harrison/Knowles/Lennon/McCartney/Starr, UK, 1967)
The Maltese Falcon (Huston, USA, 1941)
Man Bites Dog (Belvaux/Bonzel/Poelvoorde, Belgium, 1992)
Man of the West (Mann, USA, 1958)
Man Facing Southeast (Subiela, Argentina, 1986)
The Man from Planet X (Ulmer, USA, 1951)
The Man Who Fell to Earth (Roeg, UK, 1976)
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (Ford, USA, 1962)
The Man Who Wasn't There (Coen/Coen, USA/UK, 2001)
The Man with the Golden Arm (Preminger, USA, 1955)
Maniac (Esper, USA, 1934)
Manos, the Hands of Fate (Warren, USA, 1966)
Mariken van Nieumeghen (Stelling, The Netherlands, 1974)
Mars Attacks! (Burton, USA, 1996)
Martin (Romero, USA, 1977)
Matinee (Dante, USA, 1993)
The Matrix (Wachowski/Wachowski, USA/Australia, 1999)
Mean Streets (Scorsese, USA, 1973)
Medea (Pasolini, Italy, 1969)
Meet me in St. Louis (Minnelli, USA, 1944)
Memento (Nolan, USA, 2000)
Men in Black (Sonnenfeld, USA, 1997)
Metropolis (Lang, Germany, 1927)
Mighty Peking Man (Ho, Hong Kong, 1977)
Mildred Pierce (Curtiz, USA, 1945)
Miller's Crossing (Coen/Coen, USA, 1990)
Miracle on 34th Street (Seaton, USA, 1947)
The Misfits (Huston, USA, 1961)
Mommie Dearest (Perry, USA, 1991)
Mondo Cane (Cavara/Jacopetti/Prosperi, Italy, 1962)
Mondo Hollywood (Cohen, USA, 1967)
Monterey Pop (Pennebaker, USA, 1968)
Monty Python and the Holy Grail (Gilliam/Jones, UK, 1975)
More (Schroeder, West Germany/France/Luxembourg, 1969)
Mortal Inheritance (Amenechi, Nigeria, 1996)
Motel Hell (Connor, USA, 1980)
Movie Orgy (Dante, USA, 1968)
Mr. Nice Guy (Kam-Bo, Hong Kong, 1997)
Ms. 45 (Ferrara, USA, 1981)
My Best Fiend (Herzog, UK/Germany/Finland/USA, 1999)
My Bloody Valentine (Mihalka, Canada, 1981)
My Darling Clementine (Ford, USA, 1946)
My Name Is Bruce (Campbell, USA, 2007)
My Name Is Nobody (Valerii/Leone, Italy/France/West Germany, 1973)
My Neighbor Totoro (Miyazaki, Japan, 1988)
My Own Private Idaho (Van Sant, USA, 1992)
Myra Breckenridge (Sarne, USA, 1970)
Naked Killer (Yiu-Leung, Hong Kong, 1992)
The Nanny (Holt, UK, 1965)

Narcotic (Esper/Sodar't, USA, 1933)
Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind (Miyazaki, Japan, 1984)
Near Dark (Bigelow, USA, 1987)
Nekromantik (Buttgereit, West Germany, 1987)
Nekromantik 2: Der Todesking (Buttgereit, Germany, 1991)
Neon Genesis Evangelion (Anno, Japan, 1995)
New Jack City (Van Peebles, USA, 1991)
New Wave Hookers (Dark, USA, 1985)
Night of the Hunter (Laughton, USA, 1955)
Night of the Lepus (Claxton, USA, 1972)
Night of the Living Dead (Romero, USA, 1968)
The Night Porter (Cavani, Italy, 1974)
Nightmare on Elm Street (Craven, USA, 1984)
Nightmare on Elm Street II: Freddy's Revenge (Sholder, USA, 1985)
Nosferatu: Symphonie des Grauens (Murnau, Germany, 1922)
Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation! (Hartley, Australia/USA, 2008)
Nothing (Natali, Canada, 2003)
Les Nuits Fauves (Collard, France, 1991)
Oedipus Rex (Pasolini, Italy, 1967)
Of Freaks and Men (Balabanov, Russia, 1998)
Office Space (Judge, USA, 1999)
Oldboy (Park, Korea, 2003)
Once Upon a Time in the West (Leone, Italy/USA, 1968)
Ong-bak (Pinkaew, Thailand, 2003)
The Opening of Misty Beethoven (Metzger, USA, 1976)
Orphée (Cocteau, France, 1950)
Otaku No Video (Mori, Japan, 1991)
Out of the Past (Tourneur, USA, 1947)
Outrageous! (Benner, Canada, 1977)
Owo Blow: The Genesis (Ogidan, Nigeria, 2007)
Palindromes (Solondz, USA, 2004)
Pandora's Box (Pabst, Germany, 1927)
The Panic in Needle Park (Schatzberg, USA, 1971)
Paranormal Activity (Pelti, USA, 2007)
The Passion of Joan of Arc (Dreyer, France, 1928)
The Passion of the Christ (Gibson, USA, 2004)
Peeping Tom (Powell, UK, 1960)
Peggy Sue Got Married (Coppola, USA, 1986)
Performance (Cammell/Roeg, UK, 1970)
Personal Best (Towne, USA, 1982)
Le petit amour (Varda, France, 1988)
Phantom of the Opera (Julian, USA, 1924)
Pink Flamingos (Waters, USA, 1972)
Pink Floyd: The Wall (Parker, UK, 1982)
Piranha (Dante, USA, 1978)
The Pirate (Minnelli, USA, 1948)
Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (Verbinski, USA, 2003)
Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest (Verbinski, USA, 2006)
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End (Verbinski, USA, 2007)
Plan 9 from Outer Space (Wood Jr., USA, 1959)
Planet of the Apes (Schaffner, USA, 1968)
Planet Terror (Rodriguez, USA, 2007)
Play it Again, Sam (Ross, USA, 1972)
Point Break (Bigelow, USA, 1991)
Poison (Haynes, USA, 1991)
Porcile (Pasolini, Italy, 1969)
Predator (McTiernan, USA, 1987)
Primer (Carruth, USA, 2004)
Prince of Darkness (Carpenter, USA, 1987)
Primitive London (Miller, UK, 1965)
Princess Mononoke (Miyazaki, Japan, 1997)
Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (Elliott, Australia, 1994)
The Producers (Brooks, USA, 1968)
Prophecy (Frankenheimer, USA, 1979)
Psycho (Hitchcock, USA, 1960)
Psych-Out (Rush, USA, 1968)
Psychomania (Sharp, UK, 1973)
Pull My Daisy (Frank/Leslie, USA, 1959)
Pulp Fiction (Tarantino, USA, 1994)
Punishment Park (Watkins, USA, 1971)
Quadrophenia (Roddam, UK, 1979)
Quatermass and the Pit (Baker, UK, 1967)
Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man (Rice, US, 1963)
A Question of Silence (Gorris, The Netherlands, 1982)
Rabbit's Moon (Anger, USA, 1950)
Race with the Devil (Starrett, USA, 1975)
The Rainbow Thief (Jodorowsky, UK, 1990)
Raiders of the Lost Ark (Spielberg, USA, 1981)
Rambo: First Blood Part II (Cosmatos, USA, 1985)
Rape of the Vampire (Rollin, France, 1968)
Rear Window (Hitchcock, USA, 1954)
Rebel without a Cause (Ray, USA, 1955)
Reefer Madness (aka *Tell Your Children*) (Gasnier, USA, 1936)

Re-Animator (Gordon, USA, 1985)
Re-Entry (Belson, USA, 1964)
Repo Man (Cox, USA, 1984)
Reservoir Dogs (Tarantino, USA, 1992)
Resident Evil (Anderson, UK/France/Germany, 2002)
Return of the Living Dead (O'Bannon, USA, 1985)
Ride Lonesome (Boetticher, USA, 1959)
Ride the High Country (Peckinpah, USA, 1962)
Ringu (Nakata, Japan, 1998)
Rio Bravo (Hawks, USA, 1959)
Rita of the West (Baldi, Italy, 1967)
Robocop (Verhoeven, USA, 1987)
Robot Monster (Tucker, USA, 1953)
Rock 'n' Roll High School (Arkush, USA, 1979)
Rock around the Clock (Sears, USA, 1956)
Rock, Rock, Rock! (Price, USA, 1956)
The Rocky Horror Picture Show (Sharman, UK/USA, 1975)
Romance (Breillat, France, 1999)
The Room (Wiseau, USA, 2003)
Rose Hobart (Cornell, USA, 1936)
Rosemary's Baby (Polanski, USA, 1969)
Sailor Moon (Sato, Japan, 1992)
Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Pasolini, Italy, 1975)
Salon Kitty (Brass, Italy, Germany, 1976)
Santa Fe Satan (McGoohan, UK/USA, 1974)
Santa Sangre (Jodorowsky, Mexico/Italy, 1989)
The Saragosa Manuscript (Has, Poland, 1965)
Scanners (Cronenberg, Canada, 1981)
Scarface (De Palma, USA, 1983)
Schoolgirl Report (Hofbauer, GER, 1971–1975)
Scorned (Stevens, USA, 1994)
Scorpio Rising (Anger, USA, 1964)
SCUM Manifesto (Seyrig/Roussopoulos, France, 1976)
The Searchers (Ford, USA, 1956)
The Serpent and the Rainbow (Craven, USA, 1987)
Se7en (Fincher, USA, 1995)
Seven Samurai (Kurosawa, Japan, 1954)
Sex and Zen (Mak, Hong Kong, 1991)
Sex and Zen III (Chang, Hong Kong, 1998)
Sex: The Annabel Chong Story (Lewis, USA, 1999)
Shaft (Parks, USA, 1971)
Shaft in Africa (Guillerman, USA, 1973)
Shake, Rattle and Rock! (Cahn, USA, 1956)
Shakespeare in Love (Madden, USA/UK, 1998)
Shane (Stevens, USA, 1953)
Shaun of the Dead (Wright, UK/France, 2004)
Shivers (Cronenberg, Canada, 1975)
Shogun Assassin (Houston, Japan/USA, 1980)
Sholay (Sippy, India, 1975)
The Shooting (Hellman, USA, 1967)
Showgirls (Verhoeven, France/USA, 1995)
Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist (Dick, USA, 1997)
Silence of the Lambs (Demme, USA, 1991)
Silent Movie (Brooks, USA, 1976)
Singin' in the Rain (Donen/Kelly, USA, 1952)
Sins of the Fleshapoids (Kuchar, USA, 1965)
Sissi (Marischka, 1955)
Sissi, the Young Empress (Marischka, Austria, 1956)
Sissi, Fateful Years of an Empress (Marischka, Austria, 1957)
Skidoo (Preminger, USA, 1968)
Slacker (Linklater, USA, 1991)
Sleep (Warhol, USA, 1963)
Sleep with Me (Kelly, USA, 1994)
Sleeper (Allen, USA, 1973)
Sleepy Hollow (Burton, USA/Germany, 1999)
Smithereens (Seidelman, USA, 1982)
Snakes on a Plane (Ellis, USA, 2006)
Snuff (Findlay/Fredriksson/Nuchtern, US, 1976)
Some Like it Hot (Wilder, USA, 1963)
Suicide Club (Sono, Japan, 2002)
The Sound of Music (Wise, USA, 1965)
Space Is the Place (Coney, USA, 1974)
Spaceballs (Brooks, USA, 1987)
Spartacus (Kubrick, USA, 1960)
Speed (de Bont, USA, 1994)
Spider Baby (Hill, USA, 1968)
Spiderbabe (Crash, USA, 2003)
Spirits of the Dead (Vadim/Malle/Fellini, France/Italy, 1968)
Splice (Natali, Canada/France, 2010)
A Star Is Born (Cukor, USA, 1954)
Star Trek (Desilu Productions, Norway Productions, Paramount Television, USA, 1966–1969)
Star Wars (Episode I: The Phantom Menace) (Lucas, USA, 1999 US)
Star Wars (*Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (Lucas, USA, 2002)
Star Wars (Episode III: Revenge of the Sith) (Lucas, USA, 2005)

Star Wars (Episode IV: A New Hope) (Lucas, USA, 1977)
Star Wars (Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back) (Kershner, USA, 1980)
Star Wars (Episode VI: Return of the Jedi) (Marquand, USA, 1983)
Stardust Memories (Allen, USA, 1980)
Starship Troopers (Verhoeven, USA, 1997)
Starship Troopers 2: Hero of the Federation (Tippett, USA, 2004)
Stop Making Sense (Demme, USA, 1984)
Strange Days (Bigelow, USA, 1995)
Straw Dogs (Sam Peckinpah, USA, 1971)
Streets of Fire (Hill, USA, 1984)
Successive Slidings of Pleasure (Robbe-Grillet, France, 1974)
Suicide Club (Sono, JAP, 2001)
Sullivan's Travels (Sturges, USA, 1941)
Sunset Boulevard (Wilder, USA, 1950)
Super Fly (Parks Jr, USA, 1972)
Super Fly T.N.T. (O'Neal, USA, 1973)
Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story (Haynes, USA, 1988)
Suspiria (Argento, Italy, 1977)
Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (Van Peebles, USA, 1971)
Switchblade Sisters (Hill, USA, 1975)
Sylvia Scarlett (Cukor, USA, 1935)
Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (Park, Korea, 2002)
The Tall T (Boetticher, USA, 1957)
Tank Girl (Talalay, USA, 1995)
Targets (Bogdanovich, USA, 1968)
Tarzan the Ape Man (Van Dyke, USA, 1932)
Tarzan and his Mate (Gibbons, USA, 1934)
Taxi Driver (Scorsese, USA, 1976)
Teenage Zombies (Warren, USA, 1957)
The Tenderness of the Wolves (Lommel, Germany, 1973)
Tenebrae (Argento, Italy, 1982)
Terminal Island (Rothman, USA, 1973)
Terminator II: Judgment Day (Cameron, USA, 1991)
The Terror (Corman, USA, 1963)
Tesis (Amenabar, Spain, 1996)
Tetsuo, Man of Iron (Tsukamoto, Japan, 1989)
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper, USA, 1974)
Them! (Douglas, USA, 1954)
They Live (Carpenter, USA, 1988)
The Thing (Carpenter, USA, 1982)
Thirteen (Hardwicke, USA, 2003)
This Filthy World (Garlin, USA, 2006)
This Is Spinal Tap (Reiner, USA, 1982)
Thriller – A Cruel Picture (Vibenius, Sweden, 1973)
Thundercrack! (McDowell, USA, 1975)
The Tingler (Castle, USA, 1959)
Titanic (Cameron, USA, 1997)
Tokyo Decadence (Murakami, Japan, 1992)
Tommy (Russell, UK, 1975)
Top Gun (Scott, USA, 1986)
Top Hat (Sandrich, USA, 1935)
Touch of Evil (Welles, USA, 1958)
A Touch of Zen (Hu, Hong Kong, 1969)
Towering Inferno (Guillermin/Allen, USA, 1974)
Trainspotting (Boyle, UK, 1996)
Trash (Morrissey, USA. 1970)
The Trip (Corman, USA, 1967)
Triumph of the Will (Riefenstahl, Germany, 1935)
Trog (Francis, UK, 1970)
Troll 2 (Fragasso, Italy, 1990)
Tron (Lisberger, USA/Taiwan, 1982)
Troops (Rubio, USA, 1998)
Trouble Every Day (Denis, France/Germany/Japan, 2001)
Trouble Man (Dixon, USA, 1972)
Turkish Delight (Verhoeven, The Netherlands, 1973)
Tusk (Jodorowsky, France, 1980)
Twelve Monkeys (Gilliam, USA, 1995)
Twilight (Hardwicke, USA, 2008)
The Typewriter, the Rifle and the Movie Camera (Simon, USA/UK, 1996)
Two Lane Blacktop (Hellman, USA, 1971)
Unico (Hirata/Tezuka, Japan, 1981)
The Unknown (Browning, USA, 1927)
Up in Smoke (Adler, USA, 1978)
The Usual Suspects (Singer, USA, 1995)
Vampire Princess Miyu (Hirano, Japan, 1988)
Vampyr (Dreyer, France/Germany, 1932)
Vampyros Lesbos (Franco, West Germany/Spain, 1971)
Velvet Goldmine (Haynes, UK/USA, 1998)
The Velvet Vampire (Rothman, USA, 1971)
Videodrome (Cronenberg, Canada, 1983)
Vincent (Burton, USA, 1982)
Vinyl (Warhol, USA, 1965)
Violent Cop (Kitano, Japan, 1989)

Visitor Q (Miike, Japan, 2001)
Viva (Biller, USA, 2007)
Viva la muerte (Arrabal, France/Tunisia, 1971)
Wanda, the Sadistic Hypnotist (Coraito, USA, 1969)
The War Game (Watkins, UK, 1965)
The War of the Worlds (Haskin, USA, 1956)
The Warriors (Hill, USA, 1979)
Waterworld (Reynolds, USA, 1995)
We Can't Go Home Again (Ray, USA, 1976)
Weekend (Godard, France/Italy, 1967)
Welcome Home Brother Charles (Fanaka, USA, 1975)
Welcome to the Dollhouse (Solondz, USA, 1995)
Wes Craven's New Nightmare (Craven, USA, 1994)
What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (Aldrich, USA, 1962)
When Harry Met Sally (Reiner, USA, 1989)
When Night Is Falling (Rozema, Canada, 1994)
The Wicker Man (Hardy, UK, 1973)
The Wild Angels (Corman, USA, 1966)
The Wild Bunch (Peckinpah, USA, 1969)
Wild at Heart (Lynch, USA, 1990)
The Wild One (Benedek, USA, 1953)
Wild in the Streets (Shear, USA, 1968)
Wings of Desire (Wenders, Germany, 1987)
Witchfinder General (Reeves, UK, 1968)
The Wizard of Oz (Fleming, USA, 1939)
Woodstock (Wadleigh, USA, 1970)
The World's Biggest Gang Bang (Bone, USA, 1995)
WR: Mysteries of an Organism (Makaveyev, Yugoslavia, 1971)
X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes (Corman, USA, 1963)
Yantra (Whitney, USA, 1957)
Yojimbo (Kurosawa, Japan, 1961)
Young Frankenstein (Brooks, USA, 1974)
Zelig (Allen, USA, 1983)
Zero de conduite (Vigo, France, 1933)
Ziegfried Follies (Ayers/Del Ruth/Lewis/Minnelli/Pye/Sidney/Walters, USA, 1945)
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Figure 1.2 *Sources:* DVD frame grabs: (from Oddbod Productions/City Heat Productions CANADA/USA DVD, 2003) Year – 2000; Country – Canada; Producers - Karen Lee Hall, Steven Hoban; Director – John Fawcett.

Figure 2.1 *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1987; Country – United States; Producers – Todd Haynes/Cynthia Schneider; Director – Todd Haynes.

Figure 3.1 UPI Photo/Barbara Wilson/Golden Raspberry Award Foundation. *Source*: United Press International.

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Figure 4.1 *Sources:* DVD frame grabs: *Cannibal Holocaust* (from Grindhouse Releasing USA DVD, 2008) Year – 1979; Country – Italy; Producers – Franco Di Nunzio, Franco Palaggi; Director – Ruggero Deodato. *The Beyond* (from Anchor Bay USA DVD, 2000) Year – 1981; Country – Italy; Producers – Fabrizio De Angelis; Director – Lucio Fulci. *Evil Dead* (from Anchor Bay USA DVD, 2002) Year – 1981; Country – USA; Producers – Robert Tapert, Irvin Shapiro; Director – Sam Raimi.

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Figure 7.1 Year – 1936; Country – USA; Produced and directed by Joseph Cornell.

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Figure 7.2 Year – 1959; Country – USA; Produced and directed by William Castle.

Figure 8.1 Year – 1939; Country – USA; Producers – Mervyn LeRoy; Director – Victor Fleming.

Figure 9.1 *Sources: Emmanuelle* (from Lions Gate Entertainment USA DVD, 2007) Year – 1974; Country – France; Producer – Yves Rousset-Rouard; Director – Just Jaeckin; *The Brood* (from MGM Home Entertainment USA DVD 2003): Year – 1979; Country – Canada; Producers – Pierre David, Claude Héroux, Victor Solnicki; Director – David Cronenberg; *Showgirls* (from MGM Home Entertainment/Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment USA DVD 2007): Year – 1995; Country – United States.

Figure 9.2 DVD frame grab: (from New Line Home Entertainment USA DVD, 2004) *Pink Flamingos*. Year – 1972; Country – USA; Director and Producer – John Waters.

Figure 10.1 DVD frame grab: (from Warner Home Video USA DVD, 2009) *Fame*. Year – 1980; Country – USA; Producers – David De Silva, Alan Marshall; Director – Alan Parker.

Figure 11.1 Publicity still, courtesy Royal Film Archive of Belgium.

Figure13.1 Courtesy Kathleen Dow, Robert Shaye Papers, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

Figure 13.2 Year – 1974; Country – USA; Producer: Buzz Feitshans; Director – Jack Hill.

Figure 14.1 Image courtesy of Royal Film Archive of Belgium. Year – 1920; Country – Germany; Producers – Rudolph Meinert, Erich Pommer; Director – Robert Wiene.

Figure 14.2 Year – 1970; Country – USA; Produced by Andy Warhol; Directed by Paul Morrissey.

Figure 15.1 Year – 1968; Country – UK/USA; Produced and directed by Stanley Kubrick.

Figure 16.1 *The Sound of Music* Year – 1965; Country – USA; Produced and Directed by Robert Wise. *The Happiness of the Katakuris* – courtesy of Palisades Tartan.

Figure 17.1 DVD frame grab: (from Paramount Home Entertainment CANADA DVD, 2007) Year – 1946; Country – USA; Producer and Director – Frank Capra.

Figure 19.1 DVD frame grab: (from Warner Bros. Entertainment UK DVD Release, 2007) Year – 1982; Country – USA/Hong Kong; Producers - Michael Deeley/Ridley Scott; Director – Ridley Scott.

Figure 20.1 Photo by Michael Hanscom of Norwescon (www.norwescon.org). *Source*: Michael Hanscom, used with permission.

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Cult Cinema

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An Introduction

Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton

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"*One has to be in a state of* euphemia*, cultic purity … Any religious ritual is arbitrary unless one is able to see past it to a deeper meaning …. It had to be approached on its own terms …. It was heart-shaking. Glorious. Torches, dizziness, singing. Wolves howling around us and a bull bellowing in the dark. The river ran white. It was like a film in fast motion, the moon waxing and waning, clouds rushing across the sky. Vines grew from the ground so fast they twined up the trees like snakes; seasons passing in the wink of an eye, entire years for all I know … Duality ceases to exist; there is no ego, no "I" … as if the universe expands to fill the boundaries of the self. You have no idea how pallid the workday boundaries of ordinary existence seem, after such an ecstasy. It was like being a baby*"

– Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (1992)

"Keep you doped with religion and sex and TV
And you think you're so clever and classless and free"

– John Lennon, *Working Class Hero* (1970)

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Introduction

Cult cinema is a term that is often met with some confusion. One of the problems of responding to the puzzled enquirer who asks "what exactly *is* a cult film?" is that the phrase has been adopted and employed in a variety of ways in its relatively brief lifespan. This book is an attempt to provide an overview of the predominant means by which cult cinema has functioned and been understood in all of its complexity, without simplistically contending that its instability is evidence of its redundancy as a valid concept. Such dismissals can only be accepted if one believes that words and terms can always be reduced to short, definitive explanations. Many words, however, have unstable meanings, often because their connotations fluctuate throughout time and also because they are used in different ways across varied contexts. David Lee has argued that "meaning is not an inherent property of words but is strongly influenced by contexts of use" (1992: 16), stressing the heterogeneous and complex nature of words.

To begin with, there is the range of meanings associated with the word "cult" proper. Generally speaking, there are two frameworks through which the word "cult" is approached, a sociological one and a religious one. The religious understanding refers to "cult" as the ancient or original procedures of practice that are externally present in the observation of a belief. These procedures of practice represent the care (from the Latin *cultus*) given to exercising a belief. The emphasis of these procedures lies on rituals, routines, and on material elements of the belief (idols, temples, shrines, attire).

The sociological understanding of the term "cult" also deals with religion, but it approaches it more as a degree of institutionalization. According to Ernst Troeltsch's (1931) typology of religious beliefs (which concentrates on Christian religion only) a cult is a form of religious behavior that is different from a church or a sect. Whereas a church claims its belief to have absolute truth and is geared towards the elimination of competitive beliefs, a cult is less concerned with universality of belief. Cults are also far less professional and bureaucratic in their organization than churches (with only a very small number of full-time salaried clergy), and they are not as closely allied with state-powers as churches usually are. Troeltsch also notes that like sects, cults promote a purity of belief. But unlike sects they do not usually advocate a return to purity. Instead, they embrace a new purity (this is why they are often called NRM: New Religious Movements), which makes their type of belief more open to esotericism and prone to mysticism. Cults are also different from sects in that they originate much more organically, whereas sects are typically break-offs from churches.

Troeltsch's typology was further refined by Howard P. Becker (1932) and Colin Campbell (1977), who emphasize that cults are usually small in size, that the observance of belief is of a private nature, and that their difference from churches means they are often portrayed as deviant – in opposition to mainstream culture. Cowan and Bromley (2008: 10–11) specify this last point by arguing that cults, like many religious beliefs, operate with a concept of 'unseen order' which acts as an incentive for the "harmonious adjustment" of behavior to a greater good. The unseen order motivates explanatory narratives that interpret its relationship to the everyday world (myths), and it acts as a sort

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of compass for prescribed behaviors (rituals). For Cowan and Bromley a main difference between cults and established religious groups lies in the fact that culturally "their myths, beliefs, rituals, and practices . . . differ significantly from those of the dominant culture" (2008: 11).

Although cults have always carried a pejorative connotation, an organized resistance against cults has arisen in recent decades, especially since the second half of the 1960s (Cowan 2003; Beckford 2003: 30). Christian counter-cult movements have tended to regard all cults as deviations from orthodoxy, and therefore as heretical. Secular counter-cult movements too have increasingly opposed cults because of the perception that high-profile controversies (such as the Manson Family, Jonestown's People's Temple, the Solar Temple, or Heaven's Gate,) but also more moderate movements (such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation, of which the Beatles were famed followers) have created cults using methods of conversion such as "brain washing" and "mind control," and that cult members are essentially slaves to charismatic leadership ("gurus"). For example, in "Why the Cults Are Coming", Marvin Harris (1981) argues that one reason for increased cultism is as a response to perceptions that society is too alienated in its post-industrial age. For Harris, this response is ineffective because cultism too runs the danger of alienation, of seeking solutions to spiritual crises through worldly means – economic and political. This is worth noting because of the immediate context it provides for the increase in use of the term with regard to cinema that occurred around the same time.

The phrase "cult cinema" – which has brought the connotations of the existing word "cult" to bear on the world of film culture – is a particularly knotty term, which renders it difficult to pin down in any definitive manner. It is subject to differing applications and battles over its meanings (as when disputes arise over which particular titles are cult films). Despite its contested nature, it is not totally elastic: its use has been influenced by historical and other contextual developments, so that when one looks at the ways in which the word functions within various contexts (i.e. in journalistic articles, in academic papers, on a variety of internet discussion platforms), there are a number of recurring themes which tend to be associated with it.

This book provides an overview of a range of topics which we believe are important to cult cinema. Within each of the chapters we attempt to describe the concept or category in question and to outline ways in which it has been important to cult cinema, to provide information on historical and/or theoretical features which centrally inform such categories, while also making reference to films where necessary to illustrate particular points. In this way, we hope to provide a thorough overview of cult cinema from a number of different perspectives, which we feel has the benefit of pointing to the diverse ways it has functioned within film culture. While we are aware of the contested nature of cult cinema, we nevertheless offer our own interpretation in the light of previous research. We also think that an introductory book of this nature should reflect the diversity of interpretations and designations involved in the field of cult cinema, and in this sense the book can be considered as following a "constructivist" approach to cult media (though of course we only focus on cinema) outlined by Philippe Le Guern, who posed the question: "Is it, in the end, the usage of the concept of cult, its mobilization, and its varying interpretations by audiences that should be examined, independently of the question of whether cult corresponds to an objective reality and a proven body of work?" (2004: 4) We certainly think that the usage, interpretations and values attached to cult are particularly important; yet while we do not think that any film is immanently cult, we do think that the ways in which the concept has been utilized in different contexts and developed historically has nevertheless led to a body of texts that are frequently referred to as cult films, and this is reflected in films that are repeatedly mentioned throughout the text. We have, however, also attempted to present a wide range of films here in order to point towards the large, and varied, body of work that has been termed cult. The large number of films mentioned and discussed in the book precludes us from being able to explain in what sense *every* film is to be considered cult, though we do frequently do so. If an explanation is lacking, we should stress that it has been discussed and/or listed as a cult film within print or online.

We should also mention our use of another concept that is difficult to pin down, and which is often used as a yardstick against which cult cinema is measured,

namely the concept of the mainstream. The mainstream is referred to a number of times within this book and we would like to make it clear that we also use this term in a similarly constructivist manner as we use cult: it acts as an umbrella term which refers to a number of values, most often denoting the "norms" of film production, textuality, and consumption. However, what counts as the mainstream (and what counts as the norm) may differ according to context. For Jancovich *et al.* (2003a) the mainstream tends to be a rather fuzzily defined imaginary concept among a number of different "taste cultures," yet despite such imprecision it still functions as a crucial concept among fans who use it to define themselves against more "normal" or "average" film viewers (2003a: 1–2).

The History of Studying Cult Cinema

Considering our claim that cult cinema has been influenced by its historical and other contextual developments, we will provide a brief overview of the historical emergence of cult cinema as a subject, particularly within an academic context. Hitherto there has not been a great deal written on how cult has emerged and developed historically within film culture, though some works have contributed to this field. These would include the contextual introduction sections in Mathijs and Mendik's collection *The Cult Film Reader* (2008a) as well as Greg Taylor's history of "cultism" within American film criticism, *Artists in the Audience* (1999). Other historical work can be found in occasional articles or as fragments of larger works, which include Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1991), Jancovich (2002), Smith (2006), Sexton (2011), and Stevenson (2003e).

While the use of the word "cult" within film culture stretches back much further, it was probably in the 1970s that the term "cult film" or "cult cinema" began to be used (at least relatively frequently), and it tended to refer to films that gained repeat audiences and who would often indulge in behaviors considered "ritualistic," hence the adoption of the religious metaphor. Thus, in addition to the ritual of continually returning to "worship" a particular text, other rituals such as repeating the lines of the films (as was the case with *Casablanca*) or dressing up and talking back at the screen (as was the case with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) were observed as evidence of cult viewing practices. The 1980s saw the rise of academic studies of cult cinema, with most attention being paid to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (see, for example, Austin 1981a; Siegel 1980), but also including Umberto Eco's (1986, first published in 1985) canonical study of *Casablanca* as a cult movie. While the first two articles are largely sociological in nature, primarily focusing on audience responses as cult, Eco's article was an attempt to map out the textual nature of the cult film (albeit through a single example), noting that a cult film is particularly rich in *intertextual* detail; that it is an example of "living textuality," consisting of a large assemblage of characters and situations which draw upon archetypal characters and situations from other films. While he states that all movies do this to an extent, he claims that *Casablanca* does so excessively, so that it is not "one movie. It is *movies*." (1986: 208). He ended by claiming that this process of excessive quotation, which he did not believe was a deliberate strategy of the film's creators, was more recently becoming a self-conscious component of film production and that we were entering a "Cult Culture" (1986: 210). Several chapters in this book explore the importance of Eco's ideas: Chapter 17 discusses intertextuality in relation to classical Hollywood cults; Chapter 21 explores the importance of intertextuality more broadly, particularly through the strategies of parody and irony. Chapter 22 looks at the importance of "meta-cult," which Eco argued was culture that self-consciously draws on cult (1986: 210).

As academic studies of cult cinema grew Eco's arguments became questioned. J.P. Telotte, for example, claimed that Eco overstated what he described as the "imperfections" of *Casablanca*, thus "trivializing what the public perceives to be a classic of the American screen" (1991b: 44). Whereas Eco viewed it as a kind of incoherent patchwork, Telotte stressed how the film managed to unify all of its various, disparate elements. Barry Keith Grant, meanwhile, questioned Eco's stress upon the cult film as a "collagelike assembly of interchangeable parts" as he stressed that this was a general characteristic of *all* classical Hollywood genre films (1991: 125). Both of these articles appeared in Telotte's 1991 collection on cult cinema, which was the first academic book entirely devoted to the cult

film phenomenon. This collection was also important for broadening academic cult studies: while the two films that had up to this point gained most coverage as cult films – *Casablanca* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – featured prominently, a large range of additional titles were also included. These films were approached from a wide variety of frameworks, though among these different perspectives there was an assertion that the cult film came in two notable guises: the "classical cult" film and the "midnight movie." The former were films produced within the classical Hollywood system between, approximately, 1917 and 1960 (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985) and which had endured through being repeatedly viewed by particular audiences at repertory screenings or through frequent television appearances. Issues explored in relation to the classical cult film in this volume include nostalgia, the role of the cult star, and the function of camp, topics discussed respectively in Chapter 7, Chapter 8 and Chapter 17. The midnight movie phenomenon (discussed in Chapter 1) – which had already by this point led to two books on the subject (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991 [1983]; Samuels 1983) – was at this stage perhaps the most noted manner by which films were designated as cult, and was where *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* gained its cult reputation. Scholars in this section discussed issues such as transgression (covered in Chapter 9), performance (covered in Chapters 7 and 10), nostalgia (Chapter 17), as well as distribution/exhibition trends (Chapter 1). And yet, while midnight screenings still occur, this edited collection was published when their heyday was passing. In Gregory A. Waller's empirical survey of midnight movie screenings in Kentucky between 1980 and 1985, he notes the "shrinking market" for midnight movies and claims that one of the reasons for this is because "many once-popular midnight movies – and movies that might have become successful at midnight – became available on videocassette" (1991: 177).

The importance of the videocassette, and home viewing more generally, was only briefly mentioned in Telotte's edited collection, but it would soon become a central focus of academic studies of cult cinema. The idea of repetition – of viewing films again and again – became much easier when films were accessible on videotape. As Anne Jerslev noted, videotape also enabled viewers to be able to have more mastery over films through functions such as fast-forward, rewind and freeze-framing (1992: 194). Videocassettes had a huge impact on film culture generally, and inevitably affected the processes associated with cult cinema. The domestic arena now became an important site in the construction of cult films: new "sleeper" patterns could be formed, for example, when films which flopped or disappointed at the box office found a new life on videocassette. Or, as was the case of the "video nasties" in the United Kingdom (see Chapter 4), new forms of censorship could lead to the formation of particular subcultures based around a corpus of videotapes. Video companies could also use "cult film" as a marketing label, releasing films that already had a cult reputation (or fitted vaguely into a cult-like genre such as exploitation) in order to sell films.

Novel viewing conditions and the expansion of cult discourses into marketing would feed into new approaches to cult cinema within academia. In 2000, Mendik and Harper edited another book-length collection on cult cinema, in which a variety of approaches to the cult text were evident, including theoretical analyses of films which had already established a cult reputation, the study of "transnational cult" films, cult stars and video nasties. Perhaps the best-known (and notorious) chapter in this collection was I.Q. Hunter's piece on *Showgirls*, much of which explored his own liking of the film and the politics of taste. The interrogation of cult in relation to taste – why people like particular works and for what reasons, and how these relate to particular social conditions – became particularly notable in the 2000s, with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu the most influential figure being drawn upon to analyze such issues. Bourdieu had already been drawn upon by Jeffrey Sconce in his influential 1995 article which investigated enthusiasts of a variety of exploitation films, a mode of ironic connoisseurship he termed "paracinema" (see Chapter 8). While Sconce's article did not discuss cult film as such, it certainly made an impact on subsequent studies of cult cinema, and paracinema tends to be considered a subsection of cult cinema. Work by Hawkins (2000), Hills (2002a), and Jancovich (2002) all extended research into areas of cultist taste (and other cult media in the case of Hills), and this was

also evident in some of the chapters within another collection on cult cinema by Jancovich *et al.* (2003b). The growth in the study of taste and cult was undoubtedly linked to the rise in academic studies of fans (see Chapter 5), a research area that has often overlapped with cult studies (Hills' aforementioned cited work was a study of fan cultures) and which has also been influenced by Bourdieu. Another research area influenced by Bourdieu which also overlaps with cult studies is the study of subcultures, particularly those subcultures identified through intensive forms of media consumption.

While the mass consumption of video technology marked an important stage in the domestication of cult cinema, the increasing digitization of media technologies has arguably led to a new stage in such domestic trends. In particular, the increasing embedding of the internet into people's lives and the success of DVDs have led to new patterns being observed within cult studies. DVD, which usurped VHS as the dominant media upon which films were domestically consumed in the early 2000s, actually expanded the types of material available to view at home. As the discs were cheap to manufacture an increasing body of film material began to be released, with small companies emerging to cater towards more "niche" tastes. This was undoubtedly aided by the growth of the internet which in the 2000s was being used by an increasing number of people. This had a number of impacts for cult cinema, relating to areas including e-commerce, sites of consumption, as well as ways in which cultists could share information and communicate with other cultists. E-commerce meant that it was now easier to obtain a wide range of films; this would have been particularly important for those who lived outside of the metropolitan areas in which "specialist" films were more likely to be accessed (such as repertory cinemas and specialist outlets selling more exclusive videos). This is not to claim that cult films are *always* more obscure, marginal films (see Chapters 5, 17 and 20 for discussions of more "mainstream" cult films), but such fare does constitute a significant corpus within traditional canons of cult cinema. The virtual networks created by internet connectivity not only enabled people to search out and obtain films and film-related goods from a range of actual locations, it also created a wealth of accessible information on films so that people could find out about new films, seek out production details about particular films, interpretations of films, or details about stars and actors, for example. The proliferation of information, whether through databases such as the *Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*, fan sites, online journals, blogs, or wikis, to name only a few notable examples, is important because of the ways in which cultists often want to know more about particular films. This eagerness to know more, or to "master" a film, manifests itself not merely through repeat viewings, but also through gaining knowledge of films in other ways, so that films become much more than just specific viewing encounters and feed into the cultist's broader cultural life in a variety of ways.

The significance of online culture for cult cinema first made itself present within Mendik and Harper's and Jancovich *et al.*'s edited collections but only as a marginal presence, most notably in Julian Hoxter's (2000) analysis of internet fan sites on *The Exorcist* in the former, and Harmony Wu's (2003) consideration of online cult material in relation to Peter Jackson in the latter. Yet a number of articles have been appearing over the past few years which consider the importance of network culture for cult cinema either directly or indirectly, including Brooker (2002), Jenkins (2006), and Telotte (2001). We discuss digital issues occasionally throughout this book, most notably in Chapters 4 and 5, where we point to some trends within cult fandom that have been sparked by new technologies and their uses, and in Chapter 22 where we consider the emergence of cultist DVD labels. The fact that technological change is increasingly accelerating and being used in novel (and often unsurprising) ways makes it difficult for academic work to keep abreast of such shifts. No doubt when this book is published there will have emerged new trends and a number of more recent articles that we will not have been able to consider. We have done our best, though, to at least indicate some of the debates engendered by technological changes and how these have impacted on the field of cult cinema.

At some point in the oscillation between availability and scarcity the conscious avoidance of easy access becomes an important attitude. Anecdotal evidence from studies of collecting, the long-term reception of the video nasties, and so-called "residual media" suggests transferable technologies impact on the "street

value" of their reputations (Staiger 2005a; Egan 2007; Acland, 2007). Jancovich quotes director/cultist Frank Henenlotter:

> all those obscure films that I would have risked injury and death to see (literally, in some of those theatres) are now available at your local clean video store! It's a little unnerving. I'm wholeheartedly in support of this, but I'm still not used to the fact that those films that I spent my whole life trying to see are now *consumer items* (quoted in Jancovich 2002; our emphasis)

Henenlotter was speaking about the early 1980s, and things have accelerated since. We should, however, remain aware that new technologies do not displace older technologies and therefore render them redundant. Instead, they reconstitute relations between different types of mediated activities, whether watching films, writing about films or talking about films. Thus, public visits to the cinema to watch films may have been overtaken by domestic viewing, but they still remain important, and for some the cinema experience takes on ever greater value in relation to watching cinema on the home screen (whether this be a large, high-definition set or a small laptop screen). And while VHS has "officially" become an obsolete format, its marginal status can create a new set of cultists. Analogous to music fans preferring vinyl over compact discs these cultists trade or swap VHS cassettes, or post older videos or videotaped televised films of movies which are otherwise hard to get as digitized AVI files (on sites such as Cinemageddon and Karagarga). New technologies do not necessarily wipe out old technologies: they can co-exist in interesting ways, feeding into value judgments or new cultural patterns. The circulation of a low-fi quality VHS bootleg is of high significance for the cult surrounding *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (Davis 2008). The relations between old and new technologies, between the public and domestic film viewing site (and between mobile and static platforms), will undoubtedly continue to inform the future trajectory of cult cinema. It may be that cult cinema becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between other forms of cult media, but we do not think that this is certain. In the age of "convergence" the distinctions between different media platforms may have become increasingly intertwined, sometimes murky, but we do believe that despite such overlaps many people do distinguish between cinema (films, movies) and, for example, television. It is for this reason that we think that cult cinema is worthy of an overview as a self-contained subject, albeit one that cannot be isolated from the broader, interconnected media sphere within which it exists.

Definition of Cult Cinema

Numerous attempts have been made to define cult cinema. Many of these approach the topic from a vernacular angle, highlighting elements that cannot be caught in a description and – hence – remain intangible and very subjective. If anything, this means that a definition of cult cinema can only be intersubjective. Many overviews of cult cinema give lists instead of definitions, in the hope that the aggregate of illustrations of how individual films are cult leads to an explanation of why they are cults.

If we look beyond lists, definitions of cult cinema come in four contexts: sociological studies, reception studies, textual interpretations, and aesthetic analyses. Sociological studies assume that a cult film is a film with an intense following, not unlike religious cults. It is a contested parallel, which we will explore further in Chapter 12. However, if cult cinema is seen as a form of cultism in which religiosity has been replaced by an intense mode of consumption, the kind Douglas Cowan and David Bromley have called "audience cults" (2008: 89–90), it offers valuable insights into how exactly cult followings develop and what kind of cultural status they take on. Similarly, cult film can be approached as a form of deviant subculture. The most strident example of the sociological approach is presented by Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich (1992). They define a cult film as one whose audience community intensely celebrates "themes that (1) place typical people into atypical situations, (2) allow for narcissistic and empathic audience identification with subversive characters, (3) question traditional authority structures, (4) reflect societal strains, and (5) offer interpretable and paradoxical resolutions to these social strains" (Kinkade and Katovich 1992: 194). This definition describes a double bind: these components are features of the films themselves as well as characteristics

of what audiences experience. For Kinkade and Katovich, a contradictory attitude is essential. Cult audiences rebel against the mainstream and canon of cinema and hold that "nothing is sacred"; at the same time they present their own fandom as "sacred."

Reception studies investigate the trajectories through which films develop cult followings as part of their passage through markets. Such studies often offer theoretical outlines of cult films' place in culture, mostly through illustrations and case studies. For Hills (2002a) and Staiger (2005a), cults are a very visible form of fandom. For Jeffrey Sconce (1995, 2007) and Mark Jancovich (2002), cult receptions are to be understood as struggles for cultural positions, rooted in battles over taste hierarchies. Reception approaches also concentrate on the conditions under which cult followings are developed and maintained (Waller 1991; Hawkins 2000; Klinger 1994). In this view, cult films are films whose celebration or appropriation by cultists is the accidental consequence of their fractured reception trajectories. Often failures upon their initial release, and frequently encountering obstacles in their search for audiences, they develop committed followings during repeat screenings (often at fringe times) and they go on to enjoy long lasting fandom. For Danny Peary (1981: xiii), cult receptions are minority receptions, which means that they concern methods of distribution and consumption outside the mainstream. Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 4–8) isolate active fandom, a sense of community, the liveness of the viewing experience, commitment and endurance, a sense of rebellion, a paracinematic desire for the deconstruction of canons, persistent legends of distribution, specialist or niche events, and a long-term presence, as characteristics of cult receptions. We will examine these concepts more closely in the first section of this book.

The textual approach follows closely on the reception studies approach. While the stress in this approach is on offering a definition based on the analysis of the films, there is a strong acknowledgment of the role of viewers. A central point of attention in these studies is the complexity of communication between text and viewer. A key component of that communication is the use of what is often called "allusions" or "inferences" (by Carroll 1998 and Bordwell 1989 respectively). These are salient moments or small clues within a film that are picked up by savvy viewers who relish their expertise in recognizing these "cues." Other central points in the textual interpretation approach are "nostalgia," "irony," and "camp." These concepts refer to hyperbolic uses of modes of representation, picked up by viewers eager to appropriate these in their enjoyment and celebration of the films.

There are a few attempts to define cult film from a uniquely aesthetic angle, as films whose reception is secondary to understanding them. Most of these are valuable because they emphasize issues of "exoticism," "rarity," "genre," "trangression," and "quality" (Grant 1991; Cox and Jones 1990, 1993). Often, these studies concentrate on specialized subgenres and formats (such as the giallo, anime, martial arts, vampire movies, sleaze movies). These studies are essential in outlining the stylistic components that trigger enthusiasm, aberrant reactions, or repeat-viewing devotion. We will explore many of these instances in the second section of our book.

At their narrowest, aesthetic approaches seek to understand cult films as so unique that they defy interpretation, and operate purely on an affective and visceral level (hyperbolic camp, pornography, extreme horror, weepies, schmaltz, or maudlin melodramas). These films are defined through their representational and stylistic excess, which frequently motivates their subsequent critical interpretation. Such definitions are most common in fanzines and specialist blogs, but echoes of this sentiment are traceable in academic studies as well: for instance, Jancovich *et al.* have defined cult via a "multitude of sins" (Jancovich *et al.* 2003a: 1), while Welch Everman refers to it as something "kind of offbeat, kind of weird, kind of strange" (Everman 1993: 1). Harper and Mendik have compared its intensity and physical impact to an "orgasm" (Mendik and Harper 2000a: 7), while for Allan Havis (2008: 2), the very nerve of cult film is related to "personal frisson," which he explains in the form of a recurring dream. Umberto Eco has perhaps come closest to a description of this elusive factor. He has explained the cult cinema experience as having an "archetypical appeal" that provokes a "sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a déja vu that everybody yearns to see again"' (Eco 1986: 200). Even though Eco is quick to separate the term archetype from any "mythic connotation" (1986: 200), and

even though he shies away from invoking any reference to pontifical language, or to Carl-Gustav Jung's collective unconscious, his reference to a desire to relive some "magical moment" as a group is central to his argument.

Based on these previous attempts, and with the historical shifts in usage of the term in mind, any updated definition of cult cinema is both an amalgam of what has been said before and a departure from it. In our view, *cult cinema is a kind of cinema identified by remarkably unusual audience receptions that stress the phenomenal component of the viewing experience, that upset traditional viewing strategies, that are situated at the margin of the mainstream, and that display reception tactics that have become a synonym for an attitude of minority resistance and niche celebration within mass culture. In turn, filmmakers have used audiences' management of their "cult attitude" to consciously design films to include transgressive, exotic, offensive, nostalgic or highly intertextual narratives and styles. Although such opportunistic programming of cultism has created the impression that the term cult is now merely a marketing ploy, there continue to be receptions – especially in relation to the use of new technologies alongside traditional theatrical exhibition – that generate unexpected audience engagements which reconfigure the very notion of viewership.*

Structure of the Book

This book is structured into two main parts, each of which include a number of chapters on subjects that we feel are of particular importance to the study of cult cinema. The first part is "Receptions and Debates." Receptions are particularly important within the field of cult cinema, as the term emerged as a phenomenon that described particular reception patterns as opposed to specific textual features. In Chapter 1 we outline the important reception contexts which have been historically intertwined with cult status and move on to look at more specific instances of reception that can feed into cultism. In Chapter 2 we look at the importance of the marketplace in relation to cult cinema, an area that has been neglected in many studies of cult because of the way in which cult cinema has often been perceived as antipathetic to commercial strategies (a view which we do not share). Chapters 3 and 4 interrogate the institutions and mechanisms of prestige and evaluation that govern films' immediate reception into public culture. Among the elements we discuss here are awards, festivals, conventions, censorship, and criticism. In Chapter 5 we focus on fandom and subcultures, both of which are interlinked with the study of cult cinema in important ways and which have increasingly gained academic attention in the recent past. Chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on two concepts that have attracted very specific forms of fandom, namely auteurs and stars. In Chapter 8 we discuss camp and paracinema: viewing strategies that have been labeled cultist because they are seen to diverge from normative viewing positions in order to create alternative evaluative criteria. The importance of differing from cultural norms has been a key theme running through debates on cult cinema and in the final three chapters we explore the idea of difference further. Chapter 9 analyses the concepts of transgression and freakery, Chapter 10 deals with issues of gender and sexuality, and Chapter 11 looks at issues of exoticism and transnationalism. In the final chapter in this part, Chapter 12, we look at how the historical bond between the concepts of cult and religion can inform modes of appreciation.

Part II of the book, "Genres and Themes," analyzes modes that have been prominent within discussions of cult cinema. We therefore identify the ways in which particular genres have been linked to cult cinema through exploring relevant historical and conceptual issues. In our discussion, we will first pay attention to motives, tropes, traditions, and genres that have been located outside of, and regarded as antithetical to, mainstream cinema, such as exploitation films and B-movies (Chapter 13), underground and avant-garde cinema (Chapter 14), drugs (Chapter 15) and forms of music such as rock, punk, or glamrock (Chapter 16). We will next discuss modes of cultism within genres and themes from films that use formulas and motives more firmly entrenched in traditions close to, or within, the mainstream. Chapter 17 looks at Hollywood cinema, Chapter 18 at the horror film, Chapter 19 at science fiction, and Chapter 20 at blockbusters. In each case, we will identify which films within these traditions are more likely to receive cult reputations, and through which means. Our last two chapters will focus on the notions of intertextuality (Chapter 21) and meta-cult (Chapter 22), and interrogate the

increasing self-awareness and use of modes affiliated with cultism within discourses in the critical reception, production and marketing of cinema, a process that has impacted greatly on how films are identified as cult today.

The large number of chapters in the book reflects the many diverse threads that feed into the overall topic. Inevitably, there are overlaps between some sections. No one category is ever entirely isolated from others. The parts and the chapters are constructed to provide a structure which can be used by readers to navigate their way through this book. Within chapters, where there are overlaps with other chapters, we note this by referring to other chapters which provide further detail on the particular material under discussion. We hope the book thus allows readers to explore particular aspects of cult cinema and to map their own journey through this broad field.

As this book is primarily an overview of cult cinema studies up until this point (even though we would like to think of it as also extending current studies), it reflects some of the "blind spots" within such research. Perhaps the most important one that we are aware of is the very American-centric nature of cult cinema studies up until this point. That is, the focus on cult receptions has tended to focus on reception within the United States. It is true that there has been research on cult reception outside of the United States (primarily, but not limited to, the United Kingdom), but this is comparatively marginal. Following from this, the majority of films which get listed as cult films and discussed as such are also from the United States. There are certainly exceptions, and there are particular geographical areas that have become prime sites of cult production (notably Japan and Hong Kong, discussed in Chapter 11), but their films still tend to gain their cult reputations at least partly in the United States. While we have attempted to provide a range of cult films from different countries, we are bound by the state of research in the field up until now (although the growth of the internet has started to complicate, if not entirely eradicate, such trends). We hope that more research charting cult reputations in a greater diversity of contexts, such as Latin American cult cinema or Eurocults, will increase over the forthcoming years. Likewise, we anticipate that more research will be conducted into "female cults" (which we briefly touch upon in Chapters 6 and 10) and other areas that have hitherto fallen beneath the radar of cult cinema studies. This, we feel, demonstrates that there is a great deal of work still to be done within cult cinema studies, which signals a healthy and productive future for the subject.

Part I

Receptions and Debates

1

Cult Reception Contexts

We have proposed in our introduction that cult cinema is primordially known through its reception. In this chapter we provide a conceptual view of various elements that inform cult reception contexts. In order to illustrate how cult receptions differ from mainstream or normalized trajectories our attention first goes to the paradigmatic historical exemplar of cult cinema, namely the midnight movie. Next, we will outline the significance of a phenomenological approach to cult film reception. Subsequently, we will theorize the kind of experience cult receptions offer, and the value it generates.

Midnight Movies

Traditionally, the midnight movie is associated with New York. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum (1991: 310) observed that, on a worldwide scale, "New York is Palookaville when it comes to midnight movies," and there were vibrant late night scenes across North America and Europe.[1] Yet the New York scene is the only one thoroughly investigated and therefore we will use it as our key example.

Most scholars agree New York's midnight movie scene started when, in the late 1960s, underground and avant-garde theaters, with established clienteles and institutional affiliations, started programming risqué and exploitative materials. Mark Betz (2003) argues this shift was encouraged when "kinky" foreign art films and American underground films came together, near the end of the 1960s, in an exploitation/art circuit that emphasized the countercultural potential of cinema. Parker Tyler (1969) suggests a cross-fertilization between filmmakers who started to include more sex and violence in their films, and the demands of theaters catering to more permissive taste patterns, created a momentum in which practitioners and patrons encouraged each other to go ever further (Tyler 1969). The film usually credited with initiating the transition is the infamous *Flaming Creatures*, with its Dionysian theme and brutal rape-orgy. It was seized at several screenings and stunned audiences at others (for more on this film, see Chapters 3 and 14). Soon, other films with provocative aesthetic attitudes, and shocking or politically radical imagery drew similar receptions: *Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, *Blow Job*, *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, and *Chafed Elbows*, which Tyler describes as "the offbeat of the offbeat." It had a "marathon run at a small East Village theatre" (Tyler 1969: 53). Probably the most cultist trajectory was that of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* and *Invocation of My Demon Brother*, both of which ran for long periods of time at late night slots in theaters East of Greenwich Village (Betz 2003; Tyler 1969). A constant reference in the receptions of these films was that of physical and mental liberation from repression – a function similar to that of ancient rituals.

At the beginning of the 1970s a string of New York theaters started midnight programming. The underground repertory was complemented with exploitation films with kaleidoscopic and apocalyptic motives, revivals of previously banned films, new and explicit horror, films pushing the boundaries of sexual permissiveness, and exotic and surreal foreign films (Figure 1.1). The acceleration was a sign of the

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Figure 1.1 Midnight movie classics from 1970 to 2002: from left to right, *El Topo, The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Donnie Darko*.

vibrancy of the counterculture, and of its widening into radical "outsider" films – the weirder the better. Topping them all was the visceral and symbolically heavy Mexican western-on-acid *El Topo*. Virtually unadvertised, *El Topo* sold out the Elgin theater for half a year. After a while, its screenings were described as a "midnight mass" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 94). With the success of *El Topo*, the midnight movie really took off. Films as diverse as George Romero's zombie film and civil rights-metaphor *Night of the Living Dead*, Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* (a mystical adaptation of René Daumal's *Mount Analogue* to which Jodorowsky improvised a clever ending), and the mind-boggling surrealism of *Viva la muerte* attracted repeat audiences looking for "underground" thrills, and gusts of revelations – often aided by illegal substances. With these films, the midnight movie added an anti-establishment stance to its radical aesthetics; increasingly graphic depictions of sex and violence and explorations of immorality correlated with the audience's anxieties about the "violence engulfing the United States" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 99, 112). Even if this feeling that the midnight movie exemplified a revolutionary attitude was more an impression than a fact, for midnight movie viewers the era's general unrest seemed to synchronize with what they experienced on screen – as if it predicted "the end of the world as we know it."

As the 1970s progressed, the countercultural movement lost momentum. Midnight movies became ever more outrageous, but as their popularity widened across campuses, generic and aesthetic radicalism replaced ideological commentary. Art house and B-movie distributors such as Janus films and New Line Cinema became engaged in the midnight movie. Lesbian vampire movies, porn chic, blaxploitation movies, and foreign philosophical allegories such as *Antonio das Mortes*, *The Saragosa Manuscript*, or *WR: Mysteries of an Organism*, replaced the original batch of films. The most notorious among these films was *Pink Flamingos*, which tested viewers' threshold for revulsion – exactly the reason for its successful reception.

By the late 1970s, the midnight movie had become a staple of alternative cinema exhibition, the urban and college town equivalent of the drive-in. It was characterized by a hedonistic and wildly extravert context of rambunctious yet joyous celebrations. Many of the films championed in the circuit were as flamboyant as their audiences, with as figureheads campy rock musicals such as *Tommy*, or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Proudly self-referential, these films were as much performances of cults, as cults themselves. Because of its endless runs *Rocky Horror* became a repertory in its

own right (Weinstock 2007; Austin 1981a). Occasionally, "original" cults would still develop, around enigmatic films such as *Eraserhead*.

In the 1980s, much of the midnight movie attitude moved to VCR viewing, where "pause" and "rewind" functions on the remote control replaced the theatrical repeat viewing experience. What survived were nihilistic or flamboyant post punk movies such as *Heavy Metal*, the hardcore *Café Flesh*, or *Liquid Sky*. By the end of the decade many of the original midnight theaters had closed their doors, and filmmakers joined the burgeoning "independent" scene, or went underground again, with Abel Ferrara (*King of New York*) and Larry Fessenden (*Habit*) as crossover exceptions (Hawkins 2003). Only with large intervals would new midnight movie cults appear. The most prominent ones – *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Donnie Darko* – became the phenomenon's de facto eulogies. In 2001 "everything changed", writes Joan Hawkins:

> The World Trade Center in New York City was destroyed . . . The geography of downtown Manhattan has changed. So has the mood in the USA. And it's not at all clear what new avant-gardes and cult films might rise up to address what seems at this point to be a new era (one in which irony, for example, may not be considered an appropriate response to anything) (2003: 232).

For Hawkins, the cult of the midnight movie, a "moment when we believed that direct intervention in the country's spectacle would do some good," was over (2003: 232).

As befits cult receptions, the midnight movie did not really die. Since the 1990s the demise of the original phenomenon was balanced by three other trends. First, new films found their ways into festivals, which increasingly included midnight showings as part of their programs. Second, midnight premieres also became a feature of blockbuster releases vying for cult status. Third, the midnight movie phenomenon went into meta-mode. *Donnie Darko*, for instance, arguably the most famous midnight movie after 9/11, is also a meta-midnight movie. Its audiences at the New York Pioneer Theater, aware of the legacy of the midnight movie phenomenon, were not only continuing a tradition that had existed for more than thirty years, they also consciously knew they were contributing to the heritage of the phenomenon by keeping it alive, or honoring the tradition by paying lip service to it. A decade after its first midnight run, college campuses, art houses, and festivals still screen *Donnie Darko* at midnight for this reason. Other instances of the meta-mode of the midnight movie include nostalgic revivals and queer celebrations of often overtly mainstream "classics" such as John Hughes's teen comedies (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*), or sword and sorcery fantasy films (*Conan the Barbarian*). Their midnight success relies on the kitsch and camp attitude *Rocky Horror* had cemented as a core characteristic of the cult reception trajectory, and it reclaims some of the irony Hawkins claims it lost by exposing topical political attitudes through cheesy old movies. In its most recent form, this reflexive nostalgia has also included the original midnight movies, with relaunches of *El Topo* joining the never-ending runs of *Rocky Horror* and occasional newcomers, such as *The Room* (Bissell 2010).

In sum, the midnight movie highlights the key characteristics of a cult reception trajectory: films lumped together in a lively and "countercultural" exhibition context by their capacity to commit, through outrageously weird and explicit imagery, subcultural audience collectives, and to elicit performances of fandom and obsessions with the interconnectedness of elusive details intrinsic as well as alien to the films that enables allegorical and political interpretations that position themselves outside the realm of normalcy.

The Difficulty of Researching Cult Cinema

As the exemplar of the midnight movie illustrates, cult reception contexts are extremely heterogeneous. According to Mathijs and Mendik (2008a: 4–10), part of why they are called cult is because these receptions contain multitudes of competing and opposite discourses that stand in contrast of what a "normal" consumption process ought to be like. How does one begin to research such diverse contexts? At the basis of the cult reception context lies a fundamental philosophical question: does the value of a cultural product lie in its features and intentions or in the eye of the

beholder? This question has important implications for the methodology of researching cult cinema.

Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 15–16) distinguish between two schools of thought on this problem, with different implications:

> ontological approaches to cult cinema are usually essentialist: they try to determine what makes "cult cinema" a certain type of movie . . . Phenomenological approaches shift the attention from the text to its appearance in the cultural contexts in which it is produced and received. Such attempts usually see cult cinema as a mode of reception, a way of seeing films (2008b: 15).

In the ontological approach, the reception process is one that affirms the properties of the product. In the phenomenological approach the reception process negotiates these properties in the light of how they make themselves known – as a kind of phenomenon. Mathijs and Mendik refer to the work of Jerome Stolnitz as an effort that tries to solve the deadlock between these two positions. For Stolnitz (1960a, 1960b) any value is less a matter of the properties of the work or the viewer than of the experience generated by the flow of meaning during the process of perception. Stolnitz distinguishes between objectivist, subjectivist, and objective relativist views of experience. Objectivism, like the ontological approach, places the essence of value in the work itself – as if the work carries meaning within itself. This makes perception a process of detection. Subjectivism, on the contrary, identifies value as a faculty of the perceiver – as if the audience places its own meanings upon the work. This makes the work "empty."

Most reception studies of cinema embrace this approach. Janet Staiger (1992), for instance, explains that in order to understand how films work, and how the strategies through which they are given value operate, one has to distinguish between meanings generated through texts, through readers, and through contexts. Throughout, however, one has to accept

> that cultural artifacts are not containers with immanent meanings, that variations among interpretations have historical bases for their differences, and that differences and change are not idiosyncratic but due to social, political, and economic conditions, as well as to constructed identities such as gender, sexual preference, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality. (Staiger 1992: xi)

Staiger argues that the best methodology for stressing contextual factors is to shift the focus of subjectivism from the mind of the spectator to the material conditions (the labor) involved in assigning meaning to a work – she calls this methodology a neo-Marxist approach. According to such an approach, studies of receptions should place emphasis on the use-value, exchange-value, and symbolic value of films (the latter being the value that is not expressed in material terms but in terms of the knowledge, expertise, kudos, and status, but also the dangers for exclusion and isolation any affiliation brings).

There have been several attempts to carve out procedures for this methodology. One attempt, by Barbara Klinger (1997), distinguishes between diachronic and synchronic approaches to film reception. The first stresses the materials that feature in a chain of events over time during a film's reception; the second emphasizes the materials from events that co-occur within the reception. The first method gives breadth, the second depth. Because cult reception trajectories are known to be volatile it is necessary to use both approaches simultaneously. Moreover, cult reception contexts are highly influenced by what Martin Barker (2004) has called unpredictable "ancillary materials": already existing artifacts and discourses that relate to the upcoming release that lead to polemics and legends and that prevent a nice match between expectations and the actual experience. The best example is probably the myth surrounding the troubled production history of *Casablanca*. Another good example is the abrupt way in which *Night of the Living Dead* was introduced to audiences, as part of a matinee double bill, before it became a midnight movie. This means that an essential part of the cult reception context is that it is "fractured." Its smooth running is interrupted or otherwise compromised, and audiences struggle to find an appropriate frame of reference for the newly released film.

Another attempt concentrates on the units of meaning that circulate in receptions. Each reception contains "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" references. Following David Bordwell (1989: 13), intrinsic references can be labeled "cues," elements of the film and its immediate

production context used by viewers as tools in their construction of arguments about the film. Extrinsic references are "quotes," influences from outside the regular context that interfere with the reception. The degree to which a film's public course takes on the characteristics of a cult reception often depends on the abundance and the weight of extrinsic references. The longer a film's public visibility lasts (even in small communities), and the bigger the influences, the more likely it is to fracture a smooth reception. Controversies and moral panics are frequently a major part of the fractures in a cult reception trajectory.

There are some complications with the attempts we sketched. Topical events can penetrate so far into a film's reception they take over its direction. This is what initially happened to *Donnie Darko*. Even though it had been set for the Halloween weekend, traditionally a time for darker, more adult fare, *Donnie Darko* was too meta-generic to pose as a horror film, and the destruction of New York's World Trade Center on September 11th had temporarily eliminated audiences' appetites for dark materials and provocations. As one critic put it in hindsight: "why seek out talking rabbits warning of the end of the world when it already seemed to be happening?" Cult receptions also demonstrate psychological tendencies towards "insulation." Russ Hunter (2009, 2010) observes how subsequent to *Suspiria* (usually considered his best film) the reception of Dario Argento's films petrified into a series of mantras, which led to a refusal to include new achievements (or rather the lack of them) into reappraisals. The more Argento's reception became mantra-like, the more frequently it was called "cult." Such inoculation from new debates demonstrates how difficult it is to distinguish between instances of cultism that are convictions, and instances that are *performed* as attitudes, and if indeed there is a measurable difference.

Finally, there is the complication of a cult reception context's endurance. Films such as *The Wizard of Oz* or *Casablanca* have been enjoyed *as cult* by generations of audiences. The label cult is also instrumental to the long-term reputation of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or *Pink Flamingos*, films that can be said to be on perennial release, as well as to the cult status of *Emmanuelle*, which played in theaters for a full decade. As figureheads for a certain period and style, their long-term receptions are imbued with a sense of nostalgia, one that is equally often a nostalgia for a period (a zeitgeist or a popular myth) as a nostalgia for a kind of cultic experience. For years, *El Topo* was virtually unavailable – it only made it more cult. The search for bootlegged copies of *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* quickly became a characteristic of its cult instead of an obstacle to it – as the vibrant illegal trade of VHS copies of it testifies.

As a result of these complications cult reception contexts ultimately remain exceptions to insights into how film receptions work. It is in this important sense that cult cinema is kept isolated from the mainstream – as an unresearchable, "fugitive" object with elusive receptions that don't "work" and that are in essence, dysfunctional and unproductive.

Cult Cinema as Phenomenal Experience

The way into investigating cult cinema receptions, and cult cinema, as an object of research lies in operationalizing that exceptionalism. This is possible through the third view Stolniz isolates, namely objective relativism. This concept assumes value and meaning lie in between product and perceiver – in the actual *phenomenal experience* of the spectator, and the mutual material environment of both. Adopting a phenomenological perspective, argues Dudley Andrew (1985: 631), attempts to make visible reason "on the run." When we look at the ways in which our exemplar of the midnight movie presents itself, a more matching approach hardly seems imaginable. There are several reasons why Stolnitz's practical form of phenomenology, objective relativism, and its focus on the phenomenal experience, provide a good framework for studying cult reception contexts.

First, the phenomenal experience is an aesthetic one. It is an experience that is sought for its own sake – as an end in itself. It sketches the experience as one that cannot be purposeful, that cannot be an end to a means. Otherwise the perception would shut down under pressure of the perceiver's desire to find functions for the work (Fenner 2008: 104–106). There are several advantages to outlining the reception of cult cinema as a phenomenal experience of an aesthetic kind. It offers the opportunity to balance traditional

points of attention in a reception study (such as box office performance, critical reception, marketing, and so on) with a focus on elements such as emotive overtones, degrees of investment, or formations of attachment. It also offers a possibility to investigate terms such as loyalty, time-wasting, excessive idolatry, or enthrallment in a reception. These terms are exactly the kinds that are found time and again in descriptions of cult receptions as "useless."

A second characteristic of seeing cult receptions as a phenomenal experience concerns the space in between the work and the perceiver. A phenomenal experience implies closeness, and so does cult cinema. This spatial relationship is to be understood as both geographical and mental. The cult film experience is indeed often described as one of close proximity to the screen (enthrallment with the giant canvas), to fellow viewers (huddled together in communion), and to the subject matter (overly close-reading of themes and motives). The two most commonly employed metaphors are that of the darkness of the theater (much loved in lyrical assessments of the midnight movie), or that of being glued to a home viewing set. The mental closeness refers to the viewer as someone near to the film, someone with a connection and an investment in it, and, as we will see in our discussions of fandom, someone with a sense of ownership over the film. At the same time the closeness also assumes that the object itself (the film) has some agency in the relationship, not only as carrier of cues and clues, but also something that first receives its meaning from the viewer and then talks back. Often, the closeness makes it difficult for the researcher to clearly distinguish between viewer- and object-agency (for an elaboration, see Miller 2010: 42–78).

A third characteristic Stolnitz draws is that of disinterestedness. Disinterestedness needs to be seen here not as a refusal to engage with a particular reception, nor as a position of free or detached engagement towards it, but rather as a form of decontextualized commitment, a sense of focus. It is not in the film that the cult reception is disinterested. Rather it concentrates intensely on everything to do with the film, the properties and appearances of which are interrogated and elaborated upon with detail and repetitively. Repeat viewing, as a physical reliving but also as a reactivation of emotion, is a key component and recurrent characteristic of cult receptions (Wood 1991: 156–166, Châteauvert and Bates 2002: 90). The parallel with a religious exegesis of sacred texts is an obvious one. This is not to say that any attention for the rest of world is absent, only that it is viewed through the lens of the text and its affiliate discourses. Norman Kreitman (2006) employs the term "cultural disinterestedness" to identify this form of attention. He adds that it operates with a keen sense of the "generalized other," and that it can achieve a feeling of liberation from immediate personal concerns. Jean Châteauvert and Tamara Bates (2002: 93) observe how film cultism always harbors the desire to know the other's experience. For cult receptions, this characteristic is essential, as it highlights the extent to which the perception is always part of a larger whole – never limited only to one individual.

Cult Cinema as Bad Experience

An important qualification governing cult receptions is their perceived status as "bad," as an inferior form of experience. Watching a film for its own sake, from really close up, and with an intense focus that channels everything else through that film's perception in order for it to achieve meaning, is generally regarded as something an enlightened or informed viewer would not do. Ritual repeat-viewing is regarded as childish, boring, compulsive, but not tasteful. It goes, for instance, against the template of the cinephile as someone with an omnivorous curiosity and taste for films of quality.

Many cult reception contexts explicitly refer to the films as "bad," as poor or distasteful filmmaking. This badness has moral as well as aesthetic components. In chapters throughout this book we will analyze instances of cult films that are celebrated because of their representations of transgression, abjection, freakery, grossness, gore, misogyny, or cruelty. Likewise, cult receptions are known to revel in exoticism, fetishism, idolatry, and repetitiveness. This badness is as frequently approached ironically as it is carried as a sign of pride.

The tendency to classify the cult experience as inferior depends largely upon the degree of rationality and freedom attributed to how people watch films.

Studies of receptions of cult films often deal with expert audiences (such as critics, connoisseurs, or taste leaders). Often this is for practical reasons: these groups are the ones who most visibly embrace the positive attitude, the direct access, and the obsession with detail typical for disinterestedness – they are the easiest to research. If one looks at some influential studies of film reception contexts, especially fan studies, that apply to cult cinema, one gets the impression there is an assumption all such viewers operate as perfectly rational agents, not affected by cultural or social conditions, and totally free to choose their affiliations (Peary 1981; Jenkins 1992; Sconce 1995, Taylor 1999). Not only is this an artificial form of rationality; it is also far removed from the reality of many cult receptions. The liberty to browse freely between kinds of receptions before electing one is balanced by personal inhibitions, and by the cultural and social conditions that influence the environment within which the phenomenal experience occurs. It seems obvious to state that choice is limited by the material conditions within a given time and place. Next to that, alignments and affiliations frequently come through certain cultural ties, such as class, gender, ethnicity, or heritage. To use Kreitman's terms: the sense of the generalized other often looms large. These conditions make concepts such as loyalty, affordability, and pride, *and* the connections between them (such as declaring a loyalty to an affordable item at a certain time and place as a source of pride) a key feature in cult cinema receptions. Yet many scholars of cult cinema and many researchers of film receptions overlook these conditions and consequences.

One of the most prominent scholarly efforts to address this limited freedom has come from Pierre Bourdieu (1984). According to Bourdieu, taste can be distinguished in "tastes of luxury" and "tastes of necessity." Tastes of luxury are typical of the kind of freedom and limitless choice assumed by rational agency, though they can depend on habit as much as conscious decision-making. Tastes of necessity are, Bourdieu argues, the result of a "forced choice" that is fulfilled not only because it is an economic necessity but also a cultural reflex of people who "are inclined to fulfill it, because they have a taste for what they are anyway condemned to" (1984: 178). Bourdieu's conceptualization of taste as socially conditioned has been very influential. Yet his conclusions are often criticized by studies of cult receptions that continue to assume that cult viewers exercise free taste. In fact, the cult receptions of "tasteless" films (gore, pornography, rape-revenge, video nasties, trash) are regarded as choices of luxury by cult fans who thereby assert themselves as taste leaders because they can elect to apply aesthetic criteria to otherwise unredeemable movies. Reading protocols such as "camp" and "paracinema," which we will discuss at length in Chapter 8, are examples of this assertion.

One important exception to this view is the work of Mark Jancovich (2002). Paraphrasing Bourdieu, Jancovich sees these protocols as games of formalist sophistication: "As Bourdieu shows . . . the privileging of form over function asserts the 'superiority [of the bourgeois] over those who, because they cannot assert the same contempt for . . . gratuitous luxury and conspicuous consumption, remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies'" (Jancovich 2002: 312). In this sense, cult receptions display tastes of necessity as much as tastes of luxury. Cult reception contexts can thus be conceptualized as sites of struggle between choices of necessity on the one hand and games of luxury typical to bastions of middle-class luxury such as college towns or urban centers like Manhattan (locations where the midnight movie blossomed) on the other hand, with "taste" (and tastelessness) as the tool of distinction between kinds of cult receptions.

Cult Cinema as Collective Experience

A major way in which cult receptions are different from other forms of film receptions is that they are part of a collective process. We have already alluded to the fact that cult reception contexts work with a sense of the generalized other and that they are tied to social conditions of groups of people. Of course this notion is embedded in the very definition of the term cult as a community, a commonality of congregation that sees itself at odds with normalized culture. But it is not always this clear-cut. The collectivity of cult receptions is not just an aggregate of individual perceptions; it is more an impression of a collective effort that supersedes it. Put otherwise, the phenomenal

experience is a shared one, even when the actual perception occurs individually.

This means that the collectivity of cult receptions is frequently a sensibility in addition to a material fact. There have been numerous attempts to describe collective processes of cultural reception of this nature. Siegfried Kracauer (1926) and other members of the Frankfurt School of sociology, employed the terms "crowds" and "masses" to describe movie audiences unaware of each other's presence yet attuned to the same points of interest. Throughout this book we will return to how film cultists and fans have been described through labels that stress collectivity. Overall, the intent was pejorative: by describing these audiences as groups they are denied individuality and agency – they are seen as an effect of their consumption rather than an active force shaping it.

Recent decades have seen a change in that patterning of collectivity. Benedict Anderson (1983) has used the term "imagined communities" to refer to autonomous and sovereign communities not based on face-to-face everyday contact yet sharing strong convictions and opinions. The conceptualization of community that comes closest to capturing the collectivity of cult receptions comes from Michel Maffesoli, who uses the term "affective communities" to describe what he regards as instances of neotribalism in contemporary society. According to Maffesoli (1996a: 40), such communities are active agents rather than powerless or passive recipients, even in their resistance to productivity. He observes how they place an emphasis on style and hedonism as a reaction against what is perceived as an increased instrumentalization of the world:

> the more one encourages a "utensilitarian" conception of existence, then the more, as if in response, a sociality asserts itself, one that, on the contrary, rests on the imaginary, on an existential casualness, a search for hedonism, a shared pleasure in living, and on appearance and the play of forms. (Maffesoli 1996a: 40)

Maffesoli stresses how this reaction is shared and social, a collective effort. Furthermore, his observation of how it relativizes utilitarianism acknowledges the aesthetic component of the collectivity – a core component of the phenomenal experience. Maffesoli's preferred metaphor for this conceptualization is the mythical figure of Dionysus (see Chapter 12). Maffesoli's description fits perfectly formations of fandom that have developed around cult receptions. It also matches the analysis of various subcultures (see Chapter 5).

Maffesoli (1993a, 1993c) further observes how collectivity is not always expressed in numbers, such as attendance figures. It often remains hidden ("imaginary"). The collectivity we speak of here is often an impression, a feeling of feeling together, an impression of solidarity and sharing that informs one's emotional attitude, and not necessarily one's material life (though it has effects in that material life). According to Maffesoli it is also a collectivity inspired by directness of experience, by hope, by a tendency to imagine other times (nostalgic pasts or utopian or even apocalyptic futures), and by a desire to dissociate itself from purposefulness. Instead of purpose it preferences "drifting" and the seeking of pleasure in what Maffesoli calls "the excesses of everyday life" (Maffesoli 2005; also see Mathijs 2010a). These elements certainly influenced the exemplar of the midnight movie, even in its post-heyday incarnations.

There is a tension between Maffesoli's conceptions of collectivity and those underpinning a lot of studies of fans and subcultures. Maffesoli's observations concentrate on radical degrees of collectivity that carry a deep suspicion of authority and an anarchist resistance to it, and that refuse to settle into "the real totalitarianism [of] interpretative systems [that] reinforce every social and political institution" (2005: 199). This is a collectivity of simultaneously active and passive opposition to dominant ideology that in its anti-intellectualism stands at odds with some more radical activist, utopian, and nihilist forms of cultism. It also stands at odds with more authority-friendly versions of cult reception contexts that see themselves less in opposition to dominant ideology and/or are co-opted into normalized patterns of consumption and behavior. Tensions between degrees of commitment in the collective experience, for instance between oppositional versus co-opted cult receptions, inclusive versus exclusive cult receptions, omnivorous versus univorous receptions, and sincere versus ironic or performative receptions, will inform much of our discussions of the cult experience.

At its broadest, for instance at moments when films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *The Lord of the Rings* acquire a sort of cultural presence wider than their immediate niche appeal, the collective experience can be close to a sensibility that typifies a zeitgeist. At such moments it can be referred to as "part of the fabric" of society or a defining feature of the "social ambiance" (Maffesoli 1993b). When *The Lord of the Rings* films became a massive success some critics saw this as the result of the fact that its niche, which was frequently described as "geekdom," was now no longer a cultist, marginal position "but a formative force in the cultural imagination of our times" (quoted in Biltereyst, Mathijs and Meers 2007: 46). In this book we will analyze specific articulations of various senses of collectivity on numerous occasions.

Cult Cinema as Connected Experience

In some of his analyses of affective communities, Maffesoli (1996b, 2007) remarks that they give rise to "networks of relationships" whereby the network itself creates a feeling of belonging. The implication is that next to the collectivity the very notion of the network is of importance to maintain a sense of togetherness. This observation is not new. The idea finds its roots in the 1950s, when the concept of "para-social interaction" became a central component in attempts to understand how mass media could offer viewers a sense of close interaction with performers (Horton and Wohl 1956). In the 1960s the idea also appeared in media theories and semiotics (the work of Marshall McLuhan, Umberto Eco, and Jean Baudrillard).

The concept of connectivity fully entered onto the foreground in the 1980s and 1990s, when the idea of the network became the point of focus of Manuel Castells, who employed it to posit the idea of a "network society" (1996–1998). According to Castells, the end of the twentieth century (and of the millennium) is a moment in which a new kind of global society is coming into place, one that is based on three processes: the information technology revolution, a string of crises in capitalism and statism, and the coming of age of a range of social and cultural movements such as environmentalism, libertarianism, and feminism (what Maffesoli would call "neo-tribes"). Castells calls this emerging society one of "real virtuality" – a pun on one of its technological tools of imagination, virtual reality, but also an indication of how much of that new society exists as a network of links and connections between "cultural communes," which produce what Castells calls "global hypertexts," units of information in constant flow. Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum, the copy without original, is a powerful influence on this vision (Castells 1998: 336; also see Bell 2006: 55). Castells' network society is not a program for an ideal world, nor is it a dire forecast for a dystopic world – it explains how "bad" *and* "good" cultural communes exist in spite of public spheres that pressure them.[2]

If we apply the idea of the network to cult reception contexts the emphasis shifts from the "essence" of these groups (that what makes them unique) to the ways in which they establish and differentiate themselves in relation to the rest of the world (that what connects them) through the quantities and qualities of their connectedness. In theory, this allows for the mapping of cult receptions in terms of their proximities, alignments, or affiliations as much as in terms of their isolated identities. It is a perspective that is less concerned with the preservation of the essence of each group in alignments between communes or tribes (to use Maffesoli's term) and more with how the tangents through which they share contexts of action shape their existence.

Since Maffesoli and Castells presented their ideas there have been a number of attempts to apply them to cultist receptions. Joshua Meyrowitz (2002) uses the concept of connectedness in relation to fan obsessions and degrees of intimacy between fans and celebrities – what he calls the cult of media friendship. Diken and Laustsen (2002) discuss *Fight Club* as a film about cultural communities (for instance neo-fascist ones). Judith Halberstam (2003) and Angela Wilson (2008) use it to examine lesbian punk-rock and Riot Grrrl subcultures. Bernard Cova, Robert Kozinets, and Avi Shankar (2007) apply it to the receptions of goth subculture, surf culture, and *Star Trek* wikimedia. It also informs numerous studies of online fandom. What remains under-researched is how links *between*

micro-groups fuel cult receptions. Early twenty-first-century cult films such as *Donnie Darko*, *Ichi the Killer* or *Ginger Snaps* have derived at least part of their cult reputation from crossing over between various cultural communities, and as such they are perfect illustrations of how the connected experience affects cinema cultism, fandom, and subcultures. For instance, the cult status of *Ginger Snaps* largely lies with how it links cultists from various cultural communities (horror, Goth, lesbian, feminist) around an affective catch-phrase ("morbid sisters") that allows the building or sustaining of bridges between each of these communes – it is a "facilitator" of crossovers (Figure 1.2). In that sense, *Ginger Snaps* is an exemplar of a new kind of cult reception, equally deep in its commitment, but less easily pinned down to just one type, and because of that more empowered. For the study of cult cinema this perspective can be of great importance. For one, the concept of connectedness explains how a shift might be needed from studying cult receptions in function of finding their essence to studying them in function of how they connect to each other.

Cult Cinema as Surplus Experience

Cult reception contexts frequently upset protocols of meaning making. Next to generating values that can be understood in terms of the mainstream (i.e. in terms of productivity and functionality) cult reception contexts generate what Paul Ricoeur has called a "surplus of meaning and of value which is qualified but not exhausted by analysis" (quoted in Andrew 1985: 631). We would call it surplus experience.

In cult receptions, a connection equals an intimate affiliation, and what is connected acquires power. In a move to update Marxist methodologies of



Figure 1.2 A collage of imagery from *Ginger Snaps* arranged around the "morbid sisters" motive and dialog: "out by sixteen or dead in this scene, together forever."

understanding material culture, Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1990) argued that objects – such as films – do not uniquely occupy a use value (their practical value) or even exchange value (their monetary value), but that they rely on symbolic value: they trigger needs and desires which attract cultist affections – such as investments in paraphernalia, antiques, or memorabilia. The connections of such objects, and object-signs, to each other generates a complex network of proxy seductions and fetishisms. One example of this is the appearance of an actor at a fan convention, where they sign autographs on posters and where, via exclusive meet-and-greet sessions, distinctions are drawn between those who can converse with the actor, and those who remain outside that circle. These networks of seduction, appropriation, and fetishism can be summarized as what Andrew Ross (1989: 210) has called a "cult of knowledge and expertise." In terms of value, these networks produce as a surplus value: they are the outcome of a form of labor in which the involvement of the perceiver is crucial, but which is not generally recognized as a productive effort, and does not render a direct profit. Therefore the surplus generated by cultist details is often called wasteful, a "geeky" self-indulgence that does not advance cinema, or improve the material conditions or cultural literary of the perceiver. The components informing these extensions of the perception process are furthermore elusive, obfuscated, and difficult to chart because they exist at the margins of what is accepted as evidence and material fact: gossip, trivia, hearsay, legend, prejudice, are often relegated as pieces of information, excluded from data as insignificant. Because of their contentious nature they pose a challenge to methods of analysis (they are almost impossible to codify, quantify, or qualify). In terms of a cult reception context it means cultists will always look for a further meaning, even when there is none, because connecting things gives the impression that one displays expertise and is, hence, powerful.

A complication is that not all elements of a cult reception are of equal weight. Nor does the physical film itself remain at the center of its reception. Klinger (1989) has called attention to the ways in which actions accompanying the reading of a film allow for "digressions" in which contextual information provides clues for enjoyment and communication with the text that compete with the ones in the text itself. This is at least in part informed by an ability to connect the (experience of the) text to an active knowledge of (and willingness to use) contextual or ancillary information. Some receptions disregard a film's features altogether. The video nasties (films whose UK video releases were caught up in a controversy in the early 1980s) are an example where a reputation of a group of films developed independent of their intentions or even their actual content: they were lumped together by the press, and subsequently by prosecutors, for their supposed impact on the viewer, not because they shared any common features (Barker 1984; Egan 2007). Furthermore, some meanings cannot be seen in separation of other texts, such as sequels, remakes, serializations, or re-imaginations. Trailers, double bills, directors' cuts, added footage, accompanying soundtracks, retrospectives, revivals, rediscoveries, restorations, prequels, spoofs, and new cultural sensibilities all impact on that reception. Literally anything can change public opinion on a film, as is demonstrated by Klinger's (1994) research on the changing status of the films of Douglas Sirk, and Cynthia Erb's (1998) study of the changes in the reputation of *King Kong* as a cultural icon after numerous remakes, appropriations, and parodies. Any research into a cult reception context, then, needs to integrate the complex patterns of influences and opinions operating in particular situations (synchronically), and maps them as processes over time (diachronically), all analyzed as types of "talk" – uttered by those involved in the production, presentation, and perception – in order to map the combinations of strategies used to forge (or fail) meaning. The obsessive mining for details and endless *kinds of talk* imply an *explosive* and *completist* frame of reference for cult receptions. For those outside that frame of reference any knowledge it generates is irrelevant, *only* surplus.

There have been numerous attempts to conceptualize the obsession with connectedness and cross-talk. According to Dana Polan (1978) they are part of an increase in "self-reflexivity" of cinema. Robert Stam (1985) has called it "reflexivity." Umberto Eco (1986) sees it as "intertextuality." Danielle Aubry and Gilles Visy (2009) label it "transtextuality." Whatever its label, early attempts regard the concept as a

countercurrent to cinema's mainstream. Polan calls it Brechtian; Stam links it to Jean-Luc Godard's interrogations of film language. But in later discussions of the concept it is less seen as exceptional and more as a routine or protocol that has gradually been embedded into the very fabric of cult film, as well as into the range of expectations audiences have of cult films, so that every cult film becomes intertextual by default – that is how Mathijs and Mendik (2008a) present it. There are some small but significant differences between the various ways in which this cross-talk is discussed. We will address these in chapters that analyze the specific contexts in which they are used (see Chapters 2, 17, 18, 21).

There is some dispute over connectedness and cross-talk as surplus experience. One school of thought holds that the obsession with trivia is playful and revealing yet without relevance for the perceiver. The affiliations that connections allow are less causal than rhetorical, circumstantial, or incidental. They can be made for the sake of it. For Robert Stam (1985), the way in which films can invite connections, and be reflexive, is a sign of their aesthetic maturity. It testifies of expertise in contemporary culture, of posture to show off one's social standing within an existing cultural constellation, but also of a need to demonstrate some connections are indeed precious in a society that increasingly comes across as detached, specialized, and fragmented. But it does not do anything of a wider cultural relevance (see Chapter 21 for an elaboration). Against that view stands another school of thought, which claims that if one looks carefully at the moral and political consequences of the obsession with details, it becomes clear that they can *also* be used to uproot existing constellations and instead promote revolutionary ideals (Ross 1989; Havis 2008). Thinking through the ideological implications of the "transgressions" of culture that occur in films said to be cult can create imbalances, provoke controversies, and stimulate utopian ideas. Through their fascination with details, then, the surplus experience that cult receptions generate allows audiences to "imagine" another world with other rules, and laugh at that world at the same time. It creates a rebellious attitude of defiance at odds with what dominant forces in a society endorse.

Conclusion: Cult as Performance?

In this chapter we have argued that cult cinema is best served by an approach that has its philosophical roots in a practical form of phenomenology. We have moved in this chapter from cult cinema's paradigmatic exemplar, the midnight movie, and the smallest possible unit of perception, the spectator, to the largest possible, a society, and we have identified the cult experience on each of these levels. Needless to say all of these levels inform each other.

In conclusion, we would like to highlight one aspect that we briefly touched upon in our summary of the history of the midnight movie, namely the fact that in several cases the cult is less lived than performed. The distinction between an actual, sincere, and authentic cult experience and a performance of one is difficult to make and we will argue throughout this book that in many cases it is virtually impossible to make the distinction. In most of our chapters we will discuss instances of cult receptions and indeed of moments in cult films that can both be seen as authentic *as well as* a performance of an experience. We will tie some of those debates into an organized view on just how performative a cult experience and, by extension, the very notion of cult is.

Notes

1. In Paris, it is often associated with the ten-year run of *Emmanuelle*. In Los Angeles it has kept close links to the underbelly of Hollywood, with a special interest in reviving "maudit" and "bad" Hollywood films such as *Plan Nine from Outer Space* or *The Room*. In London it is connected to the vibrant nightlife of Soho. In Antwerp cinemas like The Monty linked to the cosmopolitan attractions a port brings. In Ottawa it is still associated with the Mayfair cinema, whereas in Vancouver all original midnight movie houses have been replaced by multimedia centers such as

the Rio Theatre. San Francisco (with its Roxy Theater and Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive), Cambridge MA (with its Brattle Theater, which started the *Casablanca* cult), and Montreal (with its Rue St Catherine repertory theaters) also had lively midnight scenes. Many American college towns, such as Ann Arbor, MI, Madison, WI, Austin, TX, or Lexington, KY, also were, or are, at some point or another, thriving markets for midnight movie programming (Waller, 1991).

2. The concept of connectedness has been the subject of discussion for many decades, from the experiments of psychologist Stanley Milgram in the 1960s, to Malcolm Gladwell's musings on "Connectors" as people essential to setting trends. The concept of connectedness gained popularity in the early 1990s when it became the central metaphor of John Guare's play *Six Degrees of Separation*. In the play, a character declares: "I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation." (Guare 1994: 81). According to Gene Plunka (2005: 352), Guare's play exposes how in an attempt to "make a difference and feel we belong" the only thing one *can* do is *connect*. A revealing variation of the degrees of separation concept is the cult game *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*. The challenge is to connect actor Kevin Bacon to as many other celebrities in as few steps as possible.

2

The Cult Cinema Marketplace

When *Blues Brothers* director John Landis visited a cult film conference once as a guest of honor he was amazed at the attention cult films are accorded. "Back in the day, when someone called your film cult it meant it had bombed. Why study failures?" Like most other films, cult films are intended to provide a healthy financial profit in return for investment, even if the emotional component of that investment was a "labor of love." Landis's remark suggests cult films have a reputation of not delivering such profit. However, while it remains a very risky business, the label "cult" also has enviable commercial prospects, with potentially high profits margins. This chapter looks at cult cinema from the angle of political economy. It pays close attention to labor, funding and entrepreneurship, marketing, niche promotion, exhibition culture, and black markets.

Production Culture

Studying the production and business routines of films known as cult can provide valuable insights into the conditions that help shape the prefigurations of those receptions. This chapter aims to do that by painting the contexts of inception, labor, production, the aid of technology in the creation of films, and the attitudes, routines and practices as a culture in itself – a community very much like the kind anthropologists study. This community is what John Thornton Caldwell (2008) has called a "production culture."

The production culture of cult cinema is rife with attitudes of hyperbole and reflexivity, and it behaves as "a masonry" (Caldwell 2008: 36). Practitioners in the film and television industry display a high degree of self-importance (hyperbole), and self-consciousness about their profession (reflexivity). Some of this attitude is seen as inflated entitlement or arrogance, and as the "role-playing" of tasks (playing to "be" an industry professional). But these attitudes also reflect the degree of commitment, dedicated labor (and long hours), and professional care that goes into the production of films – a vocation more than a day task. It can lead to surprising innovations, often improvised under tense pressure, and to bursts of creativity in solving practical problems within strict financial constraints against looming deadlines. As Caldwell points out, the hyperbole and reflexivity cannot be separated from the perception of importance that the world accords to the film industry. The press, ancillary industries, and circles of fans, business associates, and dignitaries see being associated with the industry as important, and the industry sells its self-importance as a "culture" one wants to be associated with (2008: 10–11). "Genesis myths," "making-it sagas," "war stories," and gossip, rumors, buzz, and reputation play a crucial role in the sustenance of this culture. They provide a framework for the trade of the product that is delivered, and they establish career capital (2008: 37–68). Since much hinges upon the public delivery of a final product (a film), there is a careful balancing of presenting to that public rituals of trade and turf marking implied in this culture: occasionally on-set

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troubles or "behind the scenes" revelations fit the profile, and are willingly leaked, but sometimes they are kept under cover.

Cult films differ from this system in that their attitudes of hyperbole and reflexivity seem to be more extreme than those usually accepted as normal. In jumping out of bounds they fit the reputation of cult cinema as "out of control." *Casablanca*, with its much-told production legends, is a famous example of this, but much of the production culture of Hong Kong cult cinema of the 1980s, or Italian horror of the 1970s operates in similar ways. The degree to which hyperbole and reflexivity are part of the production contexts is evidenced in the stunt work, the fight choreography, the work of crews and cast, and the professional approach to the subjects – always more over-the-top or self-aware than is the norm in Hollywood (Card 1991: 66–78; Reid 1994; MacCormack 2004). For Umberto Eco (1986), this quality is what makes *Casablanca* the archetypical cult film. It is also evident in products that become cult because of their failures, when the final product of labor is perceived as an abject fiasco, and the reason for that failure is seen as the result of inefficient use of skill and craftsmanship. This was the case with high-profile disasters such as *Heaven's Gate* and *Waterworld*, films known as megalomaniac and extravagant.

Another noticeable set of differences concerns scale and skill. While many cult films have had reasonable budgets, many of them are made for much less money than traditional cinema. This is a particular characteristic of exploitation cinema and B-movies (which we analyze in Chapter 13). Yet even in the classical poverty row and exploitation industries, and in the non-industrial cultures of avant-garde and underground cinema hyperbole and reflexivity remained a prevalent dynamic. Crew and cast working on films that became cult often display a "superior survivor" tactic – as if referring to an experience one has to be initiated to and graduate into. It is often associated with a "military-identity" complex, which Caldwell sees in particular with stunt and camera crews, with nomadic labor systems and working-class machismo (2008: 113).

The best example in that respect are special effects crews, in particular those of Tom Savini, Rick Baker, Rob Bottin, or Gary Zeller (also see Chapter 18). To illustrate the similarity with cult audiences it is insightful to quote one of Caldwell's sources at length here:

> I would say that our company is a kind of "tribal" thing. Once you are in, and get the secret tattoos – we're then in there as a family operation . . . The core group that we have is intensely loyal. When work is slow they'll come in anyway . . . It's not just a paycheck issue. I'm old school. You just gotta love the work. And one of the bad things that happened when everything went digital was suddenly – compared to the old days – there were enormous sums of money thrown around . . . When this Hollywood cycle goes bust, we'll see a lot of these folks go away. And the nerds like us will still be there – doing the work. (2008: 127)

This attitude certainly helps sell products as "cult-like." Occasionally, companies and crews straddle the distinction between cult and mainstream: the KNB EFX company of special effects combines work for blockbuster Hollywood productions with smaller, more "streetwise" productions with lots of cult potential, like the *Ginger Snaps* films, *From Dusk 'till Dawn* or *Splice*. The creative challenge of accomplishing a vision within strict constraints and volatile conditions posed by these productions, and the war stories and street credibility that come with that, transfer easily into cult reputations. They become a point of pride.

Put together, next to a very high degree of reflexivity and hyperbole, the production culture of cult cinema appears to be more accidental, improvisational, renegade and subject to professional obsession than mainstream cinema, operating on a much smaller scale but with a notably bigger "family" influence (Caldwell uses the word nepotism).

Funding and Distribution

The spirit of independence of cult films is evidenced in their unique funding structure, complete with unsavory accounting tricks. The opaque financing and accounting practices of colorful figures such as Coffin Joe, or the dispersed funding of Alain Robbe-Grillet's films, have become legendary (Barcinski 2003: 27–38; Tombs 2003: 352–356). So is the impenetrable funding structure of *Daughters of Darkness*, evidenced in its seven production partners from six different territories

(Mathijs 2005b: 455). Other curious examples include the financing of *Caligula* by adult magazine *Penthouse*, the patched financing of Orson Welles's films late in his career, and the participatory, communal self-financing by the crew of *Mariken van Nieumeghen* (Agterberg 2004). The long incubation periods that several cult films went through contributed to their appeal, but were nightmarish in terms of financing. David Lynch started work on *Eraserhead* with a small grant, and worked stubbornly on it for a full five years. *El Topo* took four years to complete.

Two oppositions run through the funding of cult cinema. The first pitches commercial funding against state involvement. The overall majority of cult cinema is commercial in funding. Subject matter is partly responsible for this. Films such as *Emmanuelle*, *Behind the Green Door*, or *Café Flesh* would probably have never been possible if local authorities had to approve their funding. In some cases producers consciously avoided state involvement because of the associations of art house and "legitimate" filmmaking it brought with it. *Daughters of Darkness* is one such example. Director Harry Kümel wanted to produce "something nasty" and therefore chose to forego state-supported funding (Mathijs 2005b: 454). Yet state involvement is not uncommon in cult cinema, especially in Europe. State subsidy programs became well established in most European countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and they were frequently complemented by tax shelter systems that encouraged investments into cinema, exactly at a time of increased permissiveness, when state grants and funds would be less likely to declare ineligible the kinds of materials that would have been rejected a few years earlier. As a result, local authorities have been a substantial factor in funding films that acquired cult followings. In several cases this caused outrage, especially when the features of the films in question were deemed morally challenging. Canadian films from *Shivers* to *Ginger Snaps* have suffered (or benefited, depending on the view one takes) from such debates, as have Paul Verhoeven's *Turkish Delight*, in the Netherlands, the Belgian *Man bites Dog*, several of Pasolini's films in Italy, and the films of Dusan Makaveyev and Jan Svankmajer when Eastern Europe was still under Communist rule.

The second opposition is between single and multi-source funding. This is largely a historical distinction. In the period before the end of the 1960s, the majority of films that became cults were financed through one main source, often the production company. It channeled all investments into the film. The careers of Roger Corman, William Castle, and Samuel Arkoff were built on this system. Because the system guaranteed some sort of continuous production gambles could be taken in terms of style and subject matter, as more profitable productions would cover less successful ones. It gave young filmmakers the chance to try their hand at movies. Though the system did involve presales, there was a relative independence; deals with distributors were not necessarily cut before the films were made (Schaefer 1999: 98–99). This also gave distributors the liberty to tailor films they purchased. Radley Metzger's company Audubon Films made several changes to European films they made available in the United States. New York distributor Sam Cummins even added a diary and voice-over narrative to the scandal film *Ecstasy*, in an attempt to get it approved without having to cut a sex scene. The attempt failed (Fischer 2001: 130).

This single-source situation first changed with the establishment of state subsidies in Europe, and the destratification of production, distribution, and exhibition in the United States. In many cases, funding opportunities across European countries enabled producers to look for small, hence less contentious, sums of money from a variety of authorities, and combine these with private investments to patch together a budget. In this system, presales to distributors played a crucial role. The result of having the distributor involved in the production meant that changes were made during production, rather than after the delivery of the print. But it made for less stable financing. Christopher Wagstaff notes how the majority of Italian spaghetti-westerns of the late 1960s and early 1970s were financed through an "extremely fragmented" model of advances and guarantees from distributors (Wagstaff 1992: 250; Eleftheriotis 2001: 92–134). Exploitation filmmaker Jess Franco made good use of such opportunities in securing small amounts of money from widely diverse sources, pulling funds from practically every European country, adding extra scenes of hard or soft material to meet local demands, and even taking on ethnic sounding pseudonyms for himself and his cast and crew in order to meet criteria

for "regional" involvement. Until the mid 1980s overseas sales were usually excluded from this practice. It put US distributors of European cult cinema and European distributors of American cult films in the position to pick up films cheaply – a key feature of the midnight movie circuit. *El Topo*'s acquisition by Allen Klein of ABKCO, and *Even Dwarfs Started Small*'s acquirement by Robert Shaye of New Line Cinema, are among the most noteworthy examples because both cases concern filmmakers, namely Alejandro Jodorowsky and Werner Herzog, who were only just embarking on a career as filmmaker, and for whom the support from burgeoning distributors was more or less a guarantee that they could embark on new projects. In the case of Jodorowsky, that was *The Holy Mountain*, which was partly financed by John Lennon through ABKCO. As if to underscore the unpredictability of cult movies, and of course their niche appeal, *The Holy Mountain* did not receive wide visibility. It premiered in Cannes in 1973, and it had showings in New York and at various festivals but then it disappeared from circulation – at least until its DVD release in 2007.

Having to sell a film territory-by-territory, or city-by-city, had the side effect that word-of-mouth and reputation preceded the actual arrival of a film. The beneficial aspects of this free publicity have led to the tradition of staggered releases: distributing a film in a few selected venues first before making it available elsewhere. It helped *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, for instance, receive much press attention and it fueled the controversy around it (Peary 1981: 347; Staiger 2000: 183). These days, staggered releases are a well-known tactic to sustain a film's run across territories. In business terms, such films are known as "sleepers," and when they continue to attract good business they will be said to have "long legs." Needless to say, the long legs of *Emmanuelle* and *Donnie Darko* outrun most mainstream cinema's trajectories.

With the increased global trade in films, and the home-viewing market exploding in the 1980s, overseas presales opened up opportunities for increased funding and exposure. The travails of Roger Corman in Argentina, shooting productions there in order to benefit from local funding and distribution prospects, are one example (Falicov 2004). Another was the aggressive presales technique practiced by Cannon, led by Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, who had learned from Corman and Arkoff. Throughout the 1980s they financed camp classics such as *Bolero* and *King Solomon's Mines* shoulder-to-shoulder with art house films such as *King Lear* and *Barfly* (Beauchamp and Béhar 1992: 91–98). Eventually their system backfired, but it extended numerous horror and soft-core franchises well into the 1990s. The advent of the internet opened up possibilities as well, though more in terms of marketing than funding or distribution. Online distribution (or internet retailing) enabled more direct contact with clients, and the niche culture of nostalgia made DVD re-issues of camp and cult classics a lucrative area, but the market remains small and profit margins are slim (for an elaboration on DVDs and cult, see Chapter 22).

Marketing: Causing and Containing Commotion

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of marketing efforts, and distinguish between wanted and unwanted outcomes. Cult cinema forms an illuminating case in this respect. On the one hand it carries an abundance of production legends into its reception, ready to be distorted, abused and pulled out of context by slick marketeers. On the other hand, it has an audience that resists being told what to like and that is inventive in circumventing prescribed consumption. Film marketing needs to strike a balance between getting a film noticed and risk threading on communities' sensitivities (summarized in Earnest 1985; Staiger 1990; Jäckel 2003; Barker 2004). Cult films regularly upset that balance.

Many of the producers and distributors mentioned earlier in this chapter have become better known as publicity riggers than good businessmen or creative artists. They managed to bring their products under the attention of audiences by forcefully associating their films with topical fears, pleasures, and promises, and as such they generated what Thomas Austin (2002) has called "satellite texts," materials so closely associated with a film's public presence that it can be seen as part of the sales or production processes, developed to respond to and manage problematic discourses surrounding films. Whereas "making of" videos and

programs, or notes in press kits function as attempts to streamline receptions, many other satellite texts allow meandering tangents of association, offering audiences the chance to "experiment" with meanings. Examples include the mentioning of sources of inspiration by stars and directors, of influences carried over from other films or the alignment of the film with certain causes and social issues – a favorite technique of exploitation cinema. In some cases, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, satellite texts are part of a subtle prescription of how the film should be read (Biltereyst, Mathijs, and Meers 2007). As Cynthia Erb (1998: 34) put it in relation to *King Kong*, however, there is a general willingness to let the "wild logics of the marketplace" determine the reading of a film.

The very term "cult" is finding increased application in marketing because of the rising awareness that it might lead to some revenue. Yet there is still some apprehension among publicists to plainly self-identify a product as "cult." *Snakes on a Plane* is an infamous example of a film that encountered resistance in being accepted as cult by audiences partly because it had boldly announced its own "cultishness" (or at least encouraged it). Most often, the use of the term "cult" is introduced into marketing campaigns indirectly, for instance through quotes from critics and reviewers predicting a film's cult reception. Though one would anticipate that the term "cult" is indiscriminately used, its occurrence is relatively selective. It occurs less in materials that are geared towards a mass public that is not automatically associated with the kind of moviegoing and consumption linked with cult cinema. Put differently, the term "cult" is an exclusive one. That is also evident in its use in press books. It appears predominantly in press materials accompanying films by directors consistently linked to independent and exploitation cinema (Argento, Cronenberg, Lynch, Corman). In genre terms it is most heavily employed in relation to science fiction, horror, and fantasy publicity materials.

Indirect and auteur-related usage aside, relatively few films actually make an effort to market themselves as cult. For one, publicity budgets are usually tiny, and there is no consensus over what strategy is most effective, or over which elements of the film need to be highlighted. Quite the contrary, marketing campaigns accompanying films that became cults have often found themselves struggling to achieve any direction at all, drowning as they were in a sea of numerous little, uncontrolled stories surrounding the films. Even films whose big budgets and strong backing would presume tight control over prefiguration, can succumb to legends and accidents which may lead to cult receptions. The distributors of *Hannibal*, the sequel to *Silence of the Lambs*, for instance, had made efforts to pitch the film as a "weird romance." But they had underestimated how the character Hannibal had sedimented into popular consciousness as a cult monster, and how circulating tales had already affected a Hannibal film's reputation. No Valentine's Day release was going to change that perception (Mathijs 2002).

One particular form of marketing associated with cult cinema is the presentation of material that is as persistent and remarkable as the stories surrounding the films. Stunts, rumors, scandals, and daring an audience to "sit through" an experience are key tactics in that effort. They have their roots in entertainment marketing, where as much effort went into adorning the front of house and canvassing the audience as in the stage show itself. To paraphrase one reviewer, the best show should be put in the lobby (Schaefer 1999: 102). Cult film learned from circus, vaudeville, burlesque theater, sideshows and roadshows how to attract audiences' attention. The releases of *King Kong* and *Psycho*, with carefully planted materials in lobbies (and in the media) are good examples (Erb 1998; Williams 1994). Producer William Castle equipped several of his films with gimmicks and accompanying gadgets that would incite audiences by way of antagonism – daring them into the theater as it were (Waters 2003; Brottman 1997). Castle's stunts were often too elaborate to work effectively, but the reactions they elicited still helped his releases gain attention. Roger Corman's publicity materials often latched themselves onto topical headlines to pretend they addressed hot topics, or were tailored to match local expectations (Pam Grier actually became Caucasian in some posters for *The Arena*). New World Pictures editors Joe Dante and Allan Arkush would liberally borrow shots from everywhere, or invent fake awards to link a coming attraction to "exciting promises" – usually drugs, sex or violence (Gray 2004: 107–109). Each of these marketing campaigns did not just poke audiences, they also

disciplined them, and – as Linda Williams (1994) argues with regard to *Psycho* – they brought the prefigurations and expectations in reign. This did not always work. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was supposed to follow on the heels of the Broadway stage production. But the show was so savagely dismissed by critics that the whole promotion campaign for the film fell in disarray (Weinstock 2007: 18). In many cases the distinction between carefully planned strategy, disciplining effort, and accident become completely blurred *into* the kind of legend cults are known for. The recurrent streams of gossip that accompanied the films, and careers, of Judy Garland and Hedy Lamarr are excellent examples (Staiger 1992; Fischer 2001). An example of a "legend" that was planted in order to create a distinction between those who would react to it in disgust, and those for whom it would serve as an attractor, is *Scanners*. The film was presented to horror fans (and to the fan press) as a film exclusively about exploding heads, with the infamous head blasting off its shoulders present in virtually every story, in trailers, fanzines, and on posters. *Scanners*' strategy, devised by Avco Embassy employees Bob Rehme and Mick Garris, drew admiration from fanzines, and outrage from the general press. The division it created worked brilliantly, and it gave the film a lasting cult reputation as the "exploding head movie" (Mathijs 2008: 94–98). In sum, marketing efforts geared towards rumor and scandals have always found themselves in competition with other ancillary discourses.

More recently, the internet has given marketing new opportunities to emphasize little stories, and assert control over them – complicating the distinction between planted and genuine rumors or scandals even more. J.P. Telotte (2001) describes in his analysis of the marketing and release of *The Blair Witch Project* how the creation of a website that concentrated on the little stories and aspects of the film, such as elements of narrative, excess, or inventiveness aided the film in gaining attention, and helped it sell worldwide. In combination with endorsements in the form of blogs, straight from the core audience, it gave substance to otherwise empty claims of "something special." Ever since, films have tried to follow a similar strategy, and several blogging sites have grown into centers of gossip, rumor, spoiler alert, and prefigurative chatter. It has made them popular with cult fans seeking information (especially the sites giving away details and spoilers, and in particular those of films with twisted narratives or special moments), but it has also created suspicion in the eyes of the "real cultists" – a common practice in subcultures eager for distinction. Ambiguity over the origin of stories of rumors and scandals can certainly help films achieve cult reputations, but the suspicion that marketing efforts are involved frequently clashes with cultists' preference for genuineness.

A final characteristic of marketing films received as cults involves niche promotion. Because of their extended reception trajectories, the marketplace of cult films contains a mix of new and old materials, and hot and cool reputations – the former referring to what is momentarily in the spotlight, and the latter to those products that are kept in circulation to meet demands of repeated consumption, either reruns, ongoing sales of DVD and video, or even reworked versions of old materials. Excellent examples are the many different cut versions of *Blade Runner*, the numerous edits of video nasties, and the different edits of the *Lord of the Rings* films. In such a chaotic environment it is essential to market a film to the right target audience, without wasting too much effort on the "wrong" constituency. As Matthew Ragas argues in *The Power of Cult Branding*, this means concentrating on the already established niche following:

> Using mass marketing to convert "pagans" is rarely where your company will find its true brand evangelists. The trick is, you have to preach to the choir. That's right. Focus your efforts on satisfying the happy customers in the "congregation" you already have! These are customers who already listen to your marketing messages, already know your product, already know your brand, and already feel real excitement for your company's product. Preach to them. Make them feel loved and accepted. (Ragas 2002: 61)

In other words, a film that wants to be cult needs to look for cultists. This strategy works best for homogeneous niches. It worked extremely well for the post-initial reception marketing of *The Blair Witch Project*. Well-directed messages to the known fan community of the genre were able to mobilize them and have them discuss the film to the point where fan excitement was noticed by other parts of the marketplace, whose

curiosity then led to wider exposure and profit (Telotte 2001). *Paranormal Activity* too cleverly mobilized fans of the horror genre, and even rewarded them by issuing paybacks: it included audience reactions of a preview in a trailer, and it offered fans the option to put their names on the credits of the DVD. These paybacks were in turn used in further marketing efforts. In much the same way, cult "bibles" such as the *Psychotronic Movieguide*, *Video Watchdog*, *Mondo Macabro*, or *Canuxploitation* have veered from the banal to the outlandish in putting cultists on their way to new discoveries, or, as marketers prefer, purchases. Recent years have seen a steep increase in efforts to reach out to niches, and this has had repercussions on how the term "cult" has been understood as a meta-concept (see Chapter 22).

This increase has solicited the reaction that the situation whereby many products supposedly designed to escape classical market mechanisms (such as films belonging to "underground" or "indie" categories) but still operating *within* that market, demonstrate the ultimate failure of cult cinema to exist outside the market place. It is a comment powerfully voiced by Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter (2004) in their discussion of the dual cult and mainstream success of films such as *Fight Club* and *The Matrix*. In a sense, it is an extension of an argument started earlier, by authors such as Thomas Frank (1997), who claimed the separation between "hot" commercial markets and "cool" underground/indie products was essentially an artificial one, and that cult, like "hipness," is one of several categories that enables films to carve out a spot in the marketplace.

Exhibition Culture

Exhibition is one area in which the identity of cult cinema is undisputed. It is in the interaction between screen and audience that cults become solidified. The most significant exhibition contexts for cult cinema are midnight movies, film festivals, fan culture, underground and avant-garde exhibition, home viewing (DVD and late night television), and the black market. Because of its paradigmatic importance for the study of cult cinema, we have discussed the exhibition context of midnight movies, and the importance of the phenomenal experience in Chapter 1. Film festivals are discussed separately in Chapter 3. Fan culture has intimate connections to contexts of auteurship and stardom, and will also be discussed separately, in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. We will devote specific attention to examples of exploitation cinema in Chapter 13, and underground and avant-garde exhibition in Chapter 14. Here, we will give an overview of the more general ways in which the exhibition of cult cinema has been organized.

The exhibition culture of cult cinema is twofold. On the one hand it refers to the screening of films outside mainstream venues, for niche audiences whose routines and practices of viewing are markedly different from "normal" audiences. On the other hand it refers to the unexpectedly different viewing attitudes that some films in regular exhibition contexts encounter. Since its earliest mentions this twofold is manifestly present. Harry Allen Potamkin (2008 [1932]) is among the early critics singling out the "special" behavior of cult audiences. Eric Schaefer (1999) and Jamie Sexton (2008a) on the other hand, give thorough overviews of how certain exhibition contexts helped determine not just the films that were available for audiences to view, but also narrowed down the kinds of reactions possible: the very fact a film was screened in, say, the Broadway cinema in Nottingham, equipped it with a certain audience that would see the film in specific ways, different from a multiplex viewing or television broadcast (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings 2003). Those ways differ from one locale to another, but some general tendencies do exist.

The pattern most commonly associated with cult cinema exhibition is borrowed from art-house exhibition. It relies heavily on a loyal audience that is heavily invested in film taste. Though such audiences will not always honor the "right" appreciations, and will display idiosyncratic local preferences (that vary from theater to theater), they are nevertheless prepared to attend screenings frequently (and even repeatedly). In a sense, their patronage is not dissimilar to that of theatre audiences including as it does such techniques as "seat reservations," "fixed seats" and "season tickets" – though these are often informally arranged. Barbara Wilinsky (2001: 6) refers to art house exhibition culture as one of "sure seaters," a term that amplifies the degree of loyalty of custom. Stressing the link with theater she quotes "It's like the Broadway theater.

They go on time. They like a small place that has no popcorn and no kids" (also see Smythe, Lusk, and Lewis 1953; Chamberlin 1960). Of particular interest is the research by Bruce Austin 1891a, 1981b, 1983, 1984), into both art house and cult film audiences. Above all, Austin notes the similarity in strategies these audiences use to decide on their choice of film.

Among the preferred exhibition techniques for cult cinema are staggered releases, double-billing, and re-runs. This pattern characterizes exhibition contexts from the late 1940s to the mid 1980s. It is the period that follows the Paramount decision, which saw a court rule forcing Hollywood studios to abandon their block booking practices and shed some of their tight control over the exhibition market (Borneman 1977). It opened up opportunities for exploitation, art house, and independent exhibitors to be creative in building an audience for their venues. The period ends in the mid/late 1980s when renewed vertical integration – this time augmented with suburban and city-limit multiplex exhibition, and video and television specialty viewing – replaced one-screen inner-city theaters and their practices of double and triple bills, matinees, and midnight screenings. Commercially, art house and cult cinema venues would be run in such a similar fashion that distinguishing between them from a business point of view makes no sense. What does matter is the difference in viewing strategy.

One thing the analogy with art house exhibition does not capture is the attitude associated with cult film attendance, the atmosphere. In an infamous article, Pauline Kael (1961) fulminated against what she saw as the snobbery and fake disdain displayed by art house patrons. Citing Dwight Macdonald's review of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Kael asked if the references to "a religious service," "hypnotic trances," and "incense-burning" were not a bit too hyperbolic to describe what was, after all, only a movie screening. She got particularly annoyed with the "repetition" of the film's main points, and the insistence that a "ritual mood" was necessary for the right reception of the film (1961: 6). What Kael failed to appreciate was the cult aspect of the screening. It was not so much the film that mattered, but the experience itself, and the images of the film were there to support that experience. The link with cult becomes more visible a little bit further in the article, when Kael takes offense to Kenneth Anger and Lo Duca's books on eroticism, scandal, and cinema, especially to their portrayals of women as lust objects. As we will see in Chapter 10, the performance of such sexist imagery is a key feature in the culture of cult film exhibition.

The main pattern sketched above does not cover all of cult movie exhibition. In fact, it excludes the most wild and radical examples. Numerous other formats have existed, and are still in operation. Most of these include the liveliness absent from Kael's account. Drive-in cinemas, grindhouse theaters, porn venues, college theaters, and even vibrant cinematheques, roadshows, and screenings of films in vaudeville and burlesque settings, complement the art house model. When looked at in general, cult cinema exhibition is art house exhibition with a more lively, visceral attitude. Among the more prominent towns and cities for cult movie exhibition are cosmopolitan cultural centers such as New York, Paris, Chicago, San Francisco, Paris, Los Angeles, London, Brussels, Amsterdam, Turin, or Montreal, and a string of college towns such as Madison, Wisconsin; Ann Arbor, Michigan; or Boston, Massachusetts (see Wilinsky 2001: 6–7). Nottingham's Broadway, mentioned above, fittingly became the site for the first ever Cult Film Conference (Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 20). Increasingly, however, such venues are competing with home viewing. Given the communal and lively aspect of cult receptions, home viewing needs to be seen in the contexts of small groups of viewers sharing a viewing experience in a context that is both lively and requires deep immersion. Examples are sleepover movies, either horror or chick-flicks, binge-viewing (understood as screening multiple films in a row: all the *Lord of the Rings* extended DVDs in one go, all three *Sissi* films, the twelve *Heimat* episodes, etc.), and special occasion viewing (bachelor parties, hen nights, hazing evenings, and so on). In this exhibition context, the formal and physical arrangement of the experience goes beyond technology, and even beyond the private boundaries of the "home," becoming a social, and in many cases semi-public event.

Piracy

A special case of cult exhibition is the black market. Overall, the loyalty of cult viewers virtually guarantees purchase (paying for entrance or products). Yet that

obedience to the market is often balanced by a resistance to having their object of fandom commercially exploited to the point where cult viewers feel they are being "sold" as well as by an attitude of rebellion against corporate commercialization and of an attraction to the thrill and hipness associated with illegal trade. In that sense, the entire black market has a cultist connotation, as it is a sign of its position outside accepted practices of film viewing.

Next to references to other black market activities such as moonlighting (illegal trade in alcohol), smuggling, or music bootlegging, the most often-used metaphor is that of "piracy." This metaphor gives the black market of film a romantic ring, and also links it to qualities historically associated with piracy (and with the myth surrounding pirates of the Golden Age of Piracy), such as anarchism, anti-authoritarianism, lawlessness, grassroots democracy, equality, naïve idealism, a penchant for unrestricted high living and a libertarian resistance against vast and shady corporations or state agencies (Snelders 2005; Leeson 2009). As we have seen in Chapter 1, these are also qualities of self-perception associated with film cultism, and because of this similarity piracy and the black market speak to the imagination of cultists.

Until the 1980s, when home viewing became a notable component of film consumption, the black market was one of freeloading. Scholars such as Eric Schaefer (1999) have made note of illegal copying, trading and exhibition of films, but this often occurred in the margins of accepted practices rather than squarely outside it. Only rarely were such practices criminalized or prosecuted. Audience freeloading existed mostly in the form of trying to sneak into screenings without having to pay, or in attempting to watch films outside one's age bracket (with sneaking into adult screenings an activity associated with rituals of initiation). The only research on this form of freeloading is anecdotal, but if the numerous admissions by critics of cult cinema of having attended screenings illegally is anything to go by then it is certainly a practice closely affiliated with the cult experience. Still, it was hardly ever regarded as a threat to the industry. That changed when home viewing technologies became a dominant mode of exhibition. With the move towards portable, cheap and user-friendly technology the counterpart of the legitimate marketplace became that of the under-the-counter exchange or the flea market: an act in a location where value is determined semi-independently of commercial market mechanisms and where clear distinctions between illegality and legality dissolve in a grey area. Among the most noteworthy elements of this form of black market were the trade in uncut VHS copies of video nasties such as *Last House on the Left* or *House on the Edge of the Park* (Egan 2007), and the trade in pornography (with the hardcore films of Radley Metzger or Traci Lords much sought after objects).

While this flea market model seems harmless, and is seldom prosecuted, it is far less tolerated by the regular industry. In fact, the industry's attitude changed so much that by the beginning of the twenty-first century the discourse of the flea market as one of small-scale entrepreneurs or modern-day Robin Hoods who made films (and thus culture) available to the public against the prohibitions of corporations or authorities was met by a competing discourse that regarded such activities as downright criminal, and even terrorist. Numerous critics have described this reaction as over-the-top, and argue that it has given piracy and the black market an unprecedented vitality and a political significance. Ever since large corporations started high-profile campaigns to push stringent copyright legislation and criminalize the hacking, downloading, copying, and sharing of marketable materials, piracy has become associated with a principle that sees the free and unregulated sharing and distributing of culture as an inalienable right of the public. This situation has reinforced the cultist edge of piracy, and it has made copy-culture an instrument in the struggle over the ownership of culture. Through anti-copyright organizations such as The Pirate Bay and concepts as the Darknet Theory (which holds that the internet's ability for peer-to-peer sharing renders copyright obsolete) copy-culture has intensified connections with the cultist overtones of cultural opposition that piracy already had.

Most instances of copy-culture concern popular and mainstream films, such as blockbusters. While such films are far from regularly seen as cult, the very activity of illegally accessing them *cultifies* their reception. Only in a few instances does this cultification move into a permanent mode of film cultism. The aforementioned video nasties are a good example, as are suppressed films such as Nicholas Ray's *We Can't Go Home Again*,



Figure 2.1 *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* owes much of its cult status to peer-to-peer sharing and bootlegging.

or Elias Merhige's *Begotten*. Often, these films are not explicitly banned but after their initial releases they have been so difficult to get hold of that a vibrant bootleg trade has replaced their legal circulation. Much of their status is subsequently derived from their place in semi-illegality. Their cult is a copy-cult. Among the most legendary exemplars of a copy-cult is *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (Figure 2.1). The film tells the story of singer Karen Carpenter of The Carpenters through the use of Barbie dolls. Neither the rights holders of the Carpenters nor the Barbie brand had given permission to have their materials used. Consequently, the film was withheld because of a copyright infringement suit filed (and won) by Richard Carpenter. Nevertheless, it was eagerly copied and shared, and it even appeared on university courses. As Glyn Davis (2008) observes, this slumbering presence has made *Superstar* a symbol for an anti-corporate low-fi sensibility.

Conclusion

The place of cult in the marketplace remains problematic. Production costs are usually low, labor can be found cheaply, and funding is of a volatile nature, with much improvisation, and benefits from unexpected partnerships. There is room for maneuvering as well. The marketplace for cult cinema is the ideal terrain for individuals and companies with a less top-heavy administration than the big studios, and an aversion of overhead costs. It is also a market where shady entrepreneurs meet organizations with high-principled aesthetic and political aims. Spreading efforts towards exposure across a number of media platforms, with consumption of and access to those platforms ever extending across time, can deliver sustained profits over a longer period of time than mainstream cinema. On the other hand, cult cinema is too unpredictable to fit the contingencies of any business plan – too dependent on erratic and impulsive receptions. Volatile partnerships break down easily, and adventures can come to a disastrous end, leaving projects without a completed product, without distribution or exhibition, effectively prohibiting profit. Even without these dangers there is a real risk that profits will be less direct, and more difficult to guard – it is far from certain they will end up with the same person or company who initially invested in the project.

3

Prestige, Awards, and Festivals

Like most other films, cult cinema receptions inhabit a network of cultural valuation and distinction. This network is at its most effective immediately after a film's release, when opinions and evaluations can be made freshly. Unlike most other films, however, cult movies have an antagonistic relationship with this part of official culture. They belong to what Jonathan Rosenbaum (1998: 48) has described as an "esoteric network" that "commerce deems irrelevant ... and that most mainstream reviewers prefer to ignore as a consequence." This alternative network of valuation exists parallel to – and occasionally *within* –circuits of institutionalized awards, prizes, and criticism. It also stretches over extended periods of time – concurrent with cult films' long runs. Chapter 4 will discuss censorship and connoisseurship as elements of cult cinema's relationship to this network. This chapter deals with cult cinema's relation towards event-based valuation. We will first detail how cult cinema receptions are affected by a cultural economy of prestige. Next, we will outline how cult receptions fare at one of the platforms of most significance in this prestige circuit, that of the film festival.

Awards and Prizes

Cult films largely stand outside what James English (2005) has called "the economy of prestige": the framework of valuation through award, ceremonies, and prizes. According to English, the last few decades of the twentieth century have seen a veritable frenzy in the establishment of prizes that designate cultural esteem. There are now, he observes, "more film prizes awarded each year than there are feature films produced" (2005: 324). This has led to a rhetoric in which nothing appears to matter more than just winning: "it is almost as though winning a prize is the only truly newsworthy thing a cultural worker can do, the only thing that really counts in a lifetime of more or less nonassessable, indescribable or at least unreportable cultural accomplishments" (2005: 21). According to English, this has simultaneously given rise to a counter-rhetoric in which wining an award is seen as somewhat dubious. He quotes Woody Allen from *Annie Hall*: "Awards! That's all they do, is give out awards, I can't believe it. 'Greatest Fascist Dictator: Adolf Hitler!'" (2005: 18). At the same time as this counter-discourse develops, however, English observes how the attention to awards and prizes has set in motion a fascination with quantifiable means of measuring cultural value that perpetuates itself, leaving little or no room for anything else: "[prizes] continue to serve as the most bankable, fungible assets in the cultural economy" (2005: 22).

Cult cinema has a peculiar role within this tensed situation. Because it occupies a marginal position within the market of official culture, it mostly falls outside the economy of prestige. In this sense, cult film receptions act as the opt-out of the desire to quantify culture. It is a position that confirms the marginal status of cult cinema and exemplifies the pride its audiences take in standing in opposition to official culture. However, in recent decades there has been a proliferation of cult cinema that has seen it partly being co-opted by official culture. Therefore its position

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these days no longer lies uniquely outside the economy of prestige, but partly inside it.

Cult films win few prizes, but if they do they are often mock prizes or prizes that fall within the aforementioned alternative "esoteric network" and are awarded through affective appreciations and niche recognitions more than widely publicized laudations. We will explore the latter as part of the network of festivals later in this chapter. Mock prizes are essentially awards created to ridicule the enterprise of issuing prizes in giving them to films that are generally seen as undeserving of awards or by inventing categories that are not sanctioned with cultural value. Historically, mock prizes began to achieve attention as a counter-cultural and ironic form of discourse in the late 1970s, around the same time that film festivals were garnering momentum as sites of celebrations for films which would otherwise not find distribution in the ever shrinking theatrical market. The result was a wave of attention for bad cinema, and a cultism of "badness," steeped in irony. Two books, *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time* (Medved, Medved, and Dreyfuss 1978) and *The Golden Turkey Awards* (Medved and Medved 1980), are usually credited for instigating mock prizes. J. Hoberman (1980) lists three reasons to celebrate bad movies: the change of taste (what was once bad is now good), a pedagogical value (to learn from others' mistakes), and the fact that movies "have a life of their own." All three culminate in what Hoberman terms the "objectively bad movie," films "so incoherent they unmake themselves" (1980: 518). Through this classifier Hoberman separates surrealist, delirious films, from films *maudits* and truly bad films, of which he sees Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* as the top. An important impetus to the celebration of badness came from satirical columnist Joe Bob Briggs, who set up the Hubcap Awards (the "Hubbys") in the early 1980s. These "so-called 'Drive-In Academy Awards' were presented at horror conventions or on college campuses and featured prizes for 'Best Slimeball', 'Best Kung-Fu', and 'Best Mindless Sex Comedy'" (English 2005: 93). As the mock celebration of badness became more prolific, however, it acquired and demanded esteem in its own right. English notes that the tone of the Hubbys Awards made it difficult to asses whether cultural hierarchies were being inversed, if the value of mindless pleasure was being asserted, or if the very capacity of movies to rise to the level of art was being mocked:

> with the Hubbys we can't be sure whether a serious honor is being bestowed on a marginal cultural product judged superior of its kind (an especially entertaining drive-in movie), or whether a mock honor, amounting to a form of dishonor, is being bestowed on a mainstream cultural product judged inferior of its kind (an especially trivial and squalid film) or whether the mockery inherent in the award is ultimately directed at particular styles of consumption (low-cultural or bourgeois). (English 2005: 94)

English maintains it is the second possibility of these three that lies at the core of mock awards. He remarks that there is a "tendency for instruments of consecration," which is how he sees awards in culture, "to take increasingly parodic and self-parodic forms without ceasing to function effectively as economic instruments in either the symbolic or the material sense" (2005: 97). This may well be true for the Hubbys. It certainly is for another award for bad cinema, the Raspberry Awards (the "Razzies"), which were instigated in 1981. The Razzies are clearly an example of English's second option.[1]

But when the mock celebration of badness takes on cult status, as it increasingly did since the beginning of the 1980s, it ceases to be mere mockery. It clashes, for instance, with the seriousness of genre-specific awards, such as the Saturn awards for fantasy, horror and science fiction, or the *Fangoria* awards for horror, named after the fan magazine, which also received cult status. *Fangoria*'s Hall of Fame, in particular, is hotly contested. One example English mentions, the AVN Adult Entertainment Awards, is perhaps a good test case. For English, its mimicking of the Oscars is part of its parodying of awards. But David Foster Wallace, covering the awards ceremonies, remarked that its protocols and procedures exude a desire to be taken seriously – only in the eye of official culture is it ridiculous, not on its own terms (Wallace 2006: 3–50). One symptomatic example of this is the fact that David Cronenberg's *Crash* won the award for "Best Alternative Adult Feature" at the AVN awards. Awarding it a prize was AVN's plea to be considered as authentic, not as (only) parody. Furthermore, even those awards



Figure 3.1 Halle Berry holds her Razzie award for Worst Actress of 2004 in one hand and her Oscar award in the other at the 25th Annual Razzie Awards, a spoof of the Oscars, on February 26, 2005, in Los Angeles. Berry won for *Catwoman* (UPI Photo/Barbara Wilson/Golden Raspberry Award Foundation).

that are merely meant to mock achievements, such as the Razzie, have had to revise their perspective since directors such as Paul Verhoeven (who won for *Showgirls*) and actresses such as Halle Berry (who won for *Catwoman*) appeared in person at the ceremony, and held acceptance speeches (Figure 3.1).

In other words, simultaneously with the rise of cult cinema as a perspective not uniquely outside, but part of the economy of prestige, mock awards have evolved to become equipped with a degree of authenticity and seriousness (the first option mentioned in English's quote). In that respect it is worth noting that there exists, since 2007, an Award for Lifetime Achievement in Cult Cinema, issued by the festival/conference Cine Excess. Recipients include Roger Corman, Dario Argento and Joe Dante. It is also worth noting that Corman was awarded a Lifetime Achievement by the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences two years after receiving the Cine Excess award; a further sign of the increased convergence of cult and culture.

In that regard the third option listed by English (that of the mock award as a critique of a mode of consumption) should perhaps no longer be seen as merely a critique but as a celebration as well. Mock prizes are exemplified by an expository desire to unveil some of the worst films ever, partly in order to ridicule them, and partly to demonstrate the entertainment value of sheer badness, and to celebrate this badness as a mode of reception. This so-bad-they're-good reason to champion bad films asserts that watching these films as valueless trash offers a form of phenomenal experience that is transgressive: it lifts the viewer out of the dreary normalness of everyday life and as such it operates in the same way religious cultism tries to accomplish epiphanies. With Maffesoli (1996a: 43) one could argue that celebrating badness alters everyday life as it elevates ordinariness and banality to a level where it can be actively enjoyed.

This mode has had some significant repercussions on the long-term receptions of several films, helping them achieve and sustain cult reputations. For the film the Medveds put forward as worst ever, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, it meant the start of a second career. The film was picked up by several festivals, and became the showcase piece of numerous "nights of bad taste" that were being organized from the beginning of the 1980s onwards. Next to Ed Wood's films, *Manos, the Hands of Fate* and *Robot Monster* are among the most perpetually recognized bad films ever. Most of the films at the top of the canon of badness are American, an indication perhaps of that culture's perceived obsession with rankings of cultural achievements. Among the most noteworthy non-American films are the Italian horror film *Troll 2* and the Bollywood film *Aag* (aka *Flames*). The former is not a sequel to *Troll*, and does not even feature trolls (but it does have former *Black Emanuelle* Laura Gemser as costume designer); the latter is a failed remake of Bollywood cult classic *Sholay*.

Since the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the celebration of badness has been exploding. Numerous books celebrating the worst movies ever have been added to mock awards, and in some cases even replaced them, as an increasing number of films are showcased for their badness. One of the most consistent candidates on such lists, *The Room*, has been regarded as straddling the line between incompetence and clever exploitation of badness. Because of its integrity it is labeled a post-camp cult film, a label that obliterates lines of reasoning along which it could be understood (Bissell 2010; Adams 2010: 298–300). Such contradictions continue to affect the receptions of bad movies. In 2010, *Battlefield Earth*, a multiple Razzie winner, and a film often cited as one of the worst in spite (or because) of it being based on source material by the founder of the Church of Scientology

L. Ron Hubbard, exemplified the thin line between real scorn and ironic celebrations of badness when one of its screenwriters, J.D. Shapiro, issued a public apology to moviegoers for his involvement in what had just been declared the worst movie of the decade.

Festivals and Valuation

Film festivals form one of the most important platforms on which processes of cultural valuation take place. For English (2005: 283), festivals are about the localizing of cultural value – literally placing it in a geographical or symbolic context and assessing value on the basis of this localization. The forces that determine this process consist of colleges of influence that include juries, programmers, boards, subscribers, sponsors, policy-makers, charities, audiences, guests, fans, and local businesses. Historically, films that developed cult receptions have not done well in such contexts. That is because most of these films exist outside – even in opposition to – normalized routines and protocols of cultural valuation. As we have argued in Chapters 1 and 2, its values are less tangibly and mostly only indirectly felt within culture at large – that is why their circuit has been called an alternative "esoteric" network. Occasionally, however, there have been overlaps, moments when films with burgeoning or nascent cult receptions appeared at regular film festivals, and caused commotions, scandals and outrage. Such upheaval mostly involved the film's ability to upset and expose the otherwise neatly hidden processes of valuation. Over the years, as the legitimacy of cult cinema has increased, such commotions have been fewer and fewer. Below, we will detail examples from Cannes to illustrate this development.

Another, parallel, historical evolution that helped to accept cult cinema's valuation at festivals has been the establishment of festivals for cults – events designed to celebrate and evaluate the kinds of films normal festivals would eschew. As their popularity grew, and they gained cultural visibility and recognition, so did the invisible colleges through which the processes of valuation took place. In other words, with the rise of niche festivals, the esoteric network became less esoteric and more respected – at least as part of a niche that earned its place in the cultural landscape. In this section we will first discuss the cultist aspects of film festivals in general, and next explore festivals that have played prominent roles in constituting and sustaining cult reputations for films.

The connection between festivals and cults goes back to Greek antiquity (see Chapter 12). With regard to film, this connection has been reinforced enough times to assume many critics see a sort of causal connection. Andrew Sarris famously cemented the link by quoting André Bazin: "No less a cultist than the late André Bazin had once likened film festivals to religious festivals" (Sarris 1970: 13). Actually, Bazin's article compared film festivals to religious orders, but there is a close link with cultism, especially in the observation of closely guarded rituals (Bazin 2009 [1955]). As Bazin's account demonstrates, to see festivals as a cultist experience is to rely on a sense of occasion of the event itself, where orotund rituals of presence and presentation such as "red carpet" walking are of equal importance to the appreciation of the actual films. Many festivals remain vague over the criteria of admission and valuation. This elusiveness has benefited the creation of myths, scandals, haphazard decisions, and rituals such as booing, hissing, and cheering (even ironically), as a result of which films implicated in such actions have acquired "legends" that have – in turn – facilitated their own cult status. In terms of the marketplace, the analogy is with the bazaar: crowded, bustling and unwieldy to the uninitiated eye but firmly structured to the insider. As mentioned, location matters greatly to these festivals. Cannes, at the French Riviera, Venice, and Locarno, are all known for their beautiful and awe-inspiring locations. Similarly, the festival of Sitges, near Barcelona, offers a large selection of horror and fantasy materials and draws a significant part of its appeal from its location and its proud self-presentation as Catalonian. More than inviting a parallel with the origin of the term cult, festivals' locations prepare audiences and attendants for a cultist-like appreciation (Harbord 2002; Koehler 2009).

The best-known festival that is a veritable cult in itself is the one highlighted in Bazin's account: Cannes. Sarris once divided the Cannes festival audiences into two categories: the moles and the moths: "the moles arrive, sniff suspiciously at the sunlight, and then plunge as soon as possible into the darkness.". The

moths "are noted for fluttering about the gemlike flames, emitted by the stars. For the moth, Cannes is an around-the-clock adventure of seaside lunches, cocktail parties, and gala dinners, all preferably free" (quoted in Beauchamp and Béhar, 1992: 24). Cannes merges the cult of stardom with that of classical auteurism, and mixes the elegance of glamour with the decadence of the bacchanal. It lays claim to grandeur, be it in the promiscuity and illicitness of the starlet appearance at the Croisette (from Simone Sylva to Pia Zadora), the sculpted majesty of the maggiorata, with Sophia Loren as its ultimate symbol, or in the presence of great, archaic auteurs – which helped to establish the cults of Alfred Hitchcock and Luis Buñuel (Sarris 1970: 53). The exhilaration, the "rush of excitement," the suggestion of easy sex, and the tireless disputes between novices and veterans that cult cinema is known for are constants in the discourse of Cannes (Beauchamp and Béhar, 1992). Much of the cult of Cannes is encapsulated in the 1960 debate over *La Dolce Vita*, champion of an edition presided over by jurors Henry Miller and Georges Simenon that was described as "the most scandalous ever" (Grenier 1960: 15). The question whether Fellini's film was a milestone in art, a celebration of moral decadence, or a cheap exploitation of women, "a satire of the female", as Pauline Kael called it (1961: 6), highlighted a debate over taste that would inform cult cinema and film festivals ever since (French and French 1999: 75–76). *La Dolce Vita* also bared the aforementioned invisible colleges and their criteria, even adding to the critical vocabulary by introducing the term "paparazzi."

Let us briefly explore two examples of Cannes film receptions that demonstrate how the esoteric networks operating in the valuation of cult clash with those of normalized cultural valuation. In each of the situations the films received part of their cult status as a result of how they exposed some of the routines and protocols of the invisible colleges at Cannes. In 1992, the low-budget Belgian black and white mockumentary *Man Bites Dog* won the International Critics competition at Cannes, amid controversy and to the astonishment of commentators who felt that the film's depiction of gratuitous violence and its status as a collaborative debut film (with overtones of being a send-up of filmmaking in general) from a small film nation did not warrant such an award (Lafond 2004; Mathijs 2005a). Several stories accompanied this controversy. One story tells of then unknown director Quentin Tarantino (who had his debut *Reservoir Dogs* to represent at the same edition of Cannes) fist fighting his way into the screening at Cannes; another story details the censoring of the original movie poster (which shows the main character killing a baby – something that is never alluded to in the actual film). The result of these two stories was that Cannes 1992 became known as the origin of the debate about a new wave of violent cinema, later known as new brutalism or "nouvelle violence." All of these stories created a situation that challenged the procedures through which films would normally be channeled at the festival, exposing part of their arbitrariness. As the involvement of *Man Bites Dog* as part of the "nouvelle violence" wave of film of the early 1990s spread, the functions of Cannes' award administration and cultural valuation became more fiercely interrogated. The combination of "violence," "Tarantino," "child killing," "mockery," and a self-reflexive critique of the media were enough to provide the reception of *Man Bites Dog* with a cult potential – mirrored in its subsequent receptions. As it turned out, *Man Bites Dog* would remain caught up in the "new brutalism" group of films said to exemplify a loss of morality in cinema. In fact, it became one of its exemplars (Hill 1997).

Another memorable example of the clash between the esoteric network that is the valuation of cult receptions and the "normal" processes operating at festivals is the reception of David Cronenberg's *Crash*, which was entered in the general competition in 1996. It was both booed and applauded at its screening, and it created a sharp division between audiences and commentators. This division articulated itself in the award it was accorded: under the presidency of Francis Ford Coppola, *Crash* was given the newly invented prize for "audacity." It was the only time such an award was ever given, and a clear sign of how the film's fast developing reputation along esoteric networks of appreciation was impacting on the procedures of valuation the festival felt it had to honor. Two of the key terms in this esoteric network were "cool" and "depravity." "Cool" referred to the film's ability to use detachment as a stylistic tool, and was used by both the film's opponents and its defenders. "Depravity" was a term uniquely

employed by its opponents, who felt the film – much like *Man Bites Dog* a few years before – crossed boundaries of moral decency (Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath, 2001; Mathijs 2008: 187–194).

Niche Cults and Festivals

One kind of film festival we want to highlight is the one where niche cults rule – where the interrogations of and confrontations with processes of valuation are built into the fabric of the festival. In that respect, we are no longer talking about cult receptions at festivals but about self-sustaining cult events. This is not to say these festivals are therefore cut off from the regular circuit altogether. While wary of interference with their devotion to certain films, such festivals remain curious for new experiences, ready to embrace them into their midst and appropriate them as "one of us."

Among the earliest such examples is a festival that was explicitly set up to champion films excluded from the regular festival circuit: the experimental festival of Knokke-Le-Zoute, in particular the editions in the 1960s. According to Parker Tyler, (1969: 165) this festival was one of several that gave expression to the "neuroticism of modern life with its new and unusually morbid accent on youth." The festival, started in 1949, and located at the casino of the affluent Belgian seaside resort of Knokke (a location similar to Cannes), focused on presenting underground and experimental films – of the kind that were also being shown on the burgeoning midnight movie circuit in New York – to critics in Europe. The festival received notoriety in 1963, when it first selected and then rejected *Flaming Creatures*, a film that had already caused upheaval in New York. Under the auspices of members of the jury, including Jonas Mekas, an improvised New Year's Eve screening of *Flaming Creatures* took place. It was interrupted by scuffles, discussions, and riots (see Broughton 1964; Garcia Bardon 2002). After the controversy was widely reported in European newspapers, the film eventually received a special *film maudit* prize (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 59). As Gerda Cammaer (2005) argues, the festival of Knokke was, at the time of this controversy, a "try-out festival, an event that was still searching for its true calling and shape." This in itself means it did not have the set protocols of the regular festival circuit. That allowed for the pushing of alternative agendas. Cammaer (2005) also notes how the *Flaming Creatures* controversy actually became "an ambassador for the festival".

The best contemporary examples of niche cults and cult festivals are horror, fantasy and science fiction genre festivals that have inherited, or sometimes grown out of, the midnight movie phenomenon. Many of these developed firm cult reputations more because of the kinds of audiences they catered to than what they screened. The festivals of Sitges, Avoriaz (now defunct and replaced by that of Gérardmer), Brussels' International Festival of Fantastic Film, Fantafest in Rome, and Fantasporto in Portugal, which all started before the mid 1980s, became crucial for the development of science fiction and horror cult fandom in Europe. The attitude of these festivals towards taste and indicators of quality is at its least problematic here: their programmers and audiences share an agenda, and they demand more of the same – more blood, more gore, more full moons, more sorcery, more time travel, and more vampires. Yet, in much the same way genre cinema never only relies on repetition and recognition but also on variation and innovation, these festivals regularly relish films that stretch the confines of the genres they cherish. As long as the framework within which these new experiences are presented is the trusted environment of the festival and the peer viewers they have known for years, they are in for the ride. This creates opportunities for a delicate balance between tradition and novelty.

This commitment is proof of the strong alignment between viewer and programmer, as part of the same cultist alliance. Visitors to these festivals are seldom only visitors, but rather fellow believers. They are closely involved with the festivals' selections and organization, and are extremely vocal in offering their opinions. As virtual co-owners they can stage boycotts or disrupt ceremonies, or lift the entire experience to a higher level of excitement and appreciation. Instead of snubbing minor stars they champion them as groundbreaking artists (an attitude that many guests have difficulty responding to; see Hills 2010b: 95). They act reflexively, very aware of their active role in the festival, and they are not afraid to exercise their power – not only verbally but also in terms of their subscription to future editions (the fact many of these festivals

actually have subscriptions makes the audience a patron in the classical sense). While several such festivals exist in North America, such as Fantasia in Montreal, Fantastic Film Fest in Austin, Texas, and elsewhere in the world (such as the Puchon International Film Festival in Korea), the emphasis of this phenomenon lies in Western Europe.

The most noteworthy network here is the European Fantastic Film Festivals Federation (EFFFF), also known as the Méliès network (www.melies.org). Unlike the loose esoteric networks described above, it is a close collaboration between Europe's major genre festivals. Over the last few decades, this network has represented 8 to 15 niche festivals across Europe, with sustained presence in Belgium (BIFFF), Finland (Espoo Cine), Italy (Fantafest), the Netherlands (Amsterdam, AIFF), Portugal (Fantasporto), Spain (Sitges), Sweden (Lund, LIFFF), and Switzerland (Neuchatel, NIFFF). The network has its own council, board and rotating presidency. Annually, the network offers one top award, the Méliès d'Or, to one of the films that were crowned in each of the individual festivals (a sort of season playoffs alternately hosted at one of the participating festivals). Through its network Méliès reaches 600,000 genre fans in Europe, making it the biggest fan-based cult-network on the continent. It furthermore facilitates a global network of adherent members in North America, Asia, and the United Kingdom. The festivals in the Méliès network also take on the role that, in North America and East Asia, fan conventions play. They are catalysts for genre fandom. In terms of scope and appeal they are on a par with conventions such as the World Science-Fiction Convention, Comicon, Otakon, or Fangoria's Weekend of Horror. But they are decidedly less corporatized and more adventurous in their programs.

Location plays a role here too. More even, the choice of theater and the urban quarters it is part of can be seen as crucial for the constellation of the cultist audience. According to Hills (2010b: 98):

> there is a fit here between a venue with an established subcultural reputation, and the materials of the festival. Just as "midnight screenings" or "late-nighters" serve to distinguish cult and horror film screenings from a cinema-going "mainstream", so too does the screening of films . . . at specific, independent cult/subcultural venues.

Hills isolates several other components that set up these niche festivals as cultist. They allow for an unusual closeness between fans and producers. They also require the performance of subcultural capital in order to overcome the threshold (a jargon, access to certain venues, insider knowledge in order to feel welcome, and so on) that equals prestige and status, and the attending of premieres, and previews. Q&A sessions, panel discussions, collectors' markets, autograph sessions, and costume parties can easily be added to this list. It is equally important, again according to Hills, that the industry that is the subject of celebration at these festivals (the actual horror productions, the sci-fi films, the fantasy games, etc.), acknowledges the labor fans and festivals audiences put into their celebration and, hence, into the establishment of a long-term reception. More and more DVD releases of cult movies include secondary materials that testify to horror, fantasy and science fiction films' success and cult appeal at festivals. The DVD collectors' editions of *Ginger Snaps* and *Evil Dead* are two examples that do so explicitly.

We want to conclude this discussion of niche cults and festivals with a short case study of the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film (BIFFF). It is an exemplary instance of cultism, in terms of its pedigree, franchise and networking, programming, and audience activity. The BIFFF started in 1983 (Figure 3.2), and it is a founding member of the Méliès network. It has a predecessor in Antwerp's festival of Fantastic Film that ran from 1974 to 1977. That festival had *The Wicker Man* as its first ever screening. *Rocky Horror Picture Show* director Jim Sharman and the director of *Blue Sunshine*, Jeff Lieberman, were among its prominent guests (Magiels 2004: 161). The last edition took place in Cinema Monty, known for its midnight movie screenings of *Eraserhead* (Apers 2004: 143–144). This midnight movie heritage remains reflected in some elements of the BIFFF programming. BIFFF quickly attracted attention because of its cultist programming. It introduced Dario Argento, Luc Besson, and David Cronenberg to Belgian audiences. Cronenberg visited in 1984 and brought all of his films, including the then unreleased *Videodrome*, which became a small-scale cult among Belgian film critics (De Kock 1983; Danvers 1984). It became the start of a template that regularly saw new auteurs



Figure 3.2 The Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film, a festival with a communal atmosphere that mixes art and exploitation. Clockwise from top left, the posters for 1983, 2010, 2005, and 1993 © BIFFF/Buzzelli, BIFFF/Sokal, BIFFF/Michetz, and BIFFF/Mauricet.

singled out for celebrations. Unique among festivals, the programming was done communally, by a team of eight full-time programmers. BIFFF's core audience quickly became heavily invested in the festival via annual subscriptions. Today, that audience is largely in its twenties to forties, university or college educated, and it has a 66/33% male/female ratio (previously that was 75/25%). The first editions drew about 30 000 viewers. Currently that number is up to 65 000, spread over two weeks. About 90 films are screened, many of them in European or world premiere. The BIFFF carved a name for itself internationally when it started

programming outside the circle of American horror. It screened Shinya Tsukamoto's, Guillermo Del Toro's, and Alex de la Iglesia's films well before they were known widely, and it unceremoniously programmed unusual materials such as Kim Ki-Duk's *The Isle* and Vincenzo Natali's *Nothing* amid traditional fare thus stirring up debates. In 1999 the BIFFF was among the first to present Europe with the new wave of Japanese horror, and in 2002 it showed an uncut version of *Ichi the Killer* to non-suspecting audiences. Also since the end of the 1990s, and following a trend of cult nostalgia, the BIFFF has organized a parallel stream of screenings called "the Seventh Reel," in which camp science fiction is screened alongside notorious horror cult material (Lucio Fulci, Jean Rollin, or Jess Franco) – at midnight of course (Van Laer 2004).

Of particular significance to the cultist feel of the festival are some of its locations. For the first 25 years of its existence the main venue was a gigantic, gothic cinema theater, the Auditorium in the Passage 44, adorned with long curtains and creepy statues. An additional venue had the design of a small, concrete bunker-like theater. Equally cultist is the highly ritualistic start to every screening: an enthusiastically shouted back-and-forth dialog by the audience that features a loose imitation of the Muppet show's "Piiiiigs in Spaaaaace' tune, various chants such as a rendition of the 20th Century Fox tune, and a loudly declared invitation to murder ("Tuer encore!"). This ritual ceremony separates the novices from the veterans at the start of each screening. When stars or directors introduce their film to the audience it loudly demands not promotion-talk but "une chanson!" (a song!); organizers usually hasten to explain this request to guests as "good natured" and occasionally guests dutifully oblige and actually perform a song (needless to say it makes them immortal) with the crowd. During screenings heckling and shouting are commonplace, as is the cheering of sex and violence on screen. Each full moon that appears on the screen is greeted with howls, each room entered followed by the yell "Close That Door!" It is in these activities that the BIFFF presents itself as a pure blooded cult. As former programmer Dirk Van Extergem describes:

> [Just like] every cult constitutes a community, a group that worships similarly and regularly, and finds strengths in that shared experience, it relies on a set of practices or conventions shared by the devotees. And the demonstrated knowledge of those things (the participatory action such as the shouting being the most evident example) certifies the initiated, binds them in their privileged knowledge to others . . . . (2004: 224).

This communal celebration suggests that the BIFFF is more about its audiences, more about itself perhaps, than about the films. That is also evident in the many side activities, the carnivalesque nature of which proves its cult to be extremely festive. Body-painting contests, parades of "film monsters," and crowd surfing precede screenings. Each press conference is open to the public. Each edition of the BIFFF is closed with a gala "bal des vampires," in which guests and audiences don outrageous costumes inspired by the history of horror, science fiction, fantasy, and cult cinema. The full compliance of attendees with the dress code makes it difficult to distinguish guests from pundits, thereby achieving the abandonment of traditional cultural status often associated with cults.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this chapter we would like to highlight how, in many cases, processes of valuation of cult cinema consist of a mixture of the main instances we have isolated, namely the interrogation of prizes and awards systems, the upsetting of protocols at festival where a nascent cult clashes with existing traditions of valuation, and the celebration of films festivals where a film's cult reception is the confirmation of a largely pre-existing cult sensibility.

A perfect example of this mixture is the festival career of *Ichi the Killer*. The film had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), at 15 September 2001, as part of a midnight screening series called Midnight Madness. But a few days before the screenings the World Trade Center in New York had been destroyed by a terrorist attack. Many flights through North American airspace were still canceled. Miike was trapped in San Francisco. He commented: "I turned on the TV barely half awake. The situation

was worse than I could imagine. This was real people. Real human beings with more stupidity, more violence, more sadness, and more pain than any movie could have" (Macias 2001: 216). In spite of gimmicks such as complementary "barf bags" with Ichi's Superhero logo on it and in the absence of its main guest the TIFF Midnight Madness series did not become a great success; no one was in the mood for exuberant violence.

After TIFF, *Ichi the Killer* was screened at about twenty film festivals before it became widely available on DVD. Most of those festivals were specialty festivals. In order to assess the cultism involved in viewing *Ichi the Killer* at these festivals, it is helpful to contrast two festival appearances: the International Film Festival of Rotterdam (IFFR) and the BIFFF. The IFFR is known for its cinephile audience, a position encapsulated in founder Hubert Bals' assertion that he wants "to find an audience for his films and not films for his audience" (quoted in de Valck 2005: 102). When the IFFR screened *Ichi the Killer*, in February 2002, as part of a series of eclectic films that shared its fascination with sex and violence the reception was positive but also somewhat restrained. Many viewers and critics felt uncomfortable with the film, not knowing where to place it, a confusion that was further heightened by the fact that Miike's other film at the IFFR, the *Sound of Music* parody *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, was nothing like *Ichi the Killer*. In short, there was admiration but not much enjoyment. At the BIFFF in March 2002, where *The Happiness of the Katakuris* again accompanied *Ichi the Killer*, the reaction was the opposite. A packed house welcomed Miike with a thundering roar, and the entire screening was enlivened by screams, cries, chants, loudly voiced wisecracks (mostly of the "ouch, that must hurt" variety), and loud bursts of applause. Each killing and most acts of violence were greeted with hysterical laughter. There was much enjoyment, but far less respect and admiration.

The audience reactions of TIFF, the IFFR and the BIFFF to *Ichi the Killer* can all be regarded as part of the film's overall cult reception, but in different ways, and through different processes of valuations. TIFF is an audience festival, and a market. Its interest is in *Ichi the Killer* as a novelty and as a film that can whip audiences into a state of frenzy. But those valuations were blocked because of the disaster of 9/11 that overshadowed the event. The IFFR is generally recognized as a leading festival for cinephiles, one where the serious valuation of film as art takes precedence over other forms of enjoyment. As such the IFFR's audience reaction is one that highlights the "uniqueness" of *Ichi the Killer* as a film in a class of its own. The fact it astonishes audiences and pulls them out of their comfort zones is what makes it cult. The BIFFF is a niche cult festival whose very reason of existence is owed to the cult of horror. The BIFFF's audience reaction demonstrates that if the framework of the audience itself (its ambiance) is robust enough, a film such as *Ichi the Killer* can function as a catalyst for the community it is unleashed upon, and heighten its already high level of cultism to a degree other films cannot.

This chapter followed a trajectory from the most mainstream events involving valuation, in which cult film receptions were isolated aberrations, over events such as festivals that by accident or design have become known to allow for "cult moments" – instances in which films with cult reputations and receptions (many of them only nascent or potential) exposed otherwise secure protocols and routines of cultural valuation, to niche genre festivals in which cultism is cemented into the fabric of the event. Throughout, the location and cultural place of events (i.e. their status in the wider landscape of public and commercial presences) has been instrumental in allowing or blocking cultist intervention. The next chapter will explore the presence of cult cinema with regard to methods of valuation in the contexts of censorship and criticism.

Note

1. The same could also be said for the pie-in-the-face anarchist mock awards (which were not limited to film). One of its most prominent activists was Belgian filmmaker Remy Belvaux, co-director of *Man Bites Dog*, who participated in the pie-ing of Bill Gates, and who later committed suicide.

4

Censorship and Criticism

This chapter discusses how the actions of two institutions in film classification, censorship and criticism, impact on cult reception contexts. The function of these institutions is to mediate the mechanisms of promotion and event-based valuation (which we explored in Chapters 2 and 3). This stage of intervention in the reception process is where the meaning of the term "cult" is most often seen as pejorative, and where films known as cult suffer a lot of adversity. Yet it is also where some of the consolidation of certain films *as* cults starts. In particular, we will isolate which roles controversy and connoisseurship play in forging cult reputations.

Censorship and Controversy

Censorship encompasses the efforts from regulators with political, legal, or moral authority to ban or withhold films from the public. At its strictest, this process entails the compulsory submission of films to boards of classification mandated by regional or national public services of a territory (such as a state) that result in legally binding rulings which can prevent films from being released in certain formats. In a looser sense it also includes negotiating the recommendations and complaints issued by religious and political pressure groups that operate through self-assigned mandates. Such groups see it as their duty to safeguard the sensitivities of communities from certain forms of harm. Negotiating the activities of pressure groups does not always lead to effective bans of films, but it does regularly lead to controversies, public upheaval over the appropriateness of a film. Pressure groups can often muster a lot of vigilant support, expressed in boycotts or pickets of a film's screenings. Combined with inadequate policies to deal with this, and clumsy communications between policymakers and pressure groups, controversies can impact significantly on the public status of a film.

One look at the canon of cult cinema reveals that censorship and controversies are a constant in its history. From *Häxan*, *Un Chien Andalou*, and *Freaks*, via "deviant youth" films such as *Rebel without a Cause*, and instances of violence in *Enter the Dragon*, to the serial violence and sex eruptions of *Baise-moi* and *Ichi the Killer*, releases have been blocked, prints cut, and screenings picketed. There is, however, an evolution in the kind of roles institutions have played in objecting to films known as cult. Throughout, bans remain scarce, and they are mostly located in the periods that precede the 1960s. With the increases in permissiveness of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the introduction of new platforms for film releases (video, DVD, internet), single-sided regulation was mostly replaced by debates *about* films' appropriateness. This, in turn, has led to an increase in controversies, enhanced by social network technologies that stimulate public discussion. In such a climate of constant negotiation cultism was likely to flourish. It might partly explain why recent decades have seen a steep increase in films laying claim to the label cult.

If we look at the kind of films embroiled in censorship and controversies, the emphasis lies on those

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films containing explicit representations of sex and violence, and those with morally unacceptable imagery. As Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 9) remark, representations of "animal cruelty, misogyny, non-Western ethnicities, small-town mentality, and the Holocaust" are among the depictions that most frequently lead to censorship or controversy. To these categories can be added children and people with physical disabilities. In some of the more extreme cases of such representations, there is a strong connection between a film's cult status and the censorship and controversies it attracted. Realistic "mondo films" such as *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Faces of Death*, rape-revenge films such as *Straw Dogs* and so-called "sick films" à la *Salò*, various Italian horror films (especially those of Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci), and several *Emmanuelle* films (especially the *Black Emanuelle* series), are good examples. Without the opposition they have received their cult status would be far smaller.

The commotion over content is mostly a symptom of the awkward cultural position of these films. It is because cult films are films with fractured yet inoculated reception trajectories that they are ideal candidates for censorship and/or controversy. They come from outside the mainstream channels of distribution, often unaccompanied by canvasing strategies that pave the way for smooth classification processes; they are introduced to the public via niche and fringe festivals or have indeed upset protocols of valuation at mainstream festivals; and they come equipped with attitudes of hyperbole and reflexivity, with limitations in terms of nuance and skill impeding on their chances to be considered "normal." Therefore such films are more likely to be seen as at odds with what a film *should* be. It is exactly with such prescriptive modalities of audience reception that institutions such as censorship commissions operate.

A good example of this is the most infamous case of censorship involving the "video nasties" in the United Kingdom. Acting upon a request to provide video retailers with a list of titles likely to be impounded or seized if stocked (to save them from random raids by local authorities, but also to make retailers aware of their rights and duties), in 1982 the Director of Public Prosecutions published a list of 74 titles of films that had at one point or another had charges pressed against them. These films became known as the video nasties. It took until 1984 before a law came into place that gave the British Board of Film Classification the authority to regulate and censor videos – which led to the prosecution of 39 titles. In the meantime, campaigning groups and the British press had given the video nasties' list a lot of publicity. This created national media hysteria around the issue. In the course of these campaigns many titles not on the list, such as *The Brood* or *Taxi Driver*, were implicated. Such inclusion benefited their cult status. It also demonstrates how indistinguishable – and for the purposes of cult reputations, insignificant – actual and proxy censorship are.

Many of the films associated with the video nasties contain challenging, graphic, and disturbing imagery (Figure 4.1). However, as Martin Barker (1984) and Kate Egan (2007) have demonstrated, more important is that a great deal of the unease of the public lay with the cultural position of these films. Much of the concern over the shocking and spooky images of the video nasties can be understood as the result of the public's unawareness of rapid advancements in, and excessive use of, special effects, especially in the horror genre. The fact that that genre was, at the time, fast becoming a sort of grassroots, working-class cult in its own right, accompanied by particularly visible forms of fandom such as fanzines, heavy metal, and goth fashion, and various forms of merchandise and fan-art, made the concern only bigger – in the eyes of the mass media it looked as if the video nasties were the symptom of a subversive movement (see Chapter 18 for more on cult horror cinema). Moreover, there was the rapid and unwieldy expansion of the video industry, which took publics and lawmakers by surprise. There was also insecurity about labor relations in the ever-changing media industries, an anxiety that was regularly combined with worries over health and safety regulations. And there was a distinct unfamiliarity with the aggressive marketing techniques of new distribution companies such as Vipco (distributor of *Driller Killer*), Go Video (distributor of *Cannibal Holocaust*), Wizard Video (distributor of *Terminal Island* and *The Boogeyman*), or New Line Cinema (which released *Evil Dead*). Added to this were inadequate regulation guidelines for new carriers (such as cable TV or video), and laws ill-equipped to prosecute and/or protect consumers, employees, and the interests of the industry.



Figure 4.1 Several horror films that showcased the rapid advancement and excessive use of special effects offended moral crusaders and policymakers, and became known as "video nasties." Clockwise from top left: *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Evil Dead*, and *The Beyond*.

These factors became so intertwined a politically volatile climate emerged that allowed policymakers and self-proclaimed moral crusaders to lump actual and simulated, real and fictional, implicit and explicit, hyperbolic and reflexive representations of sex and violence together as an issue that commanded attention and repressive reaction.

Another example of how cult receptions clash with prescribed audience modalities is the pornographic film. One core reason for its cult status is the legal and public ambiguity of explicit sex in films, or strong suggestions thereof. Its consumption takes place in a context of semi-legality, where there are large overlaps between inconspicuous enjoyment of entertainment, geeky and cheeky fandom usages of popular culture, amoral and immoral behavior in defiance of society's norms and values, and downright illegal acts of obscenity punishable under criminal law. Distinctions between soft-core and hard-core, between suggestions of explicit sex and actual sex-on-screen have always existed, but have never really been followed through legally or in public perceptions. Hard-core pornography is tracked carefully, and often outlawed by censors. Richard Randall (1976), Linda Williams (1999) and Jacques Zimmer (2002), give extensive overviews of the censorship of pornography and its treatment by society, and comment on how this has helped create a reputation of rebelliousness. Zimmer (2002: 10–19) chronicles the history of pornography as that of a struggle between the bourgeoisie and progressive libertarians. Films such as *Deep Throat*, *Behind the Green Door*, and *The Devil in Miss Jones*, all from the early 1970s, a period known as "porn chic" in which the pornographic briefly blossomed as a quasi-mainstream form of entertainment, all carry labels of rebelliousness in their receptions.

Randall (1976: 440–443) observes how, from a legal perspective, the category of pornography has problematized representations of sexuality because it allowed for a divide between illegal products (such as hard-core sexual materials that can be prosecuted as obscene under criminal law), legal products presenting themselves as illegal (marketed as though they are legally obscene while they are not, in other words "pandering" to or narrowly avoiding a certain status), and completely legal products that occasionally attracted accusations of obscenity because they got caught up in the mix. Even in the cases where easily identifiable hard-core pornography was prosecuted, confusions led to a wild variety in verdicts; Randall remarks how *Deep Throat* was once found obscene and *not* obscene in the same state. Such ambiguities have greatly enhanced the cult reputation of explicit sex and materials caught in, or trying to exploit, the associations the term brought with it. It has certainly aided the cult status of films such as *Heat*, *Last Tango in Paris*, *Caligula*, and *Emmanuelle*.

In some cases, situations like these have led cult films to become proverbial *causes célèbres* that ignite broader

cultural debate on expressions of culture, and instruments that triggered regulations to change. However, in most cases such recognition is reserved for films with production credentials and reception trajectories closer to what is seen as respectable. A good case in point is the upheaval surrounding the NC-17 and R-ratings in the United States at the beginning of the 1990s. These two ratings were designed to replace the X-rating, which had lost much of its power as deterrent after hardcore pornography ridiculed the rating with its "triple X" self-assignations. In an attempt to re-regulate film markets, the MPAA hoped the NC-17 rating would allow a distinction between art house risqué material, and plain smut. Among the first films caught up in the confusion were *Atamé*, *Henry and June*, and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and her Lover*. *Showgirls* became one of the first big budget Hollywood films to have the NC-17 label bestowed upon it (Sandler 2001). The stubbornness of director Paul Verhoeven in making changes to obtain an R-rating no doubt helped the film gain its cult reputation. The atmosphere of reception, exemplified by the ambiguity of distinctions between art house and exploitation, was as significant as the film's content.

If we assume that those in charge of classifications and those attempting to influence the process are knowledgeable about the cultural position of films, we can also assume chances will be taken to court controversy. In Chapter 2 we observed how many marketing campaigns attempt to stir up interest in films that would otherwise not stand out among the general supply of films. Trying to create a controversy by rubbing against the sensitivities of the moral majority is as good a technique as any other. Similarly, the media, policymakers, pressure groups, and other players involved in public communication can use controversies to promote their own causes. The medium of film seems to be a preferred instrument for such efforts. Talk about film always makes good copy. It is highly visible, draws lots of attention, and makes for easy cultural currency. In fact, since the 1920s, and more or less parallel with the advent of Hollywood, of the star-system, of fandom, *and* of cult movies, cinema has had a privileged relationship with the reporting of scandal. This relationship is most infamously described in *Hollywood Babylon*, a book written by cult filmmaker Kenneth Anger (which we detail in Chapter 7).

Because cult reputations are so heavily implicated in controversies, it has become a tradition among researchers of cult cinema to investigate periods immediately preceding increased regulation – on the assumption such periods must have had some scandals causing the introduction of stricter censorship and tax regulations for cinema. They are therefore often framed as eras of "decadence" before the restoration. The early 1930s, just after the introduction of sound, but before the installation of the Hays code of self-regulation in Hollywood, saw exploitation cinema make concerted efforts to court controversy and aim for cultist receptions. In the case of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *Freaks*, *King Kong* and the first two Tarzan films (*Tarzan the Ape Man*, and *Tarzan and His Mate*) this aim was actually achieved. Thomas Doherty (1999) describes this period as a heady one. Similarly, the first half of the 1970s saw a steep increase in exploitation output and cultist appreciation combined with permissiveness in regulation and easy market access for independent productions.

In addition, it is worth noting the collective nature of controversies that have had significant impacts on, or created, cult reputations. Not every scandal or controversy, and not every act of censorship leads to a cult reputation. In fact, because there are so many controversies and scandals, and so many instances of censorship, singular cases might not pull a film's reception out of normality enough to account for a cult reputation. When cases run across an extended period of time, however, stubbornly refusing to go away and unnerving the public profoundly, there is a bigger chance they will amplify or establish a cult reputation. The several years that span the video nasties or pornography controversies, the recurrent upheavals around *Rebel without a Cause* (Biltereyst 2005) or the continued polemic between scholars over *The Brood* (Mathijs 2008: 79–83) are good examples.

In sum, censorship and controversy ignite curiosity and separate the reception trajectory of a film from the many others that are circulating in a territory. If the reason for the censorship is related to challenging representations of sexuality and/or violence, or to moral taboos, the film's chances of being isolated as an aberration are even higher, since it is more likely to fall outside what is considered "normal" and "acceptable." More important than a film's content,

however, is its challenging position as a symptom of cultural discomfort, especially when a group of films is lumped together. If, on top of that, public adversity towards a film extends across a sustained period of time, it is more likely controversies and/or censorship will become a dominant factor in its cult status.

Cult Connoisseurship

The majority of critical routines ignore films with cult reception trajectories. That is because criticism, as it is classically understood, involves the making of distinctions between "good" or "bad," and the offering, through interpretation, of viewing advice based on the criteria used in arriving at such distinctions. The best example, and also the most institutionalized, is reviewing: an act of classification of cinema that is most commonly expressed through value-judgment, and managed by various publications and media corporations. Because their protocols are so focused on the mainstream of cinema, or on finding the new and novel, reviews are often unable to capture the particularities of cult cinema receptions, let alone appreciate them. Films with cultist reception contexts consistently receive bad reviews. Let us give two examples. When *Bring me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* was first released, *The Wall Street Journal* called it "grotesque, sadistic, irrational, obscene, incompetent" while to *New York Magazine* it was "a catastrophe" (Cooper 2011). *Bad Taste* was, upon its release in the United Kingdom, greeted as a film that had "nothing to commend it but its foetid imagination" (Barratt 2008: 38).

Classifications that are somewhat more sympathetic to cult cinema appear mainly in what David Bordwell (1989: 20) identifies as "essayistic criticism." The formal and informal institutions that govern it are less corporate than reviewing and geared more towards collective attitudes, assumptions, and circles. When Bordwell uses the term "invisible colleges" to refer to the informal institutions that back up essayistic criticism, he is referring to informal and diffuse circles of authorship and readership that are very much like the ones that operate within the esoteric networks that characterize cult receptions at festivals (see Chapter 3). As Bordwell (1989: 19–20) points out, these institutions, and the classifications they develop to arrive at views on films, are often "riven by disputes," yet they also remain "consanguine by virtue of the concrete routines they employ." They admit wide-ranging differences but are united in what seems a cause. The metaphor Bordwell evokes is that of the medieval Christian church. Essayistic criticism often also attempts to devote attention to films ignored by the mainstream (so called "misunderstood" films) in order to expand or interrogate the canon. Films with cult reception trajectories are perfect examples. Above all, however, a substantial part of essayistic criticism is cultist in its own right in that it is inspired by *connoisseurship*: the skill and talent to be an arbiter of taste, and to deliberately pitch expertise against mainstream and middlebrow conventionality. Connoisseurship also includes the self-reflexive interrogation of skill, talent, taste, and expertise.

Cult connoisseurship, then, exceeds regular connoisseurship in celebrating films whose reception trajectories put them at the margins of what is culturally acceptable. It places itself in an oppositional situation, at the margins of the routines and practices commonly seen as key to criticism. According to Greg Taylor (1999: 16–17), this position is often a vanguard one, concerned with exposing critical gestures and attitudes with the aim of pushing aesthetic appreciation ahead. It is less about the films than about the critical writing itself. Cult connoisseurship tries to achieve a form of purist classification, untainted by demands of efficiency or timeliness. Because of its self-declared freedom from constraints, it cannot pertain to hold an objective or aggregate view. It has to be impressionistic, based on subjective judgment. It also has to be disinterested, never giving the idea that it approaches its subject with a purpose – the professional expression of the phenomenal experience detailed in Chapter 1. Below, we will summarize some of the most important occurrences of cult connoisseurship.

Surrealist Criticism

The first form of cult connoisseurship, surrealist criticism, is also the most notoriously impenetrable. Attempting to turn the tables on the dictates of taste,

and inspired by the rebelliousness of the Dadaists, surrealist criticism attempts to make a case for films whose combination of immorality, sheer lack of quality and popular, lowbrow appeal would exclude them from any canon. Films that were "more often than not involuntarily sublime, scorned by the critics, charged with cretinism or infantilism," wrote Ado Kyrou, "anecdotal" and "demented" films "shown in local fleapits," were the ones best equipped for this turning of the tables (Kyrou 2000: 68–69). The best-known example of the kind of film surrealist critics thus championed was American slapstick comedy, the anarchy of which was regarded as a rebellion against the bourgeoisie. The films of Charles Chaplin ("Charlot") and Buster Keaton in particular were put forward as works of genius. Next to that, surrealist critics lauded the fantastic films of George Méliès, the popular serials of Louis Feuillade (especially *Fantômas*), and, occasionally, Hollywood stars. Paul Hammond (2000: 29), in his overview of surrealist writing on cinema, refers explicitly to the "cult of Louise Brooks" among the surrealists. Much of the ensuing cult reputation of *Pandora's Box* was connected to that (Peary 1981: 247–251). Of course, surrealist cinema itself, and the films of Luis Buñuel in particular, were also cultified (see, for instance, Jean Vigo's critical poem on *Un Chien Andalou* in Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 173–174).

In its practices, surrealist criticism was extremely impressionist, effusive, and personal, and characterized by an aggressive tone. Its language attempted to escape rationalist argumentation and rhetoric, and was drenched with cultist references, such as "eroticism," "amorality," "pre-consciousness," "rejuvenation," or "vitality." A fetishism of commodities was prevalent throughout. Hammond calls it the "cult of kitsch" (Hammond 2000: 27). In arriving at classifications of "see" and "don't see" films, the surrealist critics often relied on three concepts: "dépaysement" (disorientation), aleatory (accidentality), and "photogenia" (a term from French critic Louis Delluc, capturing the "ineffable 'quintessence' or the magic of cinema"; Stam 1999: 34). All three referred as much to a quality intrinsic to films as to a position of perception, visible only through particular viewing practices. Buñuel (1927, in Hammond 2000: 61–62), in his praise for Keaton's *College*, listed photogenia as central to what cinema should be. This uneasy ambiguity between essentialism and perception is typical for cult connoisseurship. As befits the phenomenal experience, the truth never only resides in the text, but equally in the beholder.

Adding to the cultism of surrealist criticism was its invisible college of the surrealist movement. Cult cinema connoisseurship flourished in surrealist criticism especially during what is known as the "intuitive period" (1919–1929) of the Surrealist movement, when the writing was confined to publications with small circulations (Hammond 2000: 25). As the movement developed and became better organized, and more institutionalized, especially in its affiliations with the political Left, it became less cultist.

Cult Cinephilia and MacMahonism

The second form of cult connoisseurship we would like to highlight revolves around cinephilia and what Robert Stam (1999: 83–88) has called the "cult of the auteur" of the 1950s and 1960s. In his study of American film criticism, Taylor (1999) analyzes how critics such as Manny Farber (who wrote for *New Republic* and *The Nation*) and Parker Tyler (who first edited the surrealist journal *View*, and subsequently did much of his writing for *Film Culture*), moved away from the kinds of classifications and evaluations their predecessors had been making about cinema. Dissatisfied with the influence of the heritage of New Criticism and Modernism on cinema, and keen to assert their own specific connoisseurship, they started to adopt what Taylor calls "cultist" and "camp" attitudes. They championed films from low repute (and increasingly from a countercultural sphere) that allowed them to promote a "vanguard" aesthetic perspective, one that was more pure (more directed towards the "essence" of cinema) and continuously fresh enough to challenge the status quo of "classical cinema" and to prevent canon-making from settling in. The fact that Farber saw himself more as a painter than a critic, and Tyler regarded himself very much a poet, meant that both exercised their criticism more as a hobby, from a position of passionate disinterestedness. Their goal was not so much to "rescue film culture," as Taylor puts it, but to "shoot from the hip" and to "delineate the oppositional margins of popular

culture" (Taylor 1999: 43). Theirs was very much the position of the "solitary activist" (1999: 47), who sought to "liberate the spectator from the 'sweet fog' of mainstream culture and return him to an idealized, revitalized version of his own folk traditions" (1999: 48). Among the films Farber deemed worthy of discussion (though not necessarily of *liking*) were *Casablanca* and *All about Eve*. Among Tyler's key exemplars were Mickey Mouse and Charles Chaplin. But the actual movies mattered less than the "critical skill and an artistic imagination" (Taylor 1999: 73). As with so many other attempts to promote the "new," this joint cultism/cinephilia eventually exhausted itself. By the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, as the dissemination of underground and exploitation cinema grew, the vanguard perspective ran out of steam. Parker Tyler's scathing overview of countercultural cinema from 1969, *Underground Film*, observed an "intellectual bankruptcy in the name of chic [that] hindered informed aesthetic distinctions" (Taylor 1999: 118).

One instance of cinephilia that is particularly cultist in its connoisseurship is the MacMahonist circle. Located largely in France, it originated in the margin of the wave of auteurism, from the mid 1950s onwards. Against the highbrow and middle-class aesthetics that were being promoted by the Parisian establishment, a playful and cheeky reaction originated, dubbed MacMahonism. The fact that the MacMahoniens named themselves after the theater ("Le MacMahon," near the Place de l'Etoile in Paris) where they convened, and that they championed films because they went against what was deemed respectable, illustrates how here too the conditions of reception were as important as the actual films. It confirms the cultism of this invisible college.

The MacMahoniens are often mentioned in the same breath as disciples of André Bazin and the critics of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, with whom they shared many concerns (and many of the MacMahoniens did publish in the *Cahiers*). The main difference is the high degree of connoisseur-like gamesmanship and fetishism of masculinity. Instead, of constructing a canon consisting of John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, or Howard Hawks (like many other critics did), the MacMahoniens trawled deep into what Hollywood dumped on the French postwar market to emerge with Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, Raoul Walsh and Joseph Losey. Maverick directors such as Nicholas Ray, filmmakers courting B-movie status such as Jacques Tourneur, a few biblical films with Charlton Heston, and several Italian and Spanish Hercules epics also received high praise, especially in attempts to provoke reactions. This critical gambling was not void of cheekiness. As Raphaëlle Moine (2008: 144) points out, the MacMahoniens introduced the word *peplum*, with all its dubious connotations of historical insincerity and camp masculinity, to cinema parlance partly because they coupled their cinephilia to "a rather affected taste for the trashy." The main outlet for the MacMahonists was the magazine *Présence du Cinéma*. Its editor Michel Mourlet was decribed as the "high priest of MacMahonism." Jacques Lourcelles and Fereydou Hoyveda (who also wrote for the left-leaning, surrealist inspired *Positif*) were among the most notable critics of the group. Later, Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut were counted among the "apostles of the MacMahonist faith" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 26).

Even as it opposed canons, middlebrow and highbrow taste, and respectable filmmakers, the impact of cinephilic cult connoisseurship, especially its advancement of auteurism, was so great that it became constitutive of a new canon inspite of itself. The hysteria of the later criticism of Tyler, the ecstasy of some MacMahoniens, the praise for camp by Susan Sontag, the self-avowed "cultist auteurism" of Andrew Sarris, nor the irrational eccentric criticism of Jack Smith or Kenneth Anger could stop this evolution. During the 1960s, Pauline Kael, who had always been skeptical of the auteur theory, mourned the newfound seriousness of cinephilia on a number of occasions and pleaded for a return to "excitement" and "bad movies" (Kael 1969; see Sconce 2007 for an elaboration). But no new critical efforts revived New York or Parisian cinephilic cult connoisseurship. In fact, as the increased ritualism of the *Casablanca* cult celebrations in the Brattle theater near Harvard University and of the midnight movies indicated, cultism would move away from cinephilia altogether, at least for a while.

Fan Criticism

The final two forms of cult connoisseurship we would like to showcase are both instances of "niche criticism." With this term we mean a form of criticism

that has a strong emphasis on closeness with the object of scrutiny, an alignment with its receptions, and an intensification of the commitment that has the cultist see pretty much all of the world through the lens of their object of fascination – an attitude shared by fan and marketer. We will discuss two of the most prominent exponents of this, namely fan criticism and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) criticism. Both display a desire to move criticism as close as possible to the experience of the naturally emerging audience and the non-expert viewer. Yet through their desire to come as close as possible to the films they love, and through their obsession with details, these forms of criticism also present themselves as forms of specialization. As forms of amateurism they have taken over the vanguard role of defining cinematic purism that was once held by cinephilia. Yet they occupy a radically different part of the critical spectrum. In general, their efforts are ridiculed because they are seen as amateurs addressing audiences with shallow interests and curiosity. Much like surrealist criticism they are also less preoccupied with the "rhetoric of the text." Often their arguments are made through bricolage and illustration instead of through academic reasoning. This includes a much more liberal use of fonts, punctuation, and lettertypes, and also some preference for visual illustrations – drawings, original artwork, and the production of amateur media work (documentaries, taped interviews, short films, montages of clips, re-stagings, and so on). In a sense, the niche critic is located in a sphere of opposition to the professional industry of film reviewing. Its invisible college is what Terry Eagleton (1984: 115–118) has called the "intimate sphere" of culture. This is the sphere of informal personal contacts, such as family, neighborhood, community, flea markets, sidewalks, chat rooms, parking lots or bars – a sphere in which the experience of subjectivity is essential. It is the sort of atmosphere Maffesoli sees as crucial to affective communities (see Chapter 1).

Fan criticism first became visible in the 1960s but blossomed from the 1970s onwards. It consists of two types of publications, prozines and fanzines. According to David Sanjek (1990: 152), prozines are periodicals that address the fan reader but that are produced as commercial, mainstream magazines. *Famous Monsters of Filmland* (started in 1958) and *Castle of Frankenstein* (started in 1962) preceded a wave of prozine magazines such as *Cinéfantastique* (1970), *Starlog* (1976) and *Fangoria* (1979). In France, a pioneering role was played by *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*. It was among the first fanzines to make a move from a niche newsletter to connoisseurship. *Midi-Minuit* was succeeded by *Écran fantastique* (from 1969 onwards) and *Mad Movies* (1972). Inspired by specific communities, such as the cult of *Star Trek* and the cult of horror cinema (for *Starlog* and *Fangoria* respectively), prozines are often closely affiliated with burgeoning fan cultures and they share with their fans a dedication to a narrow focus on one or two genres – or even subgenres. For example, when the abundant supply of horror films in the early 1980s warranted demarcations of various subgenres within the genre, *Fangoria* developed a spin-off, *Gorezone*, dedicated to horror subgenres in order to prevent other magazines from intruding onto its market. *Écran fantastique* launched *Vendredi 13* with the same intent.

While prozines are a very visible exponent of cultist criticism, they are usually seen as less deeply committed than fanzines. According to Sanjek, fanzines are amateur publications that "constitute an alternative brand of film criticism, a school with its own set of values and virtues. They aim not only to *épater le bourgeois* but also to root out obscure marginalia ... and revel in the private consumption of outrage for outrage's sake" (1990: 153). Again, *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *Castle of Frankenstein* provided a lot of the inspiration for fanzines, especially through the ways in which they experimented with tone and tenor in their reviews (often a mix of admiration and sarcasm), and through their tools of analysis: retrospectives and biographies create a sense of history; interviews play a key role in establishing the impression of semi-direct communication between artists, critics, and audiences/readers; mini- or capsule reviews give fanzines a sense of completism and archivist significance; the editors and letters pages are prominent places for continued discussion. These magazines also display a desire towards seeing films as part of collective sensibilities, as part of a "wave," a "movement," or a "new era," one of which the fan critic and the readership declared themselves an equal part. Among the most notable examples of fanzines are *Sleazoid Express*, *The Gore Gazette*, *Wet Paint*, *Le masque de Méduse*, and *Vampirella*.

The relations of prozines and fanzines to cult cinema are radically different from those of cinephilia. Their rhetoric is directed towards an appreciation of the collective effort instead of the solitary genius (though there is ample praise for the "crazy loner"). Sanjek observes a slight preference for the "cult of the technician" in prozines and a "cult of the auteur" in fanzines. Across the board, however, special effects make-up artists such as Tom Savini, or storyboard artists and production designers such as Dan O'Bannon (before he moved into writing and directing) receive as much attention as renowned directors, and their work is imbued with a form of working-class street credibility. Among the directors that owe a lot of their cult status to fan criticism are David Cronenberg (*Scanners*, *Videodrome*), Wes Craven (*Last House on the Left*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*), Larry Cohen (*It's Alive*), Lucio Fulci (*The Beyond*), Tobe Hooper (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), and George Romero (*Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*). They formed the core of the "cult of horror" propagated by *Cinéfantastique* and *Fangoria* (see Chapter 18 for more on this). Among the many ingénue fan-critics were self-declared cultists such as Joe Dante, Frank Henenlotter, and Mick Garris, who were practitioners, fans, and critics at the same time. Numerous issues also contain DIY guides to special effects (Mathijs 2010b). Classified ads are often platforms for collectors to exchange fan-related materials – in this sense they function as an extension of the flea market model we sketched in Chapter 2.

Over time, the distinction between prozines and fanzines has become more pronounced. Prozines have developed less interest in cultist appreciation and moved into a more institutionalized kind of professional criticism, of which *Cinéfantastique*, *Fangoria*, *Starlog*, *SFX*, and *Starfix* have become the representatives. Yet they still maintain a niche interest through associations with parts of fan cultures, such as fan conventions, collector's weekends, specialist stores, or spin-offs. Fanzines, on the other hand, have become more radical in their cultism. In the 1990s they were represented by publications that were mostly one-man operations, such as Tim Lucas's *Video Watchdog*, Andy Black's *Necronomicon*, David Kerekes's Headpress, and Harvey Fenton's FabPress. The niche appeal of these publications actually helped films sustain cult reputations: it reinforced Mario Bava's and Dario Argento's reputations, spearheaded the praise for the films of Bigas Luna and Peter Jackson, and assisted in the rediscovery of the films of Radley Metzger, Harry Kümel, and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

In their political positioning too, fanzines have shown a tendency towards radical collectivity. Instead of the existentialism of cinephilia, it showed a preference for utopian and communal philosophies of society. Hiding behind straightforward descriptors of setting or storyworld, a lot of letters, editorials, and reviews of films such as *Blade Runner*, *Dune*, and *The Lord of the Rings* reveal a fascination with sometimes crude and naive but often also idealistic negotiations of democratic and totalitarian variations of governance. This function of interrogation makes fanzines "engaged"; it gives them a cause shared with much of cult cinema.

DIY Criticism

Since the rise of the internet developments in cult connoisseurship have shown a surge in criticism that, like fanzines, offers subjective, focused commentary with a penchant for trivia and details. We find those characteristics in abundance in what can be called Do-It-Yourself (DIY) criticism, a form of online commentary often formatted as "user comments," "threads," or "responses" that is widespread, though mostly directed to a small, niche readership. Among the most visible examples are the improvised user reviews and message board comments on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), and the various contributions of amateur reviewers to social network media such as Blogspot, Facebook, MySpace or Youtube. DIY criticism contains many characteristics of fan criticism: it preferences impressionist and subjective comments, it relishes focus, single-mindedness, and closeness, and it puts itself in opposition to professional reviewing while still claiming expertise. It is also decidedly peer-to-peer in its address (though not necessarily always in its readership) and, connected with that, it demonstrates a sense of informality of address – with much attention for hearsay, trivia, and conjecture.

While directors still receive a lot of attention in DIY criticism, there is less emphasis on their efforts than on other components of the films and their receptions.

This is undoubtedly linked to the fact that DIY criticism favors feature debuts, such as *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, *Tetsuo*, *Man Bites Dog*, *Cube*, or *Donnie Darko*, but it is also due to other factors. Among the most notable points of interest are speculations about the story world of the film (with ample elaborations on that world's plausible and improbable aspects), and observations about the simplicity yet ingeniousness of film styles (observations that are often approached as peer review, frequently with a "I could do that too" undertone). Next to this, DIY criticism appreciates wit, irony and mild nihilism, which it frequently mirrors in tone. A good case in point is the online reception of a film such as *Nothing*, which looks effortless and which invites audiences to speculate on issues such as user-friendly technology, pop-philosophy, and morality in a world where one can only trust one's closest friends.

Like fan criticism, DIY criticism has been suspected of maintaining a contentious relationship with the commercial or corporate sphere. According to Elena Gorfinkel (2008: 38), "media industries have embedded connoisseurship into online merchandising, for example, in the 'Users like you enjoyed. . .' recommendation feature of Amazon, Netflix, and Youtube." This suspicion of viral marketing, of being employed in a clever scheme, often affects DIY critics, and it has damaged some reputations such as that of superblogger Harry Knowles. In most cases, however, the tension between suspicion and trust does not deter participants from engaging in DIY criticism. Quite the contrary, the activity has become widespread, so common in fact that the perception at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century may no longer be that it is marginal or niche at all. In the form of "sweding" this form of cultist appreciation has even made its way into the film profession. Originally, a term used to refer to erased and subsequently recreated cinema in the period of VHS, sweding was re-employed as a result of its use in *Be Kind Rewind*, a film by Michel Gondry (who directed the deviously simple clip for the "Mad World" song that helped *Donnie Darko* reach its cult status). Thanks to *Be Kind Rewind* sweding has become a tool in discussions about different generations of "new media" and their user-oriented and deliberately artisan creations that carry limitations as a form of pride rather than an obstacle. In that sense it is similar to how lack of access and professionalism became points of "authenticity" for the niche critic.

Through its use of video, DVD and the internet, DIY criticism has had a profound impact on the viewing contexts of cult cinema connoisseurship. The rituals of endurance that were core to repeat viewing of the 1980s have been complemented by a new fascination for short materials (this has led to the cultification of the video clips of Michel Gondry for instance). In addition, shortness of exposure is a key element in new tendencies such as summary viewing or compilation viewing. Summary viewing consists of what Elena Gorfinkel, via Michael Newman, calls "snippy viewing" – whereby only the worst and most embarrassing moments, or representative samples, montages or "bloopers," are actually viewed (Gorfinkel 2008: 38). Good examples of creative interventions in summary viewing are *Pulp Fiction in 5 Seconds*, *Scary Mary Poppins*, or the *How It Should Have Ended* animated video speculations on alternative endings of films (most often cult films). Compilation viewing supersedes this by combining snippets of films into compilations pulled from multiple films. These are not always homages, but frequently also compilations of errors – with again the assumption that the DIY critic is a peer to the filmmaker. Frequently, such compilations are shared through the internet on shared user content platforms like MySpace, Facebook, or YouTube. Augmented viewing involves the adding of material to the original film in order to comment on it. The running commentary, or "riffing," that the television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* provided when it screened exploitation or B-movies has been a prominent source of inspiration for this practice.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter we would like to address "word of mouth endorsement." Because this process belongs equally in the areas of marketing, auteur, and star showmanship (especially celebrity endorsements, such as those Quentin Tarantino and John Waters are known for), and the peer endorsement of fan cultures of cult cinema, it is only tangentially related to the institutions of reception we have outlined above. But it informs them nevertheless.

Overall, most institutionalized forms of film classification, whether concerned with moral, legal, ideological, or aesthetic norms, behave adversely towards films whose receptions are fragmented, fractured, and unhinged. Yet within the margins there are several components of the same institutions that do find reason to champion these films. In most cases, this is not so much out of a love for the films themselves, though that is often offered as the overt reason, but out of a desire to position oneself, as taste-maker, as critic, or as intellectual. All of these processes try to achieve a status of trustworthiness that is directly related to a self-perception of significance.

It is at this level that the desire for advocacy and the fear of insecurity meet. The best possible metaphor to illustrate this situation is the concept of "word of mouth endorsement." As a simple communication process between two sources, without much interference from other forces, word of mouth is squarely placed within the intimate sphere; it relies heavily on mutual trust and personal contact. Word of mouth endorsements give the feeling they are to be trusted because of the position of equality between receiver and communicator. One of the most legendary examples is *El Topo*, a film whose midnight run in New York popularized the midnight movie phenomenon, and which relied almost uniquely on word of mouth endorsement (including that of John Lennon, who subsequently got involved in financing *The Holy Mountain*). Given the esoteric networks of connections cult films rely upon in their reception trajectories, personal endorsements have a fairly great importance – a single voice can make a distinct difference in the reception of cult cinema. To believe individual voices count is the prime conviction of connoisseurs and classifiers in a world filled with institutions.

5

Fandom and Subculture

While the study of media fans and cult media do not totally overlap, they do have much in common: cult media has often been identified through the fan devotion that it has given rise to. Our focus is, of course, on cult cinema. While we will draw upon broader media fandom in this chapter, we will consider its significance mainly in relation to cult film (though we will point towards the importance of other media, especially when non-film media consumption informs the manner by which films are framed by fans). We will chart the overlaps and interconnections between fan studies and cult cinema in relation to some of the key historical developments within these fields of study.

We focus primarily on the academic study of fans in this chapter. Some other aspects, such as fan criticism, and transnational fandom in the form of "otaku" are discussed in Chapters 4 and 11 respectively.

Fan Studies: Early Approaches

Within academia, earlier studies of fans within media and cultural studies have tended to engage with fans as particularly *active* audiences (Jenkins 1992; Fiske 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992). This was partly a response to the ways in which media fans had often been ridiculed and/or demonized within the media (for example, the constant stress upon fans with psychological problems who stalk and sometimes murder media celebrities). Thus, Jenkins argued that "to speak as a fan is to accept what has been labelled a subordinate position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities" (1992: 43). Against such negative commentary, there was a tendency to stress the positive nature of being a fan through focusing on the activities and communities which emerged from fandom.

Many studies of fans tended to focus on fans as producers, as a way of distinguishing them from "ordinary consumers." Henry Jenkins, drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, emphasized the notion of "textual poaching," whereby fans can appropriate elements of a popular text and inscribe it with their own meanings. Here, fans resist "official" ways of reading and instead "raid" (as opposed to respecting) the text: "Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions" (1992: 18).

Jenkins was keen to relate fandom to cultural politics, a political emphasis that was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that academic cultural studies tended at this point to focus upon popular culture in relation to broader social and political processes. Therefore, studies of audiences often focused on what Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998: 15–28) have termed the "incorporation/resistance" paradigm, which looks at how audiences are incorporated into, or resist, the "dominant order" via media use. Within the study of fandom this was evident in the stress upon fans' various forms of activity, of engaging in resistant behavior in order to undermine dominant ideologies (Fiske 1989: 56). While not all fan activity was construed as resistant, there was a tendency to focus on fans as engaged in "micro-political" acts: not

Cult Cinema: An Introduction. Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton.
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large-scale, radical activity but small-scale, resistant behavior. So, for example, fans could be seen as progressive in the sense that they were opposing "official" culture, through challenging what types of culture were worthy of consecration or through acts of reading/production which conflicted with institutionally sanctioned readings. An example of the latter is when fans come into conflict with copyright holders when they produce fan texts, particularly when they produce subversive interpretations which a company may not consider suitable. (Slash fiction, which creates same-sex couplings between characters, is particularly prominent within debates over correct types of fan production.) We will return to some criticism of these approaches when we focus upon more recent developments in fan studies, but for now we will think about the study of cult cinema fans in relation to these developments.

Visible and Performative Fans

It is perhaps no coincidence that both "fan" and "cult" derive from religious nomenclature: through negative connotations, both terms spread to other areas of culture. Both the study of fans and of cult cinema within the 1980s and early 1990s tended to look at the more positive aspects of the categories in question, thus marking a period in which the concepts were undergoing serious revaluation.

The stress upon audience activity marks one of the most well-known cult films, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: through dressing up, talking back at the screen, and dancing and singing within the cinema auditorium, fans of the film were engaged in textual poaching because they "remade" the text within a broader community of fans. This active, performative fandom, however, was not on the whole a prominent pattern in terms of cult film audience responses. There were, nevertheless, people who would note that many cult film screenings – in particular midnight screenings – were distinctively communal spaces in which the audience would often chat, drink, sometimes smoke pot, and occasionally shout things at the screen. Such visible text-audience encounters could be observed to note how cult cinema offered an alternative to "normal" consumption, just as fans' active behaviors could be contrasted to the consumption of "ordinary" consumers.

While *Rocky Horror* remains the most notable case of cult cinema as defined by its visible fan responses, a number of other cult films have developed visible and performative fandoms since then, and can thus demonstrate fans as active and communal agents. A more recent incidence of such fandom being linked to a film's cult status is *The Big Lebowski* (see Klinger 2010b, for an overview). In 2002, while vending at the Derby City Tattoo Expo, Will Russell and Scott Shuffitt were quoting lines from the film when other nearby vendors joined in. From this spontaneous moment of camaraderie arose an idea to organize a festival based around *The Big Lebowski*, and so was born the "Lebowskifest," a festival set in a bowling alley that features people in costume, bowling contests, and prizes (Figure 5.1). As the festival was popular, it spread: there have now been seven annual festivals in Louisville, as well as others in places such as

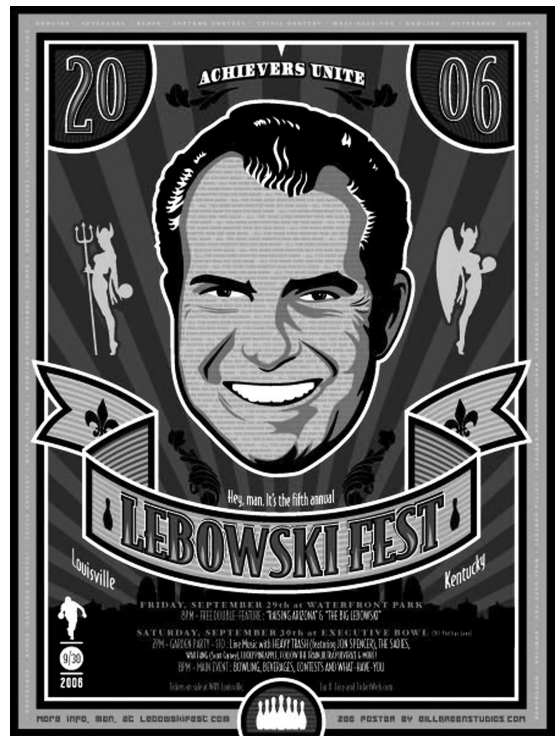


Figure 5.1 The fifth annual Lebowskifest.

Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, and one in Edinburgh, UK. Many subsequent events have grown in size and attracted guests from the film. They have also given rise to an array of merchandise: posters, t-shirts and stickers, as well as a 2007 fan book (Green *et al.* 2007). There was also an academic symposium on the film as part of the fifth annual festival, which featured a couple of presenters in costume (Robertson 2006) and brought together people who were both fans and scholars, or in Hills' terms, "scholar-fans" (Hills 2002a: 16–21). There are, additionally, a number of other related sites that have grown around the film, such as "Dudeism.com," which is a mock religion based around the ideas of the Dude.

Earlier academic study of cult cinema is more similar to fan studies, however, in its emphasis upon the fan/cultist as representing an alternative to the mainstream. As mentioned, fans were often valorized for the ways in which their activities could be seen as different from normal (and, by implication, mainstream) consumption practices through refashioning texts according to their own agendas, by using the text as a platform for communal purposes, and/or through challenging official taste. The cultist could also be seen as challenging taste and acting outside of mainstream consumption norms (through attending midnight screenings and repertory screenings, and repeatedly attending screenings of a single title) and of, in Sarris's words, loving films "beyond all reason" (Telotte 1991a: 5). Therefore, if we think about other modes of visible fandom, we can also associate these further to degrees of "alternativeness."

The fan pilgrimage, for example, has become an increasingly studied area (Hills 2002a: 144–157; Couldry 2003: 75–94; Sandvoss 2005: 44–66). These are not always necessarily related to cult texts, but those instances that are can be distinguished through the manner by which such texts embody alternative values for many of their fans. *The Wicker Man*, for example, has since its original release gained a dedicated following. Some fans of the film display their love for it in reasonably conventional ways, through purchasing the film and sometimes related memorabilia, and through gaining a good knowledge of the film. Others take this further by going on a pilgrimage to where the film was made, or collecting more obscure and hard-to-find collectibles associated with the film. Visits to the locations where the film was shot have become so popular that the South West Scotland Screen Commission publish a "Wicker Man trail" for visitors to follow, while a local coach company organizes a guided tour of key locations (Smith 2006: 264).

Such information signals a response to the continuing fascination that the film plays within a number of people's lives, despite the fact that it was not successful when originally released. In this sense, fans are a conspicuous segment of the film's identity: they have been active in resurrecting it from commercial oblivion and have kept it culturally alive. The film also is an alternative text: it represents a pagan culture and appeals to some people who are interested in occult issues and unconventional beliefs. Smith interestingly notes how the tourist visits to the film's locations are in some senses similar to the popularity of heritage sites, including locations that have featured within heritage films and television programs. *The Wicker Man*, though, exemplifies a kind of alternative heritage, a cultural trend that has been on the increase over the past decade or so. This is represented by record labels such as Ghost Box, which publishes music by artists "that find inspiration in library music, folklore, vintage electronics and haunted television soundtracks" (from the Ghost Box website); the "English Heretic" organization, which is both a parody of English Heritage but also an occult-inspired alternative to it (and which has published a booklet and CD-R guide entitled *The Sacred Geography of British Cinema*); as well as Julian Cope's "Head Heritage," which is involved in documenting prehistoric sites and pagan lore. *The Wicker Man*, along with other cult British films such as *Witchfinder General*, has become part of this alternative heritage which has further fuelled its cult reputation.

The alternative and "non-mainstream" nature of cult cinema continues to be important, though we do need to be aware that even these aspects are being challenged by more recent studies within fan studies.

Revising Fan Studies

While the first wave of fan studies was important and influential, it has more recently been subject to critique and revision. While many aspects of fan studies have

been elaborated upon, we will focus on challenges to the picture of the fan as a resistant, communal, and active agent. Hills, for example, drawing on the work of Crawford, has pointed out that the types of fans that Jenkins and Bacon-Smith focused on in their studies are not representative of all types of fandom. He notes that there exist a range of different types of fans and that the earlier wave of fan studies tended to focus on more excessive types of fandom, in the process overlooking more mundane instances (Hills 2006a: 104) Thus, more recent fan studies have sought to redress this imbalance. This, however, has fed into a need to rethink exactly what a fan is.

Contrary to the fan being distinguished through active productivity, it has been stressed that some fans may not actually belong to any fan networks (they may even confine their fandom to privacy) let alone engage in the production of fan-related texts. Rather than the existence of fixed distinctions between a fan and non-fan, Hills has suggested that "fan identity has recently been seen as context- and situation-specific" (2006a: 105). Some people may be termed fans by others, for example, for their particular consumption of a range of texts but they may not themselves identify as a fan; while Hills again cites Crawford in discussing how sports fans may be dismissed as not "proper" fans if they do not attend live games, but may be labeled as dedicated fans by those who do not have much interest in sport (2006a: 105).

Despite the context-specific argument about what constitutes fandom, it is necessary to outline a broad definition of fandom. Cornell Sandvoss provides such a definition, noting that fans are often considered to differ from more general audiences by nature of their *intense* or *excessive* interest in a particular, or a corpus of particular, cultural text(s). Sandvoss has felt the need to go beyond this particular definition, though, as he claims that intensity cannot be "objectively measured" (Sandvoss 2005: 6). He claims that the clearest behavioral indication of emotional investment in a particular text "lies in its regular, repeated consumption," so at its lowest common denominator fandom is "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (2005: 7–8). Of course, what counts as "regular, emotionally involved consumption" may again alter according to particular contextual variables.

It is worth detailing the overlaps and distinctions between a fan and a cultist, considering our overall focus on cult cinema. There have been some attempts to distinguish between these appellations within academic literature. Greg Taylor, for example, argues that the cultist can be distinguished from the fan due to a more resistant position; that is, the cultist will appropriate elements from commercial culture in order to mark out an individualized space within that culture. While the cultist will denigrate the majority of commercial culture, he or she will focus on selected moments of excellence that occasionally appear within the mass media (Taylor 1999: 161). From a different angle, Abercrombie and Longhurst have distinguished between a fan, a cultist, and an enthusiast: a fan is a person who "becomes particularly attached to certain programmes or stars within the context of relatively heavy mass media use;" a cultist is more focused than the fan, revolving around more specialist (and "refined") tastes; while an enthusiast is predominantly activity-based, spending a large amount of leisure time dedicated to their enthusiasms and often involved in networks related to them (1998: 138–139). There are problems with such categories: for example, their definition of an enthusiast is closer to how a fan has been described in much of the previous literature on the subject. Their attempt to demarcate a fan from a cultist seems too neat in light of the need to be aware of the importance of context, and also differs from Taylor's definition of a cultist.

While Taylor and Abercrombie and Longhurst conceive of the term differently, they do seem to be differentiating a cultist from a fan as understood in its general sense: that is, a cultist seems to be positioned as a particular type of fan. The growth of fan studies has therefore seen the need to distinguish between different kinds of fans. This is possibly a result of the growth of fan studies and the impact that digital technologies – in particular the internet – have wrought, further complicating understandings of the fan. It is now the case that many people will engage in online community discussions about their favorite media, whereas previously the establishment of community fandom would have been less common. In this sense, more and more people can be identified as fans, which has led Jenkins (2002) to claim that fandom is moving "from cult status towards the cultural mainstream." The need

to distinguish a cultist from other types of fans, therefore, could be considered an attempt to re-stress the non-mainstream nature of cult fandom. For the most part, this does seem to ring true: cult fans often stress the non-mainstream nature of their passions and a segment of cult fandom seeks out obscure titles that lie beneath the radar of mainstream media exposure. Nevertheless, in line with fandom's general mainstreaming, there have been arguments over whether cult cinema/cult fandom itself has become more of a mainstream process.

Cultural Capital and Subcultures

One particular figure who has been influential on more recent studies of fans is Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu has been an important reference point for those studying the politics of "taste cultures," both in terms of how fans make distinctions in order to differentiate themselves from others, and also how such operations are related to broader sociological processes. The most prominent aspect of Bourdieu's work which has been applied to subculture-related studies has been his outline of different forms of capital, particularly his notion of "cultural capital." Bourdieu (1986) outlines three main types of capital operable within society:

- *economic* capital – which is the most recognized form of capital, referring to a person's financial resources and material wealth;
- *cultural* capital – this refers to a person's educational status and their knowledge and skills related to different cultural fields;
- *social* capital – denotes the extent to which a person is connected to various social networks, for example.

Bourdieu argues that these forms of capital are interrelated, but not in any straightforward manner. It is, therefore, possible for a person to have significant economic capital but very little cultural capital: an example would be those derogatorily termed *nouveau riche*, who have come from a low-class background but who have accumulated substantial economic wealth during their lifetime. Despite being rich, their tastes (for example, in the way they decorate their home, clothes that they wear, entertainment they consume) may be considered "vulgar" by those who have a firmer rooting within a higher class and have therefore enjoyed a better education. Conversely, a person who has come from a background in which education is seen as important may be knowledgeable about a wide range of different cultural domains, but may have spurned the pursuit of money and pursued a relatively low-economic vocation: such a person would have high cultural capital but low economic capital. Social capital, on the other hand, refers to an individual's membership (which can be official or unofficial) within certain groups, which can therefore benefit them by helping them gain prestigious positions through the connections that they forge. Of course, the status of these particular groups within a broader social landscape may vary.

Sarah Thornton (1995), in her study of various underground dance cultures within Britain, coined the term "subcultural capital" to refer to the processes by which subcultures create specific forms of cultural capital. The term was used in order to mark out how distinctions are made and expertise valued within cultural areas that do not fit neatly into the spheres of "high art," which is the most common form of culture associated with cultural capital. Thornton writes:

> Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder . . . Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections . . . Just as cultural capital is personified in "good" manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being "in the know' " (1995: 11).

Within social life people are able to assemble cultural capital through expertise within specific fields. The types of knowledge possessed may be differently valued according to the field within which it operates: thus, knowledge of science fiction comics may not be held in much esteem within, say, a group of Shakespeare experts, but among science fiction comics enthusiasts it could place the beholder of such

knowledge in an advantageous position. (Of course, fields are not always separate, so that a Shakespeare expert may also be a science fiction comic expert, but such a person may play down their knowledge of comics when among other Shakespeare experts.) In the broader social field as a whole, however, Shakespeare has a higher cultural status than science fiction comics, and in this sense the latter could be seen as reflecting subcultural capital (as would cult cinema fandom) as opposed to more general cultural capital. The status and value of cultural phenomena can, of course, change: institutional recognition, for example, may be considered a means whereby a particular field becomes more widely validated, though it still may meet resistance. A very broad, general example is provided by the study of television within university: while such study enhances the reputation of the subject, it has nevertheless suffered a number of attacks (a subject, for example, not worthy of academic analysis).

Thornton's analysis of subcultural capital focused upon the media as a crucial mediator of subcultural status and cultural capital:

> [the media] are the main disseminators of these fleeting capitals. They are not simply another symbolic good or indicator of distinction, but a series of institutional networks essential to the creation, classification and distribution of cultural knowledge. (Thornton 1995: 118)

She argues that the media do not merely, as Cohen (1972) suggests, construct dominant ideas of subcultures after they have formed, but are crucial to the formation and development of subcultures. She distinguishes between three broad types of media that play a part in this process: micro-media (such as locally distributed fanzines, flyers, and listings); niche media (such as the specialist music press); and national mass media (the tabloids, the main television and radio stations). Regarding film, the categorization of different types of media may slightly differ from music, and the huge rise in internet communications since the mid 1990s will have also complicated such categories. Nevertheless, Thornton does point to the ways in which subcultures tend to promote and define themselves through niche media, while coverage of particular subcultural formations in niche media can help to "crystallize" them into a "fully-fledged subculture" (1995: 152). Mass media, on the other hand, are often involved in creating moral panics around subcultural activities or stigmatizing them in other ways. For Thornton, such negative coverage in the mass media is often welcomed by subcultures, for they define themselves against the "mainstream" and revel in their "deviant" status. When a subcultural trend becomes increasingly part of the mainstream, however – through being accepted, reported, documented by the mass media – it may well be denigrated by subcultural groups, who may then perceive the commercialization of particular cultural artifacts as "inauthentic."

Mark Jancovich has investigated cult film fans using Bourdieu's theories about cultural capital and Thornton's notion of subcultural capital. He claims that cult fandom is rife with distinctions and claims about authenticity, and is characterized by its difference from the mainstream and the mass media. Yet, while the mass media/mainstream and academic approaches to film appreciation are disparaged within cult movie fandom, they are nevertheless constitutive of such cult communities: "these institutions also provide the very mechanisms, spaces and systems of communication through which a sense of community is produced and maintained" (Jancovich 2002: 308). Jancovich argues that cult fandom emerged out of the burgeoning art house and repertory scenes that proliferated within the 1960s: the art house scene, he claims, was associated with commerce (many cinemas in this era converting to art cinemas in order to remain commercially viable), while repertory cinemas emerged from the college scene, itself linked to the academic study of film and the revaluation of older, commercial films emanated from Hollywood. Such an argument overlooks, though, how art cinemas – while commercial – are not often designated as "mainstream"; in this sense, Jancovich conflates commercialism/the mainstream here. Certainly, cult culture is characterized by a complex relationship to commercialism, but it does not seem to be opposed on a frequent basis to commerce *per se*. Rather, it is excessive commercialism, or particular *types* of commercialism (corporate and conservative as opposed to independent and "renegade") that are opposed. The academic opposition, although evident within cult

culture, is perhaps becoming less so in recent years, in line with an increased academic interest in cult media. There *is* still hostility towards academic approaches to cult (and other films) in some cult-related fan discourse, but it is certainly not as prominent as the opposition to "mainstream" values.

Jancovich cites various forms of media which help to sustain an "imagined community" using Thornton's categories of micro, niche, and mass media, though he also claims that niche media here is quite difficult to define: if tabloid newspapers, for example, constitute examples of mass media, where does this leave a specialist film magazine such as *Empire*? One answer would be that, considering Jancovich has already pointed out how the mainstream is an imaginary construct, it would depend upon the context within which the publication is perceived. From within a number of cult communities, for example, it will tend to be considered a part of the mass media, an example of a mainstream film publication. In this sense, we could distinguish between "generalized" and "specialist" aspects of the mass media. (If, on the other hand, it is considered by groups not particularly interested in film, it may be perceived as niche media.) Within niche media, we would have publications which tend to have a specialist focus *within* the field of cinema: magazines and prozines such as *Fangoria, Video Watchdog* or *Little White Lies*; while micro media would constitute fliers and programs distributed by specialist cinemas or related venues, listings, posters, etc. It is important to note, however, that "cult cinema" is not a single, reified object, but rather an imaginative concept which applies to, and is used by, a number of different subcultural film-related communities (which are not mutually exclusive). Jancovich writes that:

> cult movie audiences are less an internally coherent "taste culture" than a series of frequently opposed and contradictory reading strategies that are defined through a sense of their difference to an equally incoherently imagined "normality", a loose conglomeration of corporate power, lower middle class conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy. (2002: 315)

Homing in on a more specific example of cult cinema, we could apply Thornton's arguments to a particularly noteworthy controversy within the United Kingdom: the "video nasties" phenomenon, which emerged in the 1980s (see Egan 2007; Kerekes and Slater 2000, for detailed overviews of this phenomenon). In the early 1980s the nascent video retail business was dominated by small, independent ventures, and a number of controversial films were released on video cassette. The very lurid covers of a number of such titles (designed to attract attention, which they often did) could be seen to constitute a form of "micro-media" here, alongside the ways that such films were written about in specialist horror/cult fanzines (often in more positive ways than they were received in the mainstream and even niche press). It was not, however, until a moral panic broke out through mass media reports – particularly within tabloid newspapers but also, to a lesser extent, within broadsheets and within television and radio current affairs programming – that a particular subculture began to form. The labeling of people who enjoyed such films as somehow deviant, which was legally established through the banning of many films, only strengthened a sense of community among diverse citizens. From the moment that these films were banned, an underground network of trading and selling of illegal tapes was established through fanzines and specialist press. Within this network, (sub) cultural capital could be established through expertise (knowledge of different titles and their legal status, for example) and ownership (how many titles a person has in their collection). While most of the "community" as a whole would place themselves against the "mainstream" (which here would refer to the mass media's general perception of the films), there also existed inner-distinctions in which degrees of "authenticity" (established through performance of expertise and collections) were in operation (Egan 2007: 112–118). Such distinctions continue to operate as the "video nasties" have fed into the identity and marketing of previously banned titles on DVD, while collectors still trade and sell older video cassettes.

Mainstream Cult Fans?

Hills (2003: 185) has noted how some critics and academics – Peary (1981), Meehan (1991) – have considered the mixing of cultism and the mainstream

a paradox. Yet the case of *Star Wars*, which also forms the basis of Hills' observations, would seem to prove otherwise. Whereas a more obscure cult film may gain such status through its rarity (so that even owning a copy of the film may defer cultural distinction), this is replaced in the case of the "cult blockbuster" by repetition. Owning a copy of a blockbuster will not confer distinction, but perhaps the amount of times that a viewer watches it and comes to display knowledge of it, will. Additionally, the film also takes on a life of its own through its passionate fan base, who incorporate the film as an integral part of their everyday lives. As Will Brooker has written:

> *Star Wars* . . . is not just a film or a trilogy, or a trilogy and two prequels. For many people, including me, it is the single most important cultural text of our lives . . . . Even in 1977, *Star Wars* was a phenomenon. For many people now, it is a culture; a sprawling, detailed mythos they can pick through with their eyes closed. (Brooker 2002: xii)

While *Star Wars* was a relatively expensive, mainstream "epic," it has nevertheless furnished many fans with a spiritual experience and an ethical system that "traditional religion has failed to provide" (Brooker 2002: 5). In this sense, it could be seen as providing an alternative to the mainstream (in terms of beliefs) while at the same time being a mainstream product. Further, many fans of *Star Wars* have formed communities which sometimes come into conflict with the official creators of the *Star Wars* franchise (by creating fan work that Lucasfilm disapproves of, for instance, or criticizing some of the newer films) and are thus in conflict with the mainstream in some respects. The film is therefore both mainstream and cult: it has enjoyed such a remarkable presence within popular culture that it transcends the cult/mainstream dichotomy and alerts us to the fact that these categories may not be as distinctive as was formerly believed.

We could also think of the cult blockbuster as a kind of epochal film: a film that becomes, for many of its first wave of fans, a key film in their childhood memories which has remained with them as an important text throughout their life; additionally, it can become significant as an epochal moment in film history. The first is the most important in terms of cult reputation, but if this subjective importance is overlaid with a more "objective" significance, then this will perhaps increase the blockbuster's chances of attaining cult distinctiveness (also see Chapter 20).

The increasing proliferation of digital technologies within everyday life is further blurring the boundaries between cult and mainstream. One reason for this is that networked media, in particular the internet, make it much easier for researchers to find evidence of viewing communities that fit into existing frameworks of cult cinema. Previous to the domestication of the net, it would not have been as easy to find evidence of fans for particular films. Rather, more extraordinary cultural events would have constituted such evidence, including conventions, discernible audience patterns for specific films (as exemplified by some of the long-running midnight movies), and pilgrimages to film locations. Secondly, less direct evidence could be garnered by collecting traces of commitment for particular films, as well as tracking a film's overall reception trajectory, within film magazines, fanzines, and relevant newspaper columns. The internet massively increases the (virtual) public presence of film fans, many of whom leave online traces of their love for films via discussion forums, blogs, web sites, and social networking sites, to name some prominent examples.

Just as digital developments have led to fandom becoming more of a mainstream process (Jenkins 2002; Ross and Nightingale 2002: 143; Jennings 2007: 1), the same can be said of cult films. Cyberspace provides access to a vast social network that has been utilized by many fans and researchers of fans; discussion of cult cinema, too, has proliferated on the web, alongside activities that are demonstrative of cult reception. These processes have taken place alongside an increase in academic attention to both fandom on the one hand, and cult cinema on the other. Taken together they lead to an escalating reiteration of the concepts in question, so that being a fan is generally considered less derogatory than it once was while cult cinema is also less of an obscurantist field than previously. We can also add that the concepts of both performance and surveillance are important here, and also appear to reinforce one another. The internet and other network technologies enable people to perform their identity as fans on a more frequent

basis, which leads to them leaving greater data traces of their fandom to linger virtually as analytical fodder for future researchers. It is no surprise that increasing opportunities to form communities, to perform as a fan, and to detect fandom, lead to a greater mainstreaming of both fandom and cult cinema, which in turn impacts on the growth of academic work covering these areas.

Another reason why both fandom and an interest in cult cinema have grown with the rise of the net is that it now becomes much easier for people to engage in activities that single them out as a fan of particular media objects, and to become interested in cult films. David Jennings has written how previously it was difficult to get hold of a wide range of music and films if one lived outside large cities (2007: 1–2). Thus, a limited provision meant that it was more difficult for people to discover new films and play a part in their reputations. Of course, it was not impossible: a large number of films have always played on television, while people who have lived outside of metropolitan areas have been able to read about more obscure fare and (since the emergence of video) been able to purchase films via mail order. The actual ability, however, to discover material outside of the mainstream was a lot more difficult. (Of course, as noted above, cult films are not necessarily non-mainstream, but they often are, and even the ability to form a cult following around a mainstream product has become easier with networked media.) As cultural commentators such as Jennings (2007) and Chris Anderson (2006) have pointed out, an increasingly digitized, global multimedia environment alters this state of affairs. Jennings cites three particular important elements that contribute to a "culture of discovery": first, *trying out*, which refers to the abundant opportunities to sample media material; secondly, *links*, which enable people to constantly link from one subject that they are interested in, to another (some of which they may not have previously encountered); and thirdly, new forms of *communities* enabled by digital networks now mean that word-of-mouth (traditionally a core factor in the creation of cult status) can travel freely and quickly among connected citizens (Jennings 2007: 15–19). Anderson has also drawn attention to how the "long tail" now assumes much greater importance in the digital world. While "niche" tastes have existed for a long time, they are now becoming more important in an age where the costs of supply and demand are much lower, when it is far easier for consumers to find more obscure products and for retailers to reach customers (for an illustration of how instances of these developments in fandom have been linked to other discourses that operate in the evaluation of cult cinema, see the section on DIY criticism in Chapter 4 and transnationalism and orientalism in Chapter 11).

The growth of niche markets does not erode the boundaries between what constitutes mainstream and cult, but it does certainly alter the ways that these concepts become mobilized in relation to cultural trends. The increasing ability to spot processes that connect fan practices in relation to cult cinema, alongside the proliferation of choice and availability, means that we need to be aware that there are many different types of cult cinema fans, and that the actual status of cult cinema among such fans is very much contested: there are, for example, arguments between fans (and, perhaps, "non-fans") as to what constitutes cult cinema, which may depend on the type of film fan who is contributing to the discussion. We should also be careful to make distinctions between types of cult film and types of cult fandom. While some fans may only be interested in particular types of cult cinema (e.g. science fiction and horror), other fans will avidly consume a broader range of cult cinema (in addition to other films and other media). While it is possible to categorize some fans of cult cinema through the types of films that they are interested in, others may be more eclectic and may be more adequately categorized through their attitudes towards films and the ways in which they fit these films into their everyday lives.

Conclusion: Recent Trends in Cult Fandom

We will finish by discussing two examples of films that generated a substantial degree of cult fandom in ways which were very much connected to new technologies. The first is an extremely low-budget production that marshaled the web as part of its innovative marketing campaign, the second a large-budget spectacle

that intersected with other media in interesting ways. *The Blair Witch Project* cost only around $60 000 and generated profits in the region of $150 million in 1999 (Telotte 2001: 33). Much of its success was explained through the innovative design of its web site, which attracted a significant fan base long before the film had even been theatrically released (Jenkins 2006: 101–102). We should not overlook the fact that the website operated in conjunction with a more traditional marketing campaign (including TV spots, posters, radio ads, magazine ads, etc.) which cost around $20 million after the film was picked up for distribution by Artisan (Telotte 2001: 33). Nevertheless, the web site, in line with its related advertising strategy, was seen as important for the ways in which it generated a story world that could be appreciated on its own (and could spark interest in the film before its theatrical release), but which also acted as an added attraction for those who had seen the film. This was because the site constructed a mythical story world (presented as real) which documented the disappearance of students who had gone looking for a witch, and provided information on witchcraft that created a background against which the film was just one particular artifact (presented as found footage accidentally discovered and pieced together by Artisan). Taken together, the film, the web site, the ads, along with other artifacts (such as a pseudo-documentary airing on the SciFi channel and a series of related comic books) were constructed to interrelate with each other, so each segment added to the experience of discovering more about this particular mythical story world. They allowed people to become immersed within an active search for information: each segment could add to this experience, but one did not necessarily have to experience all of these mediated *Blair Witch* modes to appreciate it.

The cult of *The Blair Witch Project* was a very significant phenomenon as it was an instance of what Henry Jenkins has termed "transmedia storytelling," which is not entirely new but is taking on greater importance in what Jenkins terms "convergence culture" (in which the digital mediascape intersects with older media and forms new relations). Jenkins describes the transmedia story as unfolding "across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole." He continues:

> In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained, so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. (Jenkins 2006: 96)

If *The Blair Witch Project* represents a low-budget film that began to utilize the web as a transmedia device to add layers to its mythic story world (and which then enjoyed a large cash injection to expand this process across a broader range of more traditional marketing platforms), then *The Matrix* represents a much larger-scale example. Jenkins argues that it "can be seen as emblematic of a cult film in convergence culture" (2006: 98), in that its story world was disseminated across a broad range of media platforms. Each platform was carefully thought about and designed in order to exploit the specific strengths of the respective medium, so that the more platforms one encountered *The Matrix* upon, the more one knew about the overall *Matrix* universe. The story world of *The Matrix* was dispersed among three feature films, two games, a series of comic books, and a series of *Animatrix* animated shorts, with each singular piece itself containing a wealth of detail that was designed to encourage speculation and discussion. In this, it succeeded in generating a cult following of fans who discussed how bits of the story world fitted together, the wealth of references scattered within the story, and its philosophical dimensions.

Transmedia storytelling is thus an important process that can lead to the broadening of a fictional universe and produce new routes by which fans can engage with each other to create cult status for a film. It is only one way, however, that cult status can be built up through fan response in the current media landscape. Just as "new media" does not entirely replace "old media," but is overlaid upon it to create new configurations, so modern processes through which cult fandom forms are overlaid upon more traditional patterns. This means that cult fandom becomes more visible, complex and variegated.

6

The Cult Auteur

The notion of the "auteur" is inextricably bound up with the arguments published by François Truffaut and his contemporaries within the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma* during the 1950s, though related polemics existed well before such formulations and continue to take place. The concept of the "auteur" is a very specific inflection of the broader notion of the "author," adapted in relation to the cinematic medium. While it specifically refers to particular definitions of authorship, it is often employed to denote "cinematic authorship" more generally, which is how we will be adopting it in this chapter. The word "auteur" seems more appropriate within the industrial world of cinema than "author" does, as the latter is more connotative of literary and/or solitary creation.

Within the world of cult cinema the auteur acts, like in many other areas of cinema, as a crucially important mode of evaluation and categorization. A browse through many cult film publications reveals the auteur figure as a commonly significant structuring principle. Both academic (e.g. Mendik and Harper 2000b; Jancovich *et al.* 2003b) and more populist texts (e.g. Vale and Juno 1986; Ross 1993) devote substantial attention to auteurist figures.[1] The cult auteur figure is also prominent across a number of cult publications and has proliferated with the rise of web-based resources: not only do many cult-based film sites focus attention on individual cult figures, there are also whole sites devoted to cult auteurs. In addition, the name of a cult auteur can be a useful marketing tool in the promotion of certain DVD titles.

The emergence of auteurism in the mid 1950s was itself a cultist provocation: while it had previously been common to attribute authorial status to directors of "art cinema" (including figures such as Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa and Roberto Rosselini), only a select few directors working within Hollywood had tended to gain such kudos (D.W. Griffiths and Charlie Chaplin, for example). A young bunch of critics (many of whom would become filmmakers associated with the French New Wave) at *Cahiers*, including Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Claude Chabrol, championed a number of Hollywood directors (alongside more respected European directors) as auteurs, many of whom had until then been considered only as skilled craftsmen (including Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, and Nicholas Ray). While many critics disputed approaches that singled out the "genius" of directors working within a highly standardized Hollywood system, such positions nevertheless proved influential. The most passionate advocate of this position was Andrew Sarris, an American critic who popularized auteurism as a mode of film evaluation, and also outlined the position in a more systematic way in his 1962 article "Some Notes on the Auteur Theory." Auteurism also made an impact in the United Kingdom, chiefly through the journal *Movie* and writers including Robin Wood, V.F. Perkins, and Ian Cameron.

Previous to auteurism – and as outlined by Greg Taylor (1999) – cultism tended to be identified with an elite cadre of critics (Taylor focuses on Manny Farber and Parker Tyler as exemplars) who were valuing aspects of popular culture and, in the process, individuating themselves as critical provocateurs. Auteurism was an extension of this, in that it valued selected aspects of popular culture in a discriminatory

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manner, treating commercial films seriously through identifying the traces of authorial creativity within an industrial product. As such, a number of attacks were leveled at auteurist critics for promoting a "cult of the director" – in which "bad" films of privileged directors were given more credit than "good" films of directors who were not considered auteurs.

Auteurism became popularized throughout the 1960s and it also influenced the emergence of Film Studies as an academic discipline within that decade. In the 1970s, however, auteur study became either questioned or modified. As more rigorous, theoretical approaches to the subject began to increase, romantic notions concerning "genius" directors began to be questioned. While studies of directors did not cease, they were supplemented by a number of other approaches (such as genre studies and psychoanalytic analyses). Increasingly, the study of authorship began to be posed in more theoretical terms, in which the "author" within a text became seen as a functional device to activate a particular type of reading (Michel Foucault termed this the "author-function'), rather than a "creative genius" who has managed to express her/himself within a highly collaborative medium.

The more romantic approaches which focused on the "cult of the director" can be seen to have continued largely outside of academia, though here the stance of critics such as Sarris, for example, were somewhat expanded and modified. While Sarris's arguments about the constancy of individual personality shining through related film texts can certainly be considered important in the establishment of the cult auteur, his remarks on technical competence highlight an area in which cultist celebration has been expanded. Sarris wrote that "the first premise of the *auteur* theory is the technical competence of the director as a criterion of value. A badly directed or an undirected film has no importance in a critical scale of value" (Sarris 1962/2000: 132). Competence is not always a skill demanded for cult celebration, however. The celebration of individual creators within cult filmmaking can therefore be thought of as a variation on more "classical" auteurism, and it is towards a fuller elaboration of how someone gets celebrated as a cult auteur, as well as who some of the more renowned figures are, that we now turn.

One particularly important thread feeding into the status of many cult auteurs is the importance of extra-textual information. Unlike in many cases of more traditional auteurism, where the actual biography of the individual was far less important than the connections running through a cinematic oeuvre, the celebration of a cult creator is often highly dependent upon his or her reputation. Biographical information and other types of activities that promote the visibility of a particular figure may be crucial in establishing a cult status. Yet the reputation constructed through both cinematic and other means must be of a particular kind: it often tends, for example, to have connections with anti-establishment themes in some manner (though this is not always the case). In this sense, celebration of cult auteurs is often underpinned by a romanticist creed: the idea of a lone, heroic figure battling against the odds to create works that are taken to heart by outsider audiences. If academic approaches to authorship very much moved away from romantic notions, cult auteurism arguably expanded such romanticism. Further, cult fans do not always locate the director as the core of creativity (although the director is the most frequently acclaimed auteur figure). Rather, and perhaps more suitably in relation to the multiple roles afforded by film production, they can sometimes acclaim other creative forces. In relation to cult cinema, the other most acclaimed "creator role" would undoubtedly be that of the producer/entrepreneur, because such figures have had a particularly important influence on cult cinema's developments and reputations. There are other important roles, too, such as special effects creators (think of the work of Ray Harryhausen, for example, or of Tom Savini), which we briefly discuss in Chapters 2, 18 and 19.

The "Romantic" Cult Auteur

While the cult auteur's reputation needs to be acknowledged by a wider cult audience, the actual auteur can also play a crucial part in building a reputation. John Waters, for example, is a figure who has carefully constructed his own cult image through carefully referencing other cult figures and texts (such as Kenneth Anger, Russ Meyer, Herschell Gordon Lewis), through carefully courting scandal through the press (in order to widely publicize his films via

controversy) and through carefully cultivating a public persona which enhances his auteur reputation (through numerous media interviews, cameo acting appearances, writing books and compiling music CDs, and even appearing as a stand-up raconteur, one appearance of which was filmed and released as *This Filthy World*). Roger Corman, while perhaps not to the same degree, has also paid significant attention to promoting and manipulating his status, including attempts to "enhance the Corman image" through tactics such as planting bogus stories in the trade press (Gray 2004: 28). Corman is, of course, famous as a prolific producer of exploitation pictures, particularly during the 1960s when he produced a number of Edgar Allen Poe adaptations and "rebellious youth" films such as *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip*. He forged his reputation through the types of films that he made (exploitation films), but also through the sheer *volume* of films that he produced (some of which he also directed): a combination of aesthetic factors and sheer longevity has led to his canonization by a number of cult film fans. Corman is a man who has done things his own way, constantly making films on a shoestring budget and extremely short schedules. His status has benefited from the fact that he has given career breaks to a number of directors who went on to become established names, such as Joe Dante, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese, who subsequently name-check him and thus increase his general standing. He has also managed to maintain his productivity during huge industrial changes: in the 1980s, as the VHS market took off, he slowly began making straight-to-video films and now mostly produces either these or television films. On top of these status-building components, Corman has exploited his own growing cult image through writings and appearances. His book, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* (1990), plays upon his maverick and persistent nature. In addition, he has made a number of appearances at cult-related events and – until recently – maintained his own web site, where once his cult standing was trumpeted through slogans such as the "Reigning King of Independent Cinema" and, even more tellingly, inviting readers to "join the Corman cult."

Romantic cult auteurs can operate outside of the "system," like Corman. On the other hand, they may gain a reputation for individuality by working within, but at the same time battling against, the system. The former category would include avant-garde artists creating challenging "avant-garde" films, such as Kenneth Anger and Andy Warhol (see Chapters 12 and 14); or directors/producers working in low-budget, "exploitation" pictures, such as Edward D. Wood Jr, Herschell Gordon Lewis and Lloyd Kaufman (see Chapter 13). A figure like Anger has built a distinct reputation through being part of Hollywood (as a child actor) and then luridly exposing it through his *Hollywood Babylon* books, which is a crucial part of his cult status. His films are then a further rejection of Hollywood in terms of their experimentation and their sometimes controversial nature (*Scorpio Rising* was considered "obscene" and was sometimes impounded by police at screenings). The figure of Anger himself also fed into his films: his homosexuality and his interest in the occult further strengthened his outsider status. Contrasted to Anger's intentional rejection of the social mainstream is Wood Jr's less conscious creation of an "alternative" oeuvre. Rather than rejecting cinematic mores, Wood Jr was too incompetent to reproduce them successfully, which in turn created a kind of warped distortion of the mainstream. Biographically, his homosexuality and penchant for cross-dressing has also contributed to his cult standing. His merging of outsiderness in both life and art thus sets him apart; as Puchalski writes, "Wood was seriously demented in both his life and his work, and that twisted enthusiasm oozes through every sprocket-hole of his films" (1996: 126). His acclaim as one of the world's worst filmmakers has cemented his cult credentials, though this was unfortunately an accolade bestowed posthumously. Wood Jr's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* was voted the worst film ever in *The Golden Turkey Awards* (1980), which also awarded him worst director (see Chapter 3). He was remembered more affectionately in Burton's romantic celluloid tribute, *Ed Wood* (1994), which introduced him to a newer generation of cinemagoers.

While these figures do not belong to the Hollywood "system," others have been seen as important for the way that they have battled with the system to get their own way, sometimes succeeding, sometimes not. Perhaps one of the most notorious is Alejandro Jodorowsky, who has mostly worked outside of

Hollywood but who has also dabbled – often unsuccessfully – with the mainstream. His cult standing stems from his *El Topo* gaining the reputation as being the first midnight movie cult but is not confined to this film alone. He also directed the remarkable *The Holy Mountain*, a bizarre concoction of occultism, surrealism, and demystification. He subsequently encountered his first battle with the mainstream when directing an eventually aborted film of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (David Lynch, another cult director, eventually directed it but also had an unhappy time with it). Until the release of *Santa Sangre*, on which he managed to attain creative control, his film career has consisted of a single film, *Tusk*, which he disowned as a "compromised" film. Admirers of his work agreed; yet while *Santa Sangre* was seen as a return to form after *Tusk*, it was followed by what was seen as his most mainstream work, *The Rainbow Thief*, which he disowned and after which he has yet to make another film.[2]

Jodorowsky therefore stands as a cult maverick: a mad visionary who is able to make strange and remarkable films if left to his own devices, but who falters if compromised by too many external constraints. In this sense, he can be considered a cult, rather than a "classical" auteur, in the sense that many of the directors hailed in the first wave of auteurism tended to be admired for the ways in which they adapted to the compromises of the studios and retained a personal vision. His status is, as is often common, further fuelled by an extra-filmic reputation, in this case his extraordinarily prolific and diverse artistic output: he has worked as a theater producer, a mime artist, a comic artist, a circus performer, and a Tarot reader among other activities and thus fits the mould of a hyper-talented individualist. As Keesey writes of Jodorowsky, summing up his rebellious persona: "Say what you will about Alejandro Jodorowsky, but one thing is certain: he is not just another Hollywood director" (Keesey 2003: 15).

Other figures connected more centrally to mainstream filmmaking can gain a reputation for their battles with the studios, or for fiercely preserving an egotistical control over the creation of a commercial product: these directors are "mainstream mavericks." The latter is relatively rare but certainly applies to Stanley Kubrick, even though he did experience losing battles in the earlier part of his career, most notably with *Spartacus* (1960), which apparently led him to exert greater "autonomy" on his subsequent directorial work (LoBrutto 1999: 193). He has gained a reputation among fans and critics for being meticulous and controlling, a status that is difficult to probe into deeply because he always managed to maintain high levels of privacy.[3] Like Kubrick, Orson Welles is a filmmaker who fits into both classical and cult auteur frameworks, thus emphasizing their similarities in certain cases. A child prodigy and, like Jodorowsky, a man of many talents, he astonished film critics with his premiere film *Citizen Kane*. Yet this was followed by a series of frustrating encounters with Hollywood. If some of these have been critically recuperated, Welles is nevertheless a figure who retains a tragic aura: a prodigious talent whose creativity and originality was crushed by Hollywood. Welles' films have often been called uneven and incomplete, grandiose failures (Tyler 1970), and his acting was often deemed "over-indulgent, over-bearing and over-blown" (Jancovich 2009). The two films that exemplify this best are *Citizen Kane* and *Touch of Evil*. *Citizen Kane* features prominently in overviews of cult movies because of its flamboyance, audacity, and boisterousness, but also because of its box-office failure (Peary 1981: 52). *Touch of Evil* was supposed to be the film that would rehabilitate Welles in Hollywood. Taken out of his hands before it was released, it has had a severely fractioned reception trajectory, its status oscillating between unequivocal masterpiece or *film maudit*. Its reception is still far from having reached a "final moment" (Peary 1989: 255–260). In the words of Parker Tyler, Welles "remains a Cult hero, a film artist of ambiguous successes; a lone wolf, as it were, whose egoistic failures have stacked up to make him both notorious and famous" (Tyler 1963: 381).

Both Terry Gilliam and Nicholas Ray can also be considered examples of mainstream mavericks. Gilliam's cult status was bolstered by his legendary battles with Universal after they decided to edit his *Brazil* into a more audience-friendly version with a happy ending (usually referred to as the "Love Conquers All" version). Gilliam wrote a full-page ad in *Variety* appealing to Universal's then chairman Sid Sheinberg to release his longer version and then began to privately screen his cut to critics. Universal

eventually released a longer cut after Gilliam's cut gained critical acclaim, while the battles over the film were documented in the film *The Battle of Brazil*, which was released on Criterion's laserdisc (and then on the DVD) edition of the film. Gilliam has continued to work within Hollywood and, despite encountering a number of further obstacles, has been seen by many as managing to creatively express himself within the industry. He has continued to experience many problems working within the Hollywood system: *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* was beset by production problems and eventually flopped, while he has also been involved with a number of projects that have yet to see the light of day, the most notorious being his attempt to film *Don Quixote*, which began filming but had to be abandoned as during the first week of shooting one of the principal actors suffered a herniated disc and a flood wrecked the set. Nevertheless, despite these problems Gilliam is seen as someone who can impose his creative vision within Hollywood, creating fantastical cinematic realms notable for their elaborate mise-en-scène, grotesque characters and frequent use of wide angles and tilted camera set-ups. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, like Kubrick, he is an American exile who has settled in Britain and therefore retains a sense of distance from Hollywood.

Nicholas Ray also had to endure adversarial studio interference with his movies, which eventually led him to become disenchanted with Hollywood. Unlike his contemporary Welles, Ray was never a superstar. Therefore Ray's were cult films often attributable to other factors besides his direction. For *In a Lonely Place* it was Humphrey Bogart; for *Johnny Guitar* it was Joan Crawford playing a female Western heroine; and for *Rebel without a Cause*, it was James Dean and the controversy the film caused in Europe (Biltereyst 2005). Still, as Alex Cox puts it "certain individuals become cult heroes on the basis of a body of work which has genuinely curious or idiosyncratic nature ... Nicholas Ray is one such director" (Cox and Jones 1993: 26).[4]

From these few examples it is clear that the mainstream therefore acts as a major framework *against* which the cult auteur is constructed. Within this framework there are three broad models: those working outside the mainstream; those vacillating between independence and commercial work (often demonstrating some kind of tussle with commercial forces), and those who manage to work within the system but who maintain what are viewed as excessive levels of control (the "mainstream maverick"). It certainly is in the latter area where the cult auteur tends to overlap with more traditional auteur conceptions. This is unsurprising considering auteurism was a critical intervention that aimed to locate creativity within the industrial restrictions of Hollywood cinema.

The Cult of the Dead Auteur

Within such broad models, there are further categories – or perhaps what we could call "career trajectories" – through which creative film workers can attain cult status. First, and this is particularly related to the aforementioned importance of biographical information, there is the director (or producer) whose life is cut short. The cult of individuality based around early death is something more established within the world of music, particularly rock music (see Thompson 1999), though it is a phenomenon that can be seen as spilling over to the world of movies. The romantic "live fast, die young" ethos that fuels the veneration of certain rock stars is probably more connected to actors than it is to directors or producers (see Chapter 7), yet there are some exceptions. An example is French director Jean Vigo, who was associated with the first wave of the French avant-garde, itself one of the first movements to be associated with cultist viewing practices (see Chapter 14). Vigo directed only two short films and two features before his early death, yet left behind a body of work that is considered to be particularly impressive. His film *Zéro de conduite* was a boarding school picture depicting rebellious children that laid the template for others to follow, in particular Lindsay Anderson's *If*....; it further gained cult credentials because it was banned in France until 1945. His association with anarchism also fuels an anti-establishment profile: his father, Miguel Almereyda, was a militant anarchist who died in prison in suspicious circumstances in 1917 (Le Cain 2002a) and critics have often read his films as reflections of these anarchic tendencies. The fact that his two features – cut and compromised – were complete

failures on their release yet resurrected to great acclaim after his early death from tuberculosis at 29, further established him as a tragic cult figure.

The early death can often feed into the cult credentials of an individual, but it needs to intersect with other factors (i.e. death in itself is no guarantee). If a figure is marginalized or ignored during his or her lifetime, then the discovery itself of a significant body of work can imbue the "discoverers" with a sense of exclusivity via the process of righting past wrongs and drawing attention to previously hidden wares. It can also lead to speculation about the films that could have materialized if death had not so abruptly intervened (as is the case with Vigo). This would also relate to the life of British director Michael Reeves who, after directing the cult British horror *Witchfinder General*, died when it seemed he was approaching his prime. Once again, trouble fitting within the film industry – he was having difficulty following up *Witchfinder* – led to depression and a barbiturate overdose at the age of 24.

Speculation about the kinds of films that a director could have made is a form of discourse that can feed into cult kudos. This is not always the case with dead directors – as noted, Gilliam's attempt to film *Don Quixote* is an instance of a living director being subject to "what if" speculation – but it is more marked in this area, possibly because there is no longer any chance of such a film being completed (at least by this particular director). Thus, many Kubrick fans have discussed what his proposed *Artificial Intelligence: AI* would have turned out to be and how it would have been different from the actual version eventually taken over and directed by Steven Spielberg (whom Kubrick requested). More recently French director Henri-Georges Clouzot has been the subject of such "what if" speculations, largely stemming from a documentary based around his unfinished film *L'Enfer*, during the production of which he died. Serge Bromberg's film *Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno* is the result of the filmmakers' cultist obsession with this unfinished film, as Bromberg went to great lengths to track down all the negative reels shot for the film, much of it pre-production test footage. It also offers new cultist perspectives on Clouzot because the material indicates that this was going to be a daring undertaking, with Clouzot testing out optical effects to simulate a mescaline trip and also pushing the boundaries of sexual representation (Lucas 2010: 70–73). (The importance of drugs in cult cinema is discussed in Chapter 15; and sexuality is discussed in Chapter 10.) Similar cultist speculation exists around unfinished "daring" work of Alfred Hitchcock (*Kaleidoscope*) and Jerry Lewis (*The Day the Clown Cried*) (McCarthy 2003: 45–47).

Curt McDowell is another figure who died early and has a cult following, though he is certainly not as respected a figure as Vigo. Rather, his reputation stems from his more trashy output and his continual hand-to-mouth existence. Strongly associated with George Kuchar, who he often collaborated with, McDowell merged underground camp with elements of pornography in many of his films. McDowell's status is linked primarily to his feature-length film *Thundercrack!*, which Jack Stevenson has dubbed "the world's only Underground porno horror flick" (Stevenson 1996: 239–240). In addition to containing a very bizarre combination of generic markers at the textual level, *Thundercrack!* has also gained a real cult status because of its reception. It has gained the status of one of the most "walked-out-of" films, a reputation firmly established by mass walk-outs at its screening at the 1976 LA Filmex festival (Stevenson 1996: 241). After its cult popularity among midnight movie audiences in the late 1970s, the film became difficult to see because of scarcity of prints and the absence of a video release (Stevenson 1996: 229). McDowell's continual poverty also fueled his outsider status; he continually struggled to express himself via the medium of film and died of AIDS at the age of 42. With the release of *Thundercrack!* on DVD, it may be that McDowell's cult reputation filters down into a new generation of film lovers seeking something out of the ordinary.

Self-conscious Cultism and Cult Salesmanship

The "self-conscious cult auteur" is a figure who carefully manufactures her or his image through continual reference to broader aspects of cult film culture. Tim Burton is a key example here: through making the early short animation *Vincent*, based upon his obsession with cult actor Vincent Price, through to his cinematic homage to Ed Wood and onto the creation of a big-budget take on low-budget exploitation flicks, *Mars*

Attacks!, Burton's taste in cult cinema has defined his cinematic identity. He is a director who wears his cult tastes like a badge and this means that he is also seen as someone who makes very distinctive, idiosyncratic movies within the mainstream of Hollywood (with occasional exceptions, such as *Planet of the Apes*, which he was unhappy with). Another example would be Joe Dante, a cult film buff who constantly references other films in his own studio productions. (See Chapter 22 for more on Dante.)

The individual creator who self-consciously identifies with all things cult and therefore hopes to imbue his own personality with cult kudos is not destined to succeed, however. The self-created personality must also meet with broader recognition and acknowledgement if this cult identity is going to gain credence. Some figures may be accepted as cult figures by some but not others; battles around the notion of authenticity may occur when a cult persona is seen as too obviously manufactured. Such debates about authenticity and worthiness regularly circulate around Quentin Tarantino, a director who constantly refers to other cult films and directors: his work is worshipped by a number of fans yet despised by other cinema viewers and critics. (See Chapter 22 for more on Tarantino and self-conscious cultism.)

Within the cult film universe the construction of the auteur can sometimes veer between the heavily romantic notion of authentic individualism and the more artificial, campy notion of personality as a hyper-exaggerated performance. Sometimes, though seemingly at odds, these diametric ideas may co-exist through the combination of performance and backstory. For example, accrued information about the life of a figure may indicate that, despite the emphasis upon artificiality and performativity within the construction of a persona and cultural objects, there lay a real heartfelt commitment to this performance (or perhaps more correctly a series of performances). This would seem to be the case for an auteur like John Waters, whose films are marked by exaggerated camp performance but who is nonetheless often perceived as a director with a singular vision which grounds his work in discourses of authenticity.

The self-conscious construction of a persona links to the idea of the auteur figure as a marketable sign. Timothy Corrigan has pointed out that, from its inception, "auteurism had been bound up with changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies" (Corrigan 2003: 96), that it was often a way of singling out a work among a mass of industrially produced cultural objects. Corrigan was here discussing the ways in which auteurism had become increasingly commodified, so that the director was increasingly becoming like a star. Yet areas of cult cinema – in particular exploitation cinema – have been linked to commercial practices for some time. This was sometimes foregrounded through the role of the entrepreneur, who could actually gain a devoted following through creatively engaging in commercial salesmanship. Such figures are not self-conscious cult figures in the way that the previously mentioned directors are. Rather than drawing on cult traditions in order to imbue their own work with cult values, these personalities have gained a reputation for establishing commercial practices that have been embraced within cultish circles.

While Dwain Esper and William Castle both directed films, it is in the realm of showmanship that they have really gained their cult reputations. Esper, for example, used a number of gimmicks to "sell" films to patrons as he took them on the roadshow circuit, including hiring "freaks" to perform in theater lobbies to promote *Freaks* in 1949 (Stevenson 2003a: 22). Castle, meanwhile, produced gimmicks galore in order to market his films, including giving viewers a number of props (fangs, special viewing glasses, cardboard axes), while arriving in a hearse for the premiere of *Macabre* and then placing himself in a coffin (Stevenson 2003a: 23). For *House on Haunted Hill* he created "Emergo," in which cinemas were installed with a large black box placed next to the screen, out of which, at certain points during the film, a 12-foot plastic skeleton would appear and be wired over the audience. For *The Tingler* he created "Percepto," which involved installing small motors inside selected theater seats that gave small shocks to viewers at appropriate moments in the film. Such stunts have led to him being acclaimed as "King of the Gimmicks," while John Waters goes so far to claim that "William Castle was God" (Waters 2003: 14).

The lauding of certain salesmen within cult circles shows that the auteur can sometimes be venerated for commercial activities. Such tactics are still different

from the "norms" of mass marketing, however. Within a saturated marketplace, cult figures creatively draw attention to their films, often without a substantial budget. Salesmanship here combines with a fiercely individualist belief in standing out from the crowd via outlandish behavior, bolstered further by the "outsider" status of the "little man" doing what he can to earn money in a field dominated by large commercial companies.

Female Cult Auteurs

Finally, one regrettable area in which cult auteurism does not differ from more traditional forms of auteurism, or from mainstream values as a whole, is in its marginalization of female figures. While many women may feature prominently in cult films, few creative figures become cult auteurs. During the classical period of Hollywood cinema women directors only sporadically received any recognition, let alone achieve a cult status. Among the isolated exceptions are Dorothy Arzner, whose *Dance Girl, Dance* is lauded as a cult film by Danny Peary (1981: 59–63) and some of actress Ida Lupino's films such as *The Bigamist* or *The Hitch-Hiker*.

Outside Hollywood, the situation is largely the same. One of the few exceptions to have gained a sustained cult reputation is Doris Wishman (see Gorfinkel 2000; Luckett 2003; Modleski 2007), who made a large number of sexploitation pictures (including "nudist" films and the more explicit, darker sex films known as "roughies") and worked in a number of creative capacities (including writing and production, as well as directing duties). *Deadly Weapons*, usually seen as her seminal film, is often regarded as a sharp, reflexive comment on the exploitation of women in cinema. The work of a female auteur like Wishman working within areas of filmmaking often accused of their sexist attitudes has, though, troubled some feminists and further points to the problematic status of the female auteur within the world of cult cinema. Artists such as Maya Deren and Yoko Ono too have achieved cult-like status with their work, but its reach is usually limited to avant-garde circles (see Chapter 14). Outside the United States too, there is little or no cult recognition for female auteurs. Adrian Martin (2008: 42) lists Chantal Akerman as a cult figure but he immediately adds that her appeal, which he largely links to one film, *Jeanne Dielman*, is restricted to "the university circuit." Directors such as Agnes Varda (*Le petit amour*), Catherine Breillat (*Romance*), or Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*) have experienced similar restrictions of their cult appeal.

In recent years, there appears to be a slight change towards more interest in female directors as cult auteurs. Some filmmakers, especially those active since the 1970s, have seen their work acknowledged as cult. Among them are Stephanie Rothman (who was honored as a guest at a 2002 trash cinema conference in Berkeley), Kathryn Bigelow, Rachel Talalay, and Catherine Hardwicke. Still, in most cases this recognition is the result of an aggregate of their films being celebrated as cult, and less because they are seen as auteurs. For example, Rothman's films such as *Velvet Vampire* and *Terminal Island* are highly regarded but are consistently discussed in conjunction with the production work of Corman. Similarly, Bigelow's *Near Dark* and *Blue Steel* have attracted cult receptions (Powell 1994; Daugherty 2002; Redmond and Jermyn 2003), though they are discussed more frequently as "genre cinema" (the vampire film and the cop movie), or, in the case of *Blue Steel*, even as a special instance in the career of scream queen Jamie Lee Curtis. Her subsequent films, such as *Point Break* or *Strange Days* are often regarded as "masculine" in tone, while this stage of her career is often judged as a result of collaboration with James Cameron, her partner at the time. As for Talalay, the strong cult reception of *Tank Girl*, which is a favorite of the Riot Grrrl subculture as well as in lesbian circles, the equally strong cult reputation of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series (of which Talalay directed episode 5 and produced 2, 3, and 4), and her productions of John Waters' *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby* have not led to a discussion of her work through the lens of auteurism (Whelehan and Sonnet 1997). The case of Catherine Hardwicke, production designer on *Tank Girl*, but more commonly known for directing teen drama *Thirteen*, skateboard movie *Lords of Dogtown*, and the first film of the *Twilight* vampire saga is exactly the same: each of these films has a distinct cult following (see Le Breton 2009; Bode 2010) yet no efforts have been made to approach Hardwicke's oeuvre from an auteurist perspective. If one compares

this to the rushed eagerness with which male directors such as Eli Roth or Quentin Tarantino are lauded through cult receptions, a picture emerges of cultism and auteurism as masculine (this is an element we will further investigate in Chapter 10).

Conclusion

Within film studies there has been a return to thinking about the importance of authorship (e.g. Gerstner and Staiger 2003; Wexman 2003). Previously, the excesses of auteurism had come under attack for the ways in which it simplified the complex collaborative environment of filmmaking, while poststructuralist ideas undermined the romanticized belief in artistic genius. If thinking about artistic creation in individualist terms may seem a relatively recent socio-historical phenomenon (Wexman 2003: 9), the possibility of it being done away with is not very likely, at least in the near future. Nicholas Rombes (2005) has pointed out that authorship within film culture has actually proliferated in the digital age, in particular with DVDs often coming with director's commentary, which may lead some viewers to assume the director as a more central creative force than she/he actually was. Catherine Grant has termed DVDs "auteur machines"; she claims that director's commentaries and other DVD extras tend to encourage a "comprehensive attentiveness or responsiveness to the film's authorial context" (2008: 111).

Authorship should certainly not be idealized; the realities of collaborative work, industrial limitations and socio-historical determinations need our acknowledgment. Nevertheless, some people do make greater creative contributions than others, and their status and impact deserves recognition. In addition, the broader role of auteur figures within filmmaking is important in both the marketing of some films as well as the reception of films by large numbers of people.

The auteur figure is therefore important to cult cinema: within a mode of film culture and reception contexts very much based around the discovery of idiosyncratic films that differ from the "mainstream" (or at least "discovering" hidden profundities within mainstream texts), and where viewers often seek out information about particular films, the need to locate creative human beings is often an inevitable outcome of such a quest. Certain films may attain a privileged status because of connections to a figure who has already gained cult status; on the other hand, a figure may gain cult status due to his or her connection with a film that becomes a cult phenomenon. Cult auteurism shares some similarities with more "classical" auteurism, but also differs in particular ways. It tends to exaggerate certain tendencies, so that technical waywardness or scandalous personal details can be perceived as a maverick disregard for the mainstream.

Notes

1. In addition, primarily cult-oriented film books that are marked by a pronounced auteurist angle include Mendik and Schneider (2002b) and Schneider (2003). Even Hoberman and Rosenbaum's *Midnight Movies* (1983), structured ostensibly around particular films, devotes extensive discussion to directors such as David Lynch, Alejandro Jodorowsky, George Romero, and John Waters.
2. He told the *Guardian* in 2007 that he was planning to make a $5 million gangster film starring Nick Nolte and Marilyn Manson but had thus far failed to raise the money (Brooks 2007).
3. This is now about to change as a vast array of archive material relating to Kubrick's work (comprising over 1000 boxes) has been donated by his estate to the University of the Arts, London. This will undoubtedly stimulate a new wave of Kubrick research and will possibly enhance his cult status even further.
4. Ray's last two films, *We Can't Go Home Again* (1976), made with his students at Binghamton University, and *Lightning over Water* (aka *Nick's Movie*) (co-directed by Wim Wenders, 1979) are cult objects mainly because of how they sketch Ray's last years: as a raging and frustrated eye-patched veteran, and a dying, musing artist respectively.

7

Cult Stardom

Analyses of stars have become increasingly prominent within film studies since Richard Dyer's seminal publication, *Stars*, appeared in 1979, though there have long been reflections on stardom included in biographies, sociological accounts, as well as poetic rhapsodies, to name a few examples. Actually defining a star, however, is not as straightforward as it may at first appear. Without going into too many of the complexities here, we shall nevertheless stress some important ways of distinguishing a star from an actor. We can think of an actor as a person performing a role (on the stage or on the screen). When audiences begin to identify the face of the actor and recognize her or his name, and thus form some assumptions about how the actor will perform, then they also become a public *personality*. Such distinctions did occur within the early years of cinema: first, a discourse on acting emerged within the cinema around 1907, and then "picture personalities" were discussed from around 1909 (DeCordova 1991). The "picture personality" referred to the naming of an actor and related knowledge about how that actor had performed within a number of films. Stars, though, surpass the personality in that their fame and personas are more extensive. DeCordova notes that whereas knowledge about "picture personalities" is limited to their onscreen activities, the star (which he claims arose around 1914) is formed by information about screen roles *and* their private, offscreen life (DeCordova 1991: 26). The star, then, can be thought of as a construction formed out of onscreen and other public performances, media discourses which purport to shed further light on the private individual, and the projected desires of audiences who invest in these personalities.

The Cult of the Movie Star

It could be argued that all stars have gained a cult following; by their very nature stars tend to provoke desire, adoration, identification, sometimes impersonation, which are often indicative of cult status. Stars will often elicit greater interest than any particular film that they are associated with, which is why they are so important to the industry in terms of promoting specific films. Nevertheless, we will delimit the scope of this chapter by focusing on a number of stars whose status is particularly relevant to cult cinema. Thus, when we do focus on stars whose celebrity has been very much part of mainstream culture, such stars will embody additional values that promote their cult status. The first of these is the idea of *precedence*, which brings us to a discussion of the rise of the star system within the film industry. We will focus on Hollywood here, as it is generally considered to be the most important industry through which the star system emerged. We should not, however, overlook the transnational nature of stardom. Not only did Hollywood import stars who had established themselves in other national contexts, but precedents to the Hollywood industrial promotion of stars, such as the Italian phenomenon of the "divismo," played an important role in the development of Hollywood's star system (Fischer and Landy 2004: 3).

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The emergence of Hollywood stardom is now an oft-told story: early performers were anonymous, a state partly influenced by the fact that many actors wanted to establish themselves in the more respectable realm of theater and did not believe that cinematic appearances would be good for their careers (though it was beneficial to their short-term finances). However, many viewers began to develop a curiosity about recurring faces in the films that they viewed and wanted to know more about these mysterious figures. While film companies were at first resistant to the promotion of their star actors, fearing that this would lead to increased salaries, they soon realized that the marketing potentials of promoting star players could outweigh any economic disadvantages. Furthermore, the increasing demand for information on various actors from an emergent fan base would have made it difficult to perpetuate an anonymous system. In 1910, Carl Laemmle – head of the Independent Motion Picture Company of America – publicized the name of Florence Lawrence. Lawrence had previously worked for the Biograph Company and had become known as the "Biograph Girl." Laemmle, aware of Lawrence's popularity, lured her away from Biograph and promoted her name in a publicity stunt: first he circulated rumors that she had been killed in a tram accident, and then placed advertisements in newspapers uncovering the hoax and announcing that Lawrence was alive, well and filming a new production. Thus, the beginnings of the Hollywood star system were intimately connected with death (albeit a fake death), a theme that constitutes a major thread in cult stardom and which we shall address later in the chapter.

Lawrence's popularity was soon to be surpassed by an actress that Biograph had hired to replace her: Mary Pickford, who was the most popular star in the first decade of Hollywood stardom and had become "the best known girl in America" by 1915 (Barbas 2001: 49). Pickford was even hired by the McLure newspaper to write an advice column (actually ghost-written) and, importantly, contributed to the creation of the star persona: a carefully managed public personality whose onscreen and offscreen traits consistently mirrored each other. According to Barbas, she stood as an exemplar of modern personhood, adored by fans as an "ideal" individual. She therefore had a huge fan base that passionately watched her movies, sought information about her, and sometimes modeled their own lifestyles on her (Barbas 2001: 47–52). The only other star during this period to challenge Pickford in terms of star power was Douglas Fairbanks, whom she married in 1920. These stars were truly important in the development of a "cult of celebrity," which has remained with us to this day, albeit in varying manifestations.

Mainstream Cult Stars

While all stars could be considered cult in the sense that they provoke dedicated, passionate followings, the "cult star" or "cult actor" tends to be distinguished by a number of qualities. Once again, the idea of the mainstream acts as a broad, fuzzy yardstick against which the cult reputation is forged. A number of mainstream actors/stars have, though, also established themselves as cult figures, though this is often because certain factors enable them to stand apart from other stars, creating a double-tiered status (as both mainstream *and* cult). This may be because of the longevity of their star status and a particularly marked, passionate following; or it may be because their offscreen lives are marked by tragedy or activities that are considered to be unusual. One of the most notable mainstream stars who also enjoys cult status is Humphrey Bogart. Bogart's star status turned decidedly cultic when he became the subject of revivals and intense interest in the 1960s: in France, cinephiles adored him, while his films became staple features on the US repertory circuit. He has also become the subject of impersonation within films, particularly evident in Godard's *À bout de souffle* and *Play it Again, Sam*, written by and starring Woody Allen. These films testify to Bogart's iconic status as a cynical, cool figure whose image and gestures exemplified an "ideal" personality linked to rebellion and machismo. He was, for example, a key feature in the celebration of masculine values by the "MacMahonists" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 25–30; also see Chapter 4).

Joan Crawford and Bette Davis were two mainstream stars who also crossed over into cult status. Both often played strong females and both were incredibly popular throughout much of their careers. Crawford was a popular star from the late 1920s until the 1950s,

first at MGM and then at Warner Bros, and had a considerable, devoted fan base. Davis's popularity was also at its height during the same period, although she also gained a reputation for being a combative personality and was often at odds with Warner Bros because of the roles they offered her. It was after Davis and Crawford's careers were in decline, however, that their cult reputations really began to develop. In their peak, they never appeared together: they detested each other and would sometimes battle for roles. In 1962 they were eventually paired up in Robert Aldrich's psychological horror film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* This movie, which was financially successful, became a cult film due to its camp histrionics and its self-reflexive plot concerning two ex-actor sisters who despise each other. Many read the film as mirroring the tensions between the two characters in real life, heightened when Davis was nominated for a best actress Oscar, which Crawford campaigned against. Their cult credentials were boosted further due to their appearances in low-budget pictures such as *I Saw what You Did* (starring Crawford), *Trog* (Crawford), *The Nanny* (starring Davis) and *The Anniversary* (Davis). Crawford also starred in *Mildred Pierce* and *Johnny Guitar*, both of which would develop cult followings. Her personal life was also increasingly beset by troubles: she became notorious for alcoholism, while the publication of *Mommie Dearest* by her daughter Christina after her death accused her of child abuse (this was later turned into a 1981 film that found its own cult following). Both stars' cult status would also be connected to their appropriation as camp icons (see Chapter 8).

Crawford and Davis had their cult status elevated through a number of processes which are important in enhancing cult reputations. The main overriding principle involved here is how it became clear to many fans that there were cracks behind the surface of their Hollywood-constructed personas, thus revealing the seedier underbelly of the Hollywood dream. Crawford, in particular, embodied a tragic life: though her onscreen heroines often had to deal with misfortune, her alcoholism and reputed abusiveness indicated a personal life in more turmoil than any of her celluloid characters. Davis was less tragic and more bellicose, although her reputation was enhanced by publicized clashes with the studios, which marked her out as a maverick individualist unwilling to be easily molded. Both stars also revealed, in their later careers, the difficulty of aging actresses retaining their former status as they struggled with roles in films that were minor in comparison to the fare they had appeared in during their heyday.

Personal tragedy, unhappiness, decline, and scandal are all important factors which can feed into cult reputations. For those who are skeptical of the Hollywood dream factory, such stories reveal the rotten core at its heart, hidden by a veneer of mendacious optimism. For those alienated by Hollywood's narratives of happiness, they may reveal stories which are more in tune with their own lives and hence offer a point of identification or empathy. The cult fan, in seeking out difference, can thus find in such factors a way to justify their love of mainstream filmmaking, even as they denigrate the system responsible for producing such films. They offer stories of real, authentic individuals who resist the industry's tendency towards standardization and thus are considered important contributors to the moments of creativity and humanity within Hollywood films. Fortunately for such fans, there are plenty of scandals to hit Hollywood, which has led some to view it as decadent and immoral rather than virtuous. This view of Hollywood was most infamously recorded in Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*, first published in Paris in 1959 (it was not officially published in the United States until 1975). *Hollywood Babylon* pieces together a large number of scandals to hit Hollywood, most notably death, drugs, and sex. The decade that Anger focused on in greatest detail was the 1920s, when scandal after scandal hit Hollywood and when it began to be perceived by moralists as a den of iniquity. This led to the intervention of Will Hays and the cleaning up of Hollywood, though scandal would never entirely desert its shores.

What separates *Hollywood Babylon* from other accounts of scandals is that it takes the "cult of scandal" as its point of departure. Instead of only identifying individual scandals, Anger, who had grown up in Hollywood and was able to recount firsthand information, gave the impression that Hollywood was intrinsically associated with scandals, and that sectors of the public held a morbid, cultish fascination for these scandals. *Hollywood Babylon* was deemed so unnerving

that Anger could only get the book published outside the United States, in France. Fittingly, it has since received a cult reputation itself. Among the most noteworthy scandals mentioned by Anger are the 1922 Fatty Arbuckle scandal, which is usually credited for instigating Hollywood's reputation as a "cesspool," and macabre stories circulating around the sudden deaths and tragic demises of film stars such as Rudolph Valentino, James Dean, and Judy Garland (these have developed into what Mikita Brottman has called "cults of death," see below). Later editions of the book also included the slaying of actress Sharon Tate by the disciples of Charles Manson. By then, Anger himself had been courting controversy by associating himself with members of the Manson Family and Hollywood-located Satanists – a surefire way to sustain his own cult reputation (see Chapter 12).

The Cult of Death

Death, perhaps more than any other factor, has contributed to many a cult reputation, or intensified the status of those who already enjoyed devoted followings.

This subject has been analyzed by Mikita Brottman (2000: 103–119), who claims that the fascination with celebrity deaths is rooted in a dual fascination with the star as a "revelatory body" and the intensification of individualism within the twentieth century. The former point refers to the way in which the cinema, following photography, was seen to emphasize the connection between self and bodily gesture, and for stars this connection becomes heightened, as the public reads much into how their screen bodies reveal deeper meanings. The latter point refers to how identity has become increasingly individualized, moving further away from a more collectivist notion of self, which itself leads to a greater fear of individual death. Thus, for Brottman, celebrity death engenders fascination because of the way the individual celebrity relinquishes their "revelatory" power in one sense, but manages to retain it in another:

> That public body, once so expressive and so intensely scrutinized, is abruptly transformed into a limp marionette... And yet somehow, paradoxically, this detached puppet still purports to be the eminently notable celebrity its strings once so publicly animated. Little wonder, then, that the death of celebrity ... should arouse such violent emotion, such voyeurism, such curiosity, such alarm. (Brottman 2000: 111)

The cinema embalms a performance in time, while performers themselves continue to be marked by temporal decay. Cinema therefore creates a visible disjunction between then and now, which is heightened by the number of photographic images of stars disseminated through promotional materials and the like. When a performer dies, this temporal separation becomes intensified and, for those investing in the star image, poignant. Chris Petit has argued that as cinema ages it becomes "a mausoleum as much as a palace of dreams," as an increasing number of dead stars are re-animated by film viewing (quoted in Mulvey 2006: 17). It is perhaps this morbid flip-side of the palace of dreams that appeals to cult viewers, drawn as they often are to the more perverse pleasures of film viewing.

Brottman discusses two stars in detail who have gained a particularly cultic presence due to their premature deaths, but who had already gained iconic status in their lifetimes: James Dean and Marilyn Monroe. For these stars, as with others, a number of materials revealing personal, previously unknown details, flourished after their deaths. Death is certainly good for sales, as various segments of the entertainment industry have discovered. The range of personal, often prurient, information that floods the markets after a star's death can then feed back into our readings of the films that they appeared in, so that the temporal disjunction previously remarked upon becomes a constitutive feature of the viewing encounter. We may begin to read into the films elements of their personal lives that have come to light, so that they become, in Brottman's phrase, "inadvertent documentaries on the subject of human mortality" (2000: 112).

A huge star in her time, Monroe's iconic status has shown little signs of diminishing. Immortalized in Andy Warhol's silkscreen prints in the 1960s, her image has continued to proliferate in popular culture, while many of the films that she starred in also continue to hold interest for modern audiences. Brottman examines *The Misfits* as a particularly interesting film in

relation to Monroe, stardom, and death. The film was a critical and commercial disaster, but has continued to exert a morbid fascination for many because it was Monroe's, as well as co-star Clark Gable's, last completed film before their deaths. Monroe was in a depressed state during the making of the film and was reportedly difficult to work with. The combined effects of alcohol, pills, miscarriages, and breakdowns, and continual rifts with her husband Arthur Miller (who wrote the script) were reflected in the film, in which she played a confused woman going through a divorce. Montgomery Clift, who also starred in the film, was also undergoing personal problems and would die six years after the film was released. A rather tragic film therefore becomes loaded with personalized sadness when the cult of dead stars is read back into it.

James Dean's iconic status was also boosted by his early death. While, as Claudia Springer argues, many who came of age in the 1950s are likely to consider Marlon Brando the ultimate rebel, it is Dean who has come to symbolize "rebel iconography" in general. Brando, who influenced Dean, continued to evolve and change his image, whereas Dean's image became frozen in time, locked in place by the car crash that prematurely ended his life in 1955. It was at this point, argues Springer, that "James Dean was born – not the twenty-four year old man who had died on the highway, but the icon whose image would become instantly recognizable around the world" (2007:16). His death gave rise to an incredible outpouring of public mourning, led to his image selling a vast range of consumer items, and has inspired his more committed fans to visit the site of his death each year to commemorate his passing (Springer 2007). Dean's importance to subsequent "rebel iconography" is particularly associated with his most famous film, *Rebel without a Cause*. The film was released when Dean died and his portrayal of a young, sensitive, cool, and rebellious teenager became a figure of identification for many teenagers who were feeling alienated by the prevailing conformity of 1950s America. The chicken-run scene, in which Dean jumps from his car just before it speeds over a precipice, became a symbol of his real-life recklessness and took on a poignant edge. It went on to capture the imagination of many more viewers from different generations and in a number of countries, thus cementing Dean's status as a rebel cult icon.

Dean and Monroe are large-scale stars whose cult status is guaranteed by iconicity and a mixture of longevity (of status) with tragic brevity (of actual existences). Another cult icon who could also be grouped into this category is Elvis Presley, though his status is primarily as a musician. While his films do have a cult following, it is largely due to the reputation that he secured within his musical career, which then spills over to his acting roles (see Chapter 16 for more on music and cult cinema). In more recent times, young stars on the verge of breaking into the mainstream film industry and who seemed on the cusp of a glittering career have become the subject of particular cult followings. One notable example is River Phoenix, who died at the age of 23. A dedicated campaigner for environmentalism and animal rights, Phoenix died in a high-profile drug overdose at The Viper Room, a club partly owned by fellow cult star Johnny Depp. His background, too, marked him out from the crowd in a different way: his parents joined a cult religious group entitled the Children of God when he was young and his troubled life has been linked to his experiences within the cult. His death provoked intense media coverage and fan mourning, and he ticks a number of boxes that recur in various areas of cult cinema: drugs, religious cults, left-field political beliefs, and a tragically early death. More recently, the early death of Heath Ledger has led to an outpouring of emotion and it could be that he will also develop a particularly marked cult status.

While death may be the most important factor that elevates the cult status of certain movie stars, there are other features which allow mainstream (or previously mainstream) stars to attain a cult status. While space does not allow us to go into detail here, we should mention some of these. They include *scandals*, such as Fatty Arbuckle's heavily publicized criminal prosecution, in which he was accused of the rape of Virginia Rappe and of contributing to her death. Although Arbuckle was exonerated, the scandal effectively ruined his career, a tragic story which has fed his cult reputation. *Sexuality* can also feed cult status, such as the heightened sexuality of Mae West, whose risqué persona pushed at the boundaries of acceptability within Hollywood and who is thus seen as a daring, controversial figure. Or cult status may relate to *sexual* or *racial difference*: for example, gay actors whose

orientation may only come to light at a later period due to the earlier illegality of homosexuality (Rock Hudson being an example here); or black actors who struggled to carve out a career, no matter how compromised, within a racially prejudiced system (such as Paul Robeson or, later, Sidney Poitier). There are also actors who, though not gay, become gay icons, such as Judy Garland (see Chapter 8).

Cult Actors

The cultification of the dead star can be considered one of three broad ways in which a mainstream star can gain a cult status. Alongside the mainstream star who gains a cult after they have died is the mainstream star who gains a cult status after they have faded from the mainstream (such as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, who moved from the mainstream to the margins of the exploitation circuit after their mainstream heyday). Finally, a few stars seem to attain the status as both a cult star *and* a mainstream star at the same time. This can occur when a star with a rebellious or non-conformist persona moves into the mainstream but retains much of their cult fan base: while some fans may lose interest in the star for "selling out," others may identify a star who has entered the mainstream on their own terms and who has retained a non-conformist, idiosyncratic aura. Johnny Depp could be considered as a example of such a star: previously considered a rebel (through scuffles, fights, and drunkenness) who acted in a range of quirky films (he has acted for cult directors such as Tim Burton, Jim Jarmusch, and John Waters), he has now settled down and become a bankable Hollywood star through his turn as Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. Yet he still retains an aura of idiosyncrasy and exudes an air of uncompromising artistry for many.

In contrast to many of the mainstream cult stars mentioned thus far, however, are a number of actors much more recognizable as cult actors through and through, in the sense that they are not stars in the conventional sense. Some of these may have stronger connections with mainstream cinema than others, though most of them are better known as cult figures due to establishing reputations within "marginal" cinemas such as exploitation, independent, underground, "Art House" cinema, or "B" movies (of course these categories also criss-cross at certain points). Some of these actors can be particularly obscure and gain a reputation through small-scale championing.

Maria Montez, for example, was a Dominican-born actress who appeared in a number of Technicolor "costume adventure" pictures, such as *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *The Cobra Woman*. She tended to play exotic, seductress characters and was known as "the Queen of Technicolor." While critics tended to dismiss her acting abilities (not often helped by the type of pictures that she appeared in) she developed a dual cult following. First, she was adored by the people of the Dominican Republic as a figure of national pride, and even has an airport in Barahona (her birthplace) named after her; secondly, she was also appropriated as a camp icon (see Chapter 8). Her camp appeal was stimulated by underground filmmaker Jack Smith, who penned an extraordinary eulogy to her entitled "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez" (Smith 1962/3). Smith opposed the critical consensus of Montez as a "bad actress": "She believed and thereby made the people who went to her movies believe. Those who could believe, did. Those who saw the World's Worst Actress just couldn't and they missed the magic. Too bad – their loss" (Smith 1962/3: 28). Rather than judging her by the criteria of "acting ability," he asserted his own reasons to value her which were much more based around the *cult of personality*. For Smith, she encapsulated what almost amounted to a system of values, as though she were an essential reflection of the things that he believed in: "moldiness, Glamorous Rapture, schizophrenic delight, hopeless naivete, and glittering technicolored trash!" (1962/3: 28, capitals in original). This was clear in his own films, which were lo-fi attempts to recreate the exotic world that Montez, for him, captured.

In a similar manner to Smith's eulogizing of Montez, actress Rose Hobart also became the unlikely subject of an avant-garde artist's attentions. In 1936 artist Joseph Cornell made a film of Hobart after buying a film that she starred in – *East of Borneo* – for watching at home. He became so enraptured with her that he created a film, *Rose Hobart* (Figure 7.1), compiled entirely from moments in *East of Borneo* that she



Figure 7.1 Rose Hobart from *East of Borneo*, which was recontextualized in Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart*.

appeared in, and manipulated these original moments by slowing down the speed, tinting the print blue, and accompanying images with a musical soundtrack (thus dispensing with the original film's dialog). The film, then, tends to fetishize the image of Hobart and is a way of enabling viewers to pay sole attention to the movements and gestures of Hobart herself, and to perceive them in a new light, as though liberated from the original film that they appeared in. Further, as Janet Staiger argues, it is a way of "Othering Hobart by decontextualizing her from the film and yet locating her in the jungles in which everything else is 'other'." She further states that "Cornell's arrangement produces a withdrawal of meaning while investing Hobart's image with new sense and sensuality" (Staiger 2005b). This is in line with many other art works that Cornell produced, in particular the collection "boxes" that he is most reputed for, which were often based around images of stars, including Lauren Bacall, Greta Garbo, and Jennifer Jones.

As exploitation filmmaking, and particularly the fantastical-related areas of it, has strong links with cult cinema (see Chapters 13 and 19), it is no surprise that a number of actors heavily associated with such films have gained strong cult reputations. These actors include Boris Karloff and Béla Lugosi, primarily for their association with the classic Universal horror films of the 1930s (and, importantly, for their roles as Frankenstein's monster and Dracula, respectively), but also because of their subsequent careers within which they remained associated with exploitation material. Karloff, for example, appeared in a number of Corman productions later in his career, including Bogdanovich's *Targets*, a remarkably self-reflexive film about Karloff's position as a cult actor. Lugosi, meanwhile, cut a more tragic figure as he became increasingly typecast. Falling into poverty and addicted to heroin, he ended up featuring in a number of Edward D. Wood Jr's micro-budget productions, including *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, which featured posthumous archive footage of him.

Karloff and Lugosi were employed by segments of the exploitation industry because of the cult values accrued from their iconic status as classic monsters, but the emerging exploitation circuit in the 1950s and 60s also created its own star figures. Vincent Price, for instance, is a good example of an actor who both William Castle and American International Pictures (AIP) employed because of his star value, which enabled them to create films likely to find larger audiences because of the presence of a recognizable icon (Heffernan 2004: 90–112). Price's connection with Castle – in films such as *The House on Haunted Hill* and *The Tingler* – and AIP – in a number of its Poe adaptations – bolstered his cult appeal. Such appeal was also heightened in some sectors because of Price's camp qualities (see Chapter 8) and his particular acting style. In terms of acting, Price is renowned for his "hammy" style, which denotes an over-exaggerated acting mode (Figure 7.2). "Ham" is generally a term of abuse that refers to actors who do not have a very broad range of acting skills, and who thus tend to compensate through excessive facial and bodily gestures, which can render particular scenes bathetic. Yet ham can also be celebrated by cult fans because, rather than viewing ham as a failure to match the criteria of "professionalism," they sometimes view it as an *alternative* form of acting that contains more personality than many more respectable performances. This is not the case with *all* ham acting, and here the filter of subjectivity must enter the unpredictable field of evaluation. As Jack Stevenson argues: "ultimately ham is in the eye of the beholder: one person's divinely inspired ham is what another might deem complete garbage. It's an area of total subjectivity, which is why it is such an affront to critics" (Stevenson 2003c: 71). Certainly, subjectivity is a crucial component of such evaluation, but we must also add to Stevenson's assertion that broader cultural considerations must also



Figure 7.2 Vincent Price hams it up as he pretends to undergo the impact of psychedelic drugs in *The Tingler*.

be taken into account here, in particular the notion of "cultural capital" (outlined in more detail in Chapter 5), for broader cultural and social systems will to an extent shape a person's subjectivity.

Artificiality and Individuality

Price is an actor who, if he does embody ham, would seem to do so in a self-conscious manner at times. In many of the Poe adaptations, for instance, it is as though Price is aware of how he is expected to act, and plays up to these expectations of himself. While such play acting may at times be dismissed as self-parody, there is more to be said about it: in such performances there can be a consideration of an audience which is important for the cult actor, who may well cultivate her or his cult status among a particular fan base through solidifying a public persona. Mathijs (2011a, 2011b) has noted how cult actors often create formalist, rather than realist, portrayals. Thus, instead of "authentically" becoming lost in the characters that they are playing, they retain the tics and quirks that specialized audiences expect them to display. According to Mathijs qualities constitutive of formalist acting such as copying and ostentation are part of *referential acting*: "Referential acting includes homage, quotation and allusion. It offers the opportunity to include the magician's tricks: winks, nudges, signature gestures or direct address" (2011a). Referential acting highlights self-conscious qualities, and allows audiences "in the know" to register the ways in which the actor is referencing their own, as well as others', styles.

For a segment of cult fans, repetitious performances can provide pleasure rather than suggesting a lack of range. Pleasure can arise from viewing the same persona manifest itself in different filmic environments, in which subtle differences and qualities can be identified by avid, invested audiences. Certain actors become particularly cherished for acts or traits that evidence an identifiable style, a kind of authorial trace that they leave upon the films they appear in. These can include the manic tics and feral stare of Klaus Kinski, the quirky neuroticism of Jeff Goldblum, the physical athleticism of Bruce Lee, or the stately authority of Christopher Lee. Repetition can also prove pleasurable in terms of recurrent situations that some actors become entangled within. A key example here would be Giovanni Lombardo Radice, an Italian actor who has appeared in a number of low-budget horror films. A relatively obscure actor who is only known by sectors of horror fans, he has played a range of different character types, but has become known for his spectacular and gory deaths. As Patricia MacCormack (2004: 107) has observed, between 1980 and 1992 he appeared in ten horror films, of which seven included him being violently killed (while being mocked, wounded, and beaten in another). Any follower of the actor, then, becomes aware of him signifying not a "certain role, style or quality of acting, but a certain possible affect due to the probability of a visceral death" (MacCormack 2004: 108). In this sense, followers of Radice will watch one of his films with the expectation of a gory death, an expectation which may or may not be fulfilled.

The recurrence of performance gestures, role types and filmic situations can lead some fans to become highly conscious of intertextual connections evident within particular performances, which then leads to them being viewed in the context of a wider oeuvre (for more on intertextuality and cult film, see Chapter 21). This feeds into the aforementioned *self-conscious* performance style where actors will often reference other texts (which may or may not be their own performances). Bruce Campbell, who has gained a particularly dedicated cult following without ever becoming a Hollywood staple, is an actor who

certainly is well aware of his own cult status. This is evident through the ways in which he will sometimes obviously reprise his over-the-top, comic style within numerous cameo roles, but is most marked by the fact that he has played himself within a film based around him, entitled *My Name Is Bruce*. In this film "Bruce Campbell" gets mistaken for Ash, the character that he played in *The Evil Dead* films, which catapulted him to cult status. The self-conscious nature of an actor playing his or her own "self" is also a salient feature of the cult film *Pink Flamingos*, in which Divine plays Divine, even though Divine himself was only a constructed persona. Divine also parodied other stars within his own performance, such as Jean Harlow, Mae West, and Jayne Mansfield (Harries 2004: 155). Such self-conscious performances often draw attention to the artificiality of acting, which sharply distinguishes them from "method" approaches, in which the actor attempts to lose her or himself in the character.

A particularly interesting cult actor who developed a self-conscious style is Peter Lorre. Lorre made his name in Germany, coming to prominence as a child killer in *M*, and who came to Hollywood in 1935. Even though he was promoted as a star he proved difficult to cast in leading roles, tending to play either bit parts in major films or bigger parts in cheaper films, often "B" movies. Yet, even though he was never a star as such, he did, as Sarah Thomas argues, possess "cinematic value and he remained an important screen commodity, partly due to his recognisable persona" (Thomas 2007). This status as a well-known personality who nevertheless never established himself in the way he had liked, undoubtedly fed his cult status. This status was also linked to the repetitious element of Lorre's acting, as mentioned above: his performances frequently drew on a limited range of recognizable traits and gestures, including abrupt shifts from meek to sinister, soft speech patterns juxtaposed with sudden outbursts, and the movement between a blank expression and exaggerated facial contortions (Thomas 2007). Thomas argues that these repetitive elements of Lorre's performances were particularly self-reflexive and were a means of compensating for his marginal status. Thus, in *The Maltese Falcon*, he develops a distinctly recognizable vocal style so that he is still a crucial presence within the film, despite spending much screen time with his back to the camera. Lorre's persona, then, was very much tied to his position within the industry and often refers to his own status as a performer.

Hammy, self-conscious, and formalist styles can be related to the notion of *excess*, in that they exceed particular norms (of professional standards, of realist modes). Another important excessive element in the repertoire of the cult actor is *intensity* and/or *insanity*, which can often carry over into the off-screen persona of the actor. Klaus Kinski, who we have already mentioned, is loved just as much for his reported antics on film sets as he is for the performances that make it into the final cut. His insane fits are legendary and were an important part of the appeal of the documentaries *Burden of Dreams* (which documents the making of Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*) and *My Best Fiend* (in which Herzog focuses on his relationship with Kinski). Even his personal life seems to be exaggerated, as was the case with his (purportedly highly fabricated) autobiography *All I Need Is Love* (1989). In this sense, the cult actor's actual life becomes an extension of his or her on-screen persona (or at least vice versa). Other actors particularly known for their intensity and/or insanity include Dennis Hopper and Crispin Glover, who have both appeared within offbeat projects as well as more mainstream fare.

Excess can also inform the personas of cult actors in terms of the sheer amount of films that they have appeared within, and/or their association with a particular type of film. If an actor has appeared in a large number of films in a supporting or marginal role, it can provide cult fans with the potential to seek out as many appearances as possible, comparing nuances of performance in relation to the films as a whole. Often, actors predominantly associated with the fantastical/horror film tend to inspire interest in this regard, as fans of this mode of filmmaking are more reputed to seek out exhaustive details. Examples would include Mexican wrestler El Santo (Rodolfo Guzman Huerta), who crossed over into acting and starred in a large number of cult wrestling horror films; Barbara Steele, who became a fan favorite through her appearances in Italian horror films and for exuding an air of mysterious beauty; and Spanish actor Paul Naschy, who has appeared in a large number of horror-related films, and who has also written and directed a number of

films in this genre. Naschy himself was a fan of the horror film, but other actors became associated with the genre more through accident: Donald Pleasance, for example, after appearing in more respectable material in his earlier career, featured in a great deal of low-budget horror movies. Fellow British actors Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee also became cult actors for their horror-related roles, in particular through the work that they undertook for Hammer studios between the late 1950s and 1970s (though Lee often bemoans that people frequently overlook his parts in other types of films).

Conclusion

A huge number of actors and stars can be linked to notions of cult due to the ways in which they exert fascination and often accrue fan followings (see Chapter 5). In contemporary society this is linked to a "cult of celebrity," in which celebrities in general often assume hyper-real qualities through intense media scrutiny. Undoubtedly, Hollywood stars have played a central role in the cult of celebrity during the twentieth century, and continue to do so into the twenty-first century. The star can take on a particularly cultic aura because of the personalized relationship that a fan constructs between themselves and a star image, and/or through the fondness for particular stars within cult communities. In the digital age an intense relationship between fan and star can be extended, as it is now easier to extract the star image from its surrounding environment. Laura Mulvey has argued that this leads to the notion of the *possessive spectator*, who can use video or DVD players to halt the linear narrative and gain a heightened relation to the body of the star: "Halting the flow of film extracts star images easily from their narrative surroundings for the kind of extended contemplation that had only previously been possible with stills. From a theoretical point of view, this new stillness exaggerates the star's iconic status" (Mulvey 2007: 161).

Despite the cult of stardom, cult stars and/or cult actors can still be differentiated from more general stars, although such demarcations can vary according to context. Such differences will often hinge upon a conceptual imagining of the mainstream, in which the actor/star represents values and/or styles that differ from – or perhaps transcend – the norms associated with the mainstream. While the cult actor may be most commonly associated with areas of filmmaking that exist on the fringes, or outside, of the mainstream, there are also – as we have shown – a number of mainstream actors who are also cult actors. The mainstream star can also become a cult star through a broad process of *double coding*, so that they have a more general star status, but also a status among niche groups for different reasons. This double coding often occurs at separate temporal junctures: so a cult following may develop around the star *after* their mainstream status has waned. Less commonly, a mainstream star can also attract a cult following during the height of their popularity.

8

Camp and Paracinema

"Camp" and "paracinema," alongside partially related concepts such "trash" and "kitsch," have frequently been used to refer to a range of cult cinema practices. Camp is a term that has a long history of usage which extends far beyond cinema itself, whereas paracinema is a word that more specifically applies to cult cinema. In this chapter we will outline some of the main concepts that have been associated with camp and briefly reference its applicability to cult cinema, before more fully investigating the concept of paracinema and "trash" film.

Camp

While camp as a term became well known during the 1960s, it has a much longer history. According to Cleto, it first entered the language in a Victorian dictionary of slang and referred to "actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis . . . used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character" (J. Redding Ware, quoted in Cleto 1999: 9). Deriving from the French term *se camper* ("to flaunt"), it became associated with homosexual subcultures in the early twentieth century, as a type of communication between people "in the know," which could signal their (at the time illegal) sexual orientation (Benshoff 2007: 202; Cleto 1999: 9). The act of role-playing, of performing in a deliberately exaggerated manner to communicate with a particular group of people who understand such gestures, is still important in understanding camp. It has, however, extended beyond such initial understandings to become a much more complex term: it is, as Benshoff has argued "a confused and confusing term" (2007: 201); while Cleto claims that because it has different uses it should not be defined in a strict manner, as its meanings can alter according to the contexts within which it is operative (1999: 16).

One of the most well-known, and cited, articles on camp was written by Susan Sontag in 1964. This was a period in which camp was becoming much more visible within various sections of popular culture, and Sontag's piece helped to aid a particular understanding of camp. While earlier twentieth-century understandings of camp associated it with homosexuality, Sontag argued that it was much more than homosexual taste, even though homosexuals "by and large, constitute the vanguard – and the most articulate audience of – Camp" (2008: 51). Sontag articulated camp as both a mode of appreciation and a feature of objects. As a mode of appreciation, it is an approach that emphasizes artifice and exaggeration (2008: 43) and, as such, challenges dominant notions of *taste*: instead of appreciating what is considered to be conventionally "beautiful," or praising art works that contain deep meanings, camp transforms notions of beauty through stressing the importance of surface style. Camp privileges artificiality over the "natural," which stems from homosexuals' keen awareness, as minority outlaws, of gender being not a natural condition but rather something that is *performed*. Therefore, the camp persona adopted by many gay men exaggerates mannered gestures in order to foreground all gender roles as artificial constructions: that is, they are culturally learned as opposed to biologically inherent. Further, this mode of appreciation also has roots in gay men's

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feelings of alienation from dominant social norms: as a minority, excluded group, they exert power through finding value within objects that have been devalued by prevailing regimes of taste. Andrew Ross has written that "Camp ... involves a celebration by the cognoscenti, of the alienation, distance, and incongruity reflected in the very processes of which hitherto unexpected value can be located in some obscure or exorbitant object" (Ross 2008: 56). This leads to a cultish celebration of marginal artifacts in which "those who are otherwise dominant are, for once, excluded" (Cleto 1999: 31).

Appreciation of artistic film works as camp, then, can privilege film genres which are considered to be very much opposed to realism, such as the musical, melodrama, and horror, or films which are cheaply made and therefore do not disguise their artifice very well (Benshoff 2007: 203). There are also a number of stars who were appreciated as camp, including Mae West, Joan Crawford, and Bette Davis, due to their "indefatigable drive and bigger than life personas" (in which performativity is stressed) and also because of their "subordinate (but often resistant) position within patriarchal culture, and their frequent romantic troubles with men" (Benshoff 2007: 2003). A particularly important camp-cult star is Judy Garland, who Richard Dyer (1986) has examined in detail. For Dyer, any star can be read *as* camp, but Garland was also a star "who expressed camp attitudes" (1986: 179). Garland's cult reputation revolves around her child and adult career, and the pathos surrounding her comeback in the 1950s. As Wade Jennings (1991: 94) writes: "After the success of *The Wizard of Oz*, a persona was established on record. Dorothy's wistfulness and childlike candor became permanently tied to the Garland screen persona." Peary's comments on Garland encapsulate the ambiguity encapsulated in this persona perfectly:

> Much of the Oz cult among adults is a result of Judy Garland, so young, so innocent, so pretty ... Watching Garland today, and knowing how scared she was at the time, how uncomfortable she was in her tight strap, and how soon after her body would become messed up because of a growing dependency on speed and sleeping pills, our feelings must waver – between *delight* in her dynamic yet touching performance under trying conditions and *grief* that we are seeing the role that launched her into the world of superstardom she never was able to handle (Peary 1981: 393).

The cautionary tale of Garland's breakdowns, demise, failed comebacks, premature death, and quasi-sainthood, is a recurrent trope in camp. It pitches the poor defenseless child against an evil, faceless corporation, but it also portrays an irresponsible professional against the people who supported and cared for her (Kaufman 1994; Friedrich 1986: 346–349).

Camp followings, especially those of (former) child actors, are often deeply involved in identity-affirmation (Figure 8.1). Such involvements are combined with anxieties over the cultural appropriation of visual representations of child actors. In her study of the gay cult of Judy Garland, Janet Staiger details the similarities between public perceptions of Garland's adult "nervous exhaustion," "intensity," "insecurity," and "elf-like androgyny," and contemporaneous views of gays in American culture. She proposes that this similarity might be one of the reasons for the prominent queer cult appeal of Garland, articulated through organizations for gay liberation such as the Radical Faeries (Staiger 1992: 154–177). In more recent years, to the gay cult of Garland has been added, at least partially, a lesbian cult, one that departs from *The Wizard of Oz* and Garland's character of Dorothy, but which has increasingly focused on the "Wicked



Figure 8.1 Through the cult and camp following for *The Wizard of Oz*, the Wicked Witch of the West (Margaret Hamilton), Dorothy (Judy Garland), and Glinda, the Good Witch of the North (Billie Burke) have become identity affirmers for fans.

Witch of the West" Glinda. As Alexander Doty (2000: 51) writes: "I enjoyed the Wicked Witch of the West as another camp figure: she was a scary, tough butch dressed in black." The cult appeal of the theater musical *Wicked*, which takes the witches from *The Wizard of Oz* as its focus, has broadened this embryonic lesbian theme into a full-fledged mode of viewer engagement. These days, the lesbian appeal of *Wicked* and *Oz* is widely acknowledged (see Chapter 10). Tellingly, the Garland cults refer equally to her adult life and to the significance of her formative years – crucial in the formation of sexual identities. Similar anxieties can be found in the fandom surrounding Nathalie Wood and Shirley Temple, and the collectible-heavy fandoms of Deanna Durbin and Margaret O'Brien.[1]

Garland also became aware of her gay following and was well versed in gay culture, and these fed into her later performances. An awareness of her campness could, according to Dyer, be read back into her earlier film performances. They could do so in two main ways: first, knowledge of her working relations – in which the surface glamour of performativity clashes with her personal pain and hurt – became increasingly well known among sections of her gay followers; secondly, he argues that many of her performances can nevertheless be read as camp without this knowledge, as many of her roles – such as in Minnelli's *Ziegfried Follies* and *The Pirate*, and *The Wizard of Oz* – contain elements of theatricality, parody, and obvious artifice (Dyer 1986: 181). Garland's status as a camp icon became crucially heightened by the fact that her funeral (June 27, 1969) – attended by many gay men – occurred at a similar time to the Stonewall Riots (June 28, 1969), which have been linked to the emergence of gay rights activism (see Chapter 10).

Dyer's distinction between a star being read as camp, and a star embodying camp, deserves further consideration as it relates to how camp can be both a property of objects/people, as well as a mode of perception. Garland, and other stars, may embody camp because they are aware of the camp readings that have been inscribed upon them and they, in turn, actively incorporate camp into their persona as a willing participant in a kind of camp contract. Camp can also be considered to be a property of non-human objects, including films themselves. It is here where camp partly overlaps with "kitsch," which generally refers to art that is aesthetically deficient, particularly mass-art objects which are seen to tastelessly mimic other – more valuable – works. As such, kitsch is a pejorative term which is often used to denote the opposite of genuine art (as it does, for example, in Clement Greenberg's 1939 article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"; see Greenberg 1986). Nevertheless, since the growth of camp, kitsch objects themselves can be reclaimed through camp evaluations. So, even if kitsch is employed more frequently as a negative term, it is not always so (and neither is camp always used as a positive term): once again, the context of use is an important factor in the meanings of such terms. Kitsch, however, does tend to refer to the properties of an object, whereas camp is a broader term that, while it can be seen as existing within objects and as a trait of people, is more commonly thought of as a way of reading or communicating.

Susan Sontag actually identified two forms of camp, a distinction that has much commented upon: "naive camp" and "deliberate camp" (2008: 46). Naive camp refers to works which are not meant to be camp, but which are in fact attempts to create something straight, serious. However, such works are seen to fail in their attempts to be serious, and also contain a requisite degree of extravagance, ambition, and passion, which opens them up to camp readings. Sontag lists Busby Berkeley musicals such as *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933* as examples of naive camp. The elaborate swimming pool choreography that follows from the song "By a Waterfall" in Berkeley and director Lloyd Bacon's *Footlight Parade* is among the most extravagant possible. Deliberate camp, on the other hand, is camp "which knows itself to be camp" (Sontag 2008: 46). Thus, if naive camp is camp purely by dint of its appropriation as a camp artifact, deliberate camp is intentionally designed as camp. The first is camp through its readings only; while readings inevitably must affect the second (people must be able to perceive its camp intentions for its status as such to be established), such readings are not the sole dimension of its camp identity. Films that have often been singled out as deliberate camp include *Barbarella*, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, *Performance*, most of the films directed by John Waters, plus other underground works from filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger, George Kuchar, Jack

Smith, and Andy Warhol (see Chapter 13). However, neatly distinguishing between naive and deliberate camp can present occasional problems: if different people involved in a film quarrel over whether it was designed as camp, then how do we ultimately gauge whether it was deliberately produced as camp? Jack Stevenson has written how *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* – often cited as an example of deliberate camp – was nevertheless not interpreted as such by all viewers: some just saw it as bad, while others perceived it as a serious melodrama on its release (2003d: 116). Thus, both intentions and perceptions are never entirely straightforward. For instance, films such as critic Roger Ebert's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and writer Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckenridge* can both be interpreted as parodies of camp criticism (the novel *Myra Breckenridge* mentions critic Parker Tyler a few times explicitly). For Andrew Ross, these films are camp in attitude while also exposing that camp-ism (Ross 1989: 153).

Sontag also argued that time can play an important role in judging particular works as camp. The passing of time, she wrote, can provide us with the requisite distance to judge something as camp: "Time may enhance what seems merely dogged or lacking in fantasy now because it resembles too closely our everyday fantasies" (2008: 48). While we may judge more harshly failures in contemporary works of art, time can provide detachment and transform banality into the fantastic: "things are campy ... when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt" (2008: 48). Jack Stevenson links this temporal aspect of camp to nostalgia, or at least – in keeping with camp's "artificial" sensibility – a simulated form of nostalgia: "camp is not just nostalgia, but rather a distillation of its pleasurable essence. It is the sweetness of nostalgia detached from the overpowering personal memory that drives one to tears ... It's an appreciation of the *feeling* of nostalgia detached from any specific personal memory" (2003d: 113).

The importance of distance, and time, to camp appreciation links camp to a love of "bad movies," movies which often date from an older time. In particular, the 1950s is a decade that has proven ripe for camp cultism, whether it is in the many sci-fi and horror movies which have been reappropriated as camp texts, or whether it is through filmmakers – John Waters being an obvious example here – using the decade to feed into their own deliberate camp works. Alison Graham has written that the cultist embrace of the 1950s stems from "a kind of tragic irony. The perceived distance between the so-called fifties 'innocence' and a contemporary cynicism" (1991: 110). Certainly, this nostalgic distance is an important part of a camp celebration of bad films, though it is not the case that camp celebration necessarily entails such temporal distance. An example would be the more recent post-camp celebration of Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (Bissell 2010). After a brief unsuccessful run in Los Angeles during which viewers ridiculed the film in the presence of its director, *The Room* found an unexpected audience across North America at midnight screenings in art house theaters and on college campuses, where viewers began celebrating it as an ironic masterpiece – an antithesis of professionalism and craftsmanship. During such screenings, people shouted at the screen (yelling "Alcatraz!" at stock shots of San Francisco), and threw spoons and footballs around. Wiseau, who kept occasionally attending screenings, wisely embraced the newfound following and has since claimed *The Room* was always intended to be a pitch-black comedy – as the DVD proudly labels it. And neither can camp be reduced merely to the "bad film subculture" that Ross identifies as a crucial aspect of camp (2008: 60). We will, however, continue the discussion of a "bad film subculture" as it is feeds into the concept of paracinema.

Paracinema

One of the criticisms that was sometimes leveled at Sontag's article was that she downplayed the homosexual aspects of camp and was seen to "de-gayify" the concept, thus leading to its appropriation by dominant culture (Cleto 1999: 10). While it is beyond the scope of the present chapter to probe this particular debate, the idea of camp continuing in a "de-gayified" form could be applied to the concept of "paracinema," although paracinematic taste tends to resist the tastes that are seen to characterize dominant culture, as we shall go on to discuss. In actual fact,

Jeffrey Sconce – who wrote the defining article on paracinema – has stated that the tastes and attitudes characteristic of paracinema are in some ways similar to camp. He argues that there are differences, though, in that whereas camp often referred to a process by which gay men could rework Hollywood codes to suit their own sensibilities, primarily through irony, paracinema is a more aggressive attack upon reigning notions of "quality." Whereas camp is a subtle tweaking of dominant codes, paracinema "seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic art"; it is not a "queer" undermining of the mainstream but is rather a "straight" attack undertaken by white, middle class, educated, and disaffected factions (Sconce 1995: 374). (It could be argued, contra Sconce, that paracinema is *less* radical than camp because it empties the sexual politics associated with it.)

Sconce defines paracinema as a term that not only refers to a particular corpus of "trashy" films – which include various forms of exploitation cinema, government hygiene films, sword and sorcery epics, Elvis films – but, more importantly, a way of reading films and the subculture that forms around such approaches (here it is again similar to camp). He writes that paracinema is:

> less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. In short, the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic "trash", whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture. (Sconce 1995: 372)

Paracinema therefore refers to films that have been deemed worthless by elite culture and which are taken up by particular subcultural formations to establish their outsider credentials.[2] At the time of writing, Sconce observed a growing number of critics who were adopting a "paracinematic" position regarding film viewing and criticism. This was evident in a number of fanzines and other publications, including *Zontar, Subhuman, Psychotronic Video, Trashola*, *Ungawa, Pandemonium* and the RE/Search volume *Incredibly Strange Films*.[3] He states that the most visible document of this film community is Michael Weldon's *Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film* (1983). Many of the views expressed within these publications, argues Sconce, are espoused by highly cine-literate, educated citizens who are reacting against the common canons of films and filmmakers established within high cultural circles. By valuing a number of films generally considered worthless within such circles they proudly differentiate themselves from cultural consensus. *Psychotronic Video*, which began as a Xeroxed zine, was thus produced as a guide to obscure films that could be found on late-night US television, inviting readers to become interested in a realm of filmmaking that fell outside of both the mainstream and critical canons.

Sconce further argues that paracinema has a political dimension in that it explicitly challenges "reigning aesthetic discourses in the academy" (1995: 380). It does this through the way that it reads films and concentrates on an aesthetic disposition characterized by the concept of "excess." This concept, previously explored by Kristin Thompson (1977), states that excess in a film exists when style ceases to serve the diegesis (the story world of the film) and instead exists for its own sake, as a purely aesthetic element. Moments of excess within a film, because they can disrupt absorption within the film's narrative, are able to draw attention to a film as an illusory artifact. Film academics had previously privileged films that disrupt the norms of classical Hollywood cinema and its principles of continuity editing because they were seen to distance the spectator from the text and alert said spectator to some of the filmic codes that were in operation. Such films were considered politically "progressive" and constituted a core of modernist texts favored within the academy around the late 1970s and for the most part of the 1980s.

According to Sconce, paracinema shares characteristics with academic approaches to "progressive" texts. Nevertheless, whereas academics tend to analyze films as intentional products of authors, the paracinematic viewer "often celebrates the unintentional production of different stylistic features, which may be more to do with budget constraints or incompetence than with authorial intention" (1995: 385). In this sense, these viewers focus upon moments of textual "excess" perhaps more so than many academics; they are not interested in the story worlds of these films, which are often trite and negligible, but are inclined to focus on the stylistic quirks that render such films distinctive.

Sconce further argues that paracinema communities often draw attention to the politics of taste, in that they foreground how taste and aesthetics are socially constructed. The introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films* explicitly outlines this disposition:

> This is a functional guide to territory largely neglected by the film-criticism establishment ... Most of the films discussed test the limits of contemporary (middle-class) cultural acceptability, mainly because in varying ways they do not meet certain "standards" ... At issue is the notion of "good taste," which functions as a filter to block out entire areas of experience judged – and damned – as unworthy of investigation. (Vale and Juno 1986: 4)

This is an aspect of paracinema that is particularly linked to Bourdieu's work on taste and its sociological dimension, which is more fully outlined in Chapter 5. As the work of Bourdieu has become increasingly influential within a range of cultural studies work since the publication of Sconce's article, the interrogation of taste has become a more central concern within film studies. Sconce himself noted that this paracinematic attitude was already beginning to infiltrate the academy and was partly responsible for challenging approaches to film research within a scholarly context. This is an issue that we will return to as we now review how the concept of paracinema has impacted upon subsequent work on cult-related cinema.

Critical Responses to Sconce

The number of academic articles which have drawn upon, or at least referenced, Sconce's article testifies to its importance within the field of cult cinema. As with many influential academic articles, it has also been the subject of debate, criticism, and revision. Joan Hawkins's work (2000), which itself has proven influential within this field, drew on Sconce's work and extended its focus. Hawkins actually begins her consideration of paracinema by claiming that it is a type of filmmaking which is heavily characterized by *affect*: films which impact upon the viewer in a physical sense (i.e. fear, tears), rather than intellectually. Hawkins therefore stresses Sconce's oversight of affect in privileging a "reading protocol" feeding into the creation of cultural distinctions – against both the mainstream and high art (Hawkins 2000: 4). While Hawkins does not really pursue Sconce's neglect of affect, it is a criticism that others have leveled at him: that is, that his focus on how people read these films intellectually and ironically does not take into account the possibility that some people may actually become emotionally involved in viewing these films. This is a point that Sconce himself later admitted was a significant absence within the article (Sconce 2007: 8).

Returning to Hawkins, it is important to note that she also complicated the demarcations between "low" and "high," between "trash" and "art." So, looking at a number of "paracinematic" catalogs – produced by mail order companies selling the types of films discussed by Sconce – she notes some trends which complicate his assertion that paracinema places itself directly against high culture. Many of the films placed within modernist canons mentioned by Sconce, including films by Jean-Luc Godard, also find their way into paracinema catalogs. Hawkins further argues that many films considered high art actually trade on similar tropes and imagery as so-called "low brow" films. She mentions, for example, how Peter Watkins's *The War Game* and Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, while generally respected as works of art, nevertheless aim for a quite physical impact upon their viewers (Hawkins 2000: 5–6). It is also the case that many film directors have moved from the world of the avant-garde into more "lowbrow" exploitation territory. Hawkins mentions the work of Paul Morrissey, but we could also add filmmakers such as Anthony Balch, Curtis Harrington, and Walerian Borowczyk, to name a few other examples. The ease with which such filmmakers move from "high" to "low" filmmaking modes points to how such categorical demarcations perhaps tend to conceal a number of overlapping similarities.

For Hawkins, the paracinematic approach to film culture does not so much represent a need to celebrate low art in opposition to high art so much as it represents an attempt at cultural leveling; a need to break down high and low distinctions in order to create a more inclusive conception of culture (2000: 10). However, while on the one hand this paracinematic approach to film consumption is engaged in a form of cultural leveling, on the other hand

it still creates distinctions by placing itself against the mainstream. Hawkins mentions this when she notes how paracinema enthusiasts feel a need to consume something different (2000: 7) but does not really pursue how this may complicate her points about cultural leveling. Perhaps we could add that it actually consists of a strange mixture of cultural leveling *and* the re-establishment of cultural distinctions: rather than "trash" being opposed to "art," what we are now faced with is "conventional" and the "mainstream" being opposed to the "deranged," "inspired," and "marginal."

Hawkins also notes that while there is a general process of cultural leveling apparent within paracinematic catalogs, there are still distinctions made within these catalogs between different films, so that not all films are treated in exactly the same manner. She points out, for example, that some films are treated as straightforward "art" (e.g., Dreyer's *Vampyr*), whereas others are described as enjoyable in a more ironic, "so-bad-they're good" manner (e.g. *Plan 9 from Outer Space*). This points to how such paracinematic cultures are actually composed of a number of competing discourses. It is because this broad cultural sensibility is composed of a number of different voices that there are sometimes identifiable particular subgroupings within it. This is actually mentioned by Sconce when he refers to infighting between "paracinematic factions," citing overt antagonism between the zines *Film Threat* and *Psychotronic Video* (1995: 375). He does not, however, pay substantial attention to this matter and, for the most part, focuses on the particular mode of "trash" cinema represented by the *Psychotronic Video*'s approach to "trash," as opposed to *Film Threat*'s.

This skewing of focus towards a particular notion of trash, as a cinema of the past that has been neglected – what Matt Hills has dubbed "archivist" trash (2002a: 61) – downplays how "trash" can be defined differently by different communities. Jack Stevenson, for example, though writing on a variety of subjects covering historical underground and exploitation, as well as more contemporary currents, nevertheless defines trash as related to an underground, rather than archival-exploitation, sensibility. It is true that the two terms are not entirely distinct, hence underground "trash" is influenced by historical exploitation, but for Stevenson this is a mode of film-making that is very much manifested in low-budget "underground" films and practiced by filmmakers such as Jack Smith, George Kuchar, John Moritsugu, and Craig Baldwin. He argues that it is a form of *anti-art*:

> Like surrealism, it [trash] enables the film-maker, via a distorting prism of exaggerated stylisation, to use block humour to deal with shocking, horrifying or otherwise untouchable subject matter that would have been impossible to treat in a more conventional style. (Stevenson 2003b: 130)

For Stevenson, trash films self-consciously adopt a junkyard aesthetic, inverting the meaning of trash and adopting it as a badge of pride. These filmmakers collect cultural debris and construct a new aesthetic out of it; whereas Sconce's paracinematic subculture comprises critics who unearth and extol such debris and tend to find modern filmmaking wanting by comparison.

The archival bent within the paracinematic community can sometimes slip into a nostalgic tone (a tone, as mentioned, also evident in some accounts of camp). For some of these critics, the urge to delve into the more obscure and maligned recesses of film history can go hand in hand with a rejection of where cinematic culture, and often culture as a whole, currently stands. This also ties in with a rejection of the "mainstream" and an anti-corporate ethos: it is often considered that older cinematic culture allowed for a wider range of films to be seen because of the greater opportunities for small businesses to thrive. This often leads, in particular, to nostalgia for older "drive-in" "fleapit," and "grindhouse" cinemas and a distaste of the increasing, corporate-led dominance of multiplexes. This attitude is clear in Stephen Puchalski's following comments in introducing a collection of his criticism:

> More than just irreverent criticism, it's also a glimpse into a time long gone. Before the drive-ins I used to haunt during my college years were turned into mini-malls. Before the cool mom 'n' pop stores were buried by corporate-owned chains. Before 42nd Street – once renowned for its unsurpassed array of porno booths, convulsing junkies and gorgeous old theatres – was transformed into a Disney tourist trap. (Puchalski 2002: 9)

The link to films being consumed during a period of growth is explicit here, and this may well be a factor in other trash film connoisseurs' preference for films of a bygone era: they recall a formative period in their lives, when these types of films had particularly meaningful connotations, opening up as they did a vista to "another world."

This question of films being "meaningful" to particular viewers once again returns us to the question of "affect." As Sconce himself noted, the lack of focus on this particular angle was indeed a missing ingredient of his seminal article. And yet, this remark appears within an edited collection on "trash" cinema – *Sleaze Artists* – in which many contributors still tend to overlook this affective dimension. Many viewers, however, would not see themselves as gaining pleasure out of such films in a distanced, primarily ironic manner. Examples abound from people who are actually strongly affected by such films and approach them, sometimes write about them, in a serious manner. Tim Lucas's *Video Watchdog*, for example, is a consumer guide to "fantastic" cinema in which a number of such films are approached with a straight face. He and his contributors may not always acclaim such films as works of genius, and may not always maintain an entirely serious tone, but the "highly ironic" attitude identified by Sconce is not a particularly marked feature within the magazine. Likewise, Andrew Caine has written that although the "Beach Party" films made by AIP in the 1950s and 1960s have been reclaimed by some critics in ways that conform to Sconce's arguments, others – such as fans of Annette Funicello – tend to appreciate the films that she was in as "quality" products, related to ideals of "wholesomeness" (Caine 2001). Additionally, many people have recuperated these and related films in more ambiguous ways: while they may appropriate elements of them ironically, they also tend to value their soundtracks as "good." They therefore overlook the presence of music such as Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello and instead focus on more "canonized" sounds:

> Fans of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and the Beach Boys who relish *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956) and A.I.P. beach movies are arguably not engaged in "an overall aesthetic of calculated disaffection" (Sconce, 1995: 376), but rather cementing their own "good" taste according to the canonical hierarchies evident within rock criticism. (Caine 2001)

This should alert us to the complexities at work within the consumption of films that Sconce includes within his paracinematic list. Different people will appropriate films for different purposes, hence Ed Wood biographer Rudolph Grey's distaste of those who enjoyed the director's work ironically. We should therefore remember that paracinematic viewing coexists with other ways to evaluate such films. Caine's argument also points to the ways that separate textual elements can be consumed differently, so that "ironic" and "earnest" attitudes towards a single film (or a set of films) can be both present in people's responses to films.

Another problem in focusing only on the ironic recuperation of these types of films is that it leads to a contradictory position. If such films are only ironically recuperated, if we can only appreciate them because of their unintentional deviations from aesthetic norms, then there is an implicit suggestion that they are actually "bad." This, at least to some extent, goes against the argument that Sconce makes about this viewing community challenging taste. In fact, it merely reaffirms taste if it accepts such movies are actually "bad" (even if it does expand the parameters of acceptability). Such an approach also places doubt upon Sconce's claims that this community challenges the types of questions that can be asked about the cinema; bringing into question not just *what* types of films should be studied, but *how* such films should be studied. On the contrary, it would seem to close down how such films can be approached. It is for this reason that Chibnall, in a subsequent article, argued that "we should be wary of dismissing cheap genre productions as 'paracinema', dumb sensationalism which can only be camply appreciated as 'bad film'" (Chibnall 1997: 98).

There is a further problem with Sconce's focus on a selected range of critical material: his occasional tendency to make broader assumptions about audiences that is never actually evident in that material. Mark Jancovich has drawn attention to how Sconce slips into making unwarranted assumptions about audience responses to these films. For example, Sconce claims that paracinema is potentially political when he writes that "it compels even the most casual viewer to engage with it ironically, producing a relatively detached textual

space in which to consider, if only superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation" (Sconce 1995: 393). As Jancovich points out, however, this argument "fails to see that these responses are not the 'effects' of texts but the products of different cultural competence and dispositions" (Jancovich 2002: 311). Jancovich argues that Sconce incorrectly claims that paracinema challenges "bourgeois" taste or "legitimate" film culture. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, which Sconce also employs, Jancovich points out that paracinematic reading strategies privilege form over content, which Bourdieu had shown to be a "bourgeois" approach to art and which is a result of social inequality (2002: 311). Thus, this viewing community has much more in common with existing academic practice than it would like to admit, even if it does challenge some of its prevailing aesthetic tendencies. Ultimately, Jancovich argues, both "legitimate" film culture and paracinematic viewers privilege formal readings of film in order to place themselves in a superior position to "average" or "mainstream" segments of film viewers. He continues:

> far from serving as a reminder that "taste . . . is a social construct with profoundly political implications", paracinema is at least as concerned to assert its superiority over those whom it conceives of as the degraded victims of mainstream commercial culture as it is concerned to provide a challenge to the academy and the art cinema. (Jancovich 2002: 312)

This criticism is valid, though we should also be careful not to completely flatten out the differences between various segments of "educated" approaches to film art. While there may be similarities between these viewing "communities" – similarities that Sconce does not entirely overlook – their varying tastes and arguments also need to be acknowledged.

The point that Jancovich makes about paracinema communities being keen to assert their superiority over "mainstream" viewers should remind us of the earlier point made about how such viewers may on the one hand be engaged in "cultural leveling," but on the other hand produce exclusions. Matt Hills has looked at how some films and film communities beyond the mainstream can also be "othered" by paracinema *and* more "legitimate" forms of film culture. Focusing primarily on the *Friday the 13th* franchise, Hills claims that a number of slasher films have "marked one limit to trash's classificatory elasticity" (Hills 2007: 219). He draws attention to the fact that not *all* neglected "cultural detritus" is accorded the status of trashy art within paracinematic canons. Some films, including a number of slasher films, are not only regarded as worthless within more traditional forms of legitimate film cultures, but also are maligned within a number of the paracinematic publications that Sconce focuses on. They are not, though, generally representative of the "mainstream" and, adds Hills, actually have their own "cult" followings on the fringes of film culture. This demonstrates that a number of separate film viewing communities compete in different ways to vouch for the cultural value of particular films. As a majority of slasher films have been neglected not only by established film communities, Hills terms them "para-paracinema":

> As para-paracinema – simultaneously other to trash and legitimate film cultures – it indicates that [sic] ways in which paracinematic and legitimate film reading protocols can become tactically aligned through a shared revulsion for the untutored, the artless, and the commercial turned cultish. (Hills 2007: 232)

The points made by Jancovich and Hills highlight how there are a greater number of competing communities battling over the status of different groups of films than Sconce originally acknowledged. Because of the ways in which individuals differ in their tastes from other individuals, we should also be cognizant of the ways in which viewers may not always imaginatively identify with the same film viewing community at all times. To cite a hypothetical example: a person could identify and "belong" to a paracinema community when participating in an online forum, but may differ from many of the other members in her or his keen interest in political documentaries, around which he or she has formed a separate community. It is also the case that different communities themselves may forge allegiances over issues of taste on some issues and diverge greatly over others. To add to the complexity of these cultural dynamics, such alignments and divergences are not static: they are forever shifting in relation to the different socio-historical contexts in which they exist.

Conclusion

In 1995, when "Trashing the Academy" was first published, Sconce wrote how the phenomenon of paracinema was making inroads into elite culture itself, including academic film studies. Since then, academic attention to "trash" has increased as a new generation of scholars with interests in exploitation-related cinema have undertaken scholarly research. Not only have PhDs and academic publications related to such topics increased, but there has been a growth of conferences and courses within this subject area. Sconce also noted how the phenomenon was infiltrating mainstream culture, pointing out the television program *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and the film *Ed Wood* as examples. This process has also increased, as evidenced by Tarantino's continual urge to make bigger-budgeted "exploitation" pictures and the increasing accessibility of once difficult-to-find "trash" items (the latter process no doubt having reached new levels due to the growth of the internet). This process, which Hawkins terms "mainstreaming trash aesthetics" (2000: 205), demonstrates how the status of cultural objects can shift over time and across space: yesterday's "trash" can transform into tomorrow's "treasure" (to borrow terminology from Egan 2007), as evidenced by the previously "low" cultural artifact *Godzilla* being released at cinemas (and then DVD) by the British Film Institute in 2005, as it was now valued for its cultural significance. Of course, not all trash has been recuperated and there will always be films that slip through the net of cultural revaluation. Potentially, however, any film is capable of being rescued from the cultural garbage heap and transformed into a valued artifact.

The excavation of previous attitudes predating paracinematic approaches to film has been occurring alongside the academic revaluation of trash. Sconce, in his original article, noted a few predecessors to the phenomenon he was exploring: these included the surrealists, who attempted to buck the trend of bourgeois thinking by celebrating marginalized populist works, such as Loius Feuillade's serials and Max Sennett comedies. Joan Hawkins (2000: 18–20) has discussed "Macmahonism" as another crucial predecessor in this regard: named after the Cinema Macmahon in Paris, it refers to a number of French critics who lauded popular American cinema over more established "highbrow" fare and thus controversially challenged "legitimate" taste. Greg Taylor, in his book *Artists in the Audience* (1999), has identified "cult" and "camp" approaches to film art in the work of critics Manny Farber and Parker Tyler, and which fed into the work of Andrew Sarris as well as selected elements of the American Underground community (see Chapter 4 for more on Macmahonism and these critics). Despite their differences, what these critics shared was a celebration of "junk," which allowed them to display their own unique position through creatively transforming derided art works (Taylor 1999: 1–8). Sconce himself has more recently identified further paracinematic precedents in the work of Pauline Kael, whose 1969 article "Trash, Art and the Movies" extolled the AIP exploitation picture *Wild in the Streets* as a much more relevant film than the critically lauded *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

It is clear, then, that "camp" and "paracinematic" sensibilities have permeated the academy and the broader cultural fabric. This has marked important shifts in the legitimacy of what can be studied and how it should be studied. It should nevertheless be pointed out that a broadly ironic form of film appreciation is only one way of approaching neglected, derided works and should not lead us into thinking that we cannot evaluate such films from different perspectives (such as analyzing them as serious, aesthetic productions).

Notes

1. The ambiguities, anxieties and sentiments surrounding Hollywood's child cult are celebrated in Austrian artist Martin Arnold's *Alone. Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (1998), a short film of footage featuring child actors Rooney and Garland (in one of their many Andy Hardy pictures) that is alternately sped up or slowed down to highlight supposed innuendo in the relationships between the child actors and their adult counterparts.

2. We should note that there is a different way of describing paracinema which in fact precedes the use of the term by Sconce, but which has not gained such widespread currency. This refers to forms of experimental cinema that were attempting to expand cinema beyond its more common understandings, through – for example – creating works without film cameras, and which overlaps with other conceptual art practices emerging in the 1960s.
3. More recently, a small-circulation magazine entitled *Paracinema* – which focuses on "B-movies, cult classics, indie, horror, science-fiction, exploitation, underground and Asian films from past and present" – began publication in 2007. See www.paracinema.net for more information.

9

Transgression and Freakery

The apparent desire of cultists to experience something "different" can lead to strange forms of appreciation, as we have seen in the previous chapters. This chapter addresses how cult cinema's modes of reception are informed by debates around how they break boundaries of morality and challenge prohibitions in culture, how they dispute commonsense conceptions of what is normal and acceptable, and how in doing so they confront taboos. Among the most often mentioned instruments through which cult cinema is said to do this are "transgression" and "freakery."

Before we start, it is necessary to specify how perceptions and experiences of transgression and freakery lie at the heart of a particular range of cult receptions, namely *affective receptions*. As we have noted in previous chapters, aspects of perception such as curiosity, camp, and irony are of significance in sketching the cultist's interest. So are intense aspects of attachment such as fandom and idolatry. Those tools remain of high significance in how transgression and freakery are approached. Next to that, however, affective appreciation is a specifically crucial element in the perception and experience of transgression and freakery. In particular, cult cinema receptions negotiate *negative* forms of affect such as disgust, revulsion, and aversion. We noted in the previous chapter how Joan Hawkins' (2000) extension of Jeffrey Sconce's discussion of paracinema brought into focus the importance of *affect*, the impact of films upon viewers in a physical and emotional sense. She observed how affect played a role of importance in the cult reputation of films that traversed the distinction between high- and low-brow. The examples Hawkins gives are the silent documentary on autopsies, *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, and *The War Game*, a realistic imagination of the effects of a nuclear attack on the English population. Hawkins points out how the reception of these films was peppered with phrases such as "terrifying," "sickening," "destruction," "appalling," "haunting purity and truth," and she argues that rather than denunciations these terms actually were expressions of appreciation – appreciation for how, viewers claim, these films confront a sort of deep anxiety (2000: 15). As Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 10) remark, such fascinations and framings also underlie the cult reputations for films dealing with traumas that defeat representation, such as the holocaust.

Why would anyone emotionally like films about autopsies, nuclear war, or the holocaust? It could be out of a sincere sense of rebellion against what is perceived as a suffocating pressure from dominant morality. It could be out of a performative desire to provoke reaction. It could also be out of an attitude that attempts to challenge intellectualizations of film viewing – and cultural appreciation in general. It could also be out of empathy and alignment with the margins of society. Kinkade and Katovich (1992) argue that one of the key components of cult viewing's oppositional attitude is its empathy with the "little people," with which not only is meant those in disadvantaged socio-economic and cultural positions, but also literally little people (the non-normative physical body) and, by extension, every example of the anomaly, the persecuted, the outcast, and the victim. In Chapter 1 we have used the term "affective communities" to describe the ways in which a

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sensibility like this finds a grounding with a group of viewers and how it is part of a collective experience in which "the other" is always part of the consideration. The processes through which this occurs are the focus of our attention in this chapter.

Essentially, if we want to understand how the cult receptions of films that repulse or disgust viewers become tools for forging a feeling of community, we have to understand how these challenges to morality or confrontations of taboos work, how they reach viewers, and how these viewers articulate their fascination.

Taboo

A taboo is a cultural prohibition, an act seen as morally wrong. Central to understandings of taboo is the concept of "impurity" as an opposition to the normative "purity." Traffic *between* instances of purity and impurity challenges cultural systems and practices, thus leading to taboos. In the context of studies of cult reception, the concept of taboo has led scholars and critics to explore anthropological ideas to assess how cultism and (im)purity are linked to each other. Three of the main sources of inspiration in that respect have been Mary Douglas, Julia Kristeva, and Mikhail Bakhtin, all of whom have considered the body the central site for discussions of morality and taboo.

The work of Douglas and Kristeva concentrates mostly on how bodies perform a structural role in presenting or preserving a cultural order that is fixed into stable normality. As a result of this concern, they see taboos as a reflection on the contamination of perceptions of purity by impure mechanisms. Incest, for instance, is a form of violation of the established normality of intercourse and sexual contact between bodies. As a consequence the focus of what a taboo is moves away from the ways in which a taboo protects normality towards the forms of traffic and communication through which purity – and normality – are assaulted. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas (1966) points out that the traffic between the inside and outside of the body correlates strongly with what cultures see as taboos. A crucial element here is that of any substance that allows for the crossing of borders between the inside and outside of the body. Mostly such materials are fluid, moist. If we look at the kind of fluids that traverse the borders between the inside and the outside of the body, they are all, to some extent, subject to taboos. Some, such as tears and sweat are easily accommodated – though not in every situation. Others, such as spit, blood, pus, urine, semen, menstruation, lactation, or feces are much more severely sanctioned and regulated. In sum, the regulation of the transfer of bodily fluids forms the cornerstone of how groups of people perceive themselves, and how they act as a culture.

Kristeva (1974, 1982) applies the concepts of taboo and impurity to semiotics, especially those of texts of horror, which she sees as teeming with instances of impurity she calls *abjection*. Abjection, literally "the state of being cast off" is a concept that denotes the threatening "unsaid" by virtue of which meaning can be delineated. Abjection is where cultural meaning collapses. It is that which must be expelled for normal meaning to exist. Abjection is also what language fails to describe – hence the frequent usage of "yuk," "ouch," and similar terms to indicate moments of abjection. In terms of the law, the abject is that which fails to respect rules and against which the law gains meaning. In terms of identity, abjection is that which is not "I" and which threatens identity, often because it involves a fluid breaking through the skin, or because it involves bodies with missing parts. Traversing the border between the tightly regulated outside of the body and its messy and often uncharted inside (uncharted in semiotic terms) is often regarded as traumatic. Images such as blood, vomit, urine, and feces, and "monstrous" creatures with disintegrated bodies are abject in the sense that they do not respect borders: the aforementioned fluids continually spill out of bodies, thus passing from the "I" to the "not I"; the monster often signifies a collapse of boundaries, such as mutated bodies or bodies that are neither dead nor alive.

Like Kristeva's, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1965) approaches the concept of taboo through a discussion of the origins of language, meaning, and semiotics. But Bakhtin uses a different angle, that of the "carnivalesque." The term derives from the word "carnival," a seasonally recurring festive event that marks the overturning of the routines and regulations of daily, normal life. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is a unique instance in the social processes of meaning-making in which taboos are lifted and people are allowed to engage in what is otherwise culturally

prohibited. During the carnival, amorality and immorality are condoned, and impurity and abjection are encouraged. Bakhtin argued that in the Middle Ages the carnival acted as a suspension of established order. While only temporary, it was a means by which to transgress the norms and regulations of official society, and hence an attempt to unhinge its rigid hierarchies (which kept the lower classes "in their place"). During the carnival, official icons, figures and rituals were mocked and ridiculed and an alternative, inverted society was acted out. The carnival, argued Bakhtin, was an expression of a worldview: a refusal to accept the certainties, and the seriousness, stipulated by the dominant order. The "grotesque" played a central part in the transgressions of the carnival: the flesh and the body – including those aspects often hidden by decorum – were celebrated. Objects of fear, meanwhile, underwent excessive distortion so that their power could be dealt with on a tangible level. Laughter, orgiastic pleasure, and grotesquery (especially grotesque bodies), which were both inimical to official culture, were celebrated as subversive acts, and the dominant order was rendered relative through its inversion. Umberto Eco (1984) qualifies the Bakhtinian take on subversion by adding that the carnival carries within itself the revenge of the established order, which governs the extent of the subversion in terms of time and the kind of rules that can be subverted. Still, the carnival may have been temporary, but it offered a glimpse of an alternative society and thus demonstrated that the current order was not eternal.

From Taboo to Cult?

There have been numerous attempts to link the cult appeal of films to theories of taboo. Robin Wood (1979) relied on ideas of Wilhelm Reich and on Marxist cultural materialism to draw up a categorization of horror films that represented monstrosity as either liberal or reactionary. Barbara Creed (1987, 1993) developed her ideas on the feminine as monstrous through the work of Douglas and Kristeva. Ideas of Bakhtin have inspired analyses of John Waters and Lloyd Kaufman's Troma films (Mendik and Schneider 2002). A lot of scholars and critics of cult cinema are eager to point to abounding fluids and deviant bodies in order to suggest a film as a cult film: the disintegrated bodies in *Freaks*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, or *Cannibal Holocaust* (Brottman 1997), the bodily fluids abounding in porn chic films such as *Behind the Green Door* (Peary 1989), the liquid mirror (and fluid reality) in *Donnie Darko* (King 2007), the shower and blood in *Daughters of Darkness* (Mathijs 2004), or numerous scenes in the *Emmanuelle* franchise (Mendik 2004 singles out the scene in the squash court). *Showgirls* seems to have every scene constructed around the exchange of fluids by hyperbolically deviant bodies, the most infamous of which are perhaps the pool orgasm scene and the pole licking scene (Hunter 2000; Lippitt *et al.* 2003).

But where are the boundaries of such strategies of interpretation? The arguments of Douglas, Kristeva, and Bakhtin are extremely universalist. They are constructed in a manner that applies to all cultures, all actions, all meaning, to every cultural product and, by extension, every film. For one, they can function as barometers of degrees of cultism. They illustrate the cult appeal of a variety of films because they give reasons for *how*, among other explanations, some films are seen as bad, oppositional, or countercultural because of the ways they depict or confront taboos. Moreover, they offer cultists the opportunity to reinforce their cultism, as it were, by offering it a philosophical rationale and grounding in cultural history it might otherwise not achieve, simply through association with theories of taboo and deviance in culture.

Besides the positive role conceptualizations of taboo play in offering theoretical grounding for the study of cult films, the problem is that their universalism invites scholars to ignore the context-specific components of production and (especially) affectively experiencing certain films as "different" because they confront taboos and challenge morality and normalcy. Establishing direct links between conceptualizations and a film's properties also carries the danger of overlooking that producers and audiences are actively and self-consciously aware of the implications of instances of impurity, abjection, or the grotesque in films. Consider the act of licking, which we referred to earlier. It could easily be argued that such exchanges of body fluids triggers cultism – makes a film cult and allows audiences to use its shock value as a tool in seeing it as cult. During



Figure 9.1 The exchange of bodily fluids: licking in *Emmanuelle*, *The Brood*, and *Showgirls*.

her journey towards ultimate sex in the first *Emmanuelle* film, Emmanuelle (Sylvia Kristel) is instructed to lick the face of a sweaty martial arts fighter; in *The Brood*, Nola (Samantha Eggar) really shocks Frank (Art Hindle) by licking her bloodied fetus; and in *Showgirls*, stripdancer Nomi (Elizabeth Berkley) answers the provocation of Cristal (Gina Gershon), who licks her boyfriend's cheek suggestively, by licking the pole-dancing pole, up and down (Figure 9.1).

Douglas argues that strict governance over such behavior marks the enculturation of communities; using the act of licking is a provocation of this governance. Is viewers' obsession with them, then, one more sign of their refusal to act as a validation of such enculturation? Perhaps it is. But in order for this to be the case *equally*, the production and reception contexts of all three films would have to be identical. And they are not: *Emmanuelle* belongs to a different framework of presentation and reception than *The Brood*, and *Showgirls* is dissimilar from both, and each film addresses its context in its own way. For instance, the three films were made in contexts that had widely varying views on the representations of sexuality on-screen (encapsulated in tags such as "porn chic," "body horror," and "camp"), and they operated within production cultures that used hyperbole in distinctive ways. As a consequence, their grossness is of a different order and their receptions are marked by qualities that identify them as cults *in separation*.

In sum, in addition to turning towards universalist conceptualizations of taboo, research into film cults needs to give attention to context-specific ways in which films offer ways, formally and self-consciously, to make impurity, abjection, and the carnivalesque and grotesque detectible rather than just deducible. Scholars of cult cinema have made several attempts to theorize such ways, and it is to these we now turn.

Transgression

The most notable context-specific notion that informs the study of cult cinema's appetite for taboo, abjection, grotesquerie, and impurity is that of "transgression." Commonly understood, transgression is any act that violates law or morality; more broadly, it refers to the act of passing beyond any imposed limits.

Barry Keith Grant (1991) has argued that transgression plays a central role in the construction of cult films. He states that transgression can take place on the level of *content*, in terms of *attitude*, and in a *stylistic* sense. In relation to content, transgression occurs through the representation of acts or objects that may be considered threatening to social norms, or may be deemed obscene. Grant cites *Freaks* as an example of representational content that is transgressive. Grant also notes that the attitude of the filmmaker(s) may also be transgressive in that they may deliberately

attempt to outrage. Such is the case with John Waters, whose early films such as *Pink Flamingos* often involved direct challenges to good taste. Thirdly, transgressive form involves stylistic excess, which can be understood as either competent excess (the use of kinetic pyrotechnics in the *Mad Max* movies) or incompetence (the ineptitude of *Plan 9 from Outer Space*). In his analysis of transgression, Grant also addresses the issue of reception, in particular when he argues that reception attitudes can undo some of the transgressive elements of a film. As such, the specific receptions of cult films can be equally subversive (in their flirting with taboo) and recuperative. For Grant they are actually more likely to be recuperative than subversive or taboo-challenging.

While Grant contends films such as *Night of the Living Dead* or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* are ostensibly transgressive on a number of levels, they ultimately "reclaim that which they seem to violate" so that the cult viewer "ultimately gains the double satisfaction of both rejecting dominant cultural values and remaining safely inscribed within them" (Grant 1991: 124). In most cases, Grant sees little opportunity for transgression to touch audiences. Consider the 1979 Toronto Film Festival, which contained a retrospective of the films of George Romero. Before the screening of *Night of the Living Dead*, critic Robin Wood wanted to discuss with Romero how the film was ideologically subversive: "the audience, however, was impatient with such talk, became rude, and shouted for him to leave the stage so they could enjoy the movie" (Grant 1991: 128). Grant suggests that this means that the film's transgression, which Wood further analyzed in his article "An introduction to the American horror film" (1979), is recuperated by an audience attitude that refutes it in favor of "a good time." He writes: "the fact that the film can be read as a biting critique of the American middle class accounts for little of its cult appeal, although for those who can perceive it, this theme lends a degree of respectability to ... a real horrorshow" (Grant 1991: 128). We would argue that the audience's reaction does not preclude their perception of *Night of the Living Dead*'s transgression. In fact, their boisterous behavior, which for Grant is a sign of their desire "to see the good parts," could well be a sign of its affective impact with audiences, which may well harbor sentiments that would include regarding the film as a biting critique – perhaps even triggered by the initial "ouch!" and "ew!" Grant presupposes audiences jump immediately to a level of interpretive sophistication without passing through an affective moment. We would like to suggest such an affective moment is essential as a reaction to representations of transgression that then enable interpretations and analysis of exactly which taboos are challenged and how this makes a film (like *Night of the Living Dead*) a critique of morality.

Another complication to the audience reception of transgression is the fact it can be performed, faked. The way in which the fandom for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* developed into a ritualized audience response with predetermined costumes and repetition of character lines is, for Grant, a sign of how any transgression the film might have carried over onto viewers was now undone: "The performative nature of this audience response was scripted, predetermined; it discouraged spontaneous improvisation by newcomers and suggested that this community of readers was in its own way as conformist and repressive as the middle class satirized on the screen" (2000: 21). This argument is rather sweeping. Other accounts of the receptions of both films offer counter examples that suggest that the "truly trangressive experience" (as Grant calls it) *can* be achieved even when receptions are steeped in recuperation as long as affective audience activities are not overlooked (see several of the essays in Weinstock 2008). Nevertheless, the observation on the performative nature of perceptions of transgression is valid and insightful.

J.P. Telotte (1991a) also claims transgression is a key element of cult movies, and he too relates the concept to both a film's textual properties and its reception (unlike Grant he sees it as an element of both in *equal* measure). Telotte asserts that the transgression of reason – the love for unreason – is a central trope running through cult cinema, most evident in the relationship between the film and its fans: "What the film cultist embraces is a form that, in its very difference, transgresses, violates our sense of the reasonable. It crosses boundaries of time, custom, form and – many might add – good taste" (1991a: 6). Like Grant, Telotte points to the fact that "the act of transgression may be little more than a gesture; it might

only signal a kind of cook's tour of various formal and cultural borders that, in the end, simply returns us . . . to a world of reason where we can relish the feeling of transgression" (1991a: 6). Telotte describes here a kind of transgressive tourism, in that we vicariously delve into forbidden and dangerous territory only to return to a world of reason. Midnight movie screenings are the most obvious examples of outré viewing experiences that are positioned as transgressive because they cross the boundaries of time and custom, but at the same time are comforting for those who attend them precisely to enjoy the aura of difference. This double process could be related to Georges Bataille's writings, a theorist who is brought up frequently in discussions of cult cinema (Botting and Wilson 1997). Bataille argued that death was the ultimate limit, an existential full stop, and that our transgressive yearnings are self-destructive because they ultimately lead to death. Because of human capacity for self-destruction, societies restrain this damaging potential through the imposition of taboos. Thus, "transgressive" films are a means whereby we can act out urges in ways that do not endanger ourselves. Yet, even when taboos are channeled via film representation, the results can still cause social outrage.

In sum, cult films offer ways to enjoy transgression safely and can challenge conceptions of normalcy. We need to accept, though, that audience experiences can contain performative and ritualized *as well as* affective reactions to moments of abjection, impurity and grotesquerie that appear to challenge taboos and confront morality. Often cult fans believe this is one and the same thing *and* they act as if they believe it.

Freakery

The complexity of studying how cult films break or challenge taboos by pinpointing the process of transgression is further complicated by the notion of "freakery." While very similar to transgression, freakery is even more dependent on context-specific reception conditions, in particular because of its singular focus on deviant human bodies as sites of transgression. Human bodies provide a ready point of reference for audiences. Therefore, the high visibility of freakery has attracted lots of analogies between freaks-on-screen and freaks-in-the-audience.

One of the earliest attempts to conceptualize the notion of freakery comes from Leslie Fiedler (1978). In his analysis, Fiedler goes further than the dictionary definition of "the freak" (as a fellow human whose physically anomalous features are stressed through exhibition) by asserting that freaks help establish the normality of those who witness the spectacle. He thus pushes the notion of freakery into one of perception. Similarly, Robert Bogdan (1988: 10) sees a freak as "a way of thinking, of presenting, a set of practices, an institution – not a characteristic of an individual." According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1996: xviii), "the freak is a historical figure ritually fabricated from the raw material of bodily variations and *appropriated in the service of shifting social ideologies*" (our emphasis). She adds: "the freak of nature [is] a freak of culture" (1996: xviii).

To the elements of perception and reception needs to be added that of performance. Fiedler (1996: xiv) refers to the success of *Freaks* by suggesting it found its audience among the "drug-obsessed generation of the sixties, young men and women who though physiologically 'normal,' liked to refer to themselves as 'freaks'." The suggestion here is that these audiences perform freakery – for Fiedler they are not really freaks but they like to be regarded as such because of their perception that their position at the margins of normalcy is akin to that of the disabled person. With that self-perception also comes an attention for ways in which freakery is culturally positioned, in particular for the abject, the grotesque, and the impure. For Fiedler it would be no coincidence that the attention for his work coincided with the cult appeal of films such as *Freaks*, *Eraserhead*, *The Elephant Man*, *Alien*, or *The Brood*, films to which he alludes. The element of performance of freakery is not uniquely one of reception and perception. As Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (Sandahl and Auslander, 2005: 1–12) argue, it also concerns the presentation and, with it, the self-reflexivity of the performance in the text. Unlike "normative" acting, they state, the performance of disability can never fully move into a neutral mode in which the actor and character fall together. A final aspect of the performance aspect of the reception of freakery lies in how it allows

audiences to take up positions of distinction and superiority. David Church (2011: 3) sees it as follows:

> freakery is premised upon unequal viewing and social relations. A nondisabled audience retains the power to subject the non-normative body (traditionally, that of a person with disabilities) to the ableist gaze as entertaining spectacle, enjoying a mixture of shock, horror, wonder, and pity.

In making this claim, Church follows a trajectory of reason not unlike that of Grant with regard to transgression: freakery confirms the position of superiority of the audience over the forms of instances of impurity, abjection, or grotesquerie in the film they are watching and in that process the potentially subversive aspects of those instances are neutralized, even recuperated into a system of normalcy. As we have seen with regard to transgression, this potential for recuperation, or even indeed its occurrence, does not preclude other non-recuperative modes of appreciation – for instance, by disabled audiences or advocates (such as disabled performance artist Mat Fraser, who has drawn on traditions of freakery as empowering and positive), whom Church here discounts as potential audiences.

Most studies regarding freakery refer extensively to *Freaks*, undoubtedly the best-known cult film that addresses the notion – and an inevitable example in any cursory overview of cult cinema. Originally released conventionally, it outraged people at the time and distributor Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer quickly withdrew it from circulation. It was censored in several countries. It was revived, however, on the exploitation circuit after being picked up by Dwain Esper. While it received a mixed reception, it was lauded by intellectuals in France and played in art house theaters, which led to it being resurrected internationally. It played the Venice Film Festival in 1962 and proved popular on the art house circuit during that decade (Hawkins 2000: 141–148). By 1970 it appeared on the midnight movie circuit. The film has since attained the status of a cult classic and continues to be viewed by new audiences. Much of the scholarly debate surrounding *Freaks* concerns the various strategies the film is said to employ to simultaneously present the freaks (such as the Hilton Twins, Johnny Eck, Prince Radian) as abnormal, to normalize them to the extent that the narrative can set them up as "good," and to re-ostracize them in scenes such as the widely quoted Wedding Banquet. The latter scene is also at the center of studies of the film's reception (most of which are anecdotal and impressionistic), allowing as it does for analogies between the actors' performance of the chant "one of us" as a mantra ("gabba gabba gooble gobble"), and the audience's self-reflexive perception of this mantra as reflecting their own position as unorthodox film viewers (Hawkins 1996, 2000; Brottman 1997; Larsen and Haller 2002).

Besides *Freaks*, there have been numerous films whose receptions are explained as cult through their solicitation of freakery – both in their presentations of deviant human bodies as signs of how they challenge taboos, and in their receptions by audiences seeing themselves as outsiders to normalized viewing routines. *Häxan*, for instance, uses representations of old, weathered, disheveled bodies of women accused of witchcraft in opposition to those of corpulent monks who interrogate them to press a point about the ruthlessness of the inquisition. When such markers are acknowledged by audiences looking exactly for non-normativities (as many viewers of a William Burroughs narrated version of *Häxan* did when the film was re-released in the late 1960s), conflations between the film's argument and its function as a piece of exploitation create an ambivalence upon which a cult reputation can be hinged. *El Topo* is known for providing viewers with the widest and most eclectic samples of freakery. It combines disintegrating bodies (the first ten minutes of the film show an entire village littered with slaughtered people and animals) with disabilities, malnourishment, and non-normative representations of age such as nude pre-puberty children, and naked seniors. In a sense, *El Topo* explodes the concept of "freakery." Yet, as Church (2011: 15) observes, this does not necessarily have positive consequences for representations of disability:

> the freakish body remains read by cultists as a deviant and "transgressive" marker of otherness through which they can assert their oppositional aesthetic in a bid for subcultural cachet. . . . Following the binary logic of cult subcultures, actual social change that could gradually remove essentialist stigmas from the visually "abnormal" body would also remove the taboo and supposedly oppositional connotations of those bodies. Consequently, there would be little incentive for cultists to actively champion political change for people with disabilities without imperiling a major source of subcultural distinction.

One only needs to look at the long line of films with cult receptions that feature short-statured people whose easy association with exploitation and "little people," to use Kinkade and Katovich's (1992) term again, to find evidence of this sensationalism. *Freaks* and *The Wizard of Oz* have been followed by dozens of others: *Forbidden Zone*, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Suspiria*, *The Brood*, *Wild at Heart*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and so on. A lot of films with cult receptions offer framing devices to display these representations. It is part of their ambivalent attitude towards the subject matter: part apologetic, part exploitation. Among the most popular such devices are circus and sideshow environments, ornamental or extravagant settings (a boarding school in *Suspiria*, a rock music stage in *Spinal Tap*, a clinic in *The Brood*). One of the framing devices of *Freaks*, the circus, not only corrals the subject matter, it also carnivalizes it, encouraging audiences to abandon the constraints of realism for their freewheeling and far-fetching interpretations because they would have no repercussions in reality – after all, it is a circus world (for an argument along these lines, see Brottman 1997: 15–48). Church adds, however, that when the cult receptions of these films address the fluidity of the very concept of "freakery," as a constantly shifting concept in itself,

> a small opening for (sub)culturally rethinking freakery in cult cinema can develop [whereby] the "freakish" body would still remain exhibited as spectacle [but] its unruly and excessive qualities would point toward the openness and indeterminacy of all bodies, remaining capable of violating the established boundaries of "good taste." (2011: 15)

The careers of filmmakers such as John Waters (*Pink Flamingos*), David Cronenberg (*Shivers*), Lucio Fulci (*The Beyond*), David Lynch (*Eraserhead*), Peter Jackson (*Bad Taste*) or Paul Verhoeven (*Robocop*) are littered with receptions that place their films as challenges to the idea that a human body can only be of a narrow range of normalcy. A film such as *Splice* charts the mutations through which bodies can go in presenting itself as a discussion on "transmutation," and triggering a reception that circles around what a human body is in the first place. As Church (2005) points out in another essay, films such as *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (or *Of Freaks and Men*, or *In Bruges*) have experienced receptions that concentrate on how they manage to overcome the inclination to show disabled people only as "innocent victims"; they equally portray them as ill-tempered, arrogant, drunk, or in other situations still considered a little inappropriate but close to normative behavior. Iain Smith (2010a) has observed a similar development in the cult reception of the films of Philippine dwarf actor Weng Weng, known for his remakes of Bond materials (*For Y'ur Height Only*). In the case of Weng Weng, elements of "freakery" conflate with other modes such as the orientalist reception of the ethnic other (see Chapter 11) and the irony of camp. In such situations, the performance of freakery becomes a precarious exercise by audiences keen to destabilize processes of film perception.

There are two important complications for freakery. The first concerns gender, the second race. We will address gender separately, in our next chapter. Let us briefly expand on race here. The racialized body as a type of disability (or, occasionally, super-ability) and the complication of color-coding we find in the Tarzan and Kong films (see Peary 1981; Erb 1998) run through cult cinema as a constant thread but it is in the late 1960s that the portrayal of race becomes a real point of contention in cult cinema receptions. In *Night of the Living Dead*, the African-American protagonist overcomes extreme adversity, but in the final few minutes of the film he is killed by a posse of white cops and vigilantes who spot him, shoot him, and remark "here's another one." The abruptness of this ending, and the style in which it is shot (which invites comparisons with television footage of America's race riots of the 1960s) has caused critics like Robin Wood (1979) to see *Night of the Living Dead* as subversive and transgressive. As the aforementioned reaction of Grant (1991) testifies, not everyone agrees. Another example is the *Emmanuelle* franchise. As Xavier Mendik (2004) has observed, the *Black Emanuelle* series are a poignant counterpoint to the official franchise in that it exposes the underlying assumptions of racism and exoticism of the latter – which already held up a mirror of hypocrisy to audiences' taste for exotic sexuality. In each of these cases, a dark skin color is a signifier of a form of freakery.

In a few instances, this non-normativity has been appropriated, and turned into a performative quality, used by film and audiences alike to indicate

awareness of the color coding. That is most notably the case with blaxploitation films (also see Chapter 13). The main articulation of this performative affirmation is the sexually assertive protagonist – a self-assured African-American urbanite whose knack for flair and style helps him/her achieve narrative goals. In many ways, the body in blaxploitation cinema is still non-normative, but in its hyperbolic combination of sexuality, athletic prowess (less so in chases or fights than in swanky posturing), fashion-consciousness (flouting moderation in favor of excess, particularly through exaggerated "Afro" hairstyles), and urban street-smartness (bringing class-awareness into the equation), it helps viewers position themselves in opposition to the kinds of antagonism usually associated with non-normativity. Instead of having to undergo purely affective reactions of disgust, upset, or outrage, blaxploitation's self-aware performativity allows viewers to actively perform those reactions. Examples of films following this mode are *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, and *Welcome Home Brother Charles*. Without doubt the most celebrated cult icon of this appropriation is Pam Grier. Her performance in *Black Mama White Mama*, from the disreputable subgenre of the women-in-prison films, pits her against the model of white female normativity (the blonde, big busted, white girl), a battle she wins through collaboration (Sims 2006; Dunn 2008; Walker, Rausch, and Watson 2009). In the late 1990s, a wave of homage to blaxploitation received cult receptions, most notably Quentin Tarantino's celebration of Grier in *Jackie Brown*, which pitches her as the ideal woman: independent, able, confident.

A final element worth mentioning in relation to "freakery" is the hyperbolic and oversized body of attractions – the super-able body that is too athletic, too muscular, too sexualized. Such bodies are often portrayed in contrast with the diminished capabilities of disabled and non-normative bodies, yet it is equally non-normative. In *Freaks*, the strongman Hercules is easily accepted as "evil" because of his excessive strength, and his sexist ideas. Angela Ndalianis (1994, 1995) has noted the cult fascination with the oversized shape of muscular bodies in superheroes cinema. In his study of the cult fascination for bodybuilding Adam Locks (2010) has observed how the reception of the "ripped" body consists not only of the "shock" of the grotesque deviation from the normative body, but also the "pity" for the body-builders' body as a site of willful and wasteful destruction. Other, similar concerns can be found in the receptions of 1980s' action cinema (*Conan the Barbarian* and *Rambo*, for instance), in the bodily transmutations of performance artists such as Genesis P. Orridge, Orlan, Joseph Beuys Hermann Nitsch, or Jim Rose's Circus Sideshow (Kultermann 1970; Auslander 1997), or in pornography. The athletic porn performer is a sort of freak because of the "feats" they can perform. Here too oversized breasts or sexual organs are seen as a form of disability (see the receptions of the careers of Ron Jeremy, Chesty Morgan, Lolo Ferrari, or Mistress Rhiannon).

In sum, freakery is unorthodoxy made flesh. It is a tool that refers to the deviant body as one that is impure, abject, and grotesque. As a tool, it is used by groups in society that try to establish and defend normalcy, as well as by those that try and challenge it. The latter, among which we count cult audiences, use freakery in two ways: through association with the freak (encapsulated in the term "one of us"), and through affiliation with the potential that freakery brings to upset and challenge taboos. This makes freakery an extremely context-specific notion, which can be of great value in assessing the cult status of films.

Conclusion: Sick Films

In conclusion to this chapter, and to illustrate the ways in which transgression and freakery have operated in context-specific receptions and led to cult reputations, we would like to briefly discuss some kinds of films that owe large parts of their otherwise diverging degrees of cult status to their obsession with transgression and/or freakery. Most of these types of films we will discuss in some form at other points in this book, as belonging to cycles, themes, and/or genres. Here, we bring them together through a discussion of the ways in which they are said to sicken audiences via their confrontations of taboo through moments of abjection, impurity, and grotesquerie. The label of "sick" needs to be understood as containing both positive and negative connotations. For some audiences who identify themselves as cultist a sick film is something negative, while for others a sick film is not only a cult film par excellence but also a sign of admiration. In any case,

"sick" is a tag that helps understand the reaction to a cult film. As such, all of these films' reputations as "sick" are identified through reception categories rather than textual classifications and the blurriness of the boundaries between the two is evidence of how they actually resist *any* categorization. Our goal is to demonstrate how these receptions are characterized equally by sincere, affective reactions of disgust and outrage as well as by self-reflexive modes of performative reception in the negotiation of the phenomenal experience of moments of abjection, impurity, and grotesquerie.

According to Church (2009), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* – based on the work of the Marquis de Sade – is generally considered the sickest film of all time. Its presentations of a wide variety of mutilations and penetrations include acts of rape, sodomy, torture, and eating feces. These acts deliberately challenged audiences and unsurprisingly led to many countries banning the film from public exhibition. *Salò* was the culmination of director Pier Paolo Pasolini's increasingly challenging portraits of human transgression, and can be related to his earlier *Porcile*, which featured human cannibalism and concerned bestiality. Both *Salò* and *Porcile* linked these provocative acts to the theme of fascism and were thus examinations of the limits of human barbarism – forcing viewers to confront the basic cultural question: where does humanity end? According to Church, "*Salò*'s displeasurable affectivity [is negotiated] through classist and masculinist reading strategies, but their performed anxieties reveal the instability of cultural distinctions premised upon displays of (sub)cultural capital" (Church 2009: 1). In other words, the term "sick" refers here to the inability or refusal of audiences to reach conclusions about a film's place in culture. Church's observation about masculinist reading strategies here is telling. It means viewers reject speaking to the misogyny of the film in favor of a relentless and perpetually cyclical debate on its "artistic" or "exploitative" features – as if anything is better than having to admit the film is misogynist. Such a strategy can easily be regarded as a mantra that is part of the insulation of cult receptions. We will return to this point in more detail in our next chapter, when we discuss the rape-revenge film.

Sickness has also played a vital role in the construction, promotion, and reception of John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*, one of the most notorious cult films that proved enormously successful on the midnight movie circuit. Discussing Waters' work in the context of more mainstream attempts to disgust, Mendik and Schneider argue that Waters' early films approach the level of *pure gross-out*:

> It was not merely the vast downward shift in production values, pacing, acting and effects work that distinguished his works from mainstream attempts to offend. Rather, it was the fact that his cross-gendered, orally-obsessed filth fetishists belonged to a wholly distinct order of transgressiveness. (2002a: 205)

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque is used to interpret Waters here. Within the early features of John Waters – *Pink Flamingos*, and his next two films *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* – the material body, particularly in forms that are often repressed, are thrust into full visibility and often exaggerated. In fact, Bakhtin's term "grotesque realism" may be a perfect appellation for Waters' early films, particularly *Pink Flamingos*. The film is, because of its low-budget, "underground" look, connotative of realism. Waters said of this: "the very primitive (by which I mean 'bad') camerawork made people think [it] was like a documentary, and that really added to the scary part. I think the graininess and the cheapness of it all really gave it a further edge" (Kermode 1995: 19). At the same time, its characters and antics are larger than life, deliberately excessive. Additionally, the film is a litany of acts calculated to outrage, from the chicken-aided sexual intercourse to the "singing arsehole," from the slave who masturbates and then injects semen into kidnapped females, to Divine eating dog shit. Waters has claimed that his films are not political, but this is not entirely true. They are not overtly political in a didactic manner. But they are still all about challenging "taste," which is a politically charged motivation; as Waters has written, "To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about" (Waters 2005: 2). The films also challenge peoples' attitudes towards size and gender by parading cross-dressers, transsexuals, and overweight people (Figure 9.2).

Both *Salò* and *Pink Flamingos* (and other films of their directors) are so commanding in their transgression and freakery that they have established their own, unique contexts of reception.[1] This is not always



Figure 9.2 Divine and Edith Massey (as "The Egg Lady") in *Pink Flamingos*: challenging attitudes towards size?

possible. In many cases, films and their receptions have to be negotiated within pressing and well-established frameworks of exhibition and production that force themselves onto any consideration of these films as taboo-breaking, thereby partially disabling the transgression. This is particularly the case with avant-garde and underground cinema, exploitation cinema, and the horror genre, all of which are seen to have it as their duty to transgress, shock, and sicken. For an audience to manage to pull a film out of such a framework is a sign of just how forceful the instance of impurity, abjection, or grotesquerie is, and also how important it is for that audience to achieve this liberation from the pre-established framework – as if the success of the effort liberates them too. Examples include the uneasiness with which a film such as *Flaming Creatures* is included in overviews of avant-garde cinema (see Chapters 3 and 14), the perennially special status of the video nasties (see Chapter 4), and various subdivisions of the horror genre that stubbornly refuse to be recognized as "just another form of horror" – among these, the gore or splatter films of Herschell Gordon-Lewis, such as *Blood Feast* and *2000 Maniacs*, as well as Peter Jackson's early gross-out films, particularly *Bad Taste* and *Braindead* take up a special place (Grant 2000).

Exploitation cycles such as the mondo film have long tried to emulate the cult appeal of the above-mentioned modes of representing bodies in extreme peril. Because of their reliance on artifice, often a result of their limited budgets and talents, they have largely failed to achieve anything close to that authenticity (Goodall 2006). This has not withheld viewers from performing their disgust with these films – as if they were rehearsing it. Probably because of their non-Western origin, Japanese Guinea Pig films, have remained an exception – effectively combining "authenticity" with "exploitation." Jay McRoy (2008: 15–30; McRoy, 2010) points out it has given them a sizeable cult following. Even exploitation films that do not explicate atrocities are frequently keen to reference them; hence the abundance of mondo films employing the terms "holocaust" or "apocalypse" in their titles, soliciting the performance of disgust from viewers.

It appears, then, that for every moment of pure abjection represented on screen there is a context-specific framework that allows not only for viewers to be genuinely disgusted and sickened, but also to perform such reactions – and thereby recuperate into a cultural order whatever challenge was posed.

Note

1. We would like to signal one more important example where we belief any performance or recuperation is extremely difficult and where displeasurable affectivity, to borrow Church's term, remains a core aspect of its cult reception. The film is *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*. It is a fierce critique of the concept of sickness in the light of medical care, and in its treatment of freakery simultaneously a film that interrogates audiences' eagerness to perform modes of cultist viewing that embrace taboo-challenging instances of abjection, impurity, and grotesquerie. *Sick* shows a performance by terminally ill Bob Flanagan, whose entire life was affected by severe pain (he suffered from cystic fibrosis), that aimed to bring attention to the concept of "pain" – an element of bodily disintegration and of disability that is often overlooked in the world of medicine. In *Sick*, Flanagan ultimately hammers a huge nail through his penis – the ultimate act of de-masculinization (Perlmutter 1999; Sandahl 2000; Reynolds 2007).

10

Gender and Sexuality

Representations of women in cult cinema are complicated through the widespread acceptance in film studies of the notion of the male gaze. Most notably theorized by Laura Mulvey (1975) this concept holds that the female body is constructed for the pleasure of male viewership, as a tool for reproducing a patriarchic system of society. The notion of the male gaze also posits that female viewers will have difficulty finding anything in a film that allows positive, empowering identification, thus implying that a female viewer is powerless in her search for enjoyment – a victim, or someone passively undergoing the film. Next to that, there is also the prevalence of anecdotal evidence from cult reception contexts (such as the inner city fleapit theater, the genre festival and university campus theater) that testifies to boisterous audience activities regarding imagery of women, such as howling, hollering, whistling, or lip smacking, or muffled grunts of encouragements.

While the notion of the male gaze has been heavily criticized, and anecdotal evidence of audience receptions needs to be balanced against activities that are less easily construed as misogynist, there is no doubt that cult cinema has a worrisome reputation when it comes to gender equality. In this chapter, we address various components of this reputation as we sketch the most significant debates regarding gender, sexuality, and cult cinema.

Masculinity, Femininity, and Cult

Let us start with a macroscopic reflection on cult cinema and gender as articulated by Joanne Hollows (2003), who mounted a strong argument for a consideration of cult cinema as a masculine construction. The occasion of her intervention was the first international conference on cult cinema in Nottingham, UK, in 2000, and the publication of an influential study of fan-boy fandom of *Showgirls* (Hunter 2000). The *Showgirls* essay stressed how fan-boy fandom was as much a performative act as an admission of sympathy for the film's politics – with irony, camp, and hyperbole as instruments obfuscating differences between the two attitudes.

For Hollows, scholarly struggles such as those with *Showgirls* are symptomatic of perspectives that present all of cult cinema (including associated terms such as paracinema, trash cinema, or subversive cinema) as oppositional to the mainstream. The language used to draw this distinction, argues Hollows, is reminiscent of the ways in which distinctions are drawn between subcultures and popular culture – or indeed within subcultures, where degrees of authenticity are carved out. Hollows draws on research of subcultures by Sarah Thornton (1995) and Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1991) to argue that such distinctions are

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drenched with gendered language (and the values such language imposes), whereby subculture is given a masculine identity of adventurousness, resistance, and heroism, and the mainstream is regarded as passive, homely, and feminine. According to Hollows, a similar distinction operates in cult cinema: "cult has been culturally constructed as masculine," she writes (2003: 39). Hollows's argument may be obviously evident in examples of how erotic and sleaze movies are targeted towards and received by fans. But her claim also reaches farther because it questions just how inscribed ideas of masculinity are in conceptualizations of kinds of cultural appreciation. For one, argues Hollows, the masculinity of cult works to "exclude 'real' women from some of the practices associated with cult fandom" (2003: 39). She adds that:

> *Titanic* might have a "cult" following, but its associations with a feminine and "mass" audience on one hand, and "middlebrow" discourses of "quality" on the other, mean that it is unlikely to be easily accepted into academic or popular cult canons unless the "dominant" and "conservative" meanings of the women's film can be subverted by the strategies of cult fans (Hollows 2003: 38).

Since the publication of her essay, Hollows's claim has been reiterated by numerous other scholars who have noted that films with female cult fans continue to be isolated from what is commonly understood as cult, being lumped together instead with the masses or the mainstream as if their form of fandom is indeed inferior. A good example is recent research on the fandom of the vampire melodrama *Twilight* (Click 2009; Bode 2010).

In the light of critiques such as those of Hollows one would expect cult receptions to adopt a more sensitive approach to representations of gender. This is partly the case. There is a decided increase in scholarly work that notes the presence of discourses around political correctness, gender equality, and feminism within cult receptions (we will detail some of these further on in this chapter). This does not necessarily mean that these discourses dominate the receptions. But their presence is certainly visible. Examples include Annette Hills's (1997) research into discourses of gender in the receptions of films such as *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Man Bites Dog*, or various studies of the reception of *Carrie* or *Ginger Snaps* (Barker, Mathijs, and Mendik 2006). As we have noted in Chapter 6, there has also been increased interest for films with cult receptions that were made by female directors. The films of Dorothy Arzner (*Dance Girl, Dance*), Dorish Wishman (*Deadly Weapons*) or Stephanie Rothman (*Velvet Vampire*) for instance, have been celebrated as exceptions made, against the odds, in an industry largely dominated by exploitation, and their existence has been used to push debates about gender representation in cult cinema (Gorfinkel 2000; Luckett 2003; Modleski 2007). Increasingly, too, films such as *Baise-moi*, *Romance*, *Trouble Every Day*, or *Irréversible* – which are often associated with art cinema – have developed cult reputations of which gender concerns are an integral part.

There has also been some effort to isolate and analyze specifically feminist cults. Part of this involves research into the cultist receptions of activist films such as *Born in Flames*, *A Question of Silence*, or *SCUM Manifesto*, films made by women that concentrate on acts of violence against women, and on ways in which actions against such oppression can be taken (Lane 2000; Rich 1998: 319–325; Udris 2004). The most commonly mentioned example is Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Its style, structure, narrative, acting performances, and even its title are a deliberate challenge to mainstream cinema's androcentricity, and besides the genuine appeal it has with feminists (see Kinder 1977), much of its cult reception is hinged upon its status as an ambiguous work of art. This fits a pattern whereby visceral cult films are considered fan-boy material, while more abstract and intellectual films with cult followings are assigned a reception context that is seen as promoting supposedly more discriminative viewing strategies.

Even in the light of changes that have led to home viewing becoming the predominant site of consumption (hence closer to the femininity associated with domestication), much of Hollows' claim still stands. The core of cultism remains committed to a perspective that substantiates cultism as masculine. Hollows quotes David Sanjek's study of fanzines, which asserts that "self-conscious misogyny" and an "intentionally, juvenile, hard-boiled tone" go hand in hand because "only the most hardened sensibilities can bear the

assault of offensive imagery" (2003: 45). Similarly, Brigid Cherry's (1999) analysis of female fans confirms how women continue to be excluded as part of the imagined community of cult consumption.

Anxieties of Cult Consumption

One reason for the persistence of cult cinema as masculine, and a way of understanding the complexity of the process through which the tag "masculine" is perpetuated in spite of accusations leveled against it is offered by the work of Jacinda Read (2003). Read builds on Hollows's argument. She investigates how the awareness of scholars of a gendered distinction between subculture and the mainstream (and of the efforts signaled above) complicates their ability or eagerness to engage with films (and receptions) that are said to draw much of their cultism from misogyny. An evident exemplification of this awareness has been the term "guilty pleasure," a phrase popularized in the late 1970s when *Film Comment* started a column celebrating critics' favorite films they felt they could not defend, thereby of course mounting exactly that, a defense. It is telling that this backhanded form of defending what was often sexist material originated exactly at a time when "bad cinema" was being re-appraised and the pornographic and horror genres rose to infamous prominence. Read asks if some of the allegations of chauvinism and misogyny leveled against these genres (and their defenses) did not disallow fans and users to find a cultural identity or to amass cultural capital. Do such allegations not take away the possibility of male, straight fans to take up a position from which they can speak to the subject? In other words, does the criticism directed against cult cinema not make it impossible for fans to publicly remain male and straight spectators that are supportive of this kind of cinema? (Read 2003: 58). At the very least it leads to what Read calls "anxiety of consumption" (2003: 58), an acute awareness that in approaching, say, an erotic film one might well be exposing oneself to ridicule simply because of the overtones associated with cultism (we too have had to answer the question "why would you study such woman-unfriendly material" several times). In that respect, it hardly matters that the study of a cult film's *reception* does not imply an agreement with its politics. Attempts to justify, rationalize, or spoof (in the case of Hunter's *Showgirls* essay) analyses are then akin to what Will Straw (1997: 11) called "an ageing male's strategies for survival in a cultural realm in which his place is no longer certain." It puts the male scholar at the same level as the fan-boy, and it chastises both for associating with a kind of cinema that has the reputation of being "wrong." References to camp, irony or hyperbole as instruments of that attempt to survival thus become equally suspect.

Read poses a very valid point, though she offers no solution. Instead, she observes how scholar after scholar fails to provide a sound rationale when they try to claim that "new" forms of approaching cult cinema might offer a way out. Jeffrey Sconce (1995: 379) notes the position of "limbo" and disempowerment from which a lot of academics approach paracinema, as a site for "refuge and revenge." Steve Chibnall (1997: 85) goes perhaps the furthest in suggesting that "psychotronic criticism [which runs] counter to dominant streams of political correctness" and which is "aware of feminism and the politics of difference," can offer "a reassertion of the right to look, to make anything the object of the knowing, sardonic, ironizing and frankly excited gaze." Both Sconce's discussion of paracinema and Chibnall's argument on psychotronic criticism describe efforts not to address the allegation of misogyny but to blow up the system of debate, reasoning, and discourse by embracing outrageousness. Such descriptions certainly help us understand the tactics used by audiences that feel cornered in their right to align themselves with cultural products because of the dubious reputation those products have (rightly or wrongly so). By not taking into account the socio-economic and cultural conditions under which such audiences have to labor for their right to access and enjoy and cultify films, however, they fail to provide insights into just how forceful, demanding, and inescapable some tactics are.

There is also the problem that the very term "masculinity" is often used homogeneously. As Jancovich (2002) has argued, not all viewers operate from the privileged position of the "educated, male, white, middle-class" (to use Sconce's terms as paraphrased by Read) – a position of uncertainty perhaps (as Sconce argues) but unquestionably also one of liberty of access. It is a position not enjoyed by a wide range of viewers

that come from different constellations of class, ethnicity, and – indeed – gender. In fact, this is exactly the point Cherry made when she analyzed female horror fandom. Because there is a much wider range of audiences than those reflected in most research, it is not sufficient to merely describe and automatically dismiss the tactics used by viewers to regain their "right to look." There also needs to be an investigation of the material conditions that regulate the access to cult films those audiences have had, as well as research into the channels through which their cultism (of whatever degree of sophistication) is communicated.

The main implication of Hollows's and Read's work, and the consequence of our remarks above, is that many cult receptions take place in a context of anxiety, especially when it comes to mechanisms of (and receptions of) gender representation. Within these contexts it is absurd to assume that either "femininity" or "masculinity" are homogeneous concepts. Future approaches to gender in relation to cult cinema, then, would benefit by abandoning one-size-fits-all theories in favor of looking into context-specific cult receptions of gender representations – receptions by gendered, actual audiences that use their own *and* others' perception of "masculinity" or "femininity" to define themselves against mainstream culture. We will present some such efforts in the next sections of this chapter.

Non-Normative Sexuality and the Performance of Gender

In order to understand how cult receptions use concepts of gender and sexuality, it is necessary to analyze how these concepts have been embedded into the history of cult. More often than not gender and sexuality are fluid concepts, especially in the case of cult cinema. As Hoberman and Rosenbaum write (1991: 263), "Androgyny, transvestism, and gender blur have been major motifs in midnight movies from *Flaming Creatures* through the John Waters oeuvre to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*." Following Grant (1991: 129) it then becomes "important to consider how the alternative [sexuality] is used or consumed by audiences." In the next few sections of this chapter we will look at how cult films have overtly portrayed non-fixed or non-normative forms of gender and sexuality.[1]

For Judith Butler (1990), gender is always *performed*. It is the result of bodily routines, acts of stylized repetition managed through regulatory discourses: femininity, masculinity, and even the so-called "natural" and "biological" sex of a body are largely the result of cultural discipline. Breaking out of these regulatory constraints, then, is often seen as a subversive act of resistance against dominant ideologies and of liberation of the human body. This is very much the context within which much of cult cinema is discussed. The overt displays of cross-dressing, travesty, and queer sexuality in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Figure 10.1), for instance, feature against a background in which Frank (Tim Curry) constantly comments on the attire and gender presentation of Brad (Barry Bostwick) and Janet (Susan Sarandon) (Weinstock 2007).

Similarly, *Showgirls*, which also has the word "show" in its title, contains a continuous stream of comments on "performing" to be a woman or a man, and the film has elaborate scenes in which women are "checked out" for their female sensuality. In numerous other cult films too, men and especially women comment upon performing gender roles: Ilsa in *Casablanca* does so explicitly when she muses over what kind of woman she is to Victor and to Rick; in *Emmanuelle*, characters continuously comment on Emmanuelle's performance as a liberated woman. Even Emmanuelle's rape is explicitly staged as a performance.



Figure 10.1 In *Fame*, Ralph (Barry Miller) and Doris (Maureen Teefy) perform with the audience of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

There is a historical component to this link between cult cinema and the performance of non-normative sexuality. In their overview of midnight movies, Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1991) refer to the 1970 receptions of three films featuring drag, namely *Performance*, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and *Trash*, as a point in history that highlighted how performances of ambivalent or unfixed sexuality and gender roles were fast becoming a common part of cult cinema. Even films with drag and transvestite performances produced well before the 1970s, such as *Glen or Glenda* or *Some Like it Hot* received new cult appeal during midnight runs in New York in the early 1970s. The cult success of *Rocky Horror* and *Outrageous!*, which featured Bette Davis and Judy Garland-impersonator Craig Russell, continued the trend. For Andrew Ross (1989: 135–136), the link between cult cinema and the performance of non-normative sexuality (especially drag) has its origins in late June 1969 when two apparently unrelated events (the funeral of gay icon Judy Garland and the Stonewall riots that followed the arrest of people attending the gay Stonewall bar in New York) virtually forced a connection between the performance of alternate sexuality and the performance of subversive film viewing (see Chapter 8 for an elaboration on how this influenced camp viewing practices). Before the riots in Stonewall, cultist receptions were usually regarded as straight. After Stonewall, they were increasingly associated with gay and alternate sexuality, and with a conscious awareness of how gender is performed.

According to Staiger (2000: 125–160), however, the link between the collectivity of the cult experience and the performance of non-normative sexuality has roots that precede 1969 or 1970. Staiger's analysis of the receptions of the scene of the New York underground cinema of the early 1960s and especially of films such as *Flaming Creatures* (which features an orgy and several scenes of explicit sexuality) and *Scorpio Rising* (which has gay overtones), sketches a gradual symbiosis, across the decade of the 1960s, between countercultural developments, such as gay culture (we use the term gay here to refer to homosexuality as well as lesbianism and transvestism), and underground cinema that eventually culminated in cult receptions of the kind Ross and Hoberman and Rosenbaum observe. Staiger's research claim has far-reaching implications. On the one hand it demonstrates how cult cinema's development, in the guises of underground cinema, midnight movies and camp, helped find a community for a hitherto non-homogeneous gay culture. But it also suggests that for non-gay audiences who regularly attended cult screenings, and who felt themselves belonging to its subversive, subcultural or countercultural atmosphere, the performance of gender and sexuality of any kind became a notion they grew familiar with. Such a context-specific insight paints in a different light the discussion of the anxiety of male cult consumption we mentioned earlier in this chapter. For one, it signals that analyses of the anxieties of cult consumption receptions warrant placement in a historical context. Another implication is that the multiple lines of association and alignment make it near impossible for researchers to find evidence that justifies drawing a firm dividing line between so-called "innocently straight," "deliberately straight," "closetly gay," or "gender performative" attitudes towards affiliations between counterculture, gay culture, and cult or underground cinema, *especially* when not only "identities are at stake," as Staiger puts it, "but a *movement*," too (2000: 126). It is therefore perhaps more practical to assume, at least in broad overviews of cult cinema, no such line exists (and indeed both naivety and performativity may collide within the actions and beliefs of a single fan). It would also seem prudent, then, to allow the notion of so-called performed gender receptions to be of equal significance as that of so-called frank or earnest ones.

While the developments sketched by Staiger explain how gay culture found an association with a film-viewing community, it does not offer a connection to the mainstream. Many performances of non-normative sexuality remained too adventurous, too openly gay and lesbian or too ambiguous to be considered anything else but "exceptional," "problematic," or "political." That counted for new releases (such as *Harlis* or *La cage aux folles*) as much as for the reappraisal of older films such as Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*, Jean Genet's infamous *Un chant d'amour*, *Mädchen in Uniform*, or *Belle de jour* (Rich 1998: 174–206; Dyer 2003: 63–88, Cairns 2006: 58). *Personal Best* became the totemic lesbian film for a wide audience; it made Mariel Hemingway, who also

appeared in Playboy at the time of the film's release, an iconic yet controversial figure for the lesbian movement (Williams 1982). Within a smaller niche, the films of Monica Treut received a firm cult following (Straayer 1996: 23–41). For gay film cultism, the films of Derek Jarman were important (Richardson 2009).

The early 1990s saw a convergence similar to the one observed by Staiger in the 1960s, in which the performance of gender and non-normative sexuality underwent a further development and found a renewed connection with a film viewing community whose reception activities displayed cultist sensibilities. For the most part, this development is linked to the way in which so-called "New Queer Cinema" changed the narrative and stylistic frameworks through which performances of gender and non-normative sexuality were presented: stories about overcoming adversity became increasingly embedded in a context of "play" and the carnivalesque (with the circus a recurrent background). With the midnight movie circuit on the wane this renewed performativity found exhibition platforms in a growing number of LGBTQ-film festivals (LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer; see Gamson 1996, Rich 1999). Through the LGBTQ networks and communities, films such as *My Own Private Idaho*, *The Living End*, *Les Nuits Fauves*, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *Go Fish*, *When Night Is Falling*, and *Happy Together*, which combined anarchic, mocking, carnivalesque, and ironic attitudes received cult receptions across borders (Feigenbaum 2007; d'Allondans 2009). This change moved gay and lesbian cinema into a reflexive mode and in a permanent niche, a place that was still marginal culturally but that at least provided a secure position from where one could speak (to paraphrase Read's comments from earlier in this chapter). One result of this redirection were receptions that blended in nearly seamlessly with other types of cult receptions through shared stylistic tropes of hyperbole and irony, and shared narratives involving slacking and aimless young adults.

Since 2000, the emphasis on the carnivalesque has intensified to the extent that it has become the dominant lens through which performances of gender and non-normative sexuality are managed. To this has been added a self-reflexivity that roots many of these performances as homage or persiflage of previous performances of gender and non-normative sexuality – with *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, influenced by *Rocky Horror*, among its key examples (Havis 2008: 92–94; we will explore some of the mechanisms of this development in Chapters 21 and 22).

Erotica and the Performance of Gender

Performativity of gender and sexuality is at the center of many exploitation films with high erotic content – the kind of films that are said to reinforce dominant ideology. In fact, the explicit address of the performance of sexual acts and an equally explicit address of the act of observing that performance are key elements of the way in which audiences of erotic cinema are introduced to non-heteronormative forms of sexuality and gender role-playing, while the cultural sanction of this adventurousness is frequently absent. Among the most visible tropes these types of exploitation cinema employ is that of a setting that enables both performance and observation of sexuality – often a shower, a prison, a convent, or a brothel – and a quasi-automatic association of women with eroticism, most often evoked through series of scenes that revolve around female nudity and inferences of lesbian sex that is performed in the presence of (or spied upon by) a male or masculinized authority figure (a prison guard, a security guard, etc.).

A good illustration of this is the women-in-prison film, of which *Caged Heat* is an often-mentioned example (Peary 1981: 44–47). The performances of the film's stars, Erica Gavin and Barbara Steele, act as textbook illustrations of what Pauline Kael (1961) had called the "satire of the female" (Kael had Anita Ekberg's performance in *La dolce vita* in mind). We find similar routines of hyperbolic gender performance at work in nunsploitation films such as *Flavia the Heretic* and *Killer Nun* – with Ekberg in the leading role (Nakahara 2004). In the case of the soft-core erotic thriller too, the performance of female gender is constructed so it can be understood as performed. As Robert Eberwein (1998) and Linda Ruth Williams (2005) have pointed out, in the formula of the erotic

thriller female sexuality is literally put on stage, its performance explicitly worked into a story in which it is surrounded by surveillance cameras and voyeurs. Examples include film such as *9½ Weeks*, *Basic Instinct* and *Scorned*. In this context too, the body of the female is a satire of femalehood. Soft-core erotic parodic films such as *Lord of the G-Strings* and *Spiderbabe* have continued this trend of spoofing womanhood even more explicitly (Hunter 2006; I. Smith 2010b).

Some exploitation films present performances of gender and sexuality in a context of death and destruction. Among the most infamous such cycles is nazisploitation. In the wake of *The Night Porter*, films such as *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*, *Salon Kitty*, and *Gestapo's Last Orgy* have used the stages of camps and brothels to display performances of sadomasochist sexuality within the wider framework of the Holocaust (see Leiva 2008). Such performances are also prevalent in Sade-sploitation, a body of films inspired by the work of eighteenth-century French libertine author Marquis de Sade. Its representations of sadomasochistic submission – in particular blindfolding, chaining, whipping, branding, and piercing – gave films such as *Justine de Sade* and *Histoire d'O* highly contentious receptions. In the case of the vampire exploitation film, performances of gender and sexuality contain strong elements of violence, including torture, rape, and orgiastic sex. Because of the long history of the vampire film, several scholars have suggested that its representation of the performance of sexuality and gender can be seen as a barometer of Puritanism in a culture (Tseëlon 2001). Milly Williamson (2005) argues that vampire fandom, and indeed the entire cult of fashion surrounding the vampire figure, are influenced by views of the Western female as someone "guaranteed to be at fault" with dominant culture, someone "unattainable," an "impossible creature" and a "timeless cultural phantasy" (2005: 144). In vampire movies, this view is pushed to the extreme: women are represented in highly stylized and fashionable modes, yet they are also inaccessible; they are sexual, but out of reach for the spectator. An object of desire and a warning against that desire for both male *and* female viewers, female vampires are *only* performance. Films such as *Rape of the Vampire*, *Fascination*, or *Vampyros Lesbos*, showed women as active hunters as well as passive prey. Harry Kümel's *Daughters of Darkness*, a film highly praised in cult receptions, is often regarded as an example of a vampire film that problematizes the representation and performance of gender and sexuality to the extent that it takes on feminist traits (Mathijs 2004, 2005b; Dion 2009).

Probably the most acute case of the performance of gender and sexuality in the framework of eroticism is pornography, and the porn chic cycle of the 1970s in particular. For Ross (1989: 172) porn chic marks the rise of filmic porn as a full-fledged capitalist industry, characterized among others by a professionalization that saw an increase of women as agents in its production and reception, as well as a stylistic change: explicit penetrative sex was shown in full detail and the performativity of the sex act became the center of the narrative – indeed "performing" this or that sex act was what porn chic was all about. *Behind the Green Door* is an excellent example: Marilyn Chambers is kidnapped and brought to a secret sex club where she is forced to perform sexual acts on stage, surrounded first by only women (dressed as nuns), then by only men. Chambers' performance is attended by an audience that, spurred on by her actions, engages in an orgy. Eventually, the sex acts culminate in an extreme close-up "money shot" that lasts several minutes – one that is frequently commented upon as so surreal in its color-saturated slow-motion that it becomes hyperbolic, even abstract (Peary 1981: 23). *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* and *Café Flesh* too incorporated elaborate stagings and performances, turning these films into comments *about* sex (see Smith 2007). After the heydays of porn chic, the performativity of sexual acts remained a key component of the pornographic film: it informed the cult receptions of *Caligula*, *Debbie Does Dallas* and *New Wave Hookers* and it was central to the crossover reputations of the films of Annie Sprinkle, who moved from being a porn star to a career as performance artist. Hyperbolic examples of performativity in pornography are the performance of Annabel Chong in *The World's Biggest Gang Bang* (which also became the subject of the documentary *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story*), and the collaboration of former Italian porn star Ilona Staller with "husband" artist Jeff Koons. In an attempt to disrupt the patriarchal and androcentric procedures governing sex Staller and Koons "performed" marriage, and ridiculed gender role-playing, sex, and dressing up.

The Performance of Gendered Reception

A complication of the performance of gender and sexuality that affects the reception contexts of cult cinema is that of the performance of gendered reception, or the degree to which audiences perform (i.e. *pretend*) affiliations or sensitivity towards one or another gender in reaction to various representations of, and allusions to, sexuality.

Many longer-term receptions of cult films of which the representations and performances of gender and sexuality had been the subject of controversy or of discussions of how they affected people (porn arouses or disgusts, Nazisploitation repulses, drag liberates, and so on) have experienced moments in which the performance of gendered reception is said to take precedence over any other form or mode of audience activity. In most cases, such performance causes doubt about how sincere or meaningful the reception is, at least in the eyes of the researcher. This is best exemplified by the wide range of analyses of the long-term receptions of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* that try to assess how any of the film's initial liberal politics are forgotten or buried under the high degree of ritualization of the performance of its gendered reception (Wood 1991). As we observed in Chapter 9, there are several context-specific instances in which the performance of gendered audience activity can still be said to achieve some form of transgressive liberation. Nevertheless, the question remains whether multiple layers of performativity do not make it unnecessarily difficult for audiences to access any liberatory content that might lead to personal liberation. In an essay on configurations of femininity in midnight movies, Gaylyn Studlar (1991) asks if the revelation that very few cult films have effectively subverted oppressive norms means that the films are not perverse enough to elicit change, or if they are too easily assimilated. Perhaps, as Grant (1991: 129–130; 2000: 21) suggested, the high degree of ritualized performances of gendered reception is conformist indeed, precisely because it is seen as performed. For Jeffrey Weinstock (2007: 1), the consequence is that "*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has never taken place . . . at least not for me."

But, as Weinstock (2008) goes on to show, this does not prevent communities from being established and anxieties from being reduced. Exposure to the multi-layered performances regarding films such as *Rocky Horror* does still generate debate and out of those debates grow understandings, solidarities, alignments, and affective commitments. Consider, for instance, the case of feminist cultism. Some of the films and receptions we have singled out earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 6 as examples of an increased attention for and sensitivity towards issues of gender representation (the films of Akerman, Arzner, Wishman, Rothman, or the *Ginger Snaps* trilogy), can also be said to have received part of their cult recognition as a result of critics and audiences "performing" feminism. As a result, debates have arisen over whether or not a cult film's "feminist" components are indeed "truly" feminist or partly the effect of the performance of feminist attitudes in its reception. *Tank Girl* in particular has been held up as a "real" feminist cult film, especially in comparison with the cult films of Kathryn Bigelow, which are said to be too masculine, or some of the films of Catherine Hardwicke, which are said to cater too eagerly to hetero-normativity (Powell 1994; Daugherty 2002; Le Breton 2009: 137–144). According to Whelehan and Sonnett (1997: 33):

> it is the "social organization of the relations between texts within *specific conditions of reading*" that work to define the postmodern circulation of meaning-making within contemporary media forms. This is important for assessing how heterogeneous audiences are addressed across the cultural sites which form the social context of reception(s) of *Tank Girl*.

To name a specific context: many fans will set up *Tank Girl* against *Twilight* through a comparison that will note that Hardwicke was the costume designer of *Tank Girl*. Equally, *Tank Girl* is used as example to complicate considerations of just how feminist Bigelow's films are – and if indeed these articulations of feminism in the films' receptions matters (Talalay 2010). What is at stake here is less the "truth" about these films' feminism – or even the feminism of the viewers – and more the heightened awareness of "feminism" as a tool of significance in perceiving films in certain ways.

Ultimately, the performance of gendered reception can become a tool that is applicable not only in cases where audiences see themselves confronted with films that harbor a clear desire to shock, transgress, or present performances of non-normative sexuality, but towards *any film*. This activity has been referred to as "queering." The concept of queering relies on the pun involved in merging the terms "queer" (gay) and "query" (investigation). It refers to the audience activity of reading against the grain, of willfully reinterpreting films by looking for performances of non-normative sexuality even against the intentions of the makers. Queer viewing strategies are aided by what Ross (1989) has identified as "camp aesthetics" (see Chapter 8). Most cult classics have been queered. *Casablanca*'s last line has become emblematic in speculations that see Captain Renault (Claude Rains) and Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) commence (or continue!) a gay relationship. Alexander Doty (2000) outlines the queering of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as a closet gay film, *The Wizard of Oz* as lesbian fantasy, and *Psycho* as a gay film. Through queering, Jodie Foster's portrayal of Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs* and Linda Hamilton's role of Sarah Connor in *Terminator II* have been turned into iconic examples of lesbian heroines (Staiger 2000). Harry Benshoff (1997: 230) remarks how much queering involves the horror film. He writes:

> one might think that after the release and cult popularity of a film like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the idea of the monster queer would be a harder one to exploit, since audiences would already presumably have some awareness of the genre's queer undercurrents . . . Yet the general public still maintains tremendous powers of denial about matters homosexual ("Don't Ask, Don't Tell"), and the filmgoing public has a seemingly short memory for cultish deconstructions of popular culture.

Note how Benshoff's reference to a distinction between cult and the mainstream is established through a separation of audiences that can queer "undercurrents," and audiences that are not capable of this. Among Benshoff's most cultist examples is *Nightmare on Elm Street II: Freddy's Revenge*, which he calls "exceptionally queer" (1997: 246–247).

While largely playful and seldom attempting to effectively alter the course of a film's reception, queering has nevertheless impacted on the status of resolutely mainstream films, up to the point where it has ignited, rather than extended, cult status. An example of this, observed by Mathijs and Mendik (2008a: 375–376) and Sean Griffin (2009: 212–214) is the queering of *Top Gun*. Employing a variety of trivia such as the biography of flamboyant producer Don Simpson, the symbolism of imagery of locker room scenes, beach volleyball, jets as phallic symbols, and curious pieces of dialog, audiences have produced an entirely alternative meaning for the film – one that, by means of confirmation, found its way into a scene in *Sleep with Me* in which cultural authority and spokesperson for cultist sensibility Quentin Tarantino held a manic speech in which he painted *Top Gun* as a queer film. In the form of montages of "Gay Top Gun" such readings have found welcome audiences on the internet.

Hidden Strategies of Cult Enjoyment

But what if cultists will not articulate their performance of gendered reception as explicitly as the cases mentioned above? One important consequence of the performance of gender and sexuality in the receptions of cult films is that labels of enjoyment and pleasure, performed or not, automatically carry the implication of approval. Frequently, the difficulty of disentangling enjoyment from approval muzzles explicit articulations of receptions. We would like to illustrate this difficulty through the example of the rape-revenge film. Because of their foregrounding of the link between sexuality and violence films such as *Last House on the Left*, *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Thriller – A Cruel Picture*, *Ms. 45*, and *House on the Edge of the Park*, to name a few illustrious examples, have never managed to escape allegations of misogyny or sadism regardless of the opportunities for performativity they offer. Any articulation of appreciation is drowned out by criticism, and the result is often that cult fans of rape-revenge withdraw from debates altogether.

In his cross-generation reception analysis of *Straw Dogs* Martin Barker (2005, 2006) gives an insight into the complications of the cultist receptions of rape-revenge movies. He concludes that the film's troubled reception "arises from a series of things that the film

isn't ... Audiences who loved the film, lived its ambiguities, its loss of moral or motivational certainties. Audiences who hated it, sought for a clear meaning in it, and became distressed when they couldn't locate one" (Barker 2006). Importantly, in his research, Barker used a method (first used in a study of the reception of *Crash*, see Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath 2001) in which audiences were asked to map their reception of the film not only in terms of how they "liked" it but also if they "admired" it. By offering their viewers the choice to avoid equating "pleasure" with "approval" through the semi-affective audience position of "admiration" they were given the chance to highlight what they felt were important elements of their appreciation or fandom without the risk of offending notions of political correctness. It made it possible to see the extent to which committed viewers who knowingly engaged with films they knew had a bad reputation (such as second- and third-generation viewers) were able to separate and negotiate conflicting affections and interpretations towards the film. Among the views Barker managed to isolate were highly affective ones (such as the fear of physical overpowerment) as well as highly intellectual ones (such as an admiration for how *Straw Dogs* attempted to understand the presence of violence in civilization as part of a "primal instinct" or an animalistic imperative). Barker's method enabled the assessment of the ambiguities that viewing *Straw Dogs* brought with it, and it thus gave an explanation for its cult status as "volatile."

Formats such as VHS and DVD have further confounded the ambiguities associated with rape-revenge films. A research project, funded by the British Board of Film Classification, into viewers' attitudes towards and consumption of both cut and uncut versions of rape-revenge movies available in different regions in the world, found that there were strong nuances in the cultism of rape-revenge movies (Barker *et al.* 2008; Selfe 2008). Unsurprisingly, receptions of *House on the Edge of the Park*, *Ichi the Killer*, and the French *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *À ma soeur* showed huge discrepancies, depending on the kinds of aesthetic values and meanings that were ascribed to the films, the kinds of attitudes with which the films were approached, and the kind of opinions and presuppositions existed about actions of censors. In each case, however, audiences describing themselves as "admiring" though not necessarily "liking" the films, embraced opportunities given by the films' textual cues or their contexts in order to explain their deep commitment to these films. In the case of *Baise-moi*, for instance, its self-declared feminist intentions, its exploitative distribution, and its hugely controversial reception helped establish a context of "ambiguity" that fixed itself onto the film's viewing situations to the extent that it made it virtually impossible for viewers to "un-cultify" (for overviews of *Baise-moi*'s receptions, see Franco 2003; MacKenzie 2002; Reynaud 2002; Le Cain 2002b).

The various contexts within which the rape-revenge movie can be understood offer viewers the ability to shift the emphasis away from their supposed pleasure in the presentation of sexual violence towards a position in which they engage in an *interrogation* of sexual violence. Such interrogations of the sexual violence motive invariably led to debates and controversies and then to defenses, which in turn fueled cult receptions. Even if many rape-revenge movies were only sporting the revenge element as a rhetorical excuse to exploit opportunities to show sexual violence, many audiences would still accord importance to that rhetoric as a significant part of the film's meaning. In a sense, then, the rape-revenge movie holds up a mirror to cultists' desire to see disturbing and challenging materials. It even implicitly criticizes such interests (while of course still profiting from it). Yet it ultimately validates this viewing attitude because the interrogation also exposes the wider context of the struggle over meanings of problematic categories in culture and it points out how the "cultist" viewer is put in the same corner as the problem regardless of the actual reasons for viewing.

In some instances, this constant struggle to separate one's commitment to a film, genre, or director with a disreputable status when it comes to gender representation has led cult fans to withdraw almost completely from debate – not in the sense that they blow it up (like paracinematic viewers do) or that they hyperbolically perform receptions (thus obliterating the distinction between fake and sincere convictions), but in the sense that there is a refusal to explain one's choices and alignments. Russ Hunter (2009, 2010) calls such entrenched and muted resistance an "insulation trajectory." In a study of the cross-cultural reception of the films of Dario Argento, Hunter observed how

Argento established a cultist rapport with horror fans in the wake of the release of *Suspiria*. Subsequent releases of Argento's films failed to reach the same praise. At the same time, new criticism highlighted a lot of the underlying misogyny or sadosexuality in Argento's films (especially with regard to *Tenebrae* and *Inferno* – two Argento films that landed on the video nasties list). Or, at the very least, such studies brought into view Argento's so-called disrupted, fragmented, and ambivalent representations of gender (Mendik 2000; Needham 2002). But instead of causing a change in the cult reception of Argento, this only led to a more stubborn reclamation of Argento's status as "cult hero." As both Hunter and Peter Hutchings (2003) observe, there is a high degree of seriousness in how fans of Argento comment on his work.

> We seem a world away here from the camp aesthetics associated with some cult movies, notably *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or from the more aggressive counter-cultural maneuvers associated with what Jeffrey Sconce in an influential article has termed paracinema (Hutchings 2003: 134–135).

Hunter notes that this does not mean that Argento's fans are blind to changes. Quite the opposite, they are happy to concede that the director is making "inferior" films aesthetically. But they do *not* appear to be prepared to discard their fandom in the light of what Hutchings (2003: 136) has described as a move towards understanding Argento's work as symptomatic, "as a window on themes and issues that do not pertain to Argento alone." He notes how in the case of Argento advanced insulation coincides with increased mentions of the term "cult," as if Argento's supporters attempt to defend their fandom by repeating a mantra of oppositional reading they have learned and adopted. In Hunter's words, it offers "for those so inclined, a chance to 'rebel' conceptually" (Hunter 2009: 12). Conceptually, but also muted.

There is a regional element to the cult insulation trajectory as well. Next to the lack of a context of "art cinema," and the refusal to adopt a camp position or to accept insights generated by symptomatic criticism, the insulation trajectory of Argento is also affected by its cultural origin. Hunter demonstrates how time and again fans and critics refer to the fact that his films are "giallo," a "typical Italian" format that is close to that of a Western but at the same time different – Mikel Koven (2006) calls it a vernacular category, Gary Needham (2002) calls it a discursive site of contestation, and several critics refer to it through the Italian term "filone" (literally: thread), thus eschewing any reference to genre (and its implication of debates over categorization). The confusion over the specific contours and components of the giallo, and its culturally specific status, has increased ambivalence over the status of the work of Argento on an international level. On the one hand it is an attractor (Guins 2005), but on the other hand it is equally often referred to as a component that blocks anyone not familiar with that context from understanding what Argento's films are "really about." This has the consequence that many Argento fans can easily point to any symptomatic criticism as "ignoring" the cultural context within which Argento's representations of gender take place, thereby blocking debate. We will further elaborate on elements of transnationalism in our next chapter.

Conclusion

To some extent the hidden strategies of cult consumption are performative as well. Insulation entrenchments and admiration-not-approval can be regarded as postures the same way the performers of female nudity, of erotic scenes, and of queer sexuality can be said to offer merely performances – as if they are playing along with the kinds of reactions and receptions the fans think they are supposed to have without actually meaning it, as if it was a directive from "mainstream culture" they are only too keen to subvert by pretending to adhere to it.

In this perspective, then, female fans protesting to being victimized by offensively misogynist horror films, queer fans subverting the masculinity in *Top Gun* by cheering on macho posturing, and fan boys reveling in downgrading erotic displays by howling and hollering, are part of the same reaction that typifies cultism: they are assumed to challenge mainstream culture without being so offensive as to cause direct sanction while also allowing those viewers to take up a position from where they can speak – to the films, and via the films to their peers, opponents, and

the rest of culture. In other words, the separation of pleasure from admiration, the insulation trajectory theory, and the varying degrees of performativity all offer audiences of cult cinema a way of addressing gender. While such performances can also confirm the very behavior they are criticizing, the fact that it is often virtually impossible to distinguish between genuine reactions, and performed ones, gives the entire process an ambivalence that characterizes cult cinema's receptions.

Note

1. We use the term "non-normative" in its most neutral understanding, as any form of gender or sexuality that stands outside the pattern of heteronormativity, monogamy, and patriarchy that has dominated film representation since the classical era.

11

Transnationalism and Orientalism

There is an increased effort to study cult globally. It is largely the result of the obvious observation that cult cinema is – by default say some – transnational or cross-cultural. Like many other forms of cinema it enjoys the opportunities of what Toby Miller has described as "an international division of cultural labour" (quoted in Schneider and Williams 2005: 5). This is not only a commonsensical observation. Research has highlighted just how international cult cinema is. Consider, for instance, the transnational contexts of consumption of the giallo film (Guins 2005; Koven 2006; Lucas 2007), of Latin-American cult cinema (Syder and Tierney 2005; Reboll 2009), and martial arts cinema (Hunt 2000; Bowman 2010).

Let us use briefly illustrate how wide-reaching considerations of cult cinema's transnationalism can be through two examples: *The Gods Must Be Crazy* and *Godzilla*. *The Gods Must Be Crazy* presents conflicts between normality and the trangressive "Other" in the form of intercultural and international conflict: African versus European, revolutionaries from one country versus the authorities in another, civilized versus primitive, even in its self-identification as a film from Botswana while it is in effect a South African production that wanted to sidestep the apartheid boycott. Regardless of how the narrative ostensibly mocks but ultimately supports recuperation (Grant 1991: 133–135), their awareness of connotations of "African," "South-African," "native," or "the bush," and the mere presence in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* of a people, a language, and a region that are far away from what they normally encounter asks audiences that see this film in a downtown art house or repertory theater to defamiliarize Western normality. Even in its quasi-transgressive guise it confronts idiosyncratic consumption patterns and non-effective use of time thus forcing audiences to treat their home culture as "temporarily different" or "temporarily useless." The cult of *Godzilla* also built on aspects of transnationalism and exoticism. Cynthia Erb (1998) suggests there is a strong link between the *Godzilla* cult and the cultism that had evolved around *King Kong*. Of course, a major difference lies in *Godzilla*'s post-nuclear, radio-active origin, a quality that – with the nuclear bombing of Japan fresh in viewers' minds – gives the monster a decidedly tragic characteristic, and which puts the distinction between friends and foes in a complicated light. According to Chon Noriega (1987), *Godzilla* found a following beyond Japan because it forces audiences to acknowledge the monster Godzilla, in its dual role of destructor and respected icon, as "Other" to both the indigenous population and to foreigners. To a large extent, *The Gods Must Be Crazy* and *Godzilla* are transnational because they are transgressive, *and* transgressive because they are transnational. They upset the binary us-versus-them opposition that Western cinema seeks to conform.

In this chapter, we tackle transnationalism via one region that was once considered an unlikely component of cult cinema, namely Asia. J.P. Tellote's seminal collection on cult cinema mentions only one Asian film: in Gregory Waller's market study of midnight movies, Bruce Lee's martial arts film *Enter the Dragon* is described as a "highly unlikely candidate" (Waller 1991: 170). *Enter the Dragon* is also the only Asian film discussed in several other overviews (Peary 1981;

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Mendik and Harper 2000b). In recent years, however, Asian cinema has had a fundamental impact on cult cinema. It is therefore crucial we highlight the region in our considerations.

Orientalism: Curiosity versus Exoticism

One recurrent problematic of how fans, critics, and audiences express cultism of certain Asian films is that of a Westernized perspective. Mathijs and Mendik (2008a: 275–280) point out that this perspective involves *both* a cultural curiosity and a predetermined notion of exoticism. Often, the qualities that Western audiences find so attractive in Asian cinema are a result of Western viewers' curiosity for and confrontation with systems of representation they have difficulty understanding (and that therefore violate practices, routines, and habits). But this does not automatically mean that curiosity is equal to a cultist *desire* to find "exotic" and "extreme" imagery. A cultist lens only occurs when audiences expand their viewing beyond curiosity to focus on the interrogation of "tainted reputations": when aspects of the culture of origin are read as separate from its "typical" elements and are instead seen to point to that other culture's taboos.

Any such effort is inevitably affected by what has been called an "orientalist" perspective. According to Edward Said (1978: 1), who coined the term, the Orient is a Western invention that regards it as a place, to the East of Europe, "of romance, of exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." "Orientalism," then, is the concept of engaging with cultures and cultural products originating to the East of Europe from a colonial, imperialist standpoint. The concept acts as a self-affirmation of the colonizer. Said's initial analysis was largely directed at the Middle East, as well as the regions of Persia and India. Said acknowledged that for the Americas "the Orient" might have different associations, because it might relate mostly to the Far East, but overall his conceptualization has been applied to all regions East of Europe and on the Western edge of the Pacific Rim, generally known as "the East." Orientalism has also affected Eastern critical observations of the West. Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto (1993: 338) argues misrepresentations are unavoidable: "the Other cannot be misrepresented, since it is always already a misrepresentation."

With regard to cult cinema, orientalism most often refers to the ambivalent attraction of the cultural "other" from the point of the view of the Western "self." That attraction is frequently subjected to fetishist idolatry. After all, to assign a cult value to an object is an act of fetishism in itself. The fetishism of the Orient is often visualized through a series of traits associated with both femininity and uncivilized, unindustrialized wildness. Some of the most visible expressions of this fetishism include sexual seduction, soft-spoken or ornamental language, deception, immorality, ritualized lethal force combined with solemnity, and the depiction of scars, veils, and robes as props of sex and violence. As Gary Needham (2006: 10–11) has observed, such attractions are affirmative of the superior position of the West yet also indicative of the realization that that superiority is hinged upon the kind of imagery associated with the "other." In order to maintain the superiority, then, all Asian products, be they animated series (*Pokemon*), videogames (Super Mario) or hardware (Nintendo) are persistently framed as "other," regardless of whether such presences are ubiquitous or marginal. As a result, the distinction between center and periphery of culture that informs so much of cult cinema is invalid when it comes to Asian cinema – where everything is "other," everything is potentially marginal.

Given such complications, the cross-cultural exchange of Asian cult cannot be measured simply in terms of degrees of inferiority/superiority or degrees of misrepresentation. On the contrary, any surplus generated in its receptions (through fetishism, curiosity, or otherwise) falls well outside the scales of measurement for traditional cultural trades and exchanges. Films such as *In the Realm of the Senses* – too radical to be tied down into any cultural "normality" regardless from whatever angle it is considered – did a lot to deconstruct the classic orientalist view, as did several of the films we will discuss more elaborately further on in this chapter. The most significant deconstruction of orientalism occurs through cross-cultural fan receptions and the cultural surplus they generate. Such developments are accompanied, or even propelled, by globalized and transnational streams of distribution and marketing (Morris,

Siu Leung Li and Chan 2005; Denison 2006, 2008). Rob Wilson (2005: 268) even refers to this oversaturated translocality as necessitating a new form of cultist critique, one he enigmatically calls "spectral."

In sum, the orientalism of Said might work in both ways, as self-affirmative but also as interrogator of cultural identity. Even though it weighs heavily on the reception – across borders – of all cinema, it affects cult cinema differently because of that cinema's defiance of being measured in terms of normalcy. Only within the context of specific receptions and international exchanges, then, can we determine with any semblance of exactness how these acts of transnational affirmation and interrogation work.

The Reception of Asian Cult Cinema

Prior to the 1970s, cult receptions of Asian films were limited to isolated instances, most notably the samurai films of Akira Kurosawa (*Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*) and various *Godzilla* films (Peary 1983: 63–65; French and French 1999: 174–175; Everman 1993: 114–118). Since the 1970s, there have been two waves in the reception of Asian cult cinema.

The first wave occurred in the beginning of the 1970s, and runs parallel with the magnetic appeal of Bruce Lee. At this time, Asian cult cinema was largely limited to martial arts movies, re-imaginations of the jidai-geki, or Japanese films of what David Bordwell (2000: xi) has called "Sadean violence." After Lee's death and the posthumous release of *Game of Death*, cultist interest in these forms of Asian cinema dispersed across numerous tiny niches, constructed through festival audiences and Western film magazines. Characteristic of this first wave was that it relied on existing networks of cult and exploitation cinema (such as horror) to reach its audiences. It was part of the same market that sought to attract viewers by offering exotic, fetishistic materials. Put differently, during this wave Asian films became cults almost uniquely as a result of their Western reception within already cultified networks. The cult following of US-produced compilation film *Shogun Assassin*, distributed through Roger Corman's New World Pictures, and the French adoration for King Hu are illustrations of this (Macias 2001: 62–76; Wong 2007: 182–183).

The second wave, which took place from the early 1990s onwards, is radically different, partly because it shows discrepancies between regions of reception that had hitherto been presented as a unity, but also because the cultification of the films occurred *both* in Asia and in the West. In Europe, niche festivals and specialist retailers played a pioneering role in offering audiences access to Asian cinema that had already been perceived as cultist or marginal by the home territory. Similarly, in the early 1990s, specialist import-retailers of comic books and pulp literature started to carry VHS tapes and laserdiscs of Japanese anime and Hong Kong heroic bloodshed films. David Desser (2005: 210) notes that films such as *Akira*, *The Killer* and *City on Fire* were being picked up by fans whose willingness to watch them "with neither an audio or subtitle track" was a clear sign of their emerging cult reputations. These specialty titles were soon accompanied by Jet Li and Jackie Chan films, soft-porn such as *Tokyo Decadence*, *Sex and Zen* and *Naked Killer*, the fairytale *Chinese Ghost Story*, Japanese yakuza thrillers such as *Violent Cop*, and occasionally by Bollywood films (though these relied more frequently on their separate networks).

Already inscribed with cultist credentials, anime and heroic bloodshed films made their entry on student campuses, and in independent theaters. In contrast to the 1970s, audiences seemed to be treating these films as instant-cultist genres and formats in their own right, no longer as add-ons to existing networks. By the middle of the 1990s, anime and heroic bloodshed films had developed tight networks of retailers that supplied a growing Western cult following. The only significant change in that mode of distribution came in the late 1990s when a string of European festivals (of the Méliès network, see Chapter 3) started introducing their fans to anime and Japanese horror films as a means of breaking away from the traditional horror fare they usually offered. This wave of J-horror led to a diversification of the cult appeal of Asian cinema. The efforts of distributors such as Tartan (and its Asia Extreme label) brought Asian cult films to "an enthusiastic audience that is receptive to innovative genre, regardless of country of origin" (Berra 2010: 7). In the wake of J-horror, Korean films became late-night favorites at festivals, especially titles such as *The Isle* and *Oldboy*. An important factor in this development

was the attempt made by Korean festivals such as PiFan to connect to the network of European fantasy festivals.

Networks of Exchange: Otaku

Compared to Europe, North America's second wave receptions of Asian cult cinema were initially powered more by individual fans and the general dynamics of popular culture than by institutionalized networks of distribution (Brophy 2005: 1). The first attempts to chart Asian cult cinema were the reviews of Thomas Weisser in horror and trash cinema fanzines, and from 1991 on in the first fanzine dedicated to Asian cult cinema, *Asian Trash Cinema* – which later became *Asian Cult Cinema* (Weisser 1997: ix). Next to fanzines, prominent elements in this constellation were video retailers, specialty festivals, and fan conventions, especially for anime. The latter display the most visible form of cultism, particularly through what Susan Napier has called "anime nation's con culture," and in elaborate "cosplaying" (anime-themed costume parties) (Napier 2007: 149–167; Winge 2006). Universities and colleges too started paying attention to Asian cinema outside the canon (Bordwell 2000: x). Near the end of the 1990s, internet forums allowed for even more pronounced distinctions, especially between first-hand and second-hand, and pre-remake and post-remake fandom. As Matt Hills (2005: 166) notes, "individualized and psychologized notions" of cult fandom prevailed in these networks, especially through the manufacturing of distinctions between fans that had "discovered" Asian cults a while ago, and newcomers.

Perhaps the best exemplar of this development is the phenomenon of the "otaku." Originally an honorific pronoun and a word for "another's house," the term otaku commonly stands for "people who become particularly loyal fans of a subculture" (Newitz 1995: 4). Popularized by Akio Nakamori, and later also by Hiroki Azuma, the term was mostly used for predominantly Japanese male fans of video games, sci-fi, comic books, anime, and "idols" (heavily promoted Japanese pop stars). It initially carried a highly negative connotation, and like orientalism it also carries feminine associations of domesticity, passivism, ornamentalism, and shyness (Barral 1999). To this are added characteristics of sexual immaturity and a "detachment from reality that prevents the otaku from participating in society and forming authentic relationships" (Bolton 2005: 70). It is tempting to see in this initial labeling of the otaku a reproduction of orientalism that not only denies representations their right of meaning outside the Western, male gaze (much like Madame Butterfly), but also reduces the Eastern male to a powerless victim of a system of representation (cinema, media) over which only Westerners could command power.

Recent research into otaku fandom of newer generations and outside Asia, however, complicates this picture. Often, otaku are savvier than these cursory descriptions suggest. They reach a "higher perspective" in which their knowledge of mediation becomes a powerful tool in performing the delineation between the "real" and the "fictional." Christopher Bolton (2005: 66–76) adds to this the observation that there are numerous exceptions to the strict gender-division sketched above, especially in anime horror's "phallic girls." These characters function simultaneously as a confirmation of the male gaze and as a challenge to it – defying grounding in cultural reality through their highly fictional mechanical bodies. Nor did the term otaku remain limited to the East. The term also found wide application in North America, and in Russia, where it shed some of its negative connotations and became synonymous with cult fandom of anime (Napier 2007). As Annalee Newitz (1995) points out, this cross-cultural transfer of fandom gradually changed its feminine connotations (however ambiguous these often are) into associations of miscegenation, especially when the fandom involved the fantasy-horror genre, or "mecha." Newitz singles out *Tetsuo, Man of Iron* as one of several cult films from Asia that achieved its cult status in part because of how it challenged its fans to consider multiculturalism, racial mixing and identity construction. *Tetsuo* tells the story of an otaku whose body is gradually converted into a machine. *Tetsuo* is often regarded as a meditation on cyberpunk and a post-industrial crisis of identity (Conrich 2005). Newitz argues that *Tetsuo* in fact addresses the question of what it means to one's own cultural identity to access, digest, and celebrate foreign cultural products in a cultist manner. As Newitz notes, American fans might "enjoy Japanese anime precisely because it criticizes American culture" but they might

equally see it as a "respite from political correctness" in which America is blamed (quoted in Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 316).

Discussions of transnational and cross-cultural otaku fandom and comparisons with Western fandom have had the effect that they pulled this form of fandom out of a frame of reference that saw it as uniquely childish, and that, by extension, associated at least part of that childishness with the fact that the form of fandom is essentially non-Western. Instead they have presented otaku as "active," "empowered," in other words as performers of their fandom – similar to the kinds of performances we have discussed in previous chapters. An unfortunate consequence of this has been a tendency to homogeneously blend both otaku fandom and Western fandom, a tendency whereby cultural distinctions that do matter get swept aside in an effort to see all fans equally empowered by a "shared technological culture." According to Hills (2002b), it has meant that debates over how otaku fandom shares characteristics with Western cultism have shed one form of infantilization (fans are undeveloped and immature as human beings) in favor of another (as mere performers, fans are undeveloped in their critical awareness of transcultural media technology). According to Hills, this problem can be solved by regarding otaku fandom as a form of transcultural homology to Western cult fandom (*not* homogeneity) that does not erase context-specific differences in its eagerness to demonstrate similarities in performativity and achieve equality between kinds of recognition for cult fans. This homology could even, suggests Hills, form the basis of cross-cultural forms of solidarity between cult fans, a form of "fan internationalism" (2002b: 6). While Hills is careful not to push this analogy too far, it is nevertheless through the solidarity that the homology between otaku and Western fanboys escapes from the threat of "techno-orientalism."

In its straddling of various degrees of fandom and professionalism, especially with regard to series in which otaku have actively participated (such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* or *Otaku No Video*), the entire concept of the otaku becomes, according to Thomas Lamarre, "an evolution in human perception" (2009: 144), a new kind of connoisseurship, literacy or competency in reading images that is perhaps the closest possible description of what can be called a "cultist view" of cinema. It refuses to distinguish between center and margin of the frame, between storyline and setting, between foreground and background, between trivia and narrative, instead "demanding an attention to production details as so much 'data' [that it] has the effect of flattening the image into a distributive field of elements" (Lamarre 2009: 145). According to Lamarre (and he cites otaku animator Toshio Okada), otaku perception includes "isolating perceptual elements . . ., dehierarchizing layers, and flattening the production hierarchies" (2009: 149). If nothing else, the otaku intervention in fandom has heightened the attention of fans as "interactors whose pursuit . . . make him or her a cooperator in production and promotion" (2009: 153).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the reception of Asian cult cinema has exploded. Joan Hawkins has described this as part of the "mainstreaming of exploitation," a development that is particularly visible with Asian cult cinema. Tellingly, the example she uses is Park Chan Wook (*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *Oldboy*), as she quotes reviewers' struggles to accept that "movies that were once relegated to midnight screenings at festivals – and, in an earlier age, grindhouses like those that once enlivened Times Square are now part of the main event" (Hawkins 2010: 126). As a result of this mainstreaming virtually each region has developed its specialty festival and most of them have become fairly well integrated into the international circuit. Specialist online and mail-order retailers, and distributors such as Media Blasters, Section 23 Films, Bandai Entertainment, and Animeigo, which continue to supply niches of the Asian cult cinema market, find themselves in competition with major distributors and mass-market retailers.[1] The success of J-horror and other Asian cult films released theatrically have ensured this market's sustained visibility.

In sum, the cross-cultural reception of Asian cult cinema appears to have moved away from the stigma of orientalism, and away from a singularly negative connotation of the term otaku, towards an understanding of transnational cult receptions as informed by instances of performativity – fandom across borders performed by fans from various cultures embracing their fandom as an international sign of solidarity. But as the fandom grows, so does the need for internal

distinction. This need is acutely visible in increases in critical commentary that addresses particular constituencies. And as such distinctions are carved out complications of cult receptions arise, especially with regard to receptions that comment on references to intercultural and transnational traffic that many of the films themselves make. In order to sketch some of these complications the remainder of this chapter will outline the specifics of two regions that have supplied and propelled much of Asian cult cinema: Hong Kong and Japan.

Hong Kong Cult Cinema

Asian cult cinema's first highpoint in the 1970s developed around martial arts movies, or *wuxia*, coming from Hong Kong (Hunt 2003). The galvanizing moment of this cultism is the worldwide craze of Kung Fu and the cult of martial arts actor Bruce Lee. As Paul Bowman (2010: 8) argues, the films of Bruce Lee, and indeed the figure of Lee himself, present themselves as a series of clichés of what film should not be: "trivial and trivializing, violent, masculinist, orientalist stereotype; a mythologized commodification of alterity packaged for a fetishistic Western gaze; the mythological reduction of ethnicity into posters, t-shirts, nerds' film collections." At the same time, of course, Bowman explains, Lee is a challenge to all of those images. Above all, he provides an opportunity for viewers to elaborate endlessly on the clashes and mixes these images offer, a play with symbols that denies there is one single "body of knowledge" that can be gained from the international transfer of imagery but that nevertheless located Bruce Lee, not as part of this or that culture, but as a "shifting center of enduring intercultural and cross-ethnic representation" (Bowman 2010: 229).

To begin with, there is the idea of Kung Fu. *Fist of Fury* and *Enter the Dragon* Westernized Kung Fu before it was orientalized: they added realism to the choreography of fights by showcasing Lee's considerable athletic talent and his iconoclastic philosophy of fighting (Jeet Kune Do, "the way of the intercepting fist"), and by introducing exotic weapons (such as nunchakos or iron claws) and detailed ornamental props (Figure 11.1). They updated the storylines to

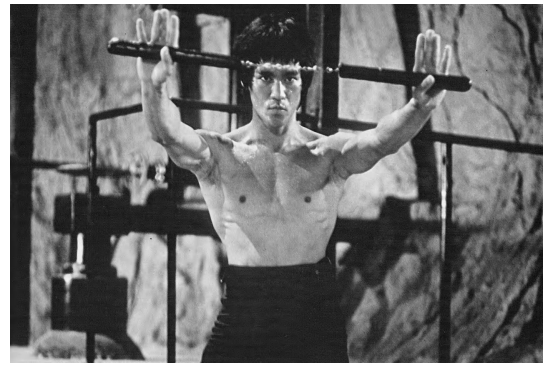


Figure 11.1 Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*, with nunchakos, at the center of enduring intercultural and cross-ethnic representation. Image courtesy of Royal Film Archive of Belgium.

contemporary, postcolonial times – even adding some references that put Lee in opposition to former colonizers, such as when he kicks a sign that says "no dogs or Chinese allowed" in *Fist of Fury*. In *Enter the Dragon* this sentiment had been tempered and changed into an international setting – a setting that fitted the transnational profile of Lee (of mixed American and Hong Kong upbringing) while offering nods to contemporary forms of exploitation cinema. The hype that had started developing around Lee in Asia was complicated by the limited availability of his films for Western audiences – as well as the fact that they were known under a range of different titles, some confusingly close to each other. Lee suddenly died, in 1973, just before *Enter the Dragon* was put on worldwide release. Within a matter of months, film fans went Bruce Lee-crazy. But Lee was not really a star *until* he died. As Eleftheriotis and Needham (2006: 407) put it:

> the legendary status that Bruce Lee enjoys has, at least partly, been facilitated by the impossibility for European and American audiences of engaging with him as a star at any level that can go, even slightly, beyond mythical opacity. ... Bruce Lee entered the consciousness of international film audiences not as a "real" actor and star but as a "legend".

It was the first time a non-Western actor from a non-Western film industry received such a cult following. The difficulties producers, distributors, and audiences

had in sketching a framework for the reception of a non-Western local martial arts star are indicative of the volatility of cult stardom (see Teo 1997; Hunt 2000; Bowman 2010).

The appeal of Bruce Lee catapulted the cult reputation of numerous Hong Kong films. *A Touch of Zen*, which predated Lee's films, but which did not receive visibility in the West until 1975, gained a cult following for its elaborate representations of fighting techniques and acrobatics, high doses of Jacobean violence of vengeance and humiliation, and inferences to Buddhist philosophies of self-defence, and because of that it stood as a firm counterpoint to contemporary Western flirts with Eastern mysticism. Because of its combination of spectacle and introspection, *A Touch of Zen* became as much of a template for cult cinema from Hong Kong as Bruce Lee (Teo 2007). Other post-Lee cult wuxia included *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*, and – increasingly – pastiches such as *The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires*, *Five Deadly Venoms*, and the posthumously produced Lee film *Game of Death* (in which he dons his black and yellow track suit). David Bordwell (2000) has observed that wuxia often evolve in cycles, in which periods of hyperbole are followed by periods of realism. The hyperbolic cycles were the ones that particularly drew cult receptions. After the hyperbole of the post-Lee pastiches, a period of realism arrived. That period of realism, in turn, spawned an even more hyperbolic wave of films in the latter half of the 1980s that again opened up Hong Kong cinema to international fandom. One part of this wave consisted of ghost stories and swordplay fantasy. Of these, a few films such as *Chinese Ghost Story* achieved cult status – especially through the ways they connected, at least in the eyes of their fans, mainland China's mythology to contemporary anxieties about the Western world and to Hong Kong's specific anxieties about the handover to China.

The most visible cult following went to a series of crime thrillers set in urban, modern Hong Kong, that pitched highly skilled, ruthless professionals such as hitmen, triad gang members, cops, and bodyguards against each other while simultaneously stressing their emotional bonds. Through close combat and choreographed fights, these films maintained the attractions of martial arts films, but they replaced tools with guns (kung-fu thus became gun-fu). Because of their high level of visceral violence, their often melodramatic and tragic storylines, and the prevalent theme of male bonding these films received the nickname "heroic bloodshed." The most noticeable of these films is *The Killer*. A collaboration between two of the most prolific creative talents of the Hong Kong film industry at the time (director John Woo and producer Tsui Hark), and the breakthrough performance of new star Chow Yun-Fat, *The Killer* appealed to cultist audiences because of its storyline of failed redemption, its plentitude of gun battles, and its intertextuality, hyperbolic religious metaphors (especially referring to catholic martryrdom), and homoerotic overtones. It took *The Killer* some time to reach international audiences, but it became the ultimate heroic bloodshed cult film. It is now invariably described as the Hong Kong film with the most "secure cult status" around the globe (Sandell 1996; An 2001; Hall 2009). In its wake, action films such as *Hard Boiled*, and dystopic wuxia such as *Ashes of Time* also became cults.

In terms of their international reception, heroic bloodshed and wuxia also benefited, ironically, from their association with a late 1980s Hong Kong rating system that saw them lumped together with horror films and softcore sex in a "Category III." Julian Stringer (1999) describes Category III as the "repressed underside of more respectable cultural forms." During much of the 1990s, almost 40% of released films in Hong Kong were labeled Category III: "*Sex and Zen III* is right there on the same shelf as Jackie Chan's *Mr. Nice Guy*" (Davis and Yu 2001: 13). In the eyes of fans, video store patrons, and audiences-at-large this created the impression that all these films were connected through "classifications of style (exploitation/cult film, art cinema, adult film) or genre (horror, gangster, martial arts)" (Davis and Yu 2001: 12). As a result, films with a Category III rating temporarily gave all of Hong Kong cinema a transgressive reputation, which in the context of the anxiety of the run-up to the region's reintegration to the nation of China, made Hong Kong cinema extremely ambiguous: "Category III is marked out as 'other,' not suitable for children; and yet, it is not stigmatized, segregated, or shunned by mainstream audiences. [I]ts transgressive, offensive qualities mark it as a 'come-on' and serve to integrate it into the market." (Davis and Yu 2001: 14). As several

scholars note, this transgression often took on the form of farce (Williams 2005). In short, Category III helped extend the international cult appeal of heroic bloodshed and wuxia films, and it enabled similar receptions for campy softcore detective films such as *Naked Killer*. Much of the cult dynamism surrounding the appeal of wuxia and heroic bloodshed films dissipated after Hong Kong's return to China.

Some elements were incorporated into the mainstream (such as Zhang Yimou's films), and some were pushed off the global audience's radar.

Anime and J-Horror

From the 1990s on, a strong cultism developed around two specific forms of Japanese cinema, anime and J-horror. Celebrated at niche festivals and through a vibrant video and DVD market, but in the margin of Japan's and the world's mainstream cinema, anime and J-horror have developed some of the most ardent fan followings of cinema of the last few decades. At the core of this cultism are an admiration for the visual flamboyance yet nihilistic morality of these two formats, and a fascination for their explorations of the themes of urban alienation and advanced electronic technology.

As a term, anime refers to Japanese animation cinema, usually adaptations of manga, comic books. The breakthrough of anime cultism lies in the 1980s, though its origins stretch back as far as the 1960s. In the 1980s, series and films such as *Akira*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, and *Bubblegum Crisis* attracted cult followings, which in the 1990s, as the formats and subgenres expanded, became more prominent and visible. The cult of anime consists of two partly overlapping areas: naive and mystical anime, and horror and science fiction anime, or *mecha*. The first category is often regarded as the least cultist, because it falls outside narrow understandings of cult audiences. Yet the nostalgia with which baby-boomer audiences remember 1960s films and series such as *Astro Boy* or *Magic Boy*, or the fondness with which 1980s youths recall the colored *Astro Boy*, the baby unicorn *Unico*, and *My Neighbor Totoro*, are strong indications of this area's ongoing cultist appeal (Brophy 2005: 36–37). As part of *kawaii* (or the cult of "cutification"), these products have established cross-generational fandom. Through series such as *Kimba, the White Lion* and the films of Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli (*Princess Mononoke*) this area of anime cultism has also been inscribed with a strong sense of karmic, environmental, and ecological awareness (Brophy 2005: 134–135; Cubitt 2005). In essence, it creates a form of "soft" or even "new age" global cultism. Rayna Denison (2006, 2008) argues this appeal needs to be seen in the context of the global marketing and presence of Miyazaki's films. Napier's study of Miyazaki online-fandom uncovers this cultism as ambiguous in the meanings its ascribes to the films, yet unified in its conviction that it presents a "non-Western worldview in which good does not always triumph over evil and the only appropriate response is to continue to look at the world 'with eyes unclouded'" (Napier 2006: 62).

Mecha has a more edgy cultist reputation, especially because its fandom demographic invites comparisons with that of other cults, such as horror and science fiction. The late 1980s are the breakthrough of mecha. Films such as *Akira*, *Tetsuo*, and the hugely controversial *Legend of the Overfiend* (Buruma 1995), received cult followings for their depictions of post-apocalyptic, macabre, highly technologized urban story-worlds in which heavily armed androids or demons, assassins, and gangsters (often supported by sinister surveillance police) fight it out at the expense of teens caught up in the battles. It is not difficult to see the image of the confused and corrupted youth become an attractor for young otaku. But the elaborate presentations of hostile urban jungles in which gangs and crime abound, and in which storylines are allowed to become lost in numerous asides are equally attractive. During the 1990s, as female otaku became a more pronounced part of the cult of anime, mecha also began to upset the fairly strict gender-divided market. According to this divide, shojo-anime, such as *Sailor Moon*, are directed at girls and presented throbbing emotions channeled through kinetic and dynamic visuals and an emphasis on altruism and attractiveness (Brophy 2005: 198–200). Shonen-anime, such as *Fullmetal Alchemist*, focus more on action, hybrid-humans and muscular athleticism, and address fanboys. The mixing of both is visible, first in "babes with guns" films, and subsequently expanded in the cult success *Ghost in the Shell*. In its representation of a dystopian urban technopolis it leans heavily towards shonen-anime. But it retains elements of

shojo-anime in the graceful, light-footed, free-floating fluidity of the female cyborg Kusanagi – who bases her identity on her relationship to the infinite ocean that surrounds her (Orbaugh 2002; Ruh 2004; Gresset 2009). Brophy (2005: 107) writes: "*Ghost in the Shell* freely mixes the karmic with the psychic with the robotic." Its fans across the world also cheer its lack of political correctness, and, like fans of science fiction and fantasy, they engage deeply in its story-world, enjoying an "estrangement from a world that sometimes can become a little too familiar" (Napier 2007: 190). Since the middle of the 1990s, series such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Final Fantasy*, or *Vampire Princess Miyu* have deepened anime cultism by establishing niches for epic, horror, and fantasy, and by applying story-worlds to numerous platforms and media (comic books, video games, television series, webcomics). In spite of this proliferation criticism accuses anime continuously of misrepresentations through its persistence of presenting women and girls as "in touch with intense, even magical, forces capable of overwhelming male-dominated reality" (quoted in Bolton 2005: 67).

The term J-horror entered cult parlance in the late 1990s, when a new generation of Japanese horror films began to forefront a mix of traditional horror elements, such as those of the *tokusatsu* (the special effects monster genre) and *yurei* (traditional ghost stories), with themes borrowed from the techno-existentialism of the anime, such as the placement of horror within an environment of economic crisis, or the view of monstrosity as a consequence of modernity. According to Ramie Tateishi (2003: 295), these films' inspired cult following is the result of a nostalgia for a cultural heritage that is entertained opposite an active destruction of that same heritage (so that it will not burden the present generation in its progress). *Ringu* is the most literal exploration of this ambiguous urge. It also opened up Western audiences for J-horror, and it introduced them to a series of similarly inspired films such as *Cure*, *Dark Water*, and *Ju-on: The Grudge*. Each of these films sees environments of modern technology (media, medical, or care-technology) trigger seemingly supernatural appearances, which its receivers are unable to process because of their disconnection from their cultural roots. Two key examples of this millennial "urban techno-alienation" are the satirical *Battle Royale* and *Suicide Club*. They present a generation of disillusioned teens who blame their ancestral culture for their desensitization. Only through cult-like arrangements opposing this parent culture do these teens find meaning for their own existence – and often they don't at all. Because of their imagery of dying teens and claims of parental culpability, *Battle Royale* and *Suicide Club* became engulfed in controversy, stirred up through speculation and agitation (in the case of *Battle Royale* fueled by the role of Takeshi Kitano, a figure with a cult reputation of his own). It caused interventions in the national parliament, calls for bans by politicians and educators, and hotly debated festival screenings abroad (Macias 2001: 149–152; Crawford 2003: 305–307).

The flagbearer of the cult of J-horror is Takashi Miike. His reputation is that of a prolific provocateur or agitator. His high and varied output flaunts the routines and practices of the industry, and of traditional authorship (Mes 2004). The difficulty with Miike lies, moreover, in his bold style: hard-hitting, flamboyant, nihilist, and above all, "cool." This coolness ties Miike to the particular reception context of "cool Japan." Miike's stylistic bravura, claims Aaron Gerow (2009: 34–35), offers a veil of superficiality that cloaks a visceral politics of diversity. Miike first rose to international prominence with *Audition*, a grand-guignol art house horror film that forever connected him to J-horror. But Miike's films are not uniquely Japanese but rather transnational. In their liminal settings (in-between places such as rooftops, tracks, streets), Miike's protagonists also find themselves hovering in between hero and coward. Characters in *Dead or Alive* claim to be "like Japanese but not Japanese, like Chinese but not Chinese"; Ichi in *Ichi the Killer* is both super-hero and cry-baby.

According to Jay McRoy, Miike's films are an interrogation of a trend of films within J-horror that have received cult appeal through their depiction of "dove style violence," a form of violence in which "human beings coldly abuse one another with a detached cruelty reminiscent of 'certain species of bird' who, when 'a flock member is *different* or weaker ... peck at the weakest bird dispassionately until it's dead'" (McRoy 2008: 103[2]). McRoy sees Miike's *Ichi the Killer* as an example of a film that is a send-up of a core theme of J-horror, namely *ijime* (buylling). *Ichi the Killer* shows not just the impact of

the bullying, but the fallout as well. It does so in such a hysterically hyper-moralistic over-the-top style (borrowing heavily from anime) that it defeats its purpose as a critique. The result, according to McRoy, is a representation of violence that is both painful and playful, and a reconsideration of the transgressive violence of desire that largely explains the film's huge cult reputation (2008: 132).

The boom of anime and J-horror brought with it attempts to extend its heritage into the past. Filmmakers such as Nobuo Nakagawa ("the Japanese Roger Corman") or Seijun Suzuki (*Branded to Kill*, "too much even for that hyperbole-drunk factory Nikkatsu") were eagerly picked up by cult distributors (Rayns 2009: 30–32; Atkinson 2009: 34). Around 2009, after a few key distributors went out of business and some festivals started to report audience fatigue, the general appeal of J-horror appeared to stagnate, and shrink to a smaller yet more devoted cult in the margins of the mainstream (Berra 2010).

Conclusion

The cult status of Kung Fu, anime and J-horror is largely undisputed. There are many other films from Asia, and from other regions of the world, where that is not the case. In general, this is because they are presented through a binary perspective: they are labeled cults either because they suddenly achieve niche popularity in certain regions (and are caught up in hypes), or because they remain forever obscure, in which case their cultness is one of invisibility instead of a niche following.

There is a danger with such a sharp-cut distinction. It relies too much on stable assumptions of what is mainstream and popular in transnational receptions, and what is at the margins. A good example of this is Bollywood, a term that originated as a tongue-in-cheek expression that describes Mumbai's Hindi-Urdu language cinema (Desai and Dudrah 2008: 1). But Bollywood is more than that. It has also become shorthand for a flamboyant style and a specific form of fandom of ethnically Indian fans for this type of film. As a dominant force in a vibrant market, Bollywood is the center of cinema, not the periphery. Still, its avid fandom, visible as much in box-office figures as in rampant piracy, equips it with cult characteristics. Furthermore, as Rachel Dwyer (2005: 1) argues, the "use of melodrama and heightened emotion" and the "grandiloquent dialogues and the all-important songs" give the impression Bollywood's production values are close to those of Hollywood cult classics. Imperial in its origins, but increasingly referring to a globalized culture industry, the very word Bollywood begs a comparison – not only one that pitches Hollywood as a standard against the derivative that are all other forms of cinema, but also one that exists only in the tensions of intercultural communication it throws up.

These complications of distinction, popularity and periphery also govern the reception of *Sholay*. This film is simultaneously regarded as the "greatest Hindi film of all time" (Dwyer 2005: 218) and as a cult phenomenon that started as a box-office flop and worked its way into the hearts of fans over the course of a number of years (Dissanayake and Sahai 1992). Lalitha Gopalan testifies to the cult status it has since acquired: "fans of this cult film extensively quote Salim Khan and Javed Akthar's script back to the screen; rumours abound on the existent variations of the closing sequence; and [Amjad Khan] became one of the most popular stars" (Eleftheriotis and Needham 2006: 325). The cult reputation of *Sholay* has also affected the remake *Aag* (aka *Flames*), albeit adversely – it has gained it the unenviable reputation of one of the worst films ever.

There is no reason not to see *Sholay* as an example of cult cinema on a par with Western cult classics. If audiences and critics of cult cinema would accept the complications of their reception contexts the way they accept those of *Casablanca* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it probably would be. Yet when confronted with Bollywood, different conditions and strategies appear to apply, and one of the most stubborn of these is that for Asian films Western audiences in particular do not appreciate ambiguities of popularity the same way they appreciate them for other forms of cinema. To put it in the words of Hills – for Bollywood any homology is not yet accepted.

A similar attitude underpins cultists' worldwide appreciation of obscurity. Even when there is little evidence of continued fandom or subcultural appeal, Western critics and audiences are keen to identify instances of Asian cinema as cult. This is for instance

the case with Philippines and Thai horror movies, and a score of exotic genre cinema from East Asia (Tombs 1997; Tumbocon Jr, 2003; Knee 2005). In these explorations the emphasis is not on the cult following of these films, but rather on the discovery, for Western audiences, of a form of cinema hitherto hidden. As such, these studies have both a pioneering and an orientalizing function: they make available new kinds of films to curious cinephiles and potential fans (thus enabling a cult following) while also framing these films as perennial "curiosities" – stripping them of any possibility to present themselves as "normal," even within their own cultural perspective, let alone on the global stage. Typically, for the perspective of obscurity individual titles of films matter less in such studies than groupings of them as "weird" and "exciting" – and in that refusal to individualize films lies of course another orientalizing element. It is a variation of orientalism that has come under some criticism (Espinosa 2009; Imanjaya 2009).

There are only few exceptions to the model that treats Asian cinema, and non-Western cinema in general as either obscure or popular but culturally over-specific for global cult audiences. Such exceptions have in common that the films and their receptions address the West (and its values) reflexively – the same way the term otaku, or Hong Kong's cinema, were said to address the West, namely through a combination of appropriation and alienation. Examples of such exceptions are *Lady Terminator*, an Indonesian horror critique of Western modernity's influence on traditional Indonesian culture, with a possessed female killer castrating men who seduce young Indonesian girls (Gladwin 2003: 227–228), and *Ong-bak*, a Thai martial arts film that "challenges the Hong Kong action model" (Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Chan 2005: 2–3). These films' cult status is partly the result of the stand they take against Western or globalized business practices, in particular issues of cultural ownership, copyright, and exotic tourism. In offering resistance against such practices, these films have occupied a rebellious position among viewers, who feel they offer an exit out of suffocating cultural routines.

Notes

1. We owe gratitude to Nathen Clerici for his expert advice on these recent developments concerning Asian cult, and we regret that we are not able to expand on the phenomenon of the cult appeal of the "kogal" (the "blue sailor suit girls") and the "take-it-easy" attitude; we refer to the essays of Hiroki Azuma for further reading on this.
2. The in-quotes are from Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara's *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia*.

12

Religion and Utopia

The previous chapters have emphasized how cult cinema is marked by deep alignments between fans and films, but also by performances of such alignments. In this chapter we would like to extend our exploration of these issues through a link with the religious meaning of the term. We touched upon the religious origin of the term "cult" in our introduction. Here, we will look more closely at areas where discourses on cinema cultism and religious cultism collide in an attempt to determine if any of the seriousness (and indeed graveness) with which religious cultism is associated is also found in film cultism, or if frivolity has replaced it altogether. Throughout, our focus will be on films depicting religion and religious cults from a minority position – in the margins or in opposition of institutionalized religion.

Discourses on Cultism and Religion

For William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark (2003: 60), religions are "social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain, and exchange supernaturally based general compensators [sets of beliefs and prescriptions for action that substitute for the immediate achievement of the desired award]." By comparison, cults are "social enterprises primarily engaged in the production and exchange of novel and exotic compensators." This means that not all cults are religions, and that they often do not offer general compensators – they promise more immediate rewards (epiphanies or healing). When cults that refer to magic evolve towards more general compensators (such as eternal life, or otherworldly benefits) they become "cult movements," which Bainbridge and Stark (2003) define as: "social enterprises primarily engaged in the production and exchange of novel and exotic general compensators based on supernatural assumptions."

The type of cult that comes closest to cinema cultism falls under what Marvin Harris (1987: 268) calls "communal cults." Bainbridge and Stark call it the "subculture-evolution model of cult innovation." They are either organized around rites of passage or rites of solidarity. The model assumes that cults can emerge without authoritative leaders, as expressions of developments and consolidations of novel cultures often inspired by essentially accidental factors (2003: 67). As an example, Bainbridge and Stark give the subculture of juvenile delinquency that caused so much upheaval in the 1950s. This example invites a link between ways in which lower-class backgrounds, forms of deviance, and religious cultism are viewed by society. We will come back to this link further on.

Matt Hills (2002a: 117) has warned that comparisons between the kind of discourses surrounding film cults and religious cults are "absurdly insensitive to cultural and historical contexts." Drawing upon work of Emile Durkheim, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, Hills nevertheless outlines a number of similarities and connections between developments in cult discourse from the perspective of studies of religion, and discourses on cult in media and film studies. For Hills, there are three main components to any comparison between cult cinema and religious cultism. The first is their marginalization: both religious cultism and film cultism seem to present an "embarrassment" to

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enlightened culture (2002a: 119). They exist in the margins of what is deemed acceptable in society. The second is what Hills calls the "practical unconsciousness" of the cultist: "the things that fans do not know . . . but which nevertheless still allow them to 'go on' in their subcultural and subjective activities" (2002a: 123). One function of this practical unconsciousness is the ability of otherwise rational people to engage in "discursive mantras" and to submit to the surrendering of "proof" in favor of an affective communal faith that brings about a "relaxation of rationalizations and justifications which fans may otherwise be called upon to produce" (2002a: 122). Hills sees this component as important in disabling the potentially awkward "why on earth are you a fan of this?" question. The third component is the increased individualization of cult beliefs, a development observed both in religious cultism and in film cultism.

There is little or no dispute over the first component: every description of cinema that utilizes its connection to religion and religious cults stresses that it is a position in the margin of cultures. At their most generous such descriptions describe cults as "mini-cultures" and "protocivilizations." Often they are less generous. There is also little disagreement with regard to the third component. It is extremely tempting to see the evolution to increased individualization in religiosity and religious/cult experiences in parallel with the rise of attention for cult movies – especially the midnight movie. In fact, one could position cult cinema's history as an indication of an evolution towards individualist religiosity. It is an evolution neatly captured in what Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have called a shift from "cult movements" to "client cults" and "audience cults," the former being more strictly organized and the latter more loosely based on the consumer activity of participants who "often do not gather physically but consume cult doctrines entirely through magazines, books, newspapers, radio, and television" (1985: 26). To these media Douglas Cowan and David Bromley (2008: 89–90) add the internet; and we could add film, cult films to be specific. We will encounter examples of both the first and third component in the historical instances of the collision between religious cultism and film cultism further on in this chapter.

But there is some debate around the second component, because by concentrating on how cultists avoid being asked about the essence of their cultism, Hills himself avoids addressing the substance of the cult experience: what *kind of experience* exactly are cult audiences after that could possibly be in line with religious cultism? Overall, critics and scholars of cult cinema are vague about this component. The quasi-religious characteristics of late night screenings frequented by repeat viewers looking for epiphanies and "whiffs of immortality" are not lost on Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1991: 16) when they describe midnight movies, but they resist going into too much detail: "Emile Durkeim's description of the positive cult is a virtual prediction of the sort of behavior observable any weekend night", they write. Danny Peary (1981: xiii) refers to some form of religiosity when he writes that "cultists believe they are among the blessed few who have discovered something in particular films that the average moviegoer and critic have missed", but he fails to specify what that "something" is. In "Confessions of a Cultist," Andrew Sarris (1970: 13) describes his initiation into New York's film cult scene as one that was "pure" because it was "poor" – an apt summary of the marginalized position of cults across history. Sarris stresses how much his position was akin to that of religious cultists: "I realized that the quasi-religious connotation of the term was somewhat justified for those of us who loved movies *beyond all reason*" (our italics). One of the reasons for this vagueness is that it portrays the film cultist as a naive, poor soul, unable to marshal the abilities to deal with films in an equally sophisticated way as middlebrow audiences, someone hopelessly lost, over-invested in aimless searches for deep answers.

David Lavery (1991: 187–199), offers one attempt to look beyond the "discursive mantra" and answer the "why are you a fan of this?" question. In Lavery's argument, the role of the discursive mantra is played by "cool" cynicism, and by semiotics and intertextuality (the idea that films are chains of signs, often towards themselves). For Lavery, such constructions stand in the way of what cult cinema and its audiences really want, namely glimpses of "cosmic meaning," the kind of feeling of collective belonging that the individualization, commodification and enculturation of belief-systems is said to have pushed out of people's everyday reach. Lavery observes such an underlying desire in films such as *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *Repo Man*,

Liquid Sky, and *Man Facing Southeast*. If one tracks the tropes and motives of such cult movies, Lavery argues, they share a common ground with early Christian Gnosticism, a religious philosophy stemming from ancient heresies that stress an escape from this world through the acquisition of esoteric knowledge (Lavery 1991: 193–194). Gnosticism has multiple incarnations. Lavery focuses on a variation that relies on the writings of Hans Jonas (who stresses the transcendental conception of salvation from a world that is essentially one big accident), Jacques Lacarriere (who emphasizes that Gnostics believe themselves to be "autochthons of another world"), and A.O. Lovejoy (who stresses "otherworldliness").

Lavery's argument is specific and speculative, but it is not unique. There is common ground between a view of cult cinema as rephrasing age-old esoteric, philosophical and spiritual questions, and one that stresses its marginalization in society, and it is caught up in a larger cultural development of the commodification, individualization, and secularization of religions and religious cults. In order to sketch this common ground we will outline a few concepts from the history of religion and cult movements. We will frame the characteristics of these moments in function of the semi-religious inspiration cinema cultism draws upon – as points of comparison but also as proxy explanations for the investments cultists make.

The Cult of Dionysus: Wasted Time and the Orgy

Our first point of interest is the cult of Dionysus, probably the most often-used metaphor for critics attempting to illustrate film cults and its affiliated social experiences through a link with the history of culture and religion. The cult of Dionysus is only one of many cults that qualify as exemplar. John Mikalson (2010: 53–65) lists seven Western cults that address the origin of culture with regard to the sacred, the divine, and that stress mystic rituals. There are numerous more from outside the West. However, because of its prominent place in the history of visceral, wild, and physical cultism and because of its permanent marginalized position in relation to legitimate cultural systems, this chapter uses the cult of Dionysus as a model.

The original function of cults was to offer people an encounter with the foundations of life untied to rules of everyday governance. The encounter was supposed to obliterate enculturation in an effort to "return" to or "elevate" into a "direct understanding." The tradition goes back to the pre-religious ways of worshipping, and especially to the tenth century BC cult of Dionysus in Near Asia. According to local lore, Dionysus was a demon who, suffering from holy madness, hid in the forest hills, where he lost himself in delirious chases in an attempt to become one with nature *as a whole*. Followers of the cult would gather at night in the woods, and engage in wild orgies, with music rousing them into dances, trances, and sex, until their hunger for a literal union with all of life would lead them to sacrifice – originally a random human, later a carefully selected animal like a goat or bull (Otto 1965; Kerényi 1976; Burkert 1987; Mikalson 2010). The ecstatic communion of the sacrifice and the devouring of its flesh would transfer divine powers to the worshipper, and would give the deepest possible pleasure of feeling united with all forms of existence (feeling *wide awake* and *alive*). In short, the Dionysian cult offered communities a way to grasp, through tacit, physical experience, the terrifying yet wonderful nature of life in all its forms (beginning and end, night and day, season after season), worship and appease the forces that control it (storms, fearsome animals, vast landscapes), make bearable through commemoration the many traumatic and horrific events that would threaten them, and celebrate the very fact they are alive, and life itself.

Centuries after its original run, the Dionysus cult has remained influential as a metaphor for a worldview in which the celebration of cosmic meaning is linked to everyday life, and not alienated from it and in which the cultic experience was essential to a full life, not a marginal addendum. One example comes from Harvey Cox (1969), who uses the Dionysian festival and the medieval festival of the Feast of Fools as a model to explore the potential of the cultic experience (and its connection with lower-class populations, which he stresses) to address core values of humanity without conforming to hegemonic systems. For Cox, the concepts of festivity and fantasy, which he sees very much in the activist and eschatological sense of Antonin Artaud (who is discussed at length), offer an alternative model through which the cultic experience (rituals, dance,

comedy, drunkenness, radicalism) can act as an agent of social change in everyday life. Another example, in line with Cox's aims to offer alternatives to individualization and commodification, is Michel Maffesoli (whose work we detailed in Chapter 1). For Maffesoli, the figure of Dionysus is a model for the celebration of everyday life because its modes of activity ignore "productivity," "efficiency," and "purposefulness." This conceptualization sees Dionysus as a core element of phenomenal experience – of cult but equally of life as a whole. For Maffesoli, what society and economy call a "waste" is exactly what a Dionysian model cherishes.

Two key aspects of the metaphor of Dionysus resonate with the kind of experience film cultism is said to include, namely the experience of time ungoverned and the visceral experience of sexual energy. For the first, the convenient shorthand is that of "wasting time," for the second it is the "orgy." Both are commonly regarded as superfluous, frivolous, and unproductive forms of conduct, and that is exactly why they resonate with cultism. The aspect of wasted time reflects on the unwillingness of cultism to slot itself into a conduct of time as prescribed by society. Instead, the Dionysian experience is essentially presented as one in which one loses oneself and in which time, as a tool that measures experiences, becomes useless. Philosophical studies of the governance of time from a variety of approaches, such as Henri Bergson (Totaro 2001), Stephen Kern (1983), Eric Alliez (1996), or John Zerzan (1994) often share a distinction between "proper" uses of time and "resistant" uses of time. The Dionysian experience, like the cult cinema experience, is seen as resistant. Mathijs (2010a) uses this parallel to argue that: "one main implication of all the modes, tools and instances of media cultism, and indeed the purpose of the epiphanies cults chase, is the subversion of a steady progression of time." Among the examples Mathijs mentions are the numerous instances of "ruptured time" in cult films (*Donnie Darko*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, etc.) as well as cult receptions' improper uses of time – watching films repeatedly, ritually, at midnight, outside of the proper time frames. To those can be added aspects of nostalgia, and of re-imagining repeat viewings as if experienced "for the very first time."

The aspect of the orgy as a contentious yet core component of cult cinema and cult receptions, is something we have alluded to a few times in Chapter 9 and 10, where we discussed within the framework of the challenging of taboos and the performativity of non-normative sexuality. The specific aspect of the Dionysian orgy in itself has been the subject of much philosophical debate. For Georges Bataille (Botting and Wilson 1997), violent eroticism is the full acknowledgement of life into death. It is primarily lustful, uninhibited, and exuberant, and only remotely concerned with procreation. It is forceful and violent in that it transgresses borders. For Friedrich Nietzsche (1968) too, the Dionysus cult stressed a vital connection between violence and sexuality that goes to the core of being alive, being human. For Leopold Flam (1973) and Hubert Dethier (1994–2002), who studied centuries of heresy and heterodoxy, the Dionysus cult, and indeed all cults, primarily concern the carnal solidarity between humans as the ultimate way to find solace and belonging. The sexual orgy is the main method towards this ever-fleeting moment of utmost satisfaction.

With regard to cult films, the references to sex and violence are often more tempered. Yet, in addition to several of the films mentioned in Chapters 9 and 10, they inform discussions of avant-garde cinema as cultist (especially *Flaming Creatures*), and they also feature heavily in debates of the cultism surrounding films such as *Häxan* and *Un Chien Andalou*. The visceral component of cultist viewing also informs a number of reception studies. Using a phenomenological perspective, Vivian Sobchack (2004) has made reference to "sensuous experiences" and "carnal modalities" to describe viewers' embodied reactions to representations of, among others, sex, violence, and death. Among the examples she uses are *Crash* and *La jetée*, both of which have received cult receptions. Sue Turnbull (2007: 181–189) analyzes cultist viewers of *The Lord of the Rings* who insist on "descriptions of affect registered in and through the body" that go as far as to count the physical "experience" of the film as the most important aspect of it, establishing what Turnbull calls a "felt connection."

The metaphor of the Dionysian orgy has even influenced some professional training. With regard to the link between film and audience, for instance, Artaud often blamed Aristotle's notion of catharsis, and other concepts of drama for that matter, for

replacing audience involvement with passivity, for exchanging performance with observation (Bermel 1977: 34). Known as the actor in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, but most notably famed as a theater theorist, Artaud called for a "cruelty" that would directly affect, and alter, the state of the audience, and through rituals would eventually obliterate the border between performance and audience. Cinema in its raw state, wrote Artaud, "emits something of the atmosphere of trance conducive to certain revelations." It is "really the real in its entirety" (Artaud 1928, in Hammond 2000: 103–104). In the 1960s, Fernando Arrabal, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Joseph Beuys launched similar proposals (Auslander 1997: 13–27). They drew a lot of criticism from acting coaches. Lee Strasberg called their wish to "return to some mystical womb" laudable, but the impact on the audience to which he was witness "disappointing" (Strasberg 1987: 178–182). One can read into Strassberg's comment the view that the religious conviction and ritualistic repetition that is necessary to arrive at the state of epiphany and gasp should really only survive as a "method," one that "softens" the suddenness of the experience, and that clearly separates practitioners from audiences – a method to make cult into culture.

Utopianism

The second concept we would like to isolate is utopianism. We would like to follow a largely historical argument to sketch the intersections between cult cinema and utopian thought. As the Dionysus cult spread across the Mediterranean area, its visceral and radical elements were exchanged for more moderate routines in a Hellenistic version of the cult that treated the state of exceptional experience as an embellishment of, or even inconvenience to, everyday life. In the variation ascribed to Orpheus, there was no longer an organic union through sex or slaughter, nor an abandonment of time, but rather artfulness and asceticism were proposed as means to achieve the same results. Of the Hellenistic cult of Dionysus, Robert Turcan (1996: 296) writes:

> the Dionysian mysteries preserved some features of the ancient orgy. Their liturgy incorporated the gestural, vestmental, emblematic, symposiac, even omophagic appearances of classic Maenadism: dances, rhythmic swaying of the body, and prophecies, drunkenness and music, garments of animal skins, the brandishing of staffs wreathed in ivy.

But he also adds that the symbolic ritualism was a few steps removed from the actual, original orgies. By the time of Socrates and Plato, most of the legacy of the Dionysian cult had been sublimated into systems of representation (theater), belief (religion) and knowledge (philosophy, history).

This change caused a shift in emphasis. Emile Durkheim (1915/1995) for instance, distinguishes between cults on the basis of their rituals: "negative" cults were based on rituals of prohibition (such as exclusion or asceticism), and positive cults were based on rituals of exhibition (such as sacrificing or mourning). The ancient Dionysus cult was very much an example of the latter; the Hellenist cult of Dionysus, the moderate cult of Orpheus, and many of the organized religions, were part of the former. From the moment the original Dionysus cult was overtaken by newer, negative ones (who inevitably isolated themselves), and by efforts to build large monolithic cultural worldviews, cults ended up in the periphery of culture, persecuted and sidelined, and the positive connotations of cultism (experiencing all of existence, commemorating the union with nature) were lost. The term "cult" became equal to "outsider" – outside the normal circuit of culture and outside of modern life, unable to keep up with it.

This outsider status facilitates links between cultism and utopian thinking, usually via references to specific movements. Scholarship on cinema cultism occasionally refers to movements such as Sufism, Taoism, Catharism, Paganism, and Manichaeism to express the position of philosophical marginality associated with cultism, as well as more revolutionary movements such as the Taborites, or folkloric or erotic pantheism. These references often appear in relation to *El Topo* – a film that seems to attract such discussions. Through these references some other components of cultism emerge, in particular the class-background and utopianism at work in cultism. Lavery's reference to Christian Gnosticism is one example of this. Lavery is interested less in the religious elements of the

Gnosticism and more in its socio-economic make-up because this paints a more accurate picture of the film cultist, as someone at odds with the mainstream in an ideological sense *and* within a socio-economic framework. It is in this sense that we need to understand Lavery's (1991: 194) reference to the work of Karl Marx.

Let us look at one example of the connection between cultism, class and utopia more closely. In their analysis of the reception of *Judge Dredd*, Martin Barker and Kate Brooks (1997: 289–291) are discussing the class backgrounds of fan-boys of the special effects in *Dredd*, when they use the work of sociologist Karl Mannheim on the cultist utopianism of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists and of "orgiastic chiliasm" as a point of reference. In *Ideology and Utopia* (1936) Mannheim distinguishes between four forms of utopianism: orgiastic chiliasm, liberal-humanism, conservatism, and socialist-communism. Chiliasm, also known as millennialism, is a belief that holds that a penultimate age of a thousand years (hence the millennium reference) will occur right before the end of the world, in which the heavens and earth will merge, and a battle with Satan will occur, before the Last Judgment. On a somewhat broader scale it holds the belief that periods of time (such as a millennium) are book-ended by huge calamities. It is tempting to use this concept as a metaphor for some of the apocalypticism in cult cinema, but there is more. For Mannheim (1936: 190), chiliasm is associated with the Dionysian cult through its investment in "orgiastic" practices of abandon, trance, reverie, and revolution – all of which put it at odds with ruling culture, and indeed present it as a danger to society (though often more by reputation than by fact). Mannheim uses the example of the Anabaptist movement of Thomas Münzer (which speaks of "storm and vitality and a new lawless and consequently free world") to press this point, and to illustrate how orgiastic chiliasm is a more radical form of utopianism than the other three models, closer to anarchism, more embedded in "presentness" (1936: 196). Barker and Brooks pick up on this element to suggest that the special effects fan-boys of *Judge Dredd* are being painted in the same corner as the chiliasts: as lower-class members of a cult that threatens routines of cultural consumption: "as chiliasm was attacked, suppressed, and misrepresented as 'irrational', 'dangerous', and 'heretical', so delight in 'violent' films is feared, condemned, and misrepresented" (1997: 290).

Another factor that emerges in comparisons between marginalized religiosity, utopianism, and cinema cultism is the concept of idolatry. It is in this sense that Walter Benjamin (1936) uses the term "cult." Benjamin is inspired by Karl Marx's use of the term "cult-value." Marx employs it to signal an alternative to use-value and exchange-value, namely fetishistic value. That is the value a commodity (or event, or expression) has that cannot be measured in currency or labor, but only in the value irrationally accorded to it by its consumers – who often feel like participants rather than clients (Marx 1976). It includes attitudes such as "idolatry," "superstition," "loyalty," solidarity," "self-effacement" – attitudes that accord a value to a good or event that is often only visible through the religious rituals surrounding its consumption. In the eyes of the capitalist society Marx analyzes, the cultic experience was outmoded and useless. It obstructs ideas of progress by treating time as an impression of the human body instead of a universal, linear concept, and by resisting the notion of advancement over time – cults do not "project" or "prophesize" the way religions do (their moment of revelation is too near to remain un-falsifiable), nor do they promote the concepts of "acceleration," "productivity," "growth," and "accumulation" (faster, better, more) that are essential to trade. Cults are all the more pathetic in a context that increasingly preferences what Durkheim called "the cult of the individual" over collective and communal celebrations (Chriss 1993). Benjamin (1936) argued that idolatry and fetishism are particularly present in the world of art. Traditionally, the cult of a work of art pivots around its "aura," its sense of uniqueness, which is revered and worshipped. But with the rise of mechanical means of reproduction (print, photography, film), this aura had come under threat. Benjamin observed that the cult moved from the material properties of the object to the ways in which it could mobilize emotions usually felt during worship and communion. The idolatric cult of stardom is a good example of such a displacement.

Marx's and Benjamin's application of the term "cult" to commodities and art, and Durkheim's "cult of the individual," show that the term "cult" was, in their

times, no longer uniquely reserved for religious worship. It referred to all kinds of worship that contained, either directly, or remotely and symbolically a longing for some deep emotional connection – through rituals with a celebratory and orgiastic exponent – with the profound meaning of human existence, and the union between the self and all other forms of being. By the beginning of the twentieth century much of that behavior was frowned upon, and condemned as unprogressive, or silly. Though they noted the cult behavior of audiences of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Rudolph Valentino, and Charlie Chaplin, Benjamin and colleagues such as Siegfried Kracauer (1926) or Harry Allan Potamkin (1933) had little patience with such low forms of culture, and they dismissed them as false forms of emancipation. "Not until the audience ceases being part of the ritual does it become an audience," Potamkin writes (2008: 217). At the time when film cults began to develop the term "cult" was enjoying a far from enviable reputation.

In the 1960s much of cultism's negative reputation was challenged. Concurrent with the advent of midnight movies, and parallel with the increase in individualized religiosity, countercultural movements arose, and sensibilities associated with cults were rediscovered and resurrected. Festivals such as Monterey, Woodstock, or the disastrous Altamont attempted to reclaim ancient rituals as "progressive" and "transcendental," and free love and drugs were – at least rhetorically – promoted as tools towards a connection with life's mystery (documentaries of those festivals have become cult films: *Monterey Pop*, *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter*, see Chapter 16). At the same time, scholars showed renewed interest in utopian thought and in the function of religious rituals in the organization of culture, especially those referencing sex and violence.

Within this context, various thinkers argued for a reappraisal of the cultic experience and a revaluation of utopian thought. Herbert Marcuse (1966) saw the regulation of sexual impulses and instincts as the key to establishing civilization and culture. According to Marcuse, repressing our desires inflicts a suffering upon humans, but produces the benefits of culture. "The sacrifice has paid off well", he added, "in the technically advanced areas of civilization, the conquest of nature is practically complete, and more needs of a greater number of people are fulfilled than ever before" (1966: 3). But Marcuse saw a danger in over-regulating repression, because it could lead to *surplus-repression*: the repression in a society that goes beyond what is needed to maintain order and that exists only to protect the power and privileges of the establishment (1966: 37). Marcuse's fear was that this might lead to what he called a "one-dimensional man," an uncritical and conformist acceptance of structures, norms, and behaviors as dictated by power-elites (Marcuse 1964). Though written decades earlier the eschatological work of Ernst Bloch (1918, 1949) on utopia and the dialectic between "being" and "being able to" received renewed attention. Often, utopian thought moved to discussions of how people could find truth in rituals. As we saw in Chapter 10, Mary Douglas (1966) pointed to the essential roles rituals played in the identification of cultural taboos and, hence, the organization of society. Mircea Eliade (1961, 1963), who developed the concept of "hierophany" (which splits the human experience into a profane experience of space and time and a sacred one), regarded rituals as equally commemorative and participative in hierophanies. René Girard (1972), on the other hand, saw rituals such as sexual and violent sacrifices as means to regulate unchained "mimetic violence," a struggle of everyone against everyone fueled by desire (Mathijs and Mosselmans 2000). Religious rituals prevent random violence, and substitute it for violence against one person, "a scapegoat." In the initial, radical version of the Dionysus cult this could be anyone but in subsequent variations this soon became someone whose symbolic death several people could unite around. After a while, argued Girard, the celebration of unison no longer requires the actual defeat (the sacrifice). Instead, rituals *representing* the act will replace the actual violence. In other words, the participative element disappears in favor of pure commemoration.

Midnight Movies and Satanism

In parallel development to many of the ideas described above, and also actively *using* them, ran increases in appreciation for instances of religious cultism surrounding films that were being described as cults – as if their cultism was not just the result of midnight screenings and devoted fandom but of their religiosity itself.[1]

Crucial in that development were perceptions of initiation into a "secret society," and of outsidership towards "mainstream" culture. Hoberman and Rosenbaum's remarks about Durkheim and religion need to be seen in this light. So does Sarris's invocation of cultism and religion quoted earlier in this chapter. In that quote we find the passion ("beyond all reason"), the thirst for direct connection ("purity"), the subversion, and the battle against intolerance that had characterized the position of cults since the advent of monolithic systems of philosophy and religion. Sarris's views also exemplify the need for a unifying figure (Bazin as the substitute for Dionysus), the importance of the rituals of festivals as sites of celebration, and the desire for advocacy. It equally stresses cultism as a conscious minority position a few isolated figures embark upon but no one else. Sarris's confession also takes the mystical/religious experience of film viewing itself, and the ritualistic way in which this is organized, as the core elements of his cultism – it is *through* his experience during the ritualistic encounters that he felt a powerful connection with being alive and becoming a cultist. Films about cultism and religiosity can be said to not only channel that connection, but to enable it.

The most visible expression of this development is the midnight movie (see Chapter 1). To their detractors, midnight movies were degenerated exploitation; to their defenders they offered opportunities of "awe and enigma" and the unique opportunity to experience all of life's thrills in one initiation. The advent of the midnight movie circuit around 1970 captured the *moment* when the inspirations from the Dionysus cult, the various marginalized (and working-class) cults of utopia through the centuries, and the more recent development towards idolatry and individualized and commodified experiences of religion *all* became a central component to certain ways of appreciating certain films. Prominent to this moment were movies in which rituals stood central: *Häxan* and *Freaks* were re-released for late night audiences in the late 1960s because they included, among other things, cultism as a theme within their stories. *Freaks*' "one of us" chant and *Häxan*'s meticulous descriptions of persecutions of cultism and marginalized religious beliefs were centerpieces of such themes (Stevenson 2006). Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Matthew*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Medea* started a trend of films that re-examined elements of well-established and institutionalized religions and myths in function of their representations of marginalized lower-class peoples, their ritualistic aspects, and their utopian and revolutionary potential – triggered and enhanced by sex and violence (Macdonald 1969).

Other films of the time were even more ambitious in their religious connections. Among these were two films of Alejandro Jodorowsky and two of Fernando Arrabal, two figures instrumental to the art collective "Panic Movement." The best known of these films was Jodorowsky's *El Topo*, generally regarded as one of the most prominent midnight movies. *El Topo* was said to evoke a "spiritual epiphany ... to the chosen" (Havis 2008: 59). *The Holy Mountain* was a more conscious attempt at a systematic criticism of organized religion that simultaneously promoted – at least in its receptions – alternative forms of religiosity. *Viva la muerte*, directed by Arrabal, was inspired by the Dionysian figure of Pan and Artaud's theater of cruelty. It contained explicit sex, a violent sacrifice, and multiple surrealist tableaux. Arrabal's next film, *I Will Walk Like a Crazy Horse*, was less rooted in political reality but in its taboo-breaking imagery it was all the more an attack upon organized religion and Western society.

In a variety of films religious cultism was effectively promoted. Most prominently among these are the films of Kenneth Anger, especially the ones that presented occultist Alisteir Crowley's religious philosophy of "Magick," a form of Gnosticism that flirts with Satanism, and which exists in various degrees of formal organization, even occasionally regarded as a proper religion (for more on Anger, see Chapters 6 and 14). Prior to the late 1960s, Anger had already directed the "luciferian" *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, a film poem attempting to visualize some of the ideas of Crowley through the representation of a number of rites attributed to Egyptian and Babylonian legends. Of crucial importance to Anger was that the part of the Whore of Babylon be played by occultist Marjorie Cameron (see Schreck 2002: 250). Anger's best-known midnight movie, *Invocation of my Demon Brother*, specifically references satanic rituals. It pulled much of its inspiration from Crowley's pop-cultural appeal with contemporary celebrities, such as John Lennon, Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page, and heavy metal band Black Sabbath (Lachman 2001). The film itself showcases a hypnotic mix of pop-cultural icons,

Satanic symbols, orgies, sexual violence, and metaphors of various religious cults. *Invocation* featured a performance of self-declared Satanist Anthony LaVey (as Satan), and it starred Bobby Beausoleil, a friend of the Manson Family.

In *Lucifer Rising*, which was started before *Invocation*, but which continued as an unfinished project until it was released as a 30-minute film in 1980, Anger elaborates further on the philosophy of Alisteir Crowley and the cult/religion of Magick, exploring it through a range of occult symbols and metaphors, and making explicit connections to the Dionysus cult and ancient Egyptian religion. The film stars Miriam Gibril and Donald Cammell (co-director of *Performance* and *Demon Seed*, and collaborator on *The Man Who Fell to Earth*), and also features Marianne Faithfull. Beausoleil composed the music (from his prison cell, where he was incarcerated because of his involvement in the murder of Sharon Tate, see further). The receptions of *Invocation* and *Lucifer Rising* propelled Anger to the forefront of occultism in cinema, a status reflected in a high degree of critical attention. Though only few fans or critics take Anger's ideas seriously, *Invocation* and *Lucifer Rising* were used within networks of cult reception as provocative samples of a willingness to mix popular culture and religiosity in opposition to established churches, and to promote cultism as an exciting alternative. Rob Cohen's documentary *Mondo Hollywood*, which tried to analyze the appeal of esoteric cultism in Hollywood in the late 1960s, offers a glimpse of this excitement (Rowe 1974; Huag 1996; Brottman, Rowe and Powell 2001; Brook 2006).

Contemporaneous to Anger's explicit address of religious and satanic cultism a high number of films emerged that addressed Satanism either as a theme or a stylistic motif. To some extent, these films can be seen as a subgenre of production-line horror movies and an attempt to exploit what seemed like a niche sensibility with mileage. Most Satanic horror movies that received cult reputations followed in the wake of *Rosemary's Baby*, a film about a pregnant woman who believes her baby will be seized by her husband and be given as a sacrifice to Satanic cultists. *Rosemary's Baby* became a cult after director Roman Polanski's own pregnant wife Sharon Tate was among the victims of the Charles Manson Family killing spree in 1969 (De Piciotto 2003; Havis 2008: 52–55). This sad event triggered a myriad of tangled reception tales linking the Manson Family to Polanski's film, to the murder of his pregnant wife, to other figures in "Satanic film cultism," all of which resisted "normal" comprehension in favor of receptions that thrived on tangents, wild explorations, and myth-building. The Polanski case briefly turned Satanism (and cultism itself) into a "cool" viewing attitude that, in acts of fandom performance, many viewers were proud to declare themselves fans of in order to distinguish themselves from other types of viewers. With the performance of Satanism in demand, dozens of films took Satanic rituals as a key motive. They ranged from *Witchfinder General*, *I Drink Your Blood*, *Le Diable est parmi nous*, *Cry of the Banshee*, *Race with the Devil*, *Santa Fe Satan*, *Mariken Van Nieumeghen*, to *The Wicker Man*. The most successful culmination came with *The Exorcist*, which presented the rituals of the Catholic Church as a form of cult.

Contemporary Performances of Religious Cultism

Explicit explorations of Satanism and religious cultism in cinema continue to appear frequently in films, even thought the context has changed much since the early 1970s. Examples with sizable cult reputations include *Prince of Darkness* and *Prophecy*. The 1980s saw a short revival of the theme of voodoo in cinema, and some of the films of this wave linked it to Satanism. It brought cult reputations to films such as *Angel Heart*, *The Believers*, and *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. In a similar vein, a few films about fallen angels received cult receptions, most notably *Wings of Desire*. Around the year 2000 a stream of millennialist apocalypse and endtime films was released, some of which stretched connections between religion, cultism, and postmodernity (see Negra 1999). Probably the best example of this stream is *The Matrix* franchise, the fandom of which, according to Marc Corcoran (2009: 123–129), is a perfect illustration of how fans switch constantly between sacred and profane planes of hierophany (he calls it "cinéphanie"). In spite of *The Matrix*, however, the receptions of these films were characterized more by their ineptness as explorations of marginal religiosity (their failure in other words) than their honest interest

in religious cultism. As such then, these films' receptions might be a further indication of a move within cult receptions towards ironic, performative celebrations of rituals that serve only to commemorate, nor participate in, some form of religiosity.

In each of these cycles, Satanism and religious cultism appear in opposition to institutionalized religion, and in that opposition they are either portrayed ironically, or dismissed as unequivocally evil and bad. The fundamental criticism of organized religion in *Life of Brian*, a film by the Monty Python comedy team about an innocent poor soul (Brian) whom everyone believes is the savior, is neutralized by the explicit parodic tone of the film. Though *Life of Brian* was banned in several regions, it had its release obstructed more because of the disrespectful tone of its humor than its presentation of alternative forms of religious cultism.

Since the 1990s, only a few films have managed to combine a sincere or non-antagonistic approach to religious cultism with a cult reputation of their own. Among the best-known examples are the obscure cult surrounding *Begotten* and the huge but controversial cultism surrounding *The Passion of the Christ*. *Begotten* makes perhaps the most serious attempt to visualize elements of Dionysian orgiastic cultism in combination with Gnostic and pagan myths. Bypassing narrative and traditional stylistics, the film features a collection of scenes with ritualistic and symbolist overtones in stark black and white colors. Among the scenes are a burial, a resurrection, an impregnation scene, the rape of the impregnated woman by a group of nomads, and a flowering of plants from a burial site. *Begotten* has long been difficult to obtain on DVD or video, and theatrical screenings are very rare. This has created an underground bootleg exchange circuit for the film, which in turn enhanced its cult reputation.

The Passion of the Christ became known for its purist approach, insisting on the explicit presentation of graphic violence, detailing the rituals of "the passion," and using sources from outside the established canon. Pushed by grassroots Christian movements, and promoted through a papal approval (though John Paul II's "it is as it was" can also be seen as a *performance of an approval*), *The Passion of the Christ* became the highest grossing non-English language film of all time. Within that mass-appeal also lingered a number of cult receptions at odds with the vox populi. Those receptions linked themselves explicitly to the film's proto-evangelical Christianity or "sectarian Catholicism." Through that controversial aspect, *The Passion of the Christ* has become a cult film that has allowed viewers a wide diversity of interpretations, a stubborn strand of which even focuses on its depiction of Satan (by Rosalinda Celentano). For Graham Holderness (2005), the film provokes audiences by putting them in the position of attendees of a liturgy. For David Fenner (2008: 250), it separates its audiences into devoted (devout) followers, and "those interested in what all the hubbub was about." In other words, part of the cultism around *The Passion of the Christ* is seeking to break the discursive mantra of the majority view and pull the film away from a fixed meaning by utilizing its open references to Satan, violence, rituals, and, even here, irony.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have tried to show how the major components of the connection between cult cinema and religion (marginalization, discursive mantras obscuring a thirst for cosmic meaning, and individualization) are complicated by the ritualistic, orgiastic, utopian, and fetishist ideals and routines that influence it. The refusal, or inability, of cultists to fully answer the question of *what kind of insight the cult experience brings* is tied up in its connection with conceptualizations and philosophies that refute the very existence of "explanations of experience." The closest one can come, it seems, is through the adoption of discourses on cultism and religion that suggest that film cults, like other forms of cultism, try to celebrate the breaking free of societal constraints by imagining a life unbound, untamed, and untimed that would provide direct knowledge of all existence. Thus, cult receptions set themselves up in opposition to society in ways that are similar to historical forms of cultism.

In its literal form, the desire towards unbound, untamed and untimed life is largely unobtainable and unwanted. Therefore the performance of rituals of the film cult experience offers a placebo. That placebo is invoked through constellations of togetherness, initiation gestures, shouting, dancing, noise, shock, astonishment, references to (or use of) illegal substances, imaginings of the dawn of time and the origin of culture, approximations of sex and violence (and both),

midnight attendance, and an advocacy for "purity" "beyond all reason." Only in a few guises would such a myriad of ritual activities be condoned without sanction. Film cultism is one of them. It would be tempting to conclude that this implies a move from *slogans to mantras* – to borrow the phrase with which Stephen Kent (2001) described a contemporaneous social development from counterculture activism into religious cultism. Such a conclusion would presume that none of the ideas surrounding the Dionysus cult, or historical forms of utopian cultism, or theories on liberation and repression that explain the essence of desire and the significance of rituals, would be valid, or viable anymore. Perhaps this is true.

But if the observations of Barker and Brooks (1997) on chiliasm, or Lavery (1991) on Gnosticism, and several similar claims (such as those of Maffesoli in Chapter 1) are anything to go by then it is much more likely that mantras have not replaced slogans altogether and that their coexistence means that utopianism, liberation theories, and Dionysian desires for orgiastic release are still embedded within cult receptions and the cult experience of cinema. In that sense, the link between religion and cinema cultism still pertains to an experience in which co-occur simultaneously the small details of one movie, and an impression of the breeze of the bigger scope of all movies, all of culture, all of human existence.

Note

1. This development is far from unique to cult cinema. It is also articulated in theater and performance art, areas in which artists such as Genesis P. Orridge, Hermann Nitsch, Joseph Beuys, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, and several others explore the crossroads between religiosity, cultism, and utopianism through the tools of violence, orgy, and rituals. Several of these artists have made films, some of which have obtained cult status, and their work is occasionally cited by film cultists as an indication of a closeness with their own community.

Part II

Themes and Genres

13

Exploitation and B Movies

If you browse the web in search of cult film sites, you are likely to encounter a predominance of exploitation-oriented material. In fact, you may form the impression that cult cinema is actually synonymous with exploitation cinema. We would like to counter that assumption, as is indicated by the wealth of non-exploitation titles that permeate this book. Nevertheless, exploitation filmmaking undoubtedly forms a key component of the somewhat broader category of cult cinema. B movies, which also figure in many a cult film list, are often conflated with exploitation films, though strictly speaking there is a difference between the two forms. More generally, though, there are also overlaps between the two, hence their incorporation into this single chapter. As so many of these films feature within cult film lists and articles, we think it is necessary to think about some key historical and conceptual issues related to their development, as these in turn feed into their prominence within cult cinema discussion, while also contributing to a firmer understanding of the terms themselves.

B Movies and Classical Exploitation

While Roger Corman has gained the status as "King of the Bs," he was fond of pointing out that he did not actually make B movies (Gray 2004: 48). Yet he, along with other exploitation figures, tends to be associated with B movies.[1] The main reason as to why Corman – along with figures like William Castle, Samuel Z. Arkoff and David F. Friedman – are not technically producers of B movies is that the majority of the work they are associated with hit cinemas after the B movie had ceased to exist. The B movie was a film paired with a bigger "A" picture and positioned firmly on the lower end of a movie theater program. This type of film flourished during the 1930s as, in a bid to recapture dwindling audiences during the Depression, many theaters began to adopt double-bill screenings in order to provide improved value for audiences. (While the B movie became a staple in various countries it has been most documented in the United States and is thus our primary focus in this chapter.[2]) Both major studios and smaller, independent "poverty row" studios produced these cheaply made pictures in response to the flourishing demand during the decade. This practice began to die out during the 1950s, though, as changes in the US industry – such as the rise of television, the move to the suburbs, increasing costs and a shrinking rate of studio productions – dictated against this exhibition strategy. As Doherty notes, the types of qualities that characterized B movies were now likely to appear on television, and thus lost their cinematic appeal. The consequence of these shifts was that many smaller theaters lacked product. A number of low-budget filmmakers then stepped in to fill the void with the production of exploitation pictures (Doherty 2002: 28).

Before focusing on the 1950s further, it is sensible at this point to rewind a little, for exploitation pictures also existed before the decline of the B movies. Summarizing the similarities and differences of exploitation and B movies during the same period will aid understanding of the later period of exploitation filmmakers and films. The B film, according to Taves, has

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several characteristics that distinguish it from the A picture. First, and most obviously, it filled the bottom half of the bill at cinemas; secondly, it featured leads with "moderate, questionable or unknown box-office appeal"; thirdly, budgets and shooting schedules were more limited, so it was produced more rapidly than an A picture; fourthly, running time was often shorter, usually around 55–70 minutes (Taves 1995: 314). Nevertheless, Taves notes there was a certain degree of fluidity between the A and B picture, that "there are no clear lines of demarcation" (1995: 314). For example, if a B picture turned out to be an unexpected success at a theater, it could make its way to the top of the bill; likewise, a top-billed audience failure could be demoted to a B slot (1995: 315–316). While there were differences between the lower budget B films made by "poverty row" studios and the more prestigious studio productions, there was an aesthetic quality evident in a number of these films, argues Taves. As B films were shot cheaply and quickly, there was minimal consultation between various production personnel; sets were cheap and often sparse, while lighting tended to be uniformly high key, as there was little time available for elaborate lighting set-ups. Films tended to rely on formulaic, often repetitious, narratives with many of them drawing from pulp fiction, and they tended to highlight "pace and thrills" over "mood, coherence and characterization" (Taves 1995: 334). Nevertheless, Taves also points out that within the limits of B productions, there were opportunities for resourceful filmmakers to experiment with lighting, editing, and camera set-ups (1995: 334).

The low-production values, greater latitude for experimentation and the general "low" status of the B movie in relation to the more prestigious A picture has undoubtedly fed into the cult status of a number of such productions. In particular, small, "poverty row" studios – such as Republic and Monogram – were admired for their contribution to cinema by a number of influential French film critics associated with *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s; Jean-Luc Godard even dedicated his debut feature, *À bout de souffle* (1960), to Monogram Pictures. The stance by many such critics/filmmakers was cultic in that it singled out areas of production generally considered unimportant within cinema history and staked a claim for their importance. There were also particular B films and filmmakers that gained reputations for transcending their production origins and gained cult followings. These include Edgar G. Ulmer's influential road movie *Detour*, the criminal couple movie *Gun Crazy*, Val Lewton's horror/mystery productions for RKO (such as *Cat People* and *I Walked with a Zombie*), and many of the low-budget films directed by Sam Fuller. Both *Detour* and *Gun Crazy* are often termed as film noirs, one of the most "cultic" genres (or series) of the classical period, and one which was applied retrospectively by French critics to a body of films that were often (though not always) low-budget, B pictures (the term was coined by Nino Frank in 1946, see Frank 1999). Many noirs appealed because they were perceived as challenging the norms that characterized much Hollywood product, particularly in their expressionistic lighting and mise-en-scène, and their often cynical, sometimes fatalist tone.

In contrast to B films, a number of characteristics defined exploitation pictures, which Eric Schaefer has exhaustively detailed for the period 1919–59 (which he terms "classical exploitation"). In terms of production, these films existed even below the poverty row B productions: they tended to be run by extremely small numbers of people, had less money to spend on filmmaking, and did not own their own plants (Schaefer 1999: 5, 47). Eric Schaefer describes how in exploitation cinema "the division of labor was not always as strict as it was in the classical Hollywood cinema's mode of production," adding that the multitasking this implies often meant that "those who labored in exploitation films usually had not had the opportunity to hone their skills to a degree comparable to those working in mainstream pictures" (1999: 46). Still, while Schaefer acknowledges that "watching a few exploitation films might lead one to conclude that their producers were fly-by-night operators who were more accomplished at evading creditors than shooting movies" (1999: 44) he is also quick to point out how much pre-1960s exploitation cinema adhered to business models used by Hollywood's B-studios such as Monogram and Republic. Exploitation producers outside the United States emulated such practices, as is evidenced by the routines and protocols of Hong Kong's Golden Harvest, Ernst Hofbauer's *Schoolgirl Report* productions, and the sleaze turned horror company Cinepix (Fay 2004). They operated in quite

flexible ways, but their core business emulated Hollywood's practices.

In order to cover up lack of skill and low production values, exploitation movies often reverted to "recycling." Schaefer points to this technique as one in which footage from other films, preferably of a shocking or astonishing nature, was borrowed to complete a certain atmosphere. Clips from *Häxan: Withcraft through the Ages* were used as inserts in *Maniac*; Ed Wood as well as Kenneth Anger used footage purchased from libraries or stock newsreel footage; Radley Metzger was known to revert to library music for the soundtracks of his porn chic films. The carry-over of characters between films meant not just a familiarity on the side of the audiences, but on that of the performers as well, eliminating expensive rehearsal time (Schaefer 1999: 57). The use of Bela Lugosi and other actors in Ed Wood's productions is exemplary in this respect. Roger Corman was not beyond adding a few extra shooting days and footage to a film that had already been released and releasing it again as if it was new; blaxploitation failure *The Final Comedown* thus became the equally unsuccessful *Blast!* (Gray 2004: 107). Repeat techniques and references to other films were later also portrayed as "allusions" (Carroll 1998). Ironically, recycling later became a key production value in the eyes of cult audiences, which led to its revaluation as a form of homage, intertextuality, or reflexivity (see Chapter 21). It determined the acting, effects, and production design of the films of Dan O'Bannon (*Return of the Living Dead*) or the neo-gothic wave of the early 1990s (especially *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, which heavily referenced exploitation techniques) and helped turn them into veritable cults of pastiche (Austin 2002: 116–119).

Exploitation movies were distributed in two main ways: first, on the state's rights system, where the producer sold the exclusive film rights to an independent exhibitor within a particular territory for a specified period (usually 3–5 years). The exhibitor would then be responsible for presenting the film, which meant that sometimes the title could be changed or footage subtracted. The second main exhibition strategy was *roadshowing*. This entailed either a single person (sometimes the producer) or a small number of units, transporting the film from territory to territory in order to exhibit it. Either they could hire out a theater for a period (known as "four walling") or, occasionally, they could set up temporary large tents in which to screen films (Schaefer 1999: 96–101; Stevenson 2000: 24). Perhaps the most distinctive nature of "classical exploitation" pictures, however, was their content and promotional strategies. The films often dealt with forbidden topics, such as sex, vice, drugs, nudity, and anything considered to be in "bad taste." As these films were made on extremely low budgets, dealing with such lurid material was a way to give them an edge, in that they were providing material that could not be found in other types of films. The name of exploitation stems from the fact that filmmakers exploited such material in their promotional campaigns, moving beyond typical film trailers, posters, and ads. They would play up the sensational aspects of their stories, and often complement screenings with extra-filmic practices such as lectures, slide presentations, sales of related materials, as well as gimmicks (such as the presence of uniformed nurses to help in case anyone fainted during screenings) (Schaefer 1999: 4–6).

Schaefer also outlines some of the predominant aesthetic features of exploitation films, which were closely linked to their economic status. Like B films, they are marked by an "impoverished" look, though to an even greater degree, with spare sets and minimal decoration frequently characteristic. In addition to low budgets, the speed of production and paucity of skilled actors and filmmakers led to a recurrence of stiff acting, bad lighting, and continuity errors (1999: 47–48). Though a number of "post-classical" exploitation films have gained more solid cult followings than their classical counterparts, there are a few classical exploitation films – such as *Narcotic*, *Maniac,* and *Tell Your Children,* aka *Reefer Madness* – that have built up cult reputations (Figure 13.1).

While – like B films – their marginal production status feeds into such reputations, these cult films are not celebrated so much for transcending their economic origins as testifying to them in a manner which spilled over into the ridiculous. That is, they tend to be enjoyed for their incompetence and unintentional hilarity, which marks them out as "bad" films (see Chapters 3 and 8 for more on the celebration of bad films).



Figure 13.1 *Reefer Madness*, a classical exploitation film.

As previously mentioned, the B movie died out during the 1950s, at least in its original form. The use of the term has continued partly because many of the exploitation films made during this period, and beyond, shared a number of features with these movies. They were shot quickly, on low budgets, usually without recognizable stars, and often relied on formulaic narratives as well as an emphasis on pace and action over coherent narratives. Doherty notes that, during the 1950s, two main features distinguished the new range of exploitation pictures from the older B films: the subject matter became more exploitation-oriented with films aimed more at teenagers (Doherty 2002: 30–31). In one sense, the older exploitation pictures and B films merged somewhat in this decade, as was evidenced by Monogram's (an independent provider of B films) move towards exploitation tactics towards the end of the 1940s (Tzioumakis 2006: 139–41). In another sense, exploitation cinema would splinter into many different generic and sub-generic shards from now until the 1970s at least.

Teenpics and Youth Culture

Doherty has identified a number of key types of teenage exploitation pictures produced in the 1950s. The main categories were the "juvenile delinquent" film, the rock 'n' roll teenpic, the "clean" teenpic, and the "weirdies" (cheap horror and science fiction films that catered to the youth market). A number of independent film companies produced increasing amounts of such films in order to meet the demand for product created by the studios' drastic reduction in output.[3] Doherty mentions that, in response to the threat of television, cinema could deliver two main things that its little rival could not: first, larger images and expensive sets; secondly, controversial content (2002: 20). The independent companies were not in the position to provide the first of these, hence their move to specialize in, and exploit, controversial subject matter and to aim this at the audience that was going to the cinema more frequently during this period: teenagers. The three types of films were targeting this age group in a way that had not happened before. The juvenile delinquent picture, for example, exploited scares about teenagers causing trouble, which were increasingly prevalent within the media. While the need to avoid trouble from potential critics led producers of such films to provide overarching moral frameworks warning against delinquency, they nevertheless tended to wallow in the excitement that such behavior gave rise to. The rock 'n' roll pictures, meanwhile, often featured stories that dramatized the place of rock 'n' roll in the broader cultural fabric: a force loved by youth and condemned by parents. The "clean" teenpic was a safer type of film that depicted teenage life in a less controversial manner. Finally, the "weirdies," though less explicitly about teenage lifestyles, could be seen as metaphorically relevant to the alienation and bodily changes experienced by teenagers, particularly in the guise of the monster figure (as argued by Doherty 2002: 119). Occasionally, the "weirdie" would explicitly concern teenage life, as indicated by titles such as *Teenage Zombies* and *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*.

A number of new independent companies and figures emerged during this period, many of who are feted within cult circles. These include American

International Pictures (AIP), their sometime producer/director Roger Corman, William Castle Productions, Sam Katzman, and Albert Zugsmith, to name just a few. The exploitation nature of these companies is made clear through some of the tactics that they used. Katzman, for example, was alert to the appeal of *Blackboard Jungle* and immediately attempted to replicate its success. As the use of Bill Haley's "Rock around the Clock" at the opening and closing of the film was seen as particularly noteworthy, and as rock 'n' roll was popular with teenagers, he produced a teenpic entitled *Rock around the Clock* featuring Bill Haley and the Comets playing themselves. Not only was it a huge hit, it signaled the glut of exploitation teenage movies to follow (Doherty 2002: 57). Exploitation producers would survey the market for exploitable popular themes and build films around them. They were in a good position to jump on a topical wave because their rapid production schedules meant that they could get a film onto the market while the topicality of the exploitable element(s) was still current. The whole ethos of exploitation filmmakers during this period is summed up by AIP's approach to marketing, codified in the following principles:

> OBSERVE trends and emerging tastes. KNOW as much as possible about your audience. ANTICIPATE how you will sell your chosen subject. PRODUCE with prudence, avoiding expense for what won't show on the screen. SELL with showmanship in advertising and publicity. USE imagination. Have good luck: even if you do everything else right, you'll still need it. (Quoted in Tzioumakis 2006: 152)

Within this type of filmmaking, a concept and title would come first, while frequently the script was developed *after* the marketing campaign had been devised. As in the classical era of exploitation, the role of marketing often-controversial content was extremely important in the absence of selling points such as familiar stars. And this was no surprise in an age when teenagers, who constituted the prime exploitation market, were claiming trailers to be the primary reason they went to see a picture; while interest in the persuasive psychology of advertising was also on the rise (Heffernan 2004: 68–69). Thus, there was renewed emphasis on sensational, eye-grabbing posters, trailers, and other paraphernalia, plus ear-grabbing radio spots and a host of other extravagant gimmicks.

The rise in teenage exploitation pictures occurred in tandem with a number of exhibition patterns, which have also played a key role in cult movie lore. The main trend was the huge increase in drive-in theaters. While conventional "hard-top" theaters were struggling, drive-in theaters, or "ozoners" as they were commonly known, grew massively. Between 1946 and 1956, the number of drive-ins increased from 500 to almost 5000, a growth spurred by the move to the suburbs and the increase in car ownership (Taylor 2002: 251). The drive-in was cheap to construct and appealed to both families – who could take their children with them – and teenagers, who were often tempted by the romantic potentials of this exhibition context. Drive-ins tended to specialize in double-features (or sometimes more), which provided added value-for-money for customers, but also proved profitable for the exhibitors as the longer people were at the drive-in, the more concessions they purchased, which is where the real profits lay. The fact that many exploitation pictures were shown on double bills may have added to their "B" status, but these programs usually screened films on an *equal* billing. The double bill also became increasingly popular within "hard tops," as did the increasing tendency to show screenings later, thus planting the seeds of the "midnight movie" (which would become more frequent in the late 1960s and early 1970s).

Exploitation filmmaking continued to flourish into the 1960s and 1970s, but it did undergo some notable changes. Though exploitation films continued to be consumed by a predominantly younger audience, the *teenage* demographic itself broadened. In the 1960s "teen" culture was supplanted by "youth" culture; whereas the former was strictly delineated by age, the latter was, Doherty argues, an "experiential realm" (Doherty 2002: 190). Youth became a state of mind, a "concept" that, as the 1960s progressed, became very much associated with the counterculture (a term which itself began to replace "subculture" in its usage). Films themselves began to reflect the themes and tastes associated with the new counterculture: rock music, sex, drugs, and a new form of politicized rebelliousness. This mode of rebelliousness did not constitute a

radical break from earlier teenage alienation so much as an extension of it. Thus, Corman's *The Wild Angels* deals with themes similar to some of the "juvenile delinquent" films, but here the protagonists are not identified as teenagers: they are Hell's Angels and, as such, have joined a specific group and adopted a creed. Their anti-authoritarianism, symbolized most visibly by the police and the church, is less nebulous than that of their predecessors, but they still seem driven by a reaction against constraints that limit their hedonistic pursuits. They lack, unlike some of the countercultural protagonists that would follow in their wake, idealistic alternatives to the current system and thus seem content to remain a thorn in its side. This lack of any alternative dawns on Heavenly Blues (Peter Fonda) at the end of the film as he waits to be caught by the police, claiming that there is nowhere to go. (*Easy Rider*, a film indebted to *The Wild Angels*, ends on a similarly pessimistic note, though in this film the main protagonists do encounter alternatives before meeting their bloody end.)

Many exploitation films would draw more specifically on the politicized counterculture and feature protagonists seeking an alternative mode of living. In many of these films, youth is associated with hopes for a new age, with the elder generation represented as negative, greedy, and out of touch. Perhaps the apogee of such filmmaking is *Wild in the Streets*, which depicts a world in which a young pop star wins the presidency, lowers the voting age to 14, and decides to retire all people over 30 into special homes and force them to take LSD. The film draws on many of the recurring exploitative counterculture tropes – music, generational tension, drugs, and political alternatives – with obvious satirical intent, lampooning not only the cynicism of the establishment, but also the fascistic undercurrents of countercultural consciousness. Many movies depicting various countercultural movements and dramatizing the generational gap would follow, including *Psych-Out*, *Alice's Restaurant* and *Gas! – Or – How it Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save it*, all of which have featured in cult lists and discussions.

Many of these teen and youth exploitation films have gained cultist reputations. At the time that they were released, they were being lapped up by younger viewers in particular, and could therefore be considered cult because they were appealing primarily to a "deviant" subculture who believed these films were communicating with them. Of course, much of the status of "delinquent youth" was constructed through exaggerated press reports, but this nevertheless led to *perceptions* of deviant groups consuming deviant films (films which were often considered tasteless by more conservative social factions despite their ultimate moral tone). A number of such films still continue to enjoy cult status, mainly through being part of the broader exploitation repertoire that serves as such an important mode of production in cultist circles. Some of these may be still loved for being innovative films which communicate ideas that contemporary audiences respond to; others may be enjoyed in a more mocking way, as "bad" films (see Chapter 24) which hold particular interest for how they depict social tensions within a specific era.

Nasty Trash: Exploitation in the 1970s

Not all exploitation fare in the 1960s and early 1970s directly concerned the counterculture, however. A number of different genres and cycles marked the period, including sexploitation films, beach party films, and mondo films. The latter were ethnographic documentaries that portrayed strange rituals and practices from around the world (the generic label stems from the film *Mondo Cane*, which established the blueprint for later such films). Often featuring liberal doses of violence and nudity, as well as a number of reconstructed scenes, these "shockumentaries" were often criticized for supposedly prioritizing sensation over education. (Goodall 2006). Most of these films hailed from Italy, pointing to another trend in the 1960s: the rise of exploitation films from other countries. In fact, there have long existed exploitation films from around the world, though the sheer number of films produced in America, and the wealth of research on American production and the reception of films in this country, has inevitably led to our current survey of exploitation cinema being skewed towards this country. Nevertheless, recent work has started to redress this imbalance (e.g. Tombs 1997; Mathijs and Mendik, 2004; Schneider 2003), while DVD labels such as Mondo Macabro are uncovering

international exploitation fare for Western audiences. Currently, though, the most recognized non-American exploitation films are those that established themselves in the American marketplace. Italy is a key purveyor of non-American exploitation due to the size of its market as well as the links forged between American and Italian film companies (as well as between Italian and UK companies) from the late 1950s onwards. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Italian film industry was in a position of considerable strength, which aided the international distribution of many of its films (Eleftheriotis 2001: 103–108), and a number of films from this period have established themselves as cult movies. Filmmakers, including Dario Argento, Mario Bava, and Sergio Leone, established themselves in this period, as did cycles such as the spaghetti western and the peplum. It is arguably the horror film, however, which has proved the most enduring mode of Italian filmmaking to international cult audiences. There has also been a growing body of work emerging around the British postwar exploitation film, particularly regarding horror (e.g. Wathen 1994) and sexploitation (e.g. Hunt 1998), and focusing on the work of cult directors such as Pete Walker (Chibnall 1998) and producers such as Tony Tenser (Hamilton 2005).

The 1960s and 1970s saw the horror film move in new, nastier directions and it became the most prevalent exploitation genre. Sexploitation also continued to be a key exploitation production area as increasingly explicit material screened in public cinemas. Previously considered outside of the exploitation market because it was limited to private or underground settings, pornography hit the public cinema screens during the 1970s with the development of the "hardcore narrative feature" (Schaefer 2002). The biggest porn hit was *Deep Throat*, which caused a sensation when it was released, though other films – such as *Behind the Green Door* – were also popular during the "porn chic" phase and continue to attract a cult following (see Chapter 10).

The 1970s also saw the emergence, and rather rapid disappearance, of several other cycles of exploitation. In each case, controversies or scandals surrounding a more or less respectable but risqué art house production gave rise to numerous attempts to cash in on the more exploitative elements of these films (the ones the film got in trouble for) and address through these elements cultist audiences. Nunsploitation tried to capitalize on the upheaval associated with *The Devils*; nazisploitation attempted to cash in on the scandal around *The Night Porter*; *Deliverance* led to some examples of hicksploitation; notable scandal-films from specific regions such as Canada (*Cannibal Girls*, *Shivers*), continental Europe (*La grande bouffe*), or Spain and Latin-America (*El Topo*) led to subgeneric modes such as canuxsploitation, Eurotrash, or latsploitation. It provoked cult reputations for films such as *Killer Nun*, *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*, *My Bloody Valentine*, *Successive Slidings of Pleasure*, and *The Cannibal Man* (we examine some of the tropes and politics of representation of these cycles in Chapter 10).

One of the most notable exploitation cycles was that of Blaxploitation films. After it became clear that a significant African-American audience existed who were willing to pay to see productions concerning black protagonists, a glut of black-oriented, exploitation films flooded the market. Melvin Van Peebles' low-budget *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is generally considered the key film which kick-started this trend, though this film's experimental aesthetic was not indicative of subsequent films following in its wake. Many films, utilizing familiar themes and images – most notably crime and drugs, pimps and private eyes, action scenes, sexually assertive protagonists, ghetto locations, and the use of soul and funk music on the soundtrack – emerged in the early 1970s. Both Hollywood majors (such as MGM and Warner Brothers) and independents (in particular AIP) produced a number of such films, which include *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, *Blacula*, *Black Caesar*, and *Foxy Brown* (Figure 13.2).

Despite the huge glut of blaxploitation films that flooded the market, the success of *Shaft* and *Super Fly* was rarely repeated, despite these films spawning sequels such as *Shaft in Africa* and *Super Fly T.N.T.* Black audiences were apparently more interested in attending "event" movies such as *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist,* hence signaling an end to the short-lived, yet influential, exploitation cycle in the mid 1970s (Cook 2000: 265). Nevertheless, a number of blaxploitation films – such as *Coffy*, *Black Caesar*, and *Super Fly* – can be considered cult films as they still attract devoted followers even though they may fall beneath



Figure 13.2 Pam Grier as the sexually assertive protagonist of blaxploitation film *Foxy Brown*.

the radar of many filmgoers' choices. In particular, the films' soundtracks (as evidenced by a number of blaxploitation compilations released over the past decade), and their now "retro" styles and attitudes, have contributed to their niche appeal.

Exploitation in the Video Era

Since the 1980s, the exploitation market has changed and become somewhat murkier. The traditional exhibition outlets, such as drive-ins and grindhouse theaters, began to disappear, which made it more difficult to get cheap films shown in cinemas. Video created a new market, yet while cheap exploitation filmmaking certainly existed to fill this market, straight-to-video titles rarely become cult hits. This is perhaps because such films tend to slip beneath the net of many people's radar. Nevertheless, there is a small, yet growing, trend for people to laud straight-to-video, trashy films on the net, particularly low-budget sequels such as *Starship Troopers 2: Hero of the Federation* or *Freeway Mad II: Confessions of a Trickbaby*. The situation in Japan is somewhat different in this regard: more respect for the video market (known as "V-cinema") is perhaps a reason why more cult films emerge from this sector. One of the most prolific and lauded cult directors, Takashi Miike, has made numerous films for this market, including *Full Metal Yakuza* and *Visitor Q*. Contrastingly, in Nigeria, the video market has fed into a growing industry, as video technology has greatly reduced both production and distribution costs. Cheap, "trashy" films based around voodoo and witchcraft are popular and are now gaining a dedicated following in the United States, giving what is interchangeably called Naija Cinema or Nollywood, and equipping films such as *Mortal Inheritance*, *Living in Bondage*, and *Owo Blow: The Genesis* with burgeoning cult reputations (Gray 2003).

The proliferation of sequels is certainly a notable characteristic of contemporary exploitation filmmaking. It is important not to overstate the "newness" of sequels, as they have existed for a long time in various guises. Nevertheless, modern exploitation filmmaking sometimes spawns franchises with unlikely longevity. Two striking examples are the *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, which between them have produced twenty films, if the film that combined their two anti-heroes – *Freddy vs. Jason* – is included (and there is another *Friday the 13th* film in production). In the case of these films, the main characters become such cult objects that they are capable of generating a proliferation of products, though fans do not receive all of these warmly. More recently, some figures are setting themselves up as exploitation filmmakers in a particularly self-conscious manner, referencing and revisiting older exploitation pictures and in the process heightening their cultural value. Eli Roth and Rob Zombie are particular examples of such filmmakers, though this tendency reached its apotheosis with Tarantino and Rodriguez's *Grindhouse*, which was packaged as a double-bill and even included fake trailers in between the two features (*Planet Terror* and *Death Proof*). If Bogdanovich, Scorsese, Coppola, *et al.*, were the original movie brats – drawing on, and often referencing, cinema history in their filmmaking – then Roth *et al.* could be thought of as exploitation brats, a second generation of self-conscious (and self-appointed) film viewers turned makers who largely draw on less respectable areas of cinema history. (See Chapters 6 and 22 for more on self-conscious authorship.) The fact that many of the more "classical" movie brats actually started out making exploitation films adds a somewhat ironic twist to the contrast.

One other notable trend in exploitation filmmaking is the art film/exploitation crossover. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon. Betz (2003),

Heffernan (2004), Hawkins (2000), and Wilinsky (2001) have all, in various ways, drawn attention to the ways in which these spheres have previously overlapped and are less distinct than formerly assumed. "Art films," for example, have notoriously been subject to exploitation marketing strategies and editorial interference, so as to play up their angles of nudity, sex, or violence. Exploitation films, too, have drawn upon art cinema because of creative reasons and/or a need to differentiate themselves from other exploitation fare. Over the past decade, however, a trend in European cinema to make art/exploitation hybrids does seem apparent and distinctive. This is particularly the case with French cinema – what James Quandt terms the "New French Extremity" (Hagman 2007: 32–33) – and includes films from Catherine Breillat (e.g. *Romance*), Gaspar Noé (e.g. *Irréversible*), Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*, 2001) and the film *Baise-moi* (which is perhaps more egregiously exploitation-oriented and less art-inflected than the others). Hagman (2007) has argued that such exploitation tactics are increasing within "art house" films as a way of drawing attention to product in a global marketplace. Alex Cox's (2006) contention that funding bodies and film festivals are encouraging the incorporation of greater amounts of explicit sex and violence would seem to support this argument. Nevertheless, one should not overestimate the extent to which this trend is new: Argento, Cronenberg, and Pasolini are all directors who have previously explored such hybrid territory.

Conclusion

Exploitation filmmaking continues to enjoy currency as a concept within contemporary cinema cultures, though it is arguably a less distinct area than it once was. The contours of the exploitation film have never been secure, but demarcations between the exploitation film and a typical studio production did previously exist. Paul Watson has argued that Hollywood's contemporary promotion of concepts and promises is evidence that exploitation has become part of the mainstream (Watson 1997: 79–80). This does seem to be the case with modern blockbusters, though we should also be aware that this does not constitute the totality of Hollywood cinema. We should also be careful not to overestimate the newness of this trend, as Hollywood has often been involved in exploitation. For example, in the 1950s a major company such as Warner Bros was investing in "weirdies" such as *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and *Them!*, and releasing them on a saturation basis alongside aggressive advertising campaigns (Heffernan 2004: 35). We should also remember that major studios produced and/or distributed a number of blaxploitation films. Perhaps we can argue that Hollywood previously only dabbled in such exploitation tactics, whereas now they are central to its operations. Yet this points to the dual nature of exploitation cinema as a concept. First, and more broadly, it stems from a purely commercial manner of exploiting a property for as much money as possible. In this sense, all commercial cinema is, and always has been, exploitation cinema. Secondly, as a category circulating within film culture, exploitation more specifically relates to a *type* of cinema that existed on the fringes of the mainstream, dealing with themes and images that the mainstream would not tolerate and exploiting taboo topics as a key appeal of the films. It is this form of exploitation cinema that tends to be most relevant to cult cinema due to its taint of outsiderness and danger (dealing with content in ways that the mainstream still tends to avoid). Today, there are still filmmakers attempting to capitalize on sensational material that pushes the limits of acceptability. At the same time, Hollywood is often willing to capitalize on such themes and images if they prove popular, hence the constant shifting and slipperiness of "exploitation cinema" as a concept.

Notes

1. This is even implied in McCarthy and Flynn's 1975 collection, *Kings of the Bs*, even though they distinguish between "classical B" pictures and the "exploitation B" pictures. They do, however, only tentatively call the latter

types B films, occasionally calling them "B-type pictures" (see McCarthy and Flynn 1975: 13–43).

2. More recent work is now expanding knowledge of the B movie beyond the United States. For example, Chibnall (2007) has recently written extensively on the British B film. Nevertheless, the "A" and "B" distinctions did generally have greater currency within the United States.
3. The studios did not entirely ignore such pictures, producing a few "adult" pictures, including *Rebel without a Cause* and *Blackboard Jungle*; while *The Wild One* was distributed by a major. Doherty does not really go into any detail as to why the majors did not produce more pictures along these lines.

14

Underground and Avant-garde Cinema

Cult cinema is often considered to be a different entity than underground and avant-garde cinemas, but these two spheres commonly intersect. The majority of cult films may tend to be more populist than the esoteric marginalia frequently associated with avant-garde and underground film, yet a number of key films belong to both domains. Perhaps of greater importance, the viewing contexts established by avant-garde film cultures bled into underground cinema and, subsequently, became important sites in which some cult films established their reputations. The avant-garde and the underground, then, are crucial components of cult cinema on the level of both particular films and the broader arena of film culture.

Avant-garde and underground cinemas are often difficult to distinguish, though the underground is generally thought to be a development of, but also a slight deviation from avant-garde film, which fully emerged in the 1960s within the United States and which soon spread to other countries. It is very much associated with the social and sexual liberation that characterized the more libertarian factions of the 1960s, and a move away from the more rigorous, politicized avant-garde that characterized the interwar period (O'Pray 2003: 7). In response a new, even more rigorous avant-garde formation emerged in the 1970s (especially associated with structural filmmaking), which often became housed within academic institutions and later became a staple of gallery exhibitions. While this distinction is certainly crude (and necessarily has to be because of the actual ways in which these terms often overlap), it does point to the key ways in which they have been distinguished. The underground currents of the avant-garde were of greater importance to cult cinema, so it is this area, along with its avant-garde antecedents, which we will primarily cover here.

Cult and the Avant-garde of the 1920s

Cult viewing practices are frequently linked to the emergence of art house and repertory cinemas that flourished in the late 1950s and 1960s within the United States. For example, Jancovich writes that "Cult movie fandom and academic film studies may have historically diverged into relatively independent scenes, but they both emerged through the art cinemas, college film societies and repertory theatres of the post-war period, and hence employ similar discourses and reading strategies" (2002: 308). This is true to an extent, but overlooks how these postwar developments were themselves building upon foundations instituted in the interwar period, when a number of film societies and repertory cinemas were established in various parts of the world. These viewing spaces, which offered alternatives to the majority of mainstream commercial cinemas, were themselves heavily linked to avant-garde film culture.

The main areas in which avant-garde or "alternative" film cultures emerged were in the major metropolitan areas of Britain, France, Germany,

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Holland, Japan, the Soviet Union and the United States, although selected activities also occurred within other countries. The types of activities usually overlapped, though there were also differences that marked them. For example, one of the main differences was between societies that took a predominantly aesthetic orientation in regards to film, and those that took a more political line, in that they saw films as tools for use towards left-wing political goals. In reality, while arguments were often exchanged between political film societies and broader, artistically oriented societies, there were areas where such boundaries blurred. For the purposes of this chapter, we should stress that we will focus on the societies that were not explicitly organized for primarily political purposes (such as workers film societies, which were widespread by the 1930s), as it is the broader film societies that fed more directly into cult viewing contexts. Nevertheless, many of the so-called aesthetic societies also screened films that were political in the sense that they challenged broader social mores and ideologies.

The emergence of film societies in the interwar period was a key factor in the development of cult cinema. It is here that a broad number of people began to band together in order to create a passionate cinema culture that explicitly aimed to offer alternatives to the dominant ways in which film was promoted and consumed. Around the establishment of these societies, or "cine-clubs," emerged a series of other cultural activities in which people discussed artistic issues in relation to film: the publication of film journals, magazines, and program notes; the organization of conferences and lectures on film culture. This flurry of cultural activity around various parts of the globe marked the first sustained and systematic attempt to establish cinema as an extremely important new art form, and to promote a wide variety of different approaches to filmmaking. Thus, these societies distinguished themselves from commercial cinemas through screening films not according to a purely commercial agenda. Instead, they would program films that: first, exemplified what they regarded as the most artistic films; secondly, represented interesting experiments on the fringes of, or outside of, the commercial industry; and, thirdly, represented interesting moments of film history. This was, therefore, the first real flowering of cinephilia, an intense love for film which has often been associated with cultism.

It was France, and more specifically Paris, where cinephilia most extensively flourished during the interwar period – and remains the capital of cinephilia even to this day (Hagener 2007: 79). Following the publication of specialist film journals in the latter part of the 1910s, cine-clubs began to appear in the early 1920s. The first major club was CASA (Club des amis du Septième Art), established by Riccioto Canudo in 1921, and this led to the establishment of "specialized" cinemas such as the Vieux Colombier, established by Jean Tedesco in 1924. (Specialized cinemas were commercially run cinemas that nevertheless attempted to balance art and commerce in favor of the former more than mainstream venues; film clubs or societies were, on the other hand, usually member organizations and therefore run through subscription fees.) London was the venue for the long-running Film Society, a members-only organization that began in 1925, while New York film society activity started in the same year when Symon Gould established the Screen Guild (Horak 1995: 20). By the end of the 1920s, a number of film societies and small, specialized commercial cinemas had been established in several countries.

The establishment of these film societies and specialized cinemas were important precursors to the emergence of the phenomenon of cult cinema for a number of reasons. First, this was a time when people were creating a cultural environment for like-minded people to view films they were passionate about, and to extend this passion for films through discussions, writings, and other extra-filmic events. In this sense, they were going against the dominant trend of films as ephemeral objects to be consumed and then forgotten about, and instead establishing films as enduring cultural objects. The importance ascribed to specific films, in tandem with the communal cultural spaces created to view films, can be related to Telotte's contention about cult films "speaking meaningfully to a select group" and to his point that the cultist's love for film speaks of *difference* from, for example, "normal marketing practices and viewing customs" (Telotte 1991a: 7).

Although it was not employed frequently during this period, the term "cult" did occasionally feature in

writings to describe audience behaviors. American critic Harry Allan Potamkin discussed "film cults" in an article on prominent taste patterns evident among cine-club patrons. He used the term in a predominantly negative sense, suggesting that the "herd-like" behavior intellectual cineastes often accused the "mass audience" of also marked various trends within their own circles. Thus, for Potamkin, a number of "fads" marked cult audience behaviors and some people were too keen to latch onto the latest cult – which here included Charlie Chaplin and Mickey Mouse among others – in an "unthinking" manner. Thus, for Potamkin, film cults were marked by snobbery, laziness, and a lack of intellectual substance (Potamkin 2008: 28). In a similar manner Kenneth Macpherson, editor of the British film journal *Close Up*, excoriated Parisian cinephiles for "intellectual kowtowing" (1930: 2). What these interventions demonstrate is that, while these cine-cultures established in various parts of the world were generally supportive of one another, they were not devoid of tensions. The ways in which Potamkin and Macpherson attempted to distinguish themselves from other currents within alternative cine-culture, anticipate the broader and more fragmented in-fighting that has often characterized cult fan cultures. In contrast with the tendency for the word "cult" to be used positively in more recent fan discussions, it was used negatively in these instances. Such distanced critiques of cult viewers, including Potamkin's accusation that cults are never self-critical or objective (2008: 28), could nevertheless be seen as foreshadowing the more Bourdieu-inflected analyses of distinctions among cult audiences within academia (Jancovich 2002).

It is reasonable to label films that gained particular adoration in these cultural circles as the first examples of cult films: cinephiles hailed such films because of their assumed importance, part of which emerged from their *difference* from the mainstream. Even if a film itself was a product of a commercialized industry, it could still become a cult object if its aesthetic properties represented a divergence from commercial norms and pointed to new artistic routes. In the 1920s, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Figure 14.1) was perhaps the biggest cult film and was labeled "the cult *par excellence* of the little cinema" by Potamkin (2008: 27). Initially, the film was released on the commercial (or mainstream) circuit and was successful in the United States, but it later became resurrected when small cinemas emerged in the mid 1920s (Thompson 1990: 139–149). In Paris, Louis Delluc had to overcome an exhibitors' ban on German films by sponsoring a single screening of *Caligari* as part of a Spanish Red Cross benefit program at the Colisée cinema on November 14, 1921 (Thompson 1990: 151). This led to the film becoming a popular success within France, before emerging as a staple on the cine-club circuit where, as Thompson points out, a "devoted fan would have been able to see it almost every year throughout the decade" (1990: 157).



Figure 14.1 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was described as "the cult *par excellence*" by critic Harry Allan Potamkin.

Another film made within a very different industrial context but which was also subject to intense cinephile devotion was Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. The film's status benefited from the increased interest in Soviet films both across West Europe and in the United States in the late 1920s, which were becoming increasingly available for viewing. Many of these, particularly films by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Vertov, represented examples of advanced cinematic art for a number of cinephiles. It was *Potemkin*, however, which tended to be hailed as the greatest example and it was screened repeatedly within film societies. While the film today is canonized as a prime example of respectable cinema, this was not the case at this temporal juncture, which points to the ways that previous films' reputations can shift over time. In the late 1920s and early 1930s it even had the cachet of being a "forbidden" film, banned as it was in many countries.

Many societies were able to circumvent such legal restrictions because their members policy meant that they were not, strictly, public screenings. Nevertheless, in Britain, while the prestigious London Film Society was permitted to exhibit *Potemkin*, the London Workers Film Society was twice refused permission to screen it. The London County Council thought that the film would have been politically inflammatory if shown to working-class audiences in a way that would not affect the more bourgeois audience members of the Film Society. Even the Film Society screenings aroused suspicion from the government, though, which led to a discussion of the Society's activities within the House of Commons (Sexton 2008a: 28).

One other film particularly worthy of mention that was first screened within the international cine-club circuit is Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali's *Un Chien Andalou*. The film was planned to outrage and shock, though it largely failed to do so, much to Buñuel's chagrin (Koller 2001). The ability of a film to confront taboos and cause a public scandal is a key contributor to cult status, yet was more successfully achieved by the film that Buñuel and Dali made next, *L'Âge d'or*, which led to audience protests and soon found itself banned (Williams 2000). Nevertheless, *Un Chien Andalou* arguably attained a greater cult status through its longevity, as it was repeatedly screened in a number of contexts. Not only did it enjoy an eight-month run in Paris (Koller 2001), it has continued to play within niche viewing contexts across international spaces at different times. For example, in the United States it was screened on a number of occasions at Amos Vogel's Cinema 16, a key postwar film society that would feed into the 1960s underground circuit. The underground circuit itself would then play a key role in the rise of the midnight movie phenomenon, where *Un Chien Andalou* continued to play, often paired with features such as Tod Browning's *Freaks* (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 295). Thus, though the film may have failed to outrage audiences at the time of its release in the way it intended, it has continued to matter to different audiences existing on the margins of the mainstream. Its confrontational power is undiminished, with its eye-slicing scene still managing to make many contemporary viewers wince.

The American Underground of the 1950s and 1960s

While Manny Farber used the term "underground film" in 1957 to refer to low-budget adventure films (Farber 1998), a new group of critics and filmmakers actively challenging mainstream norms of film production, distribution, and exhibition, would soon appropriate the concept in a more determined fashion. The key figure within this movement was undoubtedly Jonas Mekas, a Lithuanian who emigrated to the United States in 1949 and became a passionate spokesperson for a new cinema. Mekas established the journal *Film Culture* in 1955, which would become a key promoter of underground cinema, and wrote on film for the New York paper *The Village Voice*. While initially hostile to experimental work, Mekas soon began to champion it and in 1960 formed the "New American Cinema Group." This primarily supported a number of filmmakers working on lower budgets, who wanted to produce features of artistic interest outside of the Hollywood "system." Within its orbit were filmmakers such as John Cassavetes, Richard Leacock, and Shirley Clarke. The group's first statement forthrightly declared its intention to go against mainstream cinema, seen as glossy and insincere. In contrast, the new cinema claimed to be authentic, truthful, and spontaneous: "We don't want false, polished, slick films," it announced, "we prefer them rough, unpolished, but alive; we don't want rosy films – we want them the colour of blood" (New American Cinema Group 2000: 83). The group also adopted a firm anti-censorship stance, proposed to create a cooperative distribution center, and announced that the New Yorker cinema, the Bleecker Street cinema, and Overbrook theater in Philadelphia, had already agreed to exhibit their films (2000: 81–82).

The establishment of the New American Cinema Group was not an isolated phenomenon, but emerged in tandem with a flurry of small-scale film production, distribution, and exhibition. Lightweight 16 mm cameras became easy to get hold of as surplus war equipment was sold off and the amateur film market exponentially grew. Cheaper film stock and an increase in film laboratories meant that

filmmaking was open to more people, while the affordability of 16 mm projectors led to a proliferation of cine-clubs and college film societies. At first, Mekas and the New American Cinema Group were trying to differentiate themselves from the precedent set by Amos Vogel and Cinema 16, the film society that ran from 1947 to 1963. Whereas Cinema 16 typified an avant-garde ethos, the New American Cinema Group attempted to forge a path that lay somewhere in between the micro-budget short film and the Hollywood feature. This would be a short-lived movement, however, and it was superseded by the more enduring, and influential, Filmmakers' Cooperative, formed in 1961.

After the establishment of the Filmmaker's Cooperative, Mekas began to champion much lower-budgeted avant-garde and experimental films. Unlike the earlier American avant-garde, though, the underground avant-garde of the 1960s became associated with a less rigorous attitude towards filmmaking. The Cooperative was a distribution facility that aided the exhibition of small-scale films and, unlike many previous alternative distribution units, did not have any selection criteria (a policy shared by San Francisco's Canyon cinema). As Paul Arthur has noted, Mekas began to reject tenets of professionalism; in contrast, he regarded ignorance and poverty as positive terms and associated them with authenticity and spontaneity (Arthur 2005: 18). As the 1960s unfolded, this low-budget, "anything goes" ethos became connected, in particular, to the broader social counter-culture as well as a camp aesthetic. In relation to the former, it appealed to, and was taken up by, many people involved in campaigning for greater freedoms, be they sexual (e.g. the rise of gay rights), artistic (e.g. freedom of expression), or sensory (e.g. the right to partake in illicit substance consumption). A camp aesthetic (Chapter 8), meanwhile, became an important artistic thread running through many of the films made within the underground milieu. As opposed to the earlier American avant-garde's modernist rejection of popular culture, many films now began to engage with a range of populist works. These included Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, and Mike Kuchar's *Sins of the Fleshapoids*.

The movement towards populism and away from professionalism came under attack from many for abandoning any standards whatsoever. The critic Parker Tyler, who had previously practiced a camp approach to film criticism, was one of the most vociferous critics of the underground and voiced his complaints at length in his *Underground Film: A Critical History*, first published in 1969. For Tyler, many of the films being shown within this milieu were marked by a self-indulgent infantilism and retarded the efforts made by previous avant-gardists to create new cinematic art. Greg Taylor has argued that Tyler's criticism failed to acknowledge how Mekas and the underground were actually challenging restrictive aesthetic freedoms:

> Underground freedom was more than simply freedom from repressive moral standards. It was also freedom from taste conventions and aesthetic niceties, the freedom to appreciate without criticizing, to enjoy all culture, and on one's own terms. These were radical and unabashedly vanguard ideas. Mekas was brazenly liberating the artist and spectator, throwing out the old guidelines for effective art, throwing into question the very importance of valuative criticism. (Taylor 1999: 112)

This argument ignores, however, the extent to which Mekas did actually erect discriminatory criteria; it was just broader and of a different order. If he completely abolished all such criteria then he would not have been so damning of Hollywood productions. Within the underground, Hollywood was acceptable when it constituted material to be plundered and transformed through a low-budget lens, but it was to be opposed on the level of *practice*. This broad "us against them" criteria fueled the alternative community and marked many underground currents as cult, as indicated in the following quote by Greg Taylor: "Less important than the formal or hermeneutic sophistication of a particular film was its existence as an experience to be shared, praised, explored" (1999: 99). Taylor also argues that cultist and camp approaches in the writing of critics such as Farber and Tyler, were evident in the filmmaking of underground filmmakers. Cultism, for Taylor, is characterized by a selective reading of popular culture and a transformation of that culture into a more exclusive form of cultural connoisseurship; while he argues that camp is similar but less selective: it "celebrates *any mass object* that is capable of being re-created aesthetically" (1999: 16).

If the underground constituted a film community of outsiders, then a fraternal spirit was consolidated by police raids of various screenings. These, in turn, aided the cult status of the actual films involved. *Flaming Creatures* and *Scorpio Rising* arguably constitute the two main cult films that emerged from this culture and both were subject to police interventions. Shot on outdated army surplus film stock, which gives it a washed-out, otherworldly feel, *Flaming Creatures* depicts a transvestite bacchanalia. Director Jack Smith gathered friends and constructed a cheap set on the top of the Windsor cinema in New York. With its attempt to mimic exotic Hollywood B-movies on a threadbare budget, the film embodies a kind of junk-shop glamour. This aesthetic is important to the film's cult reputation, but its controversial reception is undoubtedly central in this regard. Screenings left audiences stunned; as Ken Kelman wrote, after one of the first shows at Bleecker Street Theatre:

> When the first show was over, a clique, a claque of six or so, back on the west side applauded. And I, all alone, east of the aisle up frontish, applauded, amid the numb and blind. Amid the tame, I halted, oppressed by their inertia, paused, vacillated, considered for two beats of silence or three, before I clapped solo and thus no doubt branded myself a clappy pervert, crap happy degenerate, slobbering sadist, or, even, perhaps Jack Smith. (Kelman 1970: 284)

Kelman's description captures a key aspect of the midnight movie, and of the cult reception trajectory: the sense of a truly unique, forbidden experience that would pitch oneself against the rest of the world; a countercultural feeling. Soon controversy followed. In December 1963, the Tivoli Theater in New York refused to screen the film on the evening that Smith was to be presented with *Film Culture*'s Independent Filmmaker Award, due to pressure from the city's bureau of licenses (the film had not been submitted to the New York State Board of Regents for licensing). As we have noted in Chapter 3, controversy surrounded the film again shortly afterwards when an experimental film festival in Knokke-le-Zoute in Belgium refused to screen it. It was then, along with Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*, subject to a crackdown by New York authorities in 1964 as they attempted to clean up the city's image in preparation for the World Fair taking place later in the year. Police often raided cinemas screening the film, impounding it along with projector equipment, while theater staff were sometimes arrested and jailed. This placed the film and the underground movement more generally within broader cultural debates and further politicized the movement. As Arthur has noted: "the *Flaming Creatures* affair briefly placed avant-garde film on the cultural map, stimulating support from quarters previously oblivious to or even hostile to the movement" (2005: 10). *Flaming Creatures*' cult reputation arguably endures: it has never enjoyed an official DVD release so that people wishing to view it have to obtain low quality bootleg copies or watch it through specialist websites such as UbuWeb.

It was into this melting-pot atmosphere that Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* was released. A homoerotic collage of biker subculture images and pop music, it was reported to be "the most widely seen experimental movie of its time and the most frequently rented title in the repertoire of the Filmmakers' Cooperative" (Suarez 2002: 115). The film premiered at the Gramercy Arts Theater in 1963 and went on to play in a number of different venues, including art cinemas and more mainstream outlets (Suarez 2002: 115). While it is not as explicit as *Flaming Creatures*, it still did not sit well with the authorities. The film therefore was subject to legal proceedings: Mike Getz was charged with screening an obscene film at the Cinema Theatre in March 1964, because of a brief flash of frontal male nudity (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 60). Unlike *Flaming Creatures*, however, the film's status as obscene was eventually overturned. While controversy certainly informs its cult credentials, other reasons also inform this reputation, including Anger's broader cult status, its aesthetic originality, and its coverage of marginal subcultures.

Andy Warhol is possibly the only filmmaker connected to the underground who has a larger cult following than Anger, though this is due not only to his filmmaking but to his larger profile within the art world. Warhol's films range from his early, extremely minimal works such as *Sleep* and the extremely long *Empire*, to the double-screen, more situation-driven *Chelsea Girls*, and into more narrative-focused works that Paul Morrissey directed under Warhol's aegis, including *Flesh* and *Trash*. Warhol's celebrity

reputation, allied with his often very challenging films and the fact that they have become difficult to actually see, have imbued most of his films with cult value. Warhol withdrew his films from public circulation in the early 1970s and they were not publicly available until after he died (in 1987). Even since then they have been quite difficult to see: they appear sporadically on VHS and DVD, often through obscure labels (such as the Italian label RaroVideo), while public screenings are still rare. As such, they continue to attract considerable public interest, despite the challenging nature of the material. A film such as *Empire*, meanwhile, has the cult value of being a long, live experience, something that not too many people are able to endure (an eight-hour, static view of the Empire state building), so that it becomes a communal experience for those that do (Mathijs and Mendik 2008b: 4).

Warhol was fixated on stars as cult objects (Chapter 7), as was evident in many of his screen prints as well as his screen tests; and he himself managed to foster a kind of alternative star system through his film production. Joe Dallesandro and Edie Sedgwick are two of the most well-known examples of Warhol stars who themselves became cult figures. Dallesandro was a former hustler and model who went on to appear in a large number of Warhol's films, including films that Paul Morrissey made under the Warhol moniker (Figure 14.2). He became a kind of underground sex symbol in the late 1960s/early 1970s and went on to sustain an acting career, albeit mostly in smaller roles.



Figure 14.2 Joe Dallesandro became a cult figure primarily through his appearances in Paul Morrissey's films made under the aegis of Andy Warhol.

His cult reputation has been heightened by his appearance on record covers: his crotch formed the basis of the Warhol-designed sleeve for the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* (1971), while a still of him in *Flesh* adorns the cover of The Smiths' (1984) eponymous debut album.

Sedgwick was a particular favorite of Warhol's, at least around the mid 1960s, as he saw star potential in her. Making her debut in *Vinyl*, she appeared in a number of Warhol films around this time and became one of the most glamorous underground figures. Despite wanting to break into larger acting roles, she became increasingly beset by drug and mental health problems, which led to her early death in 1971 at the age of 28. Her last film, *Ciao! Manhattan* has proven to be a fascinating document because Sedgwick's real life is mirrored in the character that she plays (Susan Superstar), who is a washed-up star suffering from mental illness.

Underground Goes Overground: The Midnight Movie

A particular reason why US underground film culture during this period is important is that it fed into the rising popularity of midnight movie screenings, at which many cult films attracted their dedicated followings (see Chapters 1 and 12 for discussions of midnight movies beyond their relationship with the underground). Mekas himself ran weekend midnight screenings at the Charles Theater in Manhattan, where he programmed a number of underground movies before the cinema closed in 1962 (it reopened in 1963 as a more conventional operation) (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 42). Mekas then started another series of midnight film screenings entitled "Underground Midnights" at the nearby Bleecker Street cinema in 1963 (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 46). Midnight screenings were not new, but the 1960s saw them enjoy an unprecedented popularity and this carried on into the 1970s, a decade generally regarded as the heyday of the midnight movie. Samuels, for example, has written that the rise in midnight screenings was kick-started by the underground and the huge amount of films made on low budgets. By 1972, it had "become an established part of

theatrical film exhibition" with an estimated $35 million a year being collected at midnight screenings (Samuels 1983: 10–11).

The move from underground to overground is worth noting, yet despite this trend, many of the big "hits" of the underground circuit are still considered to be underground and/or avant-garde, including *El Topo*, *Pink Flamingos*, and *Eraserhead*. In a sense, the midnight movie phenomenon, while becoming hugely popular, was still marginal in the sense that many of its audience members felt outside of mainstream culture in various ways (through sexual orientation, political beliefs, etc.). The midnight movie explosion in the 1970s saw a number of independently made films gaining a cult following through repeated viewings. Many of these, though, were of feature length as opposed to the shorts that had (albeit not exclusively) characterized underground filmmaking in the 1960s. In a sense, the avant-garde/underground of the 1960s splintered into two broad pathways: first, a more serious, rigorous direction typified by "structural" filmmaking; secondly, the more populist, narrative-centered, yet occasionally experimental direction typified by the films mentioned above. Such films in many senses are difficult to categorize because they straddle numerous boundaries: they could be called underground, independent, or sometimes (as with *El Topo* and *Eraserhead*), avant-garde.

It is the second direction that is most appropriate to cult cinema because the former strand generally remained somewhat too restricted to gain cult followings. Thus, while underground and avant-garde screening venues and distribution networks proliferated on an international scale from the 1960s onwards, it is difficult to establish cult films within such environments for two particular reasons. First, many films screened within such venues quickly vanish; secondly, unlike the US underground of the 1960s, documentation of these underground nodes is sparse, so it is often difficult to establish screening and viewing patterns with any precision.[1] It is only when underground films emerge from micro-niche environments and impinge upon broader cultural radars that they begin to gain cult value. This can happen in a number of ways, but perhaps the most important are controversy and exceptionality. Controversy can link a film to current social debates (as with *Flaming Creatures*) and lead to debate within mainstream media channels; exceptionality can see a film play so many times within micro-niche settings that it becomes recognized by outsiders and will then play other types of venues, or be spread throughout a wider niche community (often beyond a national border).

The Underground Today

The lack of extant documentation on underground viewing contexts complicates a proper sketch of more recent activity in this area. Suffice it to say, there has existed from the 1960s to the current day a great range of underground screening outlets, distribution networks, publications (e.g. zines, manifestoes, web sites), festivals and other initiatives around the world. Many have led transient existences, though others have managed – despite great practical challenges – to attain longevity. This is complicated further by the looseness of the term itself. Of course, it was never a simple concept but in hindsight at least, the US underground of the 1960s is associated with the term in a relatively unproblematic manner, mainly because it constitutes a kind of fulcrum point to which subsequent instances refer. Generally, though, it now refers to any film not picked up by a distribution company for a conventional theatrical release, as is argued by Hall (2004: xiv). Others would suggest, however, that there should be some form of radical, perhaps even transgressive, attitude embedded within the film. The controversial filmmaker Nick Zedd, a New York underground filmmaker, openly states that "To me it's not underground unless it's transgressive" (Sargeant 1999: 75; see also Chapter 9 for more on transgression and cult cinema). While it is not possible to fully freeze the concept, we can posit that underground films attempt to challenge through various means (e.g. through attempts to shock, attempts to challenge on the level of form, attempts to propose radical political ideas), and do not enjoy conventional cinematic releases (they either bypass mainstream cinemas and art houses, or they perhaps play them either sporadically or long after they are initially released).

Since the 1960s, a number of underground films have gained cult status, but it is only possible in the remainder of this chapter to mention some of these

and how they moved from mere underground films to underground cult films. Controversy, which has been linked to underground cults throughout this chapter, is still a chief factor in leading to cult status, though it must be mentioned that controversy alone will not guarantee such a reputation. Low-budget films, because they are not designed to play at mainstream theaters and are rarely submitted to formal censorship boards, often have greater latitude to deal with extreme or risky material. The Japanese film *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, for example, has gained a cult following due to its controversial content, which depicts children condemning their parents to death for depriving them of sexual freedom and features sexual acts between children and adults. The 1971 version of the film (a longer 1976 version also exists) was produced for European audiences and played in a number of underground venues. It has continued to garner interest, with rock group Stereolab releasing an album named after the film in 1995, and its controversial content imbuing it with rarity value. More recently, the web has increased chances of seeing this film; not only can one find DVD-R copies for sale, but it is also possible to see the film on UbuWeb and clips of the film on YouTube. Similar reception contexts exist for films such as *Nekromantik* and *Begotten*, which stand out because they try to offer a transcendental as much as a phenomenal experience through grainy, distorted, and blurry depictions of violence and transgression. In doing so, they reinforce the impression that underground cinema's cult appeal is also one that evokes a religiosity. Elias Merhige's *Begotten* carries the motto that "a time is depicted that predates spoken language, communication is made on a sensory level." Jorg Buttgereit's controversial *Nekromantik* movies have gained a cult status following their controversial reception in Germany. *Nekromantik* was released directly into cinemas without submission to the coding board and while not immediately subject to external restrictions, it was subsequently banned after *Nekromantik 2* was deemed illegal to watch, own, or screen (Blake 2004: 195). The films subsequently gained a cult following in other parts of the world, especially the United States, and are now available to purchase on DVD (though not through mainstream channels such as Amazon, which adds to their cult cachet).

Today the number of underground films produced, and the venues in which they can play (in particular the rise of specialist festivals), has continued to increase. The internet has also provided a new platform for the dissemination and screening of underground films through specialist sites such as Underground.com, while the relatively low cost of issuing DVDs has allowed a growing number of such films (as well as older underground films) to disseminate in this manner. The rise of films produced, though, will mean that more and more films will struggle to gain recognition, let alone become cult films. Nevertheless, the ever-shifting and increasingly digital mediascape will afford new routes and opportunities for the next underground cults to emerge.

Note

1. For example, the London Filmmakers' Co-Op, formed in 1966 has been well documented, though it is doubtful that any film emerging within this milieu subsequently attained cult status.

15

Cult Cinema and Drugs

A high number of cult films have links to drugs, either through featuring drugs in the plot, by referencing them abundantly, or by gaining a reputation for ideal viewing in a drugged state.[1] There are some important connections between drugs and their users on the one hand, and cult films and their audiences on the other. For example, cult film viewers have often differentiated themselves from mainstream film viewers and, by extension, mainstream society as a whole via attachment to films expressive of such difference. Bruce Kawin has written of the cult film "as a deviant or radically different picture, embraced by a deviant audience" (1991: 18), while Jancovich *et al.* have argued that the cult film is formed through a "subcultural ideology" that places films and/or filmmakers and/or audiences in opposition to the mainstream (2003a: 1). Drugs have also played a crucial role in many sociological accounts of deviance and subcultures (see Chapter 5). In various, often youthful, subcultural groupings, different drugs have often played important roles as agents of altered consciousness that can erect barriers between "us" and "them" (i.e. "straight," conventional society). This was particularly evident within the various hippy or "head" subcultures that emerged in the 1960s. In his ethnographic study of hippies, Paul Willis wrote that "the importance of drugs did not lie in their direct physical effects, but in the way they facilitated passing through a great symbolic barrier erected over against 'straight' society" (1976: 107). In particular, it was hallucinogens – most notably marijuana and LSD – that facilitated an appropriate altered state far removed from dominant cultural rhythms.

Hippie subcultures had their roots in the earlier beat generation, another subcultural movement that used drugs – along with literature, jazz, and Eastern mysticism – to place itself against straight society in favor of extolling expressivity, spontaneity, and creativity (Brake 1980: 91). It is perhaps no coincidence that the beats had connections to underground film culture, which established midnight movie screenings as a cult ritual. Amos Vogel, for example, has described midnight viewers at the Charles Theater as a "properly bedraggled beat audience spitting in the face of the bourgeoisie" (quoted in Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 42). Many of the films connected to the underground were also examples of Beat Cinema and include: Alfred Lesley's *Pull my Daisy*, which was narrated by Jack Kerouac and featured Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso; Ron Rice's *The Flower Thief*, featuring poet Taylor Mead; and shorts by beatnik artist Harry Smith. Midnight movie screenings became popularized throughout the 1960s and 1970s, established on the 16 mm college circuit and in repertory theaters, whose audiences were heavily represented by students (Austin 1981a: 44). Many involved (either centrally or tangentially) with the hippie culture were also either students or student dropouts, whose dope-smoking proclivities were permitted within a number of such venues. Therefore, a significant overlap between the audiences associated with midnight movies and hippie subcultures existed, which resulted in the elevation of films with drug connections. We should make it clear, then, that this chapter is significantly concerned with drug films connected to midnight

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movie viewing, youth countercultures in the 1960s and 1970s, and hallucinogenic drugs, as this triumvirate of factors interlocks to constitute the most significant body of drug cult films. Nevertheless, a number of important films exist outside of this remit and we will consider some of these in the latter section.

Cult Movies and Drug Depiction

Films depicting the use of drugs stem back to the earliest days of cinema. In 1894 Edison made a 30-second kinetograph (a film that could be viewed on a kinetoscope, a pre-cinematic viewing device) entitled *Chinese Opium Den*, which featured opium smoking (Starks 1982: 13). Up until the 1920s, when Hollywood began to take measures to defend itself against outraged moralists – leading to the advent of the Production Code in 1930 (not strictly enforced until 1934) – and with drug laws less prohibitive than they would later become, drugs featured in many films. The effects of drugs (such as the experience of being under the influence of opium) sometimes provided an excuse to indulge in experimental shots, including superimpositions and unusual angles. Not until we get to the 1930s, however, do we encounter films that would subsequently gain a cult status. In particular, some films released by exploitation producer Dwain Esper would gain cult followings in the 1970s.

Esper was among the many exploitation film producers who emerged after the Production Code was passed (see Chapter 13 for details on exploitation cinema). Esper's first film as an independent producer was *Narcotic*, the story of a doctor who becomes addicted to both opium and heroin. While the film was framed as a moral tale – with the doctor eventually committing suicide – it nevertheless wallowed in its graphic presentation of drugs, as well as sex. According to Stevenson, the film played over two thousand engagements before it hit the road-show circuit, where it played sporadically into the 1950s (Stevenson 2000: 25). Esper later purchased and reissued a film he titled *Reefer Madness*, which would become a huge cult favorite. He had purchased the rights to the film, originally titled *Tell Your Children* and produced by an LA church group (directed by Louis Gasner). While the film did not enjoy much success in the 1930s it was revived in the early 1970s on the midnight movie circuit, where it gained a real following among pot-heads, who took ironic pleasure from the film's almost demented anti-drug propaganda.

Between the 1930s and 1950s, films about drugs tended to be exploitation pictures sensationalizing the impact of drugs and warning of their dangers. As the 1950s progressed, however, things began to change as the Production Code was gradually relaxed. A key moment in the celluloid depiction of drug use came with the 1955 release of Otto Preminger's *The Man with the Golden Arm*. The film, starring Frank Sinatra as a heroin user, and produced by a major studio, was released without a seal and yet widely screened. Fearing the loss of authority, in line with a number of other films challenging its mandate, the PCA appended the Code in 1956 to allow treatments of drug addiction, prostitution and child birth as long as they were "treated within the careful limits of good taste" (Stevenson 2000: 38). As the stringent Production Code gradually eroded in the late 1950s and the 1960s, there emerged a number of more daring cinematic depictions of drug use, many of which would become cult films. Of particular importance was the emergence of a youth market.

The youth market came to prominence in the mid 1950s, particularly in the United States, but also in other parts of the Western world. At this stage, audiences for movies began to drop with the rise of television, the middle-class exodus to the suburbs, and a host of other competing leisure activities. Major studios started to produce fewer films as a result, which meant that some theaters lacked sufficient product. To fill the gap, a new batch of independent filmmakers stepped in with films that were often "cheap, regular and exploitable" (Doherty 2002: 28). Around the same time, the rise of the teenager as an identifiably distinct, self-conscious and affluent category had emerged (Doherty 2002: 34), so a number of these exploitation films were catering to this audience. As many of these films exploited controversial themes, it was no surprise that some of them featured drugs, such as *The Cool and the Crazy* and *High School Confidential!* Many of these films, like their exploitation forbears, were moralistic in nature, but in other ways looked forward to a number of more important drug films that emerged in the 1960s.

Counterculture, Drugs and the "Head" Film

If teenagers constituted a broad subculture in the 1950s, then the 1960s saw an extension, but also a splintering, of this phenomenon. In particular, a marked self-conscious generation gap and anti-institutional attitudes fed into a burgeoning counter-culture, in which drugs became a symbol of pride and subversion. Hippie factions, as mentioned above, were so conspicuous (through media reportage) that it was only a matter of time before films were made to capitalize upon some of the tropes associated with them, one of which was drugs (mainly LSD and marijuana). With the media increasingly reporting upon the consumption and (often-supposed) effects of LSD around the mid 1960s, a number of exploitation films featuring this drug subsequently appeared. Like a number of the older drug exploitation films, many of these films were moralistic at core, poaching hysterical tabloid reports about LSD (that it led to suicide, psychosis, murder) and reveling in the excess of the condemned antics that transpired: such films included *Hallucination Generation* and *The Acid Eaters*. Other films utilized the spurious reports that LSD lowered inhibitions to embed druggy frolics within sexploitation comedies: for example, *Alice in Acidland* and *Wanda, the Sadistic Hypnotist*. It was not long before Hollywood entered the fray, most notoriously with Otto Preminger's outrageous LSD comedy *Skidoo*, starring Jackie Gleason, Mickey Rooney, and Groucho Marx among others. This disastrous comedy has since become a cult film, though is not currently easy to get hold of, probably because it has always been a source of embarrassment to most people involved in its production.

Some of the above movies featured small scenes translating the supposed effects of an LSD trip onto the screen, but such scenes did not often constitute a substantial proportion of the films' running time. The cult status accorded such films often relates to their campy nature, an outrageousness of tone and a failure to achieve any kind of "authentic" expressiveness. On the other hand, a number of films have achieved cult status through either implicitly or explicitly representing some of the experiential properties of drugs such as LSD, or sometimes marijuana. Such films tend to be labeled "head" films, as well as "headsploitation" films (Haas 1983). Benshoff has summed up the head film as:

> a type of movie that is either specifically produced to be experienced on drugs or that has subsequently become identified by drug users as a film that can be pleasantly enhanced via the ingestion of mind-altering chemicals, most usually hallucinogens such as marijuana, LSD and their analogues. (Benshoff 2001: 31)

He goes on to add that head films emerge "through the ongoing discussion and experience of them within a community of drug-using cineastes" (Benshoff 2001: 31) Thus, a niche community – often with shared values – flocking around a film for a particular reason and with a ritualistic drug of choice to ingest for the occasion, fits comfortably into a movie cult. Moreover, within the "head" drug world, there are certain films that seem to capture cinematically the head experience and lock into the drugged viewer's perceptual apparatus. For example, Benshoff has argued that the head film can be allied to Gunning's idea of early cinema as a "cinema of attractions," a cinema that is more geared towards providing pleasurable visual moments rather than tight, linear cause-effect narratives (2001: 31). As hallucinogens tend to heighten spatial awareness and the immediacy of sensation, temporal matters are frequently downplayed; hence, for Benshoff, the head film often revolves around "spectacular aural and visual effects," focusing on color, movement, and abstractions (2001: 31).

A film that straddles the dividing line between the campy, moral exploitation drug picture and the more serious, exploratory head film is Roger Corman's *The Trip*. It was made for exploitation producers AIP but they were uneasy with the film because it was a positive depiction of LSD. In the film Paul (Peter Fonda), an advertising director having a mid-life crisis (disillusioned with his commercial work and undergoing marital problems), uses LSD in a therapeutic manner under the supervision of John (Bruce Dern), a figure modeled on real-life LSD advocate Timothy Leary. The manner in which the film depicted this trip as largely positive led to AIP placing a disclaimer about the dangers of taking drugs at the beginning of the film and an insistence that a cracked image be placed over

Peter Fonda's face at the end of the film, to indicate irreparable damage resulted from ingesting LSD. It still proved controversial: in the United States, many reviewers were outraged and its initial advertising had to be redesigned in order to placate broadcasters and publishers. In the United Kingdom the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) refused it a certificate after psychiatrists deemed it "meretricious, inaccurate in its representations and therefore dangerous" (Starks 1982: 60). Its controversial nature in the United Kingdom fueled its cult status even further as a *film maudit*: many more knew about it than were able to see it. (It was not granted a UK certificate until 2003 and was released on UK DVD in 2004.)

Despite this controversy, *The Trip* – released in 1967 – can be seen as opening the way for the growth of more positive depictions of drugs. It is also, in its rather loose plotting and emphasis on subjective drugged experiences, an important head film. Using a combination of techniques, such as liquid and carousel projectors, strobe lights, special lenses, superimpositions, focal changes and camera movements, this was one of the most sustained attempts to recreate subjective elements of an acid trip in an American feature film. Many of the effects are not actually representations of an acid state as such, more the creation of a type of generalized hallucinatory state. As psychedelics are capable of enhancing interest in abstract patterns, and of giving the impression of visual movement, abstract imagery therefore appears in a number of sequences.

The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period when youth countercultures with strong drug predilections were particularly marked, and which saw the emergence and/or extension of cult viewing spaces (drive-ins, grindhouses, art cinemas and midnight-movie screenings), it is therefore no surprise that this was the strongest period of the cult head film. Some head films explicitly featured drugs and would use the drugged experience of characters – particularly LSD – to create an audiovisual representation of the head state: films falling into this category include *Easy Rider* and *Performance*. However, films did not need to represent drug use in any explicit manner. Some films, for example, could imply the head state through knowing winks and resolutely non-linear plots: *Head*, featuring the pop band The Monkees, is a key example of this kind of film; obvious to those in the know, but perhaps working on a different level for those who do not cotton onto the drug references. (The key advantage of this type of "double entendre head film" is that it is less susceptible to censorship controversy.) Other films work in different ways: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for example, is perhaps not an intentional head film in the manner of *Head*. Nevertheless, its spectacular space scenes, often standing alone as immersive experiences irrespective of their narrative framework, created sequences analogous to the drugged experience and (for some) proved pleasurable to watch in such a state. In particular, the "Stargate sequence" was required viewing for viewers under the influence of LSD, due to its abstract depiction of a type of "cosmic consciousness" (Figure 15.1). In fact, because the film was about space, cosmic issues, and travelling beyond known perceptual realms, it was no surprise that it was appropriated as a head film. While Kubrick has downplayed the drug connection, it nevertheless fed into its marketing campaign, with one poster proclaiming it "the ultimate trip" (Castle 2004).

Some of the more abstract films that emerged within the US underground (see Chapter 14), notably films by Harry Smith, Jordon Belson, and James Whitney, undoubtedly influenced the Stargate sequence. A great deal of activity was occurring on the fringes of the cinema industry, as artists created personal, low-budget films. During the 1960s, a number of artists were creating films that either directly reflected their psychedelic experiences, or were perceived as psychedelic in nature. Harry Smith cited both marijuana and other hallucinogens as influences for a number of films that he made, including abstract and geometric

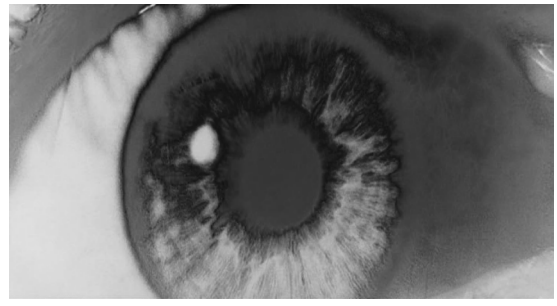


Figure 15.1 Still from the "Stargate" sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which became known as a "psychedelic" sequence.

hand-drawn films, as well as collage films. Whitney, meanwhile, made a few psychedelic films, such as *Yantra* and the more intricate, "mandala" film *Lapis*, whose raga soundtrack further lent it a drug-tinged edge. Whitney and his brother John were innovators in computer animation and *Lapis* was the first computer-aided film that James completed. Belson, meanwhile, made an increasingly complex set of abstract films based upon inner consciousness – sometimes drawing directly from his hallucinogenic experiences, but also upon meditative states – which he merged with "outer" space concerns to create a form of cosmic cinema. His statement regarding his 1961 film *Allures*, for example, demonstrates how his filmmaking would have appealed to "head cineastes": "It's a trip backwards along the senses into the interior of the being. It fixes your gaze, physically holds your attention" (quoted in Youngblood 1970: 160). Youngblood actually notes that *Allures*, and Belson's next film, *Re-Entry*, have similarities to the Stargate sequence in *2001*, although they both preceded the Douglas Trumbull designed sequence (Youngblood 1970: 162, 167). Youngblood has also claimed that many of the sequences in *The Trip* were inspired by abstract films being shown on the underground circuit (Benshoff 2001: 37). While these films would not have gained huge audiences, they did accrue smaller cult followings within the underground movie circuit which – as mentioned above – fed into a broader cult film culture via the establishment of midnight screenings in run-down inner-city areas; and they were an important influence on the head film.

There are a few psychedelic movies made outside of the United States that also seem to have developed cult followings in some quarters. One of the most notorious, and interesting, is Coffin Joe's *Awakening of the Beast*. Coffin Joe was the alter ego of José Mojica Marins, a Brazilian who had created a horror figure bedecked with a cape, hat, and particularly long fingernails. In *Awakening of the Beast*, Joe serves as a focus for four drug users who are being subject to a scientific experiment. Given doses of LSD, they descend into a psychedelic nightmare world hosted by Joe and signaled by a shift into color from black and white. This remarkable film, which is beautifully surreal yet distastefully misogynist, had its cult credentials boosted by its controversial reception; banned in Brazil, Marins found it difficult to work for some time. After fading into obscurity, his reputation has been recuperated by cult film fans over the past decade or so. Another film worthy of mention is Federico Fellini's *Toby Dammit*, a segment from the portmanteau of Poe stories, *Spirits of the Dead* he co-directed with Roger Vadim and Louis Malle in 1968. The Fellini segment is by far the most celebrated part of the film. Though not overtly mentioning drugs, it creates a psychedelic environment through which its addled protagonist (played by Terrence Stamp) stumbles, created by the stylized use of light, sound, framing, and mise-en-scène. Fellini himself told Stamp that his character should act as if he had been at a drug and sex saturated party the night before and had been given a large tab of LSD in the morning (Lebbing and Van Der Put 2000: 156).

When the cult of midnight movie screenings flowered in the early 1970s, they often allowed people to smoke dope within their premises and also screened a number of head films. As such, many films attained cult status through their popularity within such contexts. These include, among many others, *Performance*, *El Topo*, *The Harder They Come*, *200 Motels*, and *Magical Mystery Tour*. It is no real surprise, considering that head films are often based around spectacle and non-linear elements, that many of these films feature prominent use of music and contain musical set-pieces (see Chapter 16). This would fit in with Timothy Corrigan's assertion about cult films more generally as containing a "proleptic rock video form":

> Anticipated by older musicals and anticipating television shows like *Miami Vice*, these narratives often seem to undermine their own narrative structures through loosely connected nonnarrative events whose excessive display either of the visuals or the music becomes a perceptual or aural format for the audience's own performance. (Corrigan 1991: 31)

With the rise of the VCR, the midnight-movie phenomenon began to wane, but people could continue to take drugs and watch films in the more secure environment of their own homes. More recently, it has been marijuana more than LSD that has been the drug of choice to accompany film viewings. This is reflected in guides such as *Baked Potatoes* (Hulme and Wexler 1996), which provides a guide to some of the

best films to watch stoned and includes a marijuana-leaf rating scale plus a key to the type of film reviewed (e.g., "Best watched alone," "Feel-good movie," "Subtitled"). Related to stoned viewing is the phenomenon of "stoner films," which often revolve heavily around the use of marijuana (usually in a positive fashion) and thus appeal to dope-smoking film buffs. The series of Cheech and Chong comedies – most notably *Up in Smoke* – are archetypal examples of this type of film, which is often comic in tone. More recent examples include Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* and the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski*, both of which have steadily built up a cult following after initially disappointing performances at the box office.

Beyond Psychedelics

The head film mostly appealed to stoned perception, and occasionally LSD-aided states. Marijuana in particular is well suited to watching films: a relaxant, it aids contemplation and immersion. No other comparable subgenres exist; for example, there do not seem to be any film cycles aimed at the viewer under the influence of heroin or amphetamines. These drugs tend to aid conscious states that are either below or above the threshold suited to watching films. This is not to say that people do not watch films under their influence, but it does partly explain why no cycle comparable to the head film exists in relation to other drugs. Nevertheless, some movies do attempt to approximate other drug states, while there are a number of cult films that feature different drugs.

The use of heroin in particular has featured within a few cult films of note. Importantly, the films of Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey often featured heroin use (frequently in tandem with other drug intake). Morrissey's *Trash* is one of his most sustained depictions of heroin addiction. The film depicts the lives of two junkies: Joe (Joe Dallesandro) and Holly (transvestite Harold Danhaki), who aimlessly drift from one situation to another. The film is significant because, as claimed by director Paul Morrissey, it was a riposte to the glamorization of drugs evident in many of the 1960s head films. While there is not a heroin equivalent of the head film, this film could perhaps constitute the basis for such a subgenre. With its directionless plot and a main character (Dallesandro) who blankly seems to sleepwalk through the entire movie, it can be seen as a filmic analog of the heroin state (disinterestedness, lack of motivation). The camera also aids this tone by steadily documenting the unfolding performances without the aid of any flashy embellishments. In this, Morrissey continues the aesthetic example of his mentor, Andy Warhol, who was noted for his blankness and an "affectless gaze" (Shaviro 2004: 138). Whereas the head film, then, was often trying to capture the sensational pleasures of drugs via spectacle, Morrissey here downplays spectacle in preference for the mundane, and rejects subjective illustration in favor of an objective gaze. Thus, in a similar manner to how fellow Warhol-affiliated group the Velvet Underground differentiated themselves from the peace and love philosophy espoused by hippy musicians, so Morrissey's film seems to hint at a comparable nihilist sensibility within cinema.

A further factor in the cult status of *Trash*, at least in the United Kingdom, is the controversy surrounding it. The BBFC initially refused to grant the film a certificate in August 1971 because of its possible impact upon susceptible minds, in particular fearing that its explicit drug-taking scenes may prove instructive. The Greater London Council also denied the film a local certificate in September of the same year. It was not until November 1972 that it was passed "X"-rated, though on the insistence that nearly three minutes of material be cut from the film, one of which was the first heroin injection scene. A further twist was added to the saga when distributor James Vaughan added further cuts before it was theatrically released, so that the version British cinema-goers saw was eleven minutes shorter than Morrissey's cut. This was the version that made it to video in 1982, and it was not until 2005 that British film viewers could actually see a full cut of the film when it was released on DVD by Tartan (Lapper 2005). Such a troubled trajectory, partly related to its drug content, further fueled its cult status.

Despite Morrissey's avowed intention of making an anti-drug film, this was not entirely clear in the finished product, as evidenced by the nervousness shown by the British film censors. If the title "Trash" was meant to denigrate the characters within the film, viewers enamored by the sleazy, anti-authoritarian antics depicted could just as easily invert its meaning.

Much like the way hippies adopted the negative term "freak" and wore it as a positive badge of difference, likewise with "trash." In this sense, heroin films can have a wider appeal beyond mere users of the drug; they can also appeal to anyone who feels dissatisfied with the conventional parameters of everyday living. Arguably, such factors feed into the cult status of a film like *Drugstore Cowboy*. This film *does* attempt to convey some sense of the junkie's subjective drug experience, though the broader appeal of the film is arguably linked to a humanist depiction of an outsider community. While it does not glorify heroin users, it nevertheless expresses some of the excitement of choosing, and living, an alternative lifestyle. The appearance of cult writer William Burroughs in a cameo undoubtedly heightens its cult credentials. Other cult films featuring heroin use include Shirley Clarke's documentary satire *The Connection*, which involves a filmmaker attempting to film junkies making a deal; *The Panic in Needle Park*, which stars Al Pacino and Kitty Winn playing two addicted partners; *Christiane F*, Ulrich Edel's stark film about drug addiction; and *More*, Barbet Shroeder's bleak depiction of a young couple's descent into heroin (kicked off by a lighter tone and lighter drugs), which features a Pink Floyd soundtrack. The most recent cult film depicting heroin addiction is *Trainspotting*, the adaptation of Irvin Welsh's novel that caught on with British youths in the mid 1990s. Though it was primarily concerned with heroin use, though, the film also featured the use of other types of drug use (alcohol, amphetamines, ecstasy, and marijuana). Its cult success is explainable partly by how it incorporates a story concerning heroin use into a broader canvas that appealed to the then thriving youth club cultures. A story shot in a strikingly stylistic manner, concerning a bunch of young people taking drugs, feeling they are social outsiders, and with a soundtrack merging older "indie"' hits and newer club sounds, was obviously meant to appeal to a broad range of younger people (elder teenagers and upwards); and in this it succeeded.

Other types of drugs also sporadically feature within a number of disparate cult films. In particular, many blaxploitation films featured narcotics as a central plot component: drug dealers and drug gangs populated many of these films, such as *Super Fly*, *Gordon's War*, and *Foxy Brown*. While some of these films adopted a condemnatory stance against drugs, others, such as *Super Fly*, were more ambiguous. That film's ending, in which a cocaine dealer roams free, led to much criticism from the more socially active strands of the black community (who often criticized blaxploitation films for their lurid and stereotypical depictions of black people). Nevertheless, the soundtrack by Curtis Mayfield lends a critical tone that counterpoises the unfolding action on the screen. A later breed of black, urban-set films echoed this earlier cycle, though crack cocaine replaced "straight" cocaine, and there tended to be a less sensationalist approach to the subject matter. Films such as *Boyz N the Hood*, *New Jack City*, and *Clockers*, all exemplify such a move.

Conclusion

The affinities between elements of the cult audience and certain drug users has resulted in a number of drug-related films becoming cult items, a trend that is likely to continue. The changing modes of film viewing and sociality, as well as broader social trends, will inevitably affect how and why viewers celebrate certain films. For example, the heyday of the "midnight movie" occurred in run-down movie houses at a time when cinemas often tolerated drug consumption, a situation that very rarely occurs today. Currently, drug use is more likely to occur at home, where new technologies have enhanced the experience of film viewing in the domestic space, as well as the variety of films available. Social sharing of drug film viewing, then, is likely to occur at a relative micro-scale now, though the variety of platforms available through the internet enable broader, virtual forms of social connectivity to exist (and thus offer new spaces where talk about drugs and films can be found). Wider social developments, also, play a part: different forms of subcultural communities emerge in response to changing socio-cultural conditions, and the types of valued drugs within subcultures change.

Cult movies featuring prominent drug use do not appeal merely to drug-using subcultures, however. Often, they will have broader appeal, and the presence of drugs within certain films may be an incidental quality for some. For others, though, such presence

may constitute a central appeal. When drug films connect with drug subcultures in a particularly resonant manner there is sometimes a marked cycle of cult films with drug connections. The period of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the emergence of the head film was undoubtedly the most significant of such cycles to date. The stoner film is perhaps the next most important cycle, though one that spans a longer duration and is still current today. In fact, stoner comedies such as *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* and *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* are modern attempts to update the *Cheech and Chong* cycle. The presence of broad, identifiable, drug-associated subcultures does not always lead to a significant corpus of related cult films, however. The rave and club cultures that emerged in the 1990s did have a few films that were latched onto by frequent clubbers – such as the aforementioned *Trainspotting*, *Human Traffic* and *Groove* – though not perhaps as many as would have been expected. (There were a lot more made that did not seem to attract a substantial audience.) *Human Traffic* is one of the most notable in its relation to rave culture as it was actually premiered at the Homelands dance festival, which took place a few miles outside of Winchester, UK, and was attended by around 20,000 people. The film played in a tent with about 200 attendees, many of whom had taken ecstasy and who would talk back to the screen and sometimes dance along to the on-screen dancing (Sorfa 2000: 258). Yet this was a generally rare occurrence of a film tapping into the rave/ecstasy culture which was a significant phenomenon in the 1990s, particularly within Britain. Whether this was down to the properties of the drugs involved (mainly ecstasy and amphetamines), the social constitution and habits of the subcultures, broader industrial and social factors, or the "quality" of the films, is a subject that would require further investigation.

Note

1. We use the term "drugs" here in the meaning of illegal mind-altering substances. We exclude alcohol and other legal drugs from our overview, as well as some of the more specialist performance enhancing drugs that feature in the professional sports and entertainment industries. In a sense, then, we are dealing with drugs as understood by their subcultural reputation.

16

Cult Cinema and Music

Academic coverage of music and film has expanded rapidly over the past decade or so, but consideration of music within cult films is still relatively scant. This is surprising, bearing in mind the number of cult films in which music performs a key role. There are many links between film and music: industrially, a number of film and music companies belong to the same parent conglomerate, and cross-promotional tie-ins between the two media forms are common. In this sense, the music and film industries often partake in active attempts to encourage cross-media consumption. Music artists do not only provide soundtrack material for films, they also sometimes appear within films as actors. Films themselves often feed into music lyrics, titles, and videos, while film actors and other personnel occasionally move into music production. These interactions are certainly not comprehensive, but they do point to the strong links between these two forms and these are often particularly marked within the world of cult cinema.

Rock Movies

The most obvious examples of music-related cult films are movies which primarily attract a following due to the cult reputation of the musical artist(s) who feature within the film and/or provide a significant contribution to the soundtrack. Thus, if a particular group or artist enjoys a dedicated fan base, this may in turn constitute a core audience for a particular film title heavily connected with said group/artist. In his survey of midnight movies in Lexington, Kentucky, between 1980 and 1985, Gregory A. Waller (1991) found that such films were a frequent staple of this mode of exhibition (which is crucially interlinked, though certainly not synonymous, with cult cinema). Waller uses the term "rock movies" to account for a number of films in which rock music serves a crucial role, and which include: rock music documentaries and concert movies; films based on music albums; films featuring actual musical performers; and films which feature fictional rock performers. The most popular films in this survey that have gained a cult status on a broader level drew on the huge fan base of the artists involved. They include Led Zeppelin's *Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same*, a concert film incorporating fantasy sequences; *Pink Floyd: The Wall*, based on, and featuring music from, Pink Floyd's album of the same name; and *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia*, both based upon concept albums by The Who.

The concert film and/or music documentary based around a particular artist/group, is most reliant on an already existing fan base for its appeal. A concert film of a single band, for example, is unlikely to attract many viewers who are not particularly interested in that band unless other factors enhance its appeal. While *The Song Remains the Same* may have attained a cult status because of the huge popularity of the rapidly disbanding Led Zeppelin, a film such as *Stop Making Sense* accrued a reputation not merely as a Talking Heads concert film, but because of the imaginative stage designs and choreographed routines that set it apart from "routine" concert films. In this sense, while it

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primarily appealed to Talking Heads fans, it also managed to interest others who were not particularly familiar with the band's music (and who may have become interested in the band through the film). Films based on the music of particular artists, however, will often attempt to target a broader audience than the band's fan base, even though this group may constitute the most dedicated audience for such films. *Quadrophenia*, in particular, is a film that certainly appealed to a number of The Who fans, but its cult status was not solely dependent on this particular segment. Rather, the film was a historical document of British mods in the 1960s, and thus appealed to those who were involved, or interested in, this phenomenon. It also tapped into a burgeoning "mod revival" in late 1970s Britain, and has been credited with feeding the growth of this revival (Catterall and Wells 2002: 177–179). A 1997 re-release of the film intermeshed with the latter stages of the partially mod-inspired Britpop phenomenon to find a new audience. *Quadrophenia* appealed not only to fans of The Who, but also to successive generations affiliated with the "mod" (or neo-mod) subculture, and more broadly to alienated youths for its depiction of young people disaffected with conventional social life.

The importance music plays in cult films often relates to the manner by which films appeal to recognizable subcultures. As Gina Marchetti has noted, documentaries such as *Monterey Pop*, *Gimme Shelter*, and *Woodstock* appealed to the subcultures depicted in them, providing the subcultural audience "with a chance to see their favourite rock group on the big screen" (Marchetti 1985: 74). A number of different musical acts appeared in *Monterey Pop* and *Woodstock*, alongside other activities surrounding the festival, including substantial footage of concertgoers. These films were able to connect with a general countercultural audience in which a variety of different music importantly linked with a lifestyle that was opposed to dominant American ideology of the time. *Gimme Shelter* was more focused on one particular act (the Rolling Stones), though it did also feature other acts and was, more importantly, documenting an event (the Altamont music festival) that for many symbolized the dark side (and perhaps the death) of the 1960s counterculture. These films are all associated with direct cinema, a style of documentary filmmaking that attempted to capture events spontaneously through utilizing lightweight equipment and available light. Another direct cinema film, *Don't Look Back*, is also a key cult film. Following Bob Dylan on his 1965 tour of England, its main appeal is undoubtedly among Dylan's substantial (and often very passionate) fan base, though its presentation of Dylan as a hip and savvy iconoclast also presents Dylan as a kind of representative symbol of a particular generation (as well as documenting the attendant strains of being perceived in such a manner).

The intersection between cult films and identifiable subcultures arguably stems from the rise of youth-oriented exploitation films in the 1950s (see Chapter 13). This was a period when "youth," at least when combined with "delinquency," constituted a subculture in itself. Importantly, music – in the form of rock and roll – was a chief signifier of how youths differed from their elders. Following *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rock around the Clock*, a slew of rock and roll "teenpics" emerged, including *Shake, Rattle and Rock!*, *The Girl Can't Help it*, and *Love Me Tender*. The latter was one of the many Elvis Presley vehicles produced until 1969, most of which now enjoy a cult status because of the huge cult surrounding Elvis himself, but also because they enjoy a certain "kitsch" appeal (see Chapter 8). The success of films based around musical artists would continue into the 1960s, and importantly includes the Beatles' films *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!*. Richard Lester's direction in these films has been credited with creating a number of audio-visual sequences that presage the aesthetics of the music video (Smith 1998: 159), which further bolsters their appeal as innovative texts.

In the latter part of the 1970s another recognizable youth subculture – punk – also impacted upon filmmaking and created a few notable cult films. Film such as *The Blank Generation*, *The Decline of Western Civilization*, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, *Jubilee*, *Repo Man*, and *Smithereens* all, in different ways, represented punk subcultures. Some of these films – such as *The Blank Generation* and *The Decline of Western Civilization* – are documentaries which gained small cult followings among those interested in the musical scenes represented; *Repo Man* is a film that features

punks within it, and which is fueled by a punk attitude, but which is not centrally about punks and gained a cult following outside of punk subcultures. *Jubilee*, on the other hand, is a film that gained a cultish following among some "underground" audiences but which was also vilified by some punks. Other films, like *Repo Man*, had cross-cultural appeal. One example is *The Harder They Come*, a film based around the music industry in Jamaica and which appealed not only to Rastafarians but also to punks (as well as skins) in late 1970s/early 1980s Britain. This reception was boosted by the actual connections forged between some punks and Rastas in Britain during this period: Rastafarianism appealed to elements of the punk subculture through its militantly rebellious stance (Hebdige 1979: 62–70). Another cult film with cross-cultural appeal is *Space Is the Place*, a low-budget science-fiction film based around the philosophy of maverick jazz musician Sun Ra. Ra was influential on some punks because of his uncompromising, DIY approach to music (he self-issued a large number of records). He has also intersected with a wide range of other musical cultures including proto-punk (playing a concert with MC5), funk, and hip hop. While *Space Is the Place* was not widely seen on release, it has since become a cult film primarily among Sun Ra fans (see Sexton 2006), but also because of it being viewed as a seminal film related to Afrofuturism (a blending of science fiction and African American politics). If Rastafarianism imagined the future as a return to roots (African heritage) and if punk was declaring that there was "no future," Afrofuturism posits African Americans using technology to engineer a more positive future.

Cult Cinema and the Visual Economy of Rock Music

Lawrence Grossberg has argued that rock itself is a visual form, in that its fans often encounter it through live or mediated performances, or through the visual containers of record sleeves. He also notes how different types of rock fans will often adopt specific dress codes and other stylistic markers. It is this visual economy within the world of rock, he further argues, that adds to its power within the lives of its fans (2002: 83). In studying the performances of glamrock, Philip Auslander comes to a similar observation. The visual aspects of the performers such as David Bowie, Bryan Ferry, and Suzi Quatro go well beyond those of their real selves as individuals or musicians. They add layers of characterization and role-playing to the music so that posturing and posing develops into little narratives to which the music is a witness as well as its source (Auslander 2006).

The visual nature of rock music perhaps meant that its incorporation into cinema was inevitable. More importantly, this cinema/rock combination created a powerful combined force, directly appealing to fans with particular musical tastes and in the process generating a number of cult films. Rock music, for Grossberg, is a site where ideological and affective maps intersect (2002: 91). If this is the case, the transposition of rock music into films could doubly intensify the ideological and affective power of such music, through not only attaching these sounds to more concrete ideological narratives, but for placing them in a context with particularly affective potentials. According to Kevin Donnelly, non-diegetic sound and music can physically affect viewers; this power relates to its status as something both a part of, yet apart from, the filmic world, imbuing it with a kind of supernatural presence (2005: 13).

Rock music arguably enjoyed its most ideologically loaded period in the 1960s, and this combined with its visual and affective dimensions to create a rather powerful cinematic tool, contributing to a glut of 1960s cult movies in which rock music took center stage. One of the most iconic of such movies is *Easy Rider*, a studio-released feature rooted in low-budget, exploitation production (Chapter 13). *Easy Rider* employed rock music that reflected its countercultural attitude. At times, particularly in the scenes where the two main characters are travelling on the road, music dominates the attention and provides added meaning in the absence of narrative drive. Importantly, the film's soundtrack was also popular and paved the way for the use of popular music as a means to identify and tap into pre-existing taste cultures. Yet that film followed a number of other independent, exploitation pictures, such as *The Wild Angels*, *The Trip*, and *Wild in*

the Streets. All of these films used rock music as a symbol of countercultural attitude, even though these were songs written for the movies (as opposed to *Easy Rider*'s compilation of largely pre-existing songs). *Wild in the Streets* centrally incorporated music into its plot: the main character, Max Frost, is actually a rock singer turned political figure. He ultimately manages to lower the voting age to fourteen, consigns everyone over 35 to concentration camps and forces them to ingest LSD. Music, drugs, and youth here all combined into one heady, subcultural brew.

One of the most interesting 1960s films to use pre-existing popular music, however, was the "underground" film *Scorpio Rising*, directed by Kenneth Anger. Predating *Easy Rider* by five years, the film is often cited as a key moment in discussions of the "pop compilation" score in feature films (e.g. Smith 1998: 160). Whereas the films mentioned above used rock music – whether specifically produced for the film or already present within the cultural landscape – in order to reinforce and expand the subcultural nature of the films, Anger used songs that cut against the images and created an almost alchemical audiovisual collage. As the film itself features no dialog, and no inner sense of unfolding narrative, the songs help to provide a vague sense of semantic commentary. Images of leather-clad bikers are not driven by rock 'n' roll but by an audacious blend of melodic pop, including such well-known staples from the erstwhile hit parade as the Shangri-La's "Leader of the Pack" and Martha and the Vandellas' "Heatwave," as well as songs with strong sexual innuendo, such as Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" and Kris Jensen's "Torture." At times, this music does seem to bolster image events, but elsewhere it combines with the visual track to create meanings that may not have been otherwise apparent. In particular, the death, danger, and fetishism glimpsed in the visual sequences imbue these "innocent" songs with a dangerous edge, revealing, according to Philip Brophy, "that which has been covertly inscribed underneath their labelling, exposing a universe of transgressive desire" (2004: 206–207). Importantly, the use of music by Anger in this film would inspire Martin Scorsese and its influence can be detected within Scorsese's *Mean Streets*, as well as David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, films which themselves have also gained a place within cult canons.

Cult Cinema and the Musical

Not all cult films with strong musical support are dependent on rock music, however. A number of musicals have gained cult status, including *Footlight Parade, The Wizard of Oz*, *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Sound of Music*. The cult appeal of musicals can vary, though nostalgia and camp are key concepts often associated with the genre. The former in the sense that many of these films are "classical" cult films (Telotte 1991a): films from the classical era that were exhibited conventionally, but which have retained cultural currency among certain viewers because they evoke pleasurable memories. While all classical cult films are potentially valuable in this sense, the musical could be considered a particularly cultish classical genre because it belonged to, yet pushed against, classical narrative conventions through its emphasis on spectacle. And, as musicals are often self-consciously artificial, they are prominently associated with a "camp" aesthetic (Sontag 2008; see also Chapter 8).

Ian Conrich has written that the cult film and the musical share a number of common characteristics such as "performances of extravagance and exuberance, obvious energy and ability, open emotions, fantasy and sudden explosions of spectacle" (Conrich 2006: 115). As such, it is perhaps no surprise that one of the most written about cult films, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, is also a musical, albeit one that is informed by rock music. It is in this respect that its appearance in yet another musical, *Fame*, makes sense. In fact, the scenes in which students of the Fame school attend a *Rocky Horror* screening give a good indication of the difference between mainstream and cult usages of music. While attending the *Rocky Horror* screening (presided over by Rocky über-fan Sal Piro), the students strip their clothes, smoke pot, shout and cheer, and improvise on-stage chorus dancing. The on-screen audience is very much part of the set up. The contrast with the "normal" scene spliced in between the two *Rocky Horror* scenes is telling: it shows a lonely musician gently singing a love song in his room to no one in particular. More recently, following the "participatory" nature of *Rocky Horror*'s cult screenings, a number of musicals have been screened as part of a performative "package" in what are called

"Sing-a-Long" events. Stemming from a "karaoke"-type screening of *The Sound of Music* at the 1999 London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, these events encourage people to dress up and sing along with the film, with the song lyrics being displayed at the bottom of the screen (Conrich 2006: 117). These shows have expanded beyond London and other parts of the United Kingdom to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Belgium, and Malaysia. Films shown at such events include *Annie, Hairspray*, *The Sound of Music*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. Conrich himself, though, debates the extent to which such events can be thought of as constituting a cult phenomenon:

> while *Sing-a-Long-a Sound of Music* has seemingly become the contemporary model of the cult film musical experience, the event is highly staged, manufactured, packaged, and controlled. Beyond the core venues, such as London's Prince Charles cinema, the film is often consumed in a conservative manner, the apparent conformity of the audience members challenging the notion that at such screenings the audience is essentially spontaneous and transgressive. (Conrich 2006: 118)

The assertion that London audiences are less conservative than those living outside the capital is problematic; there is no explanation how this decision was arrived at (with the possibility that this is merely an assumption), or in what sense they are considered to be more conservative. It is also questionable to claim that these events are not cult because of their commercial nature, leading to a conformism which cuts against a supposed "spontaneous and transgressive" audience. This argument conveniently downplays how even audiences at midnight screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* were often marked by levels of conformity and control: even if they did initially emerge spontaneously, such spontaneity was soon overtaken by more structured participatory activity in which newcomers to such screenings had to follow strict rules (Weinstock 2007: 38–39). It is noticeable how in the *Rocky Horror* screenings portrayed in *Fame*, the audience obeys various rules with minute precision. Events that are "manufactured, packaged, and controlled" should not necessarily be regarded as negating cult value. As will be argued in Chapter 22, cult is a concept which has infused a wide range of commercial practices, and it may now be more sensible to think of cult, following Matt Hills' argument (2008a: 449), as a kind of "generic contract" between promoters/publicists and audiences/consumers. If this is the case, the audience still needs to play its part within this contract, to make up its own minds whether to accept the cult "invitation."

Conrich has also looked at a number of more modern, self-consciously "cult" musicals, such as *Joe's Apartment*, *Alfred Packer: The Musical*, and *The Happiness of Katakuris*, all of which combine elements of horror with the musical. The latter in particular is interesting as it is the product of cult Japanese director Miike Takashi and is partially inspired by *The Sound of Music*, which some promotional images for the film deliberately invoked as did the tagline: "The hills are alive with the sound of screaming!" (Figure 16.1).

A number of other musicals fit into Conrich's more "self-conscious" cult variety of films and are worth mentioning. These include *Rock 'n' Roll High School*, which features The Ramones, often cited as the first punk band; *Streets of Fire*, which features among others The Blasters; and the eccentric *Forbidden Zone*, directed by Richard Elfman and featuring the music of his brother Danny (who also plays Satan). Both *Rock 'n' Roll High School* and *Streets of Fire* reference the rock 'n' roll exploitation narratives of the past, especially the 1950s (*Streets of Fire* announces in an opening statement it is set in "another time, another place"). In that sense they are very much in tune with what in Chapter 17 we identify as the nostalgic fabrication of history (also see *Grease*, below). The images of The Ramones and The Blasters as bands also rely on that reference. Yet in both cases the nostalgia is offset by an edgy, subcultural tone that shows protagonists, music, and the rock bands themselves still in firm opposition to law and order (even if they are morally on the right side), and a narrative based around the subcultural appeal of rock music as a symbol of youth resistance against adult restriction. These offsets are aided by the cult credentials of *Rock 'n' Roll High School* producer Corman (and his screenwriter Joe Dante) and *Streets of Fire* director Walter Hill (whose *The Warriors* had already obtained a firm cult status). *Forbidden Zone*, on the other hand, is a bizarre film based upon The Oingo Boingo band's theatrical shows, which blended

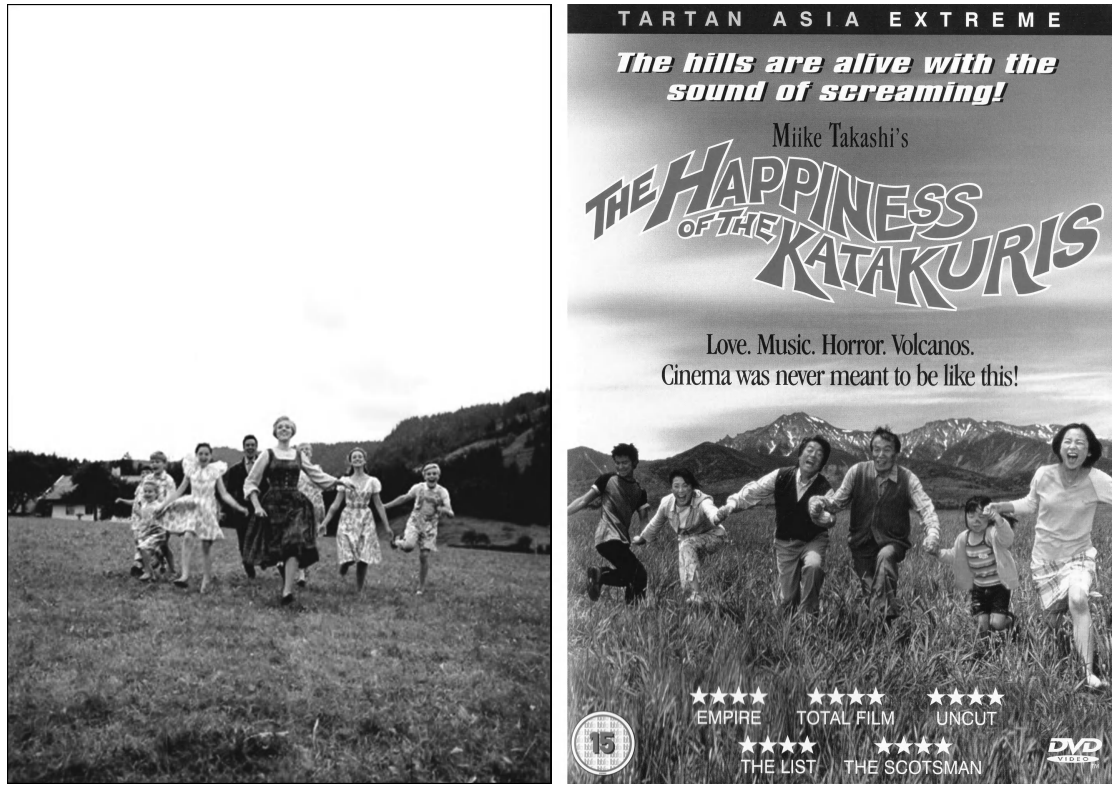


Figure 16.1 A still from *The Sound of Music*, and a DVD cover of *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, the image and wording of which clearly draws on *The Sound of Music*, which famously includes the sung words "The hills are alive with the sound of music".

gothic comedy visuals with a broad repertoire of musical styles, including cabaret and punk. Danny Elfman's subsequent status as a distinctive soundtrack composer for cult-related fare including *The Simpsons* and the films of Tim Burton and Sam Raimi, also provide this film with a post hoc cult dimension. Another cult figure, John Waters, has made a couple of musical films. *Hairspray*, set in 1962, revolved around a teenage dance show and featured a number of dance-based set pieces, though not in the traditional "song and dance" sense. The film built up a cult following on video and then spawned a Broadway musical and then a more conventional, and expensive, musical film remake in 2007. Waters' next film *Cry-Baby*, which starred Johnny Depp, was a more conventional musical (it featured song and dance numbers) that parodied earlier musicals and teenpics, most notably *Grease*.

Grease, a fantasy-like recreation of the 1950s as a utopian playground of sounds and images, has itself developed into a cult. The film was a huge success on its release, particularly among teenage girls, with the associated music singles from the film also selling extremely well. For a hardcore group of original fans, the film has continued to play a key role in their lives. Therefore, a film that was originally nostalgic about an imagined past has now itself become an object of nostalgia for a personalized past. Furthermore, the film continues to attract new fans, as shown by the sales of its DVDs and connected memorabilia. If *Grease* is a "mainstream cult," then *Grease 2* has become a cult film via a more recognizable – and some would argue more "authentic" – trajectory. Critically panned and a box office failure on its original release, the film has steadily gained a following of fans who claim it a superior movie to its more famous predecessor, and

who have formed a "Son of Grease" web site and fan group.[1]

Cult Soundtracks

While musicals do not enjoy the status that they did in their heyday, the increasing use of popular music on film soundtracks, as well as the rise of music video culture (symbolized by the arrival of MTV in 1981) has led to the proliferation of "musical moments" (Conrich and Tincknell 2006: 1) within many films. These are sequences of explicit musical performance within the film, or segments when the highlighting of soundtrack elements may, in relation with visual style, temporarily disrupt the linear momentum of the narrative. A particularly vital area of filmmaking that featured such moments is the phenomenon known as blaxploitation cinema, which flourished briefly between 1971 and 1974 (see also Chapter 13). In order to appeal to African-American audiences, these films very much relied on established musical artists who already enjoyed popularity. Thus, the soundtracks of many of these films was an area where potential audience attractions could be located, and indeed such music has often constituted the most lauded aspect of the films themselves. As Kodwo Eshun has noted, "the musical presence of *Shaft* and *Super Fly*, for example, completely overshadows that of other, more lauded genres of the period" (Eshun 1995: 53). Prestigious artists such as Isaac Hayes (*Shaft*, 1971), Curtis Mayfield (*Super Fly*, 1972), Marvin Gaye (*Trouble Man*, 1972) and James Brown (*Black Caesar*, 1973), were hired to create new music for these films, and the respective soundtracks bolstered their mood and attitude, in which a proud assertion of "blackness" was paraded. Many of the musical sequences in these films have become iconic, such as the theme song in *Shaft* accompanying John Shaft's walk down a New York street. The music becomes an immersive aural fabric, both for the audience and the character, denoting the laid-back cool of the lead character. Somewhat different is Mayfield's score for *Super Fly*, which lyrically counterbalances the main character Priest's actions, critiquing them and thus producing a dialectic in which music/vision intersect in contrasting ways.

While blaxploitation films employed well-known artists, they nevertheless featured newly recorded scores. A number of more recent cult films, by contrast, have tended to rely upon music already in public circulation. One particular cult director who has exploited such music in particularly noteworthy ways is Quentin Tarantino. Although Tarantino's music has differed in its use and range from film to film, it has tended to rely on an eclectic range of music that mostly dates from before the 1980s. Ken Garner has pointed out that many of Tarantino's characters not only discuss music, but also select particular music at certain moments (for example, on a jukebox) (Garner 2001: 190). This not only highlights the importance of the music for these characters, but for Tarantino himself. While music-dominated scenes within Tarantino films often become memorable, they also tend to serve different purposes. The infamous ear slicing scene within *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, is a prime example of effective juxtaposition in that the brutal image is underpinned by a sugary pop song, whose lyrics then take on new import. The beginning of *Pulp Fiction*, however, uses Dick Dale's "Misirlou" as an effective audio-adrenalin rush, plunging the viewer into the midst of the filmic world without mercy. At other times, Tarantino's music can serve as a referential aid, nowhere more so than when he uses music from other soundtracks, so that particular film genres or individual films are evoked. An example is the use of Bobby Womack's "Across 110th Street" in *Jackie Brown*, which was used in the 1972 film of the same name and is indicative of how the film draws upon blaxploitation (strengthened by the appearance of Pam Grier in the lead). The referentiality of Tarantino's music, in conjunction with his tendency to use songs of a certain age, also combines with visual iconography to create an atmosphere of analog fetishism. Characters within his films tend to play music on vinyl or cassette, or select tracks from a jukebox, as in *Death Proof*, which is his own personal item. The fact that the more recent songs on Tarantino's soundtracks tend to avoid overt digital markers, in line with broader characters' discussions about digital technology as cold and soulless (see again *Death Proof*), may partially explain why he needs to keep revisiting older genres more generally: he is mired in a past world, nostalgic for that which has already slipped away.

A cult film that also recalled a past world, but which conjoined this with the present in particular through its musical soundtrack, was the British film *Trainspotting*. To some, the sophisticated marketing that fueled the promotion of the film – the manner in which its different posters and its musical numbers, for example, targeted a range of key audience sectors – has, for Catterall and Wells, placed doubt upon the cult status of the film. They write:

> *Trainspotting*'s promoters pushed all the right buttons. They colluded with its target audience in a way few British cult films had done before, utilising already homogenised cults – such as those surrounding Britpop, the burgeoning Retro craze, the Rave scene and Irvin Welsh's novel – to add a synthetic veneer of cultish credibility. (2002: 234)

However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, this ignores the extent to which cult has infused marketing and promotional discourses. When the market value of cultism is recognized, it is not a surprise that it becomes adopted by commercial agents. Nevertheless, a film being marketed towards particular demographics does not guarantee the adoption of the film by such audiences as important, meaningful texts. Cattterall and Wells's use of the phrase "push the right buttons" downplays how many films may be promoted in "savvy" ways and yet be refused by the targeted audiences.

Trainspotting's music track, as Murray Smith has pointed out, actually cross-references a number of musical periods, which may have helped in its appeal to different audience types. Smith notes how the film makes connections between dance and guitar music, as well as between different decades (the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s), and between the United States and Great Britain (2002: 66). He also notes how important this music is to the film's aesthetic in that, rather than providing mere "aural wallpaper," "the film makes the music itself palpable. It would be hard to overestimate the 'value added' by the songs to the meaning and emotional force of the film" (Smith 2002: 65). Similar mechanisms underpin at least part of the cult appeal of *Donnie Darko*. In this case, the film itself stood outside the cultural context of the music's appeal: the film was American, its music mostly British. Yet that did not prevent a cult connection. After *Donnie Darko* had failed to attract good business as a film, its soundtrack became popular at British campuses and among teenagers interested in its retro-sound of the 1980s (featuring Tears for Fears, Echo and the Bunnymen, and Duran Duran). This popularity helped propel the film's cult revival. Since then, films such as *24 Hour Party People* and *Control* have deepened the interest in British pop as a cult of nostalgia. Certainly, the variety of the music used in these films, and the ways in which it draws upon a range of cultural associations and blends these with visuals and narrative, can be seen as crucial ingredients in their cult appeal.

It is not only soundtracks created from pre-existing popular music or created by already established pop musicians that can add to a film's cult appeal. A number of artists have actually gained reputations predominantly for their soundtrack work and have themselves gained cult followings as recording artists. Specific soundtracks can also become cult items, cherished by dedicated collectors of soundtracks or through becoming particularly influential within specific cultural communities. There is often a pronounced transnational nature to soundtrack collecting, in which the exoticism of the music is often valued. Examples include the Romantic spiritualism typifying German group Popol Vuh's soundtracks to Werner Herzog's movies (such as *Aguirre, Wrath of God* and *Heart of Glass*), or the Buddhist-influenced minimalism of Philip Glass's score to *Koyaanisqatsi*.

One country that has been the subject of much cult interest in terms of film soundtracks is Italy; in particular, Italian exploitation cinema (or *filone*, a word used to refer to populist genre films) from the 1960s and 1970s (a productive period for Italian film production). Composers such as Fabio Frizzi, Bruno Nicolai, Riz Ortolani, Pierre Piccioni, Nino Rota, and Piero Umiliani, as well as the rock band Goblin, have all gained followings from soundtrack collectors. In line with the rapid production of the films themselves, these composers created a large number of scores for a range of genre films including horror, police thrillers, sci-fi, sex films, and spaghetti westerns. Despite the limitations of having to produce so rapidly, the work of these composers has been celebrated by a growing number of soundtrack collectors for their

innovative blend of avant-garde, pop, rock, jazz, and other musical styles. While some of the soundtracks they have created are for films with established cult reputations (e.g. Frizzi's score for *Zombie Flesh Eaters* or Ortolani's score for *Mondo Cane*), others are more regarded than the actual films that they accompanied and it is sometimes easier to obtain the film soundtrack than it is the actual film itself.

By far the most regarded of such composers, though, is Ennio Morricone. While Morricone eventually went on to compose for larger Hollywood pictures and also modified his style to fit into a more classical tradition, his prolific output for Italian *filone* has gained a particular reputation. His work for directors Sergio Leone and Dario Argento is probably his best known within cult circles, yet the number of releases of his soundtrack work – including compilations which collect recordings from different films – testifies to his cult reputation. In addition to specific film soundtracks and compilations based around a composer's work across films being released, there are also a number of broader compilations linked to Italian exploitation cinema of this period, which include *Beat at Cinecitta* (three volumes), *Delirium of the Senses: Psychedelia in Italian Cinema* and *Italia Violenta: The Best Music of the Italian's Police Movie* [sic] (two volumes).

British horror cinema – particularly between the late 1950s and the 1970s – is another area of exploitation filmmaking linked to soundtracks that have gained a cult following. Hammer's horror films, in particular, have gained a following within areas of soundtrack collecting, with the work of James Bernard being most prominent, but also including the soundtracks to *Quatermass and the Pit* (Tristram Carey) and *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* (Basil Kirchin). Carey and Kirchin are among the relatively obscure composers who have more recently gained a following among a number of musicians interested in British soundtracks, electronic and folk music, and a number of other – often horror-related – cultural artifacts. In terms of soundtrack collecting, this interest is most saliently represented by Trunk records, a small British record label that releases TV and Film soundtracks from yesteryear and other obscure music. Its releases include the soundtracks to *Blood on Satan's Claw* (Mark Wilkinson), *Psychomania* (John Cameron) and *The Wicker Man* (Paul Giovanni). Its release of *The Wicker Man* has been seen as especially important for its influence; while the film had already gained a cult following its soundtrack had never officially been released before Trunk released it (as its first release) in a limited edition in 1998 (it was further issued by the label Silva Screen in 2002). Since then, it has itself become subject to fan devotion and the original pressings of the vinyl album have become rare collectors' items within the second-hand marketplace. It has also been credited by many musicians as sparking an interest in folk music and has thus been implicated in the recent resurgence of folk music, including subgenres known as "neofolk" (emerging from the post-industrial music scene and usually with interests in ancient paganism and the occult), and the "Freak folk" movement (which combines psychedelic influences with inspiration from British folklore) (Pitzl-Waters 2007).

A number of other cult films contain soundtracks which have themselves been subject to cult followings. These include Vangelis's ambient, synth-led score for *Blade Runner*, the cult of which was spurred by its unavailability until 1994, at least on an official level. In lieu of the official release a number of bootleg recordings of the soundtrack proliferated, and these continued to do so after the official release as they contained extra material. In 2007 a new, three-disc edition was issued that contained extra tracks and outtakes, though there were still grumbles among some fans that this edition still left out material. *A Clockwork Orange* is another cult film whose soundtrack has accrued its own cult reputation in its own right. Composed by Wendy Carlos (at the time named Walter Carlos) it made extensive use of the Moog synthesizer (still relatively new in the early 1970s), an instrument she had helped popularize with her 1968 *Switched-On Bach*, which featured covers of Bach played on the electronic Moog. The recordings for *A Clockwork Orange* led to two albums: the first was a mixture of Carlos's tracks with other classical tracks and Gene Kelly's "Singin' in the Rain"; the second, released in the same year, contained solely material recorded by Carlos, some of which was not used in the film. The soundtrack's future-oriented synthetic sounds had a pronounced influence on 1980s New Wave synthpop music such as The Human League and Heaven 17 (whose name comes from the name of a fictional pop group from *A Clockwork Orange*).

Both *Blade Runner* and *A Clockwork Orange* are cult films which have also attained a level of critical appreciation. Other cult soundtracks, however, may attain a greater respect than the actual films that they stem from (and in turn play a major part in cultifying the film itself). This is arguably the case with *Forbidden Planet*; while the film is reasonably well regarded critically, the status of the soundtrack has far outstripped that of the film itself. The main reason behind its cult status is that it is seen as particularly innovative: composers Louis and Bebe Barron were early pioneers of electronic music and the soundtrack is considered to be the first all-electronic soundtrack. Creating their own electronic circuits and drawing inspiration from Norbert Weiner's work on cybernetics, the Barons created dissonant, otherworldly sounds which had a large influence on many areas of electronic music that emerged in its wake. Another soundtrack whose status perhaps surpasses the film which it is attached to is *Vampyros Lesbos*. Although not actually recorded specifically for the film – music was taken from Manfred Huber and Sigfried Schwab's *Psychedelic Dance Party* (1969) and *Sexadelic* (1970) albums – the music gained a cult following when it was issued as the soundtrack under the title *Vampyros Lesbos: Sexadelic Dance Party* in 1995. Its blend of Eastern instrumentation and kitsch pop fitted into the vogue for easy listening "lounge music" in the late 1980s/1990s and was frequently used to soundtrack people's own parties.

It is also worth mentioning that there are some directors who have also gained a cult following for creating music for their films. One of the most notable here is John Carpenter, a cult director who has composed a number of his own soundtracks. It is his earlier, sparse synthesizer-based scores which have gained most of a following, including *Assault on Precinct 13* and *Halloween*, both of which have been extensively sampled by a number of hip-hop and electronic artists. Herschell Gordon-Lewis is another director whose own soundtracks have something of a cult following. While Lewis's soundtrack work is not often regarded as great music, the homemade, sparse music for *Blood Feast* and other tracks that he created for his films were released on a compilation in 2002 as *The Eye Popping Sounds of Herschell Gordon Lewis*. Finally, it is worth mentioning David Lynch as important in this regard. Lynch's soundtrack to *Eraserhead* (which he created with Alan Splet) was an arrangement of found sounds mixed into a suitably harsh flow of drones and hisses. Meanwhile, one of the actual songs composed for the film, "In Heaven" (performed in the film by "The Lady in the Radiator") has been frequently covered by musical artists including Bauhaus, Devo, and The Pixies. Lynch's films have since become notable for their soundtracks by Angelo Badalamenti, which themselves have a cult following, though Lynch himself has continued to be closely involved in soundtrack work and has written music and lyrics for a number of tracks featuring within his films The ability to get hold of different soundtracks or to access information about them has undoubtedly increased over the past decade or so. Web sites about soundtracks, blogs devoted to them (some of which upload actual albums from the blogger's collection) and specialist soundtrack sellers are easy to access online, while a new wave of specialist labels are emerging to cater to the increasing interest in this area. It is not, therefore, only the use of pre-existing music with subcultural appeal which is important to music and cult cinema; there is also a following for work that is specifically made for, or at least primarily connected with, a particular film. This can either gain a status through its association with a film that has already gained cult status (and may be an integral component of such status), or – as is increasingly becoming common – soundtracks can gain a kind of independent cult status regardless of the film they were produced for.

Musical Performers and "the Musician" in Cult Cinema

A number of films featuring musical performers playing lead characters have also gained cult status. These can include performers as their selves – as in the previously mentioned Elvis and Beatles pictures – or as fictional personae. As Ben Thompson has pointed out, many attempts by pop stars to forge an acting career have been the subject of ridicule (1995: 33). Occasional performances have captured the imagination of viewers, though, and this is often when the pop star is actually playing a version of their extant celebrity persona. A particularly striking example here is Mick Jagger's role in Donald Cammell and Nicholas Roeg's

Performance, in which he played a washed up rock star. Combined with its psychedelic trappings, its nonlinear editing and speculations on identity and performance, the film has proved to be an enduring cult and has even fed into subsequent pop music culture, having been sampled on Big Audio Dynamite's "E=MC2" (1985) and the Happy Mondays' "Mad Cyril" (1988). Nicholas Roeg also directed another cult film featuring an international pop star: David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. In this film, Bowie's androgynous and alien-obsessed persona, combined with his acting inexperience, imbued his performance with a sense of remoteness that suited the role of an actual alien. A sense of remoteness also characterized the performances of James Taylor and Dennis Wilson in Monte Hellman's cult road movie *Two Lane Blacktop*. The musicians' inexperience was once again expertly employed by Hellman here to convey a sense of existential anomie and was contrasted with actor Warren Oates more exuberant performance.

One particularly interesting cinematic employment of pop artists is within films that are about the music industry. Such depictions are often rather critical about the machinations of the music business, stretching back to the early days of the "rock 'n' roll film." Ben Thompson has written that there was never an "age of innocence" regarding the rock 'n' roll film, that it emerged fully cynical, possibly because "the idea of a new branch of the entertainment industry more venal than itself was just too good to resist" (1995: 38). Two noteworthy cult films about the music business and featuring musical artists certainly fit this bill: *Head* and *The Harder They Come*. The former was The Monkees' audacious deconstruction of their own manufactured image: a nonlinear, psychedelic attack on the inauthentic pop world (and a stake to move forward into autonomous artistry). Unsurprisingly, it alienated their fan base and confused many, but developed its own niche following. The latter was Perry Henzell's Jamaican film in which Jimmy Cliff starred as an artist exploited by the ruthless record companies and ended up a criminal. The film mirrors the very real exploitation of many reggae artists and highlights the social ills that many experienced in Jamaican life.

Films highlighting the cynical operations of the music business contain critical elements that tap into broader ways in which cult films (sometimes) speak to marginalized groups. Disaffection with the music industry can be representative of broader social alienation and this can combine with cult musical appeal to heighten a film's cult potential. One film about the music business deserving mention, but which does not quite fit into this cynical mould is *This Is Spinal Tap*, which featured fictional rather than real music artists. *Tap*'s cult status is due much more to its comedy value than for any social attitude. While it does share the distance of the more cynical films mentioned above, it uses this distance in a more loving manner to mock the antics of a heavy metal band and their travails. Ethan de Seife has noted how the film parodies both rock 'n' roll *and* "the semi-parasitic people and industries that have emerged to promote and valorise it" (2007: 100). In this sense, it does not take sides but treats all characters as worthy of humor. It also, importantly, adopts a mock documentary style that, in line with its acutely observed characters and surrounding paraphernalia, creates a rather uncanny effect (to the extent that some musicians have thought that some of the movie's ideas were stolen from them).

Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that music is an important contributor to many a cult film's appeal. This can work on a number of levels: the music used on the soundtrack; the ways in which music (especially the music industry) can become the subject matter of the film; or through actual musical artists appearing within the films. Musical appeal can also cut across forms and genres: from the documentary to the musical, from exploitation to avant-garde, and from drama to comedy. The cult status of a musical artist can feed into a film to create cult value, though such cult value will often increase if the actual film contains a number of common cult film traits. Though these can never be exhaustively categorized, in music-related films these tend to include: nostalgia; alienation and deviancy; kitsch and camp qualities (Chapter 8); irony and parody (Chapter 21). They will also tend to provide immersive, affective spaces that the cult viewer can become lost in and moved by, as embodied in films that privilege spectacle and performance, such as the musical or the concert film, or within the "musical

moment" of innovative audio-visual synthesis. Or films may be largely forgotten about bar the continued interest in their soundtracks, the influence of which can far outweigh the overall products they were once only a single component of.

Note

1. Their web site is at www.sonofgrease.org, while they have a Yahoo fan group at http://movies.groups.yahoo.com/group/sonofgreasefanclub.

17

Classical Hollywood Cults

Even the narrowest interpretations of cult cinema cannot ignore the cult movies Hollywood produced during its classical era, roughly between World War I and the 1960s. In their list of only thirteen films that confirm to a tight sociological definition of cult cinema Kinkade and Katovich (1992) still include three classical Hollywood productions: *Freaks*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*. There is no clear-cut definition of a classical Hollywood cult film, but there are plenty of films that have had that label bestowed upon them. An illustration that comes close to a definition is offered by Danny Peary, the critic who has given the most attention to Hollywood movies as cults:

> the typical Hollywood product has little potential for becoming a cult favorite because it is perceived by everyone in basically the same way ... Although *Gone with the Wind* and *Star Wars* have fanatical followings [they still] attract the masses rather than devotees on the fringe of the mass audience; the word *cult* implies a minority, and the studios are well aware that *Gone with the Wind* and *Star Wars* still attract the *majority* of the movie audience. Once these two pictures join such films as *All About Eve*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Casablanca*, and *The Wizard of Oz* – all popular with the mass audience but today distributed primarily for their hardcore fans – on repertory theater schedules and on the midnight movie circuit, they, too, will be classified as legitimate cult movies. (Peary 1981: xiii)

The main complication that faces classical Hollywood cults is that it concerns films that seem, at the same time, mainstream and marginal, center and periphery. Peary excludes *Gone with the Wind* as a cult film because as the ultimate classic it is too popular, and its fandom is too much that of regular moviegoers ("the masses"). The qualification of having a hardcore base of followers *within* a mass audience is important, as it delineates a distinction between the audience as a collective and the audience as an aggregate of individuals. For Peary, it is the feeling of being part of a collective that makes a community a cult. *Gone with the Wind* would be a classical Hollywood cult as long as someone would identify its hardcore fandom as a cultish community. J.P. Telotte (1991a: 9) does exactly that when he argues that the appeal of *Gone with the Wind* lies in the way it unites an otherwise heterogeneous audience around "a fondness for conventions."

In this chapter we will discuss a variety of routines and themes that have led to cult reputations for films from Hollywood in its classical era. Our first point of attention will be nostalgia, which we identify as the overarching characteristic of classical Hollywood cults. Next, we will devote attention to a few forms of labor within Hollywood that have attracted cult receptions. We will also analyze the tropes of intertextuality, gaiety and violence as contributing to classical Hollywood cults. In conclusion, we will

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elaborate on aspects of cultism towards classical Hollywood after its demise.

Nostalgia

"There's no place like home", sighs Dorothy (Judy Garland) at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*. Much of the appeal of classical Hollywood cult films comes from an elusive sense of "home," a home carrying only the good characteristics of the term. As Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 3) observe, cult receptions are drenched with a nostalgic yearning for an idealized past, a sense of belonging that can only be located outside of the present reality. For Mathijs and Mendik, this nostalgia is the result of two factors: the emotional impression of nostalgia that is part of a film's reception, and nostalgia as a component of the film's story.

The storylines of most classical Hollywood cults embody a strong yearning for a past, better time. In *The Wizard of Oz*, that past includes Dorothy's home, and – in her search for it – her innocence. In *Gone with the Wind*, it is the yearning for Tara, the manor of the family. In *Casablanca*, it is the time before the German troops marched into Paris. Peary (1981) points out how Rick's (Humphrey Bogart) initially cold and callous attitude gradually changes to reveal a "sentimentalist" view on life when that past Paris returns in his life (in the form of Ingrid Bergman's Elsa), more powerfully every time he hears the song "As Time Goes By". In *It's a Wonderful Life*, the nostalgia is for the missed chance of enjoying what one has in life while being preoccupied with other plans. In *Harvey* it is the longing for a time away from reality altogether. As Elwood Dowd (James Stewart) puts it: "I've wrestled with reality for 35 years, and I am happy to state I've finally won out over it." In *Singin' in the Rain* it is the longing for truthful entertainment, which means the recognition of skill and talent over celebrity status. In each of these films, characters get a second chance, and in most cases they take it. Only in classical Hollywood cults from the mid 1950s and later (*Rebel without a Cause*, *The Searchers*, *Touch of Evil*) is no such choice available, or it is not taken. It is as if with the mid 1950s nostalgia stops having an impact on the present and from then on only relates to the definite past.

Frequently, the sense of nostalgia is reinforced by time travel. Characters travel literally through time (*It's a Wonderful Life*), or are pulled out of the normal passage of time (*The Wizard of Oz*). Locales are presented as timeless (*Top Hat*), or stuck in limbo while for the rest of the world time goes by (*Casablanca*). Any straightforward passage of time is furthermore interrupted by frequent stops (for a song or for elaborate flashbacks), and within the mise-en-scène numerous props and atmospheres refer to multiple ages and eras; it is almost as if the surroundings of circuses, cabarets, or theater stages, littered with assorted materials from bygone eras clutter the story to the point it can no longer progress functionally (*Meet me in St. Louis, Touch of Evil*).

Another recurring characteristic of the nostalgia in classical Hollywood cult films is its suspicion of modern technology and progress. It is a characteristic shared with many forms of secular and religious cults. Technology is represented as an obstruction to happiness, bringing only anxiety and alienation, and tearing communities and families apart. As is the case in *Miracle on 34th Street*, but also in *Casablanca*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Harvey*, *Touch of Evil* and many others, nostalgia is frequently inhabited by a gentle but persistent criticism of capitalism, consumerism, commodification, and the pinch these have put on close-knit communities. New York, as embodiment of capitalism, frequently gets a bad rep in these films. The classical Hollywood cult film that encapsulates this sentiment best is *Meet me in St. Louis*. In the film, the Smith family finds new means of transport, communications, and artificial lights threatening their cohesion as a family, in their home, in their trusted corner of the town. It takes the combined antics of the female family members, especially young Tootie (Margaret O'Brien), to persuade the father to change his mind. The structure of *Meet me in St. Louis* is that of seasonal cycles, not of progress. It offers in the song "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" a rationale for nostalgia as an embrace of the repetition of the past (Kaufman 1994).

The nostalgia of these films is paralleled by the nostalgia in their receptions. On a very particular level, the nostalgia that accompanies the reception of classical Hollywood cults is partly that of the audience's yearning for a form of film consumption that has passed, namely that of the cozy inner-city neighborhood theater where young and adult couples could catch

double bills, matinees, and premiere-evenings alike. As Wheeler Winston Dixon observes: "one went to the movies to see the stars, but also to be with one's friends . . . You would see your friends and neighbors a few rows down and wave to them" (Dixon 2006: 181). Next to that, the element of nostalgia in the receptions of classical Hollywood cults is one that lifts audiences out of specific conditions of time. According to Telotte (1991a: 9), films such as *Casablanca* and *Rebel without a Cause* display a "remarkable ability to live on through and, in effect, outside of history." They are unstuck in time. Telotte links this displacement in time to the nostalgia with which cult audiences approach these films. At its simplest, this nostalgia is the yearning for the initial impression the film left on the viewer, or, a little broader, a desire for a "first time" exposure to a film – the part of the phenomenal experience of viewing that regards every session as "original" (Barker and Mathijs 2007; Card 1991: 66). The ability to position the viewing as a continuous "first time" with all its emotional impact and aura of uniqueness intact, and to embrace the nostalgia that memories of such a first time evoke, is what sets classical Hollywood cult viewers apart from other cultists. Simultaneously, the nostalgia in the reception of classical Hollywood cults operates as a desire for innocence, or for an indefinite "other" time where the day-to-day troubles that occupy daily routines do not exist. Classical Hollywood cults "represent what Christopher Lasch has termed 'ego-ideals': 'admired, idealized images', in a most fundamental sense, *loved ones*" (Telotte 1991a: 9). Such images offer not only consolation to audiences, they also provide an imaginary release from the tensions of real life.

In combination, the re-creation of a "first time" and the search for innocence and idealized icons keep much of the nostalgia in the receptions of classical Hollywood cult films free of irony. In that sense it is different from the receptions of many other types of cult film. The combination also creates legends of receptions, whereby particular instances are singled out as markers for a "true" capture of a film's meaning. These instances become directives for moments of nostalgia in subsequent receptions. This was the case with several instances in the immediate reception of *Rebel without a Cause*, after the death of its star James Dean, and amid some upheaval over the film's place in a controversy over how it was contributing to the corruption of "deviant youths" – a perception that led to the film being banned in France (Biltereyst 2005). After the shock over Dean's death had passed, and moral panics about deviant youths had subsided, the long-term reception of *Rebel without a Cause* was accompanied by a nostalgia for that initial reception – when it seemed to matter to watch the film (McKelly 2005; Shary 2005; Springer 2005).

At its broadest, the nostalgia surrounding the cult reputations of classical Hollywood also transfers into a cultism for much of the period of classical Hollywood, and for the cultural certainties and excitements it is said to offer. Classical Hollywood *itself*, with its image of glamor, stardom, and glory, but also with its perceived decadence, abuse, and sleaze, has a cult reputation. Of course, many eras attract their own nostalgic reminisces. But what sets the classical Hollywood period aside is that the nostalgia for it is often expressed through the same media of film and television that helped to establish this cultural mythology in the first place. It was mainly in films from the 1980s that the consumption of nostalgia took on a cultist quality in its own right, expressed and fueled by films such as *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, and *Dirty Dancing*. For Vera Dika (2003), such nostalgia is in effect a fabrication of history, and part of the 1980s mode of "recycled culture." Mathijs (2007) argues that the cultism surrounding 1980s films recycling cultural consumption patterns of the 1950s is part of a broader development wherein audiences' longing for a better future has given way to a yearning for a better past. Both Dika and Mathijs stress how with this development nostalgia for Hollywood cultism is transformed into a consumption pattern itself – exactly what the original classical Hollywood cults implicitly criticized.

Routines of Labor

There is a certain relationship between nostalgia as the overruling concept for classical Hollywood cults, and some of the routines of labor associated with the system of classical Hollywood, specifically kinds of labor (and perceptions thereof) that are prone to attract fan

devotion through their imperfect fit within, and challenges to, the system.

In Chapters 6 and 7 we analyzed the cult appeal of stars and auteurs. Let us add to those considerations a few Hollywood-specific elements. The most significant observation is that discussions of the labor of stars and auteurs with cult reputations of the classical era are drenched with the impression that they stand for a "truer" kind of professionalism, sophistication, glamor, or charisma from a time when such qualities were said to be of a more pure constellation. Larry Vonalt (1991: 59) calls it "artful glamour." It is an observation repeated in virtually every biographical study of Humphrey Bogart, Judy Garland, or James Dean. Such repetitions of a mantra amplify much of the nostalgia surrounding classical Hollywood cults. A second observation is that the labor of stars and auteurs with cult reputations in classical Hollywood would be labeled as "maverick," because they often evidence a less-than-smooth and fractured career – a career cut short by adversity, disrepute or early deaths.[1] Actors and directors with liberal political profiles, such as Abraham Polonsky or John Huston, or stars and directors with high-profile careers in disreputable genres such as horror, such as James Whale or Tod Browning, would also often be considered mavericks (Curtis 1998; Herzogenrath 2008). While cultism of classical Hollywood stars shows equal interest in male and female stars (though there can be much discussion over the kinds of properties cultists wish to accentuate in their fandom of male or female stars), cultism of classical Hollywood maverick directors is almost uniquely male-centered (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of female cult auteurs). At the same time, however, the masculinity of the mavericks is contested. Many have had gossip about their sexual identity become part of their reputations. The ambiguity accompanying these stories helped solidify their cult reputations.

Stars and auteurs aside, excellent examples of cults that have arisen around instances of Hollywood labor include crew whose profession invites perceptions of daredevilry, risk of bodily harm, and "street credibility," such as stunt people (immortalized, for instance, in *Singin' in the Rain*), athletes, and special effects artists (see Chapters 2, 18 and 19). One category of labor in classical Hollywood that pushed that perception of conflation between the professional and personal the furthest, and thus also received the biggest cult appeal particularly in terms of the nostalgia it incited, was that of the child actor. As Diana Serra Cary, also known as 1920s child star Baby Peggy, observes in *Hollywood's Children* (1979), the 1920 to 1940s can easily be described as the era of the "child star cult." The situations these actors ended up, or maneuvered themselves in, oscillate between "dreams" and "nightmares," swerving from boy wonder or America's sweetheart over stubborn genius to perennial exile – but never are they just simply mainstream. Child actors have always been a point of fascination for film audiences. There is nothing more universally adored than a child star. At the same time, there is a sense they are out of place, their physical and mental well-being endangered by the machinery of Hollywood. Conflicts between perceptions of child labor (exploitative, slave-labor, exhausting, damaging, and so on) and perceptions associated with children (pure, naive, innocent, playful, cute, asexual, impulsive, cruel etc.), put child acting outside of normality and open films with such acting up to wide-ranging interpretations and comments, leading to unstable receptions. Frequently, such debates have fueled cult reputations in which admiration for child acting is precariously negotiated against concerns about labor conditions. These concerns permeate the cult reputations of Jackie Coogan, Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney, Deanna Durbin, Nathalie Wood, the many other child actors in *Meet me in St. Louis*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *Night of the Hunter*, and *The Sound of Music*, and, most famously, Judy Garland (see Chapter 8 for an elaboration on the Garland cult).

The most commonly mentioned classical Hollywood cults combine high degrees of exceptionality of production and reception with presentations and conditions of labor deemed unusual for the Hollywood system – hence provoking production and reception legends or even spark entire mythologies. A perfect example is *Casablanca* (Card 1991). Umberto Eco (1986: 197) refers to its production as "a hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly," with incredible characters and mannered acting. Because of this, Eco adds, it is "a palimpsest for future students of twentieth-century religiosity" (1986: 197). In terms of reception, there was equally much confusion over the kind of film *Casablanca*

wanted to be, and what it eventually became. Films now regarded as evergreens, such as *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Wizard of Oz*, too, were seen as exceptional to Hollywood (Higashi 2005: 73; Maland 2007: 243–244). Ultimately, the superstructure of Hollywood, its collection of rationalizations and self-beliefs endorsed by the corporations leading it and publics consuming its product, has managed pretty well to contain these films and explain them away as one-time exceptions. As such, they present not an alternative to Hollywood, but oddities within it.

Intertextuality

On the basis of Hollywood's system of routines it would seem logical to assume that genre plays an important role in the characterization and reception of classical Hollywood cults. But that does not mean it is a cinema of genre. Like cult films in general, classical Hollywood cults relate closely to issues of genre in that they consistently strain, over-play, or ridicule notions of generic categorization while simultaneously relying heavily upon formulas and conventions of genres. Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 2) name *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sound of Music* as examples when they argue that cult films "shatter all existing genres." Eco asserts that Hollywood films that mix genres are likely to have cult followings. *Casablanca* is his favorite example (Eco 1986). Alex Cox too observes "a tendency to slosh over from one genre into another" (Cox and Jones 1993: 1).

Instead of being generic, then, classical Hollywood cults are meta-generic, or, intertextual. Intertextuality has connotations that stretch well beyond genre and classical Hollywood. We explore those in Chapter 21. Within the context of classical Hollywood cultism the concept of intertextuality is usually understood along Eco's definition, as a framework of data-structures (such as a film) that consists of "stereotyped situations derived from preceding textual traditions and recorded by our encyclopedia" (Eco 1986: 200). Intertexuality consists of macroscopic textual situations and stereotyped iconographical units, the latter more or less the equivalent of formulaic imagery and narrative, immediately recognizable by audiences. By breaking up genre in a number of situations and acknowledging their travel across texts, intertextuality avoids discussions of genre as "accomplishment." According to Stam (1999: 201), intertextuality surpasses the problems of taxonomism and essentialism that the concept of genre tends to become embroiled in. But it retains, and indeed highlights, the importance of how films relate to other systems of representations through clichéd or stereotypical formulas.

Classical Hollywood cults are highly intertextual in two ways. First, they are intertextual in their self-conscious application of clichés. It creates the impression that these films use as well as subvert or deconstruct the very situations they are setting up (Peary 1981; Cox and Jones 1990, 1993). The intertextuality of classical Hollywood cult movies thus becomes a way of bypassing the conditions of quality genre imposes – a way of not having to live up to the pressure of having to "be" a good genre film, but to be appreciated on "another level." A staple example is the use of story backgrounds such as the circus or the theater backstage that function as ready-explanations for eccentric behavior (which consequently does not need to be addressed through character development or plot). Among the most frequently mentioned such films are *Freaks*, *Footlight Parade*, *Hellzapoppin'*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Singing' in the Rain*, *All about Eve*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *A Star Is Born*, and *Imitation of Life*, all of which are set in the world of entertainment, where "stereotypes," "stock characters," and "sudden changes" are not only to be expected, but through their full display also become motors to the narrative and its meaning. The framed worlds in films such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Meet me in St. Louis*, or *Touch of Evil* too have been analyzed as highly intertextual. Through their intertextuality classical Hollywood cults offer audiences a way of enjoying what would otherwise be either less than fully accomplished genre exercises, or merely just good genre films.

Secondly, intertextuality invites audiences to "make up" interpretations that add to the film's richness, and its cult reputation. Audiences can use intertextual prompts to mine films for references and connections they might not even knowingly contain. The various references to *Casablanca* in *À bout de souffle*, *Play it Again Sam*, or *When Harry Met Sally* have fortified the cult reputation of *Casablanca* by adding interpretations beyond the film's intentions (Maltby 1996). A famous

example, researched by Barbara Klinger (1994), concerns the films Douglas Sirk made with Rock Hudson, which found renewed followings, and renewed cult receptions after the actor had died of AIDS in 1985, and audiences started to revisit his films to look for clues and cues for his homosexuality. Another example is the renewed cult followings for Joan Crawford triggered by the release of *Mommie Dearest*. This audience-driven intertextuality has had significant repercussions for classical Hollywood cults' long-term receptions. We have mentioned in Chapter 1 how reception contexts are known for their obsession with details, and their interconnectedness. This mining is a sign of this. It really became a part of cult readings of cinema from the late 1960s onwards, concurrent with the demise of classical Hollywood. In the years since, as classical Hollywood cults gradually lost their original audiences, they were replaced by audiences trained to look for ulterior motives and symptomatic meanings, for bits and pieces of intertextual referencing films carried unknowingly, that were simply added on to the films, or that were only noticed after they had been spoofed or referenced by other, newer films. As such, intertextuality, and its use by audiences, offers explanations as to why some classical Hollywood cults remain cult films, while others have disappeared.

Gaiety

When classical Hollywood cults are described in terms of nostalgia it is often noted that they offer a "gay ole' time." The term "gay" has changed meaning over the course of its application in the receptions of classical Hollywood cults. That change reflects a development many classical Hollywood cults experienced.

Initially, the term refers to a mood that stresses frivolous, flirtatious atmospheres in enclosed, artificial settings that highlight their entertainment and leisure functions – such as hotels, bars, ballrooms, dressing rooms, luxury estates, yachts, casinos, theaters, or film studios. Gaiety abounds most visibly in stories that upset "cheery problemless world[s] where gentlemen have valets and dress in top hats and tails and ladies have maids and dress in evening gowns" (Peary 1981: 103). The genre most commonly associated with gaiety is the musical. Among the most commonly listed Hollywood cult musicals are *42nd Street* and *Footlight Parade*, *Top Hat*, *Meet me in St. Louis*, and *Singin' in the Rain*. Gaiety also informs much of the appeal of sentimental fantasy films such as *Harvey* and *It's a Wonderful Life* – films in which the joy of living forms the main drive for the narrative. These films owe much of their cult appeal to the joyful mood they establish with their audiences, to their relentless belief in a fun time, and to the self-reflexivity of "a story inside a story inside the industry" (which functions as an intertextual tool through which the joyful mood is established).

Several critics argue that the cult appeal of gaiety lies in how it presents a world that does not gel well with reality. *Top Hat* seems oblivious to the real-life Depression. Rick's Café in *Casablanca*, the backdrop of the theater in *All about Eve*, or the background of the film industry in *Singin' in the Rain* appear disconnected from reality, consciously so (Peary 1981: 4–8; Higashi 2005). Often, there is a tension between the high-society entertainment setting and the working-class backgrounds of the characters – stuntmen, chorus dancers, piano players, bartenders, pirates and outlaws – who are presented as quasi-egalitarian collectives of guys, gals, and pals. Conflicts remain lighthearted, and are carried with a smile – as if life is merely a frivolity.

In its more modern meaning, the term "gay" also carries overtones of camp and queer sexualization. The above-mentioned films often contain "battles of the sexes," with sexual identity at stake. Such battles are accompanied by a "pratfall" – a fall from grace of the protagonist that forces him to abandon his disavowal, acknowledge his attraction to the heroine, and give up his roving ways.[2] Because these films address both a leisurely and a sexualized connotation of the term "gay" the phrase has become representative for a turn in the modes of reception of films with gaiety – a turn that has affected the long-term cult receptions of these films. Since the 1960s, savvy audiences have been more vocal in identifying or attributing queer or lesbian subtexts to Hollywood films, in particular with regard to musicals, screwball comedies, and swashbucklers. Anything from the male bonding between teens in *Rebel without a Cause*, the flirting and cross-dressing within the vaudeville troupe in *Sylvia Scarlett*, the reversal of

dominant gender roles in films with Marilyn Monroe, Joan Crawford, or Rock Hudson, or the restrained, domestic tensions in some of the films of Douglas Sirk (*All that Heaven Allows* in particular) have been reinterpreted along this sexualized understanding of gaiety (Peary 1981; see Klinger 1994 for a study of Sirk's reception). As camp and queer readings became more prevalent parts of cultism (see Chapter 8), gaiety gradually became understood as a reference to queer or promiscuous subtexts, planted and hidden in films in order to bypass the strict self-censorship of Hollywood, but detectable for those with the right arsenal of subtextual implications and inferences.

The change in application of the term "gay" illustrates a change in the long-term reception of classical Hollywood cults. This change is often reflected upon in nostalgic reflections as a perception of a loss of innocence. The cultist reattribution of the motive of gaiety in musicals, swashbucklers, and screwball comedies was paralleled by Hollywood audiences' abandonment of these genres. However, in the case of the musical such nostalgic reflections mix with camp and queer readings without too many obstructions. This mix has made the model of the musical an almost uniquely cultist type of film, especially in the period after the demise of classical Hollywood. *The Sound of Music* is generally considered the end-point of the classical musical. Its current cult reception is characterized by sing-a-longs that highlight audience participation, what Ian Conrich (2006: 117) has called "karaoke cinema" (also see Chapter 16). Fittingly, this reception, and the comments of "silliness" it elicits, can be regarded as a struggle between the initial understanding of "gay" (as frivolous fun) and the post-1960s queering of it (as repressed sexuality being outed).

Violence

Many cult films present instances of violence as a way of opposing mainstream modes of representation. Violence is also abundantly present in classical Hollywood cults, often in the guise of perpetual anarchy, toughness, or frontier liminality – in fact we can say that in classical Hollywood cults violence is routinized, made part of the fabric of storytelling and style.

Routines of violence are a particular characteristic of the zany slapstick film and its unattached, uncivil tramps and wanderers. As Harry Allan Potamkin (2008) noted, the 1920s slapstick film used to form a cult all onto itself, celebrated exhaustively by the surrealists (see Chapter 4). Because of the quantity, size, and speed of gags (pie fights, chases, crashes) within these films, and the ridiculing of figures and institutions of authority, the zany slapstick film was often seen to contain a political subtext of anarchy. Many of Chaplin's films end with the tramp setting off on the road, to nowhere in particular. The overt links between violence and zaniness in the films of the Keystone Cops, Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers (especially *Duck Soup*), and several pirate films (notably *Captain Blood*) gave them solid cult reputations. In 1941, *Hellzapoppin'* encapsulated the traits of zaniness in an overtly intertextual and self-reflexive tale about filmmaking that paved the way for parodies (see Chapter 21).

Routinization of violence is also prevalent in the hardboiled *film noir* with the femme fatale. Such films have frequently been called nihilist, for their preference for dodgy locales (in bars, cabarets, on the road, in halfway houses of low repute), their avoidance of the presentation of women in fixed routines and domestic environments, and their violence against women (comedic or not) – in these films, men are dangerous, women are lethal, and adventures are doomed. The most visible instances of such routines of violence were far more concerned with formalisms and mannerisms of violence (such as menacing poses or sudden outbursts, like Lee Marvin's infamous hit in *The Big Heat*) in shabby locations than with plot-driven storytelling. Among the most frequently mentioned hardboiled cults are *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, *Detour*, *Out of the Past*, and from the fifties, *Gun Crazy*, *The Big Heat*, *Kiss me Deadly*, and *The Killing*. *Touch of Evil* is usually regarded as the epilog of the hardboiled cult. Each of these mostly low-budget films is noted for its expressions of physical and emotional violence (often against women), for its labyrinthine plots of betrayal, and for an overall tone of cynicism, factors that gave them a heightened sense of liminality, and contributed to their cult reputation.

The most renowned routinization of violence in classical Hollywood cults, however, is the kind

associated with the frontier. A metaphor for the edge of civilization, the frontier stands as a key component of the kind of cultural mythology Hollywood is said to promote (the American Dream and its "wide horizons"). In classical Hollywood films with cult followings any crossing of the frontier appears to be impossible. Instead, characters and stories get stuck on the frontier – they linger in no-mans' lands. As a consequence violence is everywhere. Steven Schneider describes the eponymous city of *Casablanca* as "hovering" in between worlds and cultures, stalemated by the war (Schneider 2006: 91). The border town in *Touch of Evil* or the observatory in *Rebel without a Cause* are also locations in which characters are stuck and violence ensues.

The forms of classical Hollywood cult that push this notion of the frontier furthest are the exotic adventure film and the western. In the figure of the "frontier hero" simmers a dilemma between civilization and wilderness: the hero is unable to function within the civilized world but equally unable to live in the wild. That conflict inevitably erupts in violence. The biggest cult reputations are for adventures and westerns whose entire narrative is set in the frontier zone, where violence becomes a mode of existence rather than a functional tool. In the pre-Hays Code adventure film this violence is often linked to sexual attraction. In *Tarzan and his Mate* and *King Kong* love is expressed in a very physical way, as befits their position of "uncivilized" beings. With regard to the western, the frontier violence is probably most iconically illustrated through the image of Ethan Edwards at the end of *The Searchers*. Peary (1981, 1989) lists the following films as cult westerns: *My Darling Clementine*, *Johnny Guitar*, *The Searchers*, *Man of the West*, *Rio Bravo*, and *Ride the High Country*, and the Randolph Scott westerns *The Tall T* and *Ride Lonesome*. Most of these westerns are called revisionist, from the period near the end of classical Hollywood when the genre started to shed its blind loyalty to the myth of the conquering of the frontier and, instead, films such as the above-mentioned get stuck on the border. In a sense, this intertextual exposition of the genre's constructedness, expressed in an increase in formal mannerism, ignited its downfall. It helped destroy some of the mass appeal of the western. At the same time, the formal subversion helped the genre gain a cult reputation.

The cults of the zany slapstick, the hardboiled film, and the Hollywood western are largely a thing of the past. Peary aside, very few studies of cult movies even refer to Hollywood western cults (Cox and Jones 1990, 1993 is an exception). But some traces of their cult are carried over into the present in the form of homage. Contemporary films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Crash* eagerly reference the hardboiled femme fatale and the western, thus enshrining their routines of violence into cult fandom. The best example of this are European spaghetti westerns such as *Django*, *A Bullet for the General*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, *The Big Silence*, or *Once Upon a Time in the West*, or post-classical westerns such as *The Shooting* and *The Wild Bunch*. These films' routinization of violence goes a few steps further, especially in their focus on the spectacle of indiscriminate violence and on the collectivity of its perpetrators. More men than ever before get stuck in the frontier zone, and not even the most extreme violence gets them out. Their cynicism actually turns these films into send-ups of violence. It has given these films greater cult reputations than their Hollywood predecessors, ones that persist to this day. At the same time, the spaghetti western's appeal virtually erased any cult followings for classical Hollywood westerns (for more on the spaghetti western, see Chapter 20).

Classical Hollywood Cults on Television

Rio Bravo and *The Sound of Music* are often listed as the last examples of classical Hollywood cults. As we have outlined above, the cult of the violent spaghetti western erased the cult of the Hollywood western. The increasing tendency to mine musicals, screwball comedies, and melodramas for their camp and queer subtexts – and to see every mention of "gay" as something else – drastically changed their cult appeals too. In general, nostalgia for classical Hollywood pushed specific cult followings for nostalgic films out of the spotlight. But on television, classical Hollywood cults found a new home. From the 1960s onwards, and particularly through the 1970s and 1980s, television gradually replaced the repertory theater: its reruns of beloved films made re-releases superfluous. Network

television became the quintessential form of family entertainment, and it also became the medium classical Hollywood cults migrated to.

In fact, television perpetuates the cult of classical Hollywood through the nostalgia it embraces. The major proof for this is what can best be described as seasonal cults: the fervent cultism around specific, recurrent periods and dates in the year linked to cultist behavior and to specialist television programming involving classical Hollywood cults. This is how Peary introduces *The Wizard of Oz*:

> I flashed back to the fifties when *The Wizard* entered the lives of us children across America via annual television screenings that we watched religiously year after year after year. Few of us can deny how important to our lives *Wizard* was; its annual TV presentation was as comforting as our birthdays, holidays, a cup of hot chocolate (with a marshmallow), and even the opening day of the baseball season (Peary 1981: 390).

The Halloween period has a special significance for the horror film, as a dedicated release date, but also as a slot for classical Hollywood horror on television (Mathijs 2009). Valentine's Day too has, through *Casablanca*, become a slot with cultist overtones.

The most important seasonal cult is the *yuletide cult*, the avid following for, and ritualized viewing of, a group of classical Hollywood cults broadcast on television during the end-of-year celebrations (Mathijs 2010a). Among the most frequently programmed films are *Holiday*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Meet me in St. Louis*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *Miracle on 34th Street*. These films share an emphasis on family union, intimate song and dance routines, and naive beliefs in love and happiness. They provide mild criticisms of capitalist modes of consumption and distribution. They are also characterized by the prominent presence of children in the story – *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Bishop's Wife* even cast the same child actors. Above all, they transcend cynicism by highlighting maudlin sentiments, feelings of nostalgia for "olden days of yore," as Esther (Garland) puts it in "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

Perhaps more than *Miracle* or *Meet me in St. Louis*, *It's a Wonderful Life* is the quintessential yuletide cult film from classical Hollywood (Figure 17.1). Its message of



Figure 17.1 Championing family and community values over capital gain: the yuletide cult of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

championing family and community values over capital gain and ruthless business is mirrored in its reception trajectory. The film had not been a success when it was originally released. Ever since its copyright lapsed, and it became public domain, it had been cheap for networks to put it on their holiday season schedules. This enabled regional television stations to program the film, and these localized appearances helped solidify the film's reputation as a "small town" favorite, a film that demonstrated the robustness and indispensability of closely knit communities. In larger cities, broadcasts would be supplemented with fervently attended theater screenings (Peary 1981: 162).[3]

Seasonal television re-runs, and occasional theatrical re-releases, add to the already nostalgic-heavy long-term receptions of classical Hollywood cults. Two means through which this added value is expressed are crying and imagining. As with *Miracle*, the long-term receptions of *It's a Wonderful Life* abound with references to weeping and crying. As Peary remarks: "There is no shame in crying while watching *It's a Wonderful Life*, admittedly one of the most sentimental pictures of all time" (Peary 1981: 163). Eric Smoodin (2004: 183–199) details how inmates of the San Quentin prison referred extensively to crying and, indeed, anticipations of crying (being "ready-for-the-river") when discussing a screening of *It's a Wonderful Life* in January 1947. Similar observations, usually of anecdotal nature, can be found in the long-term receptions of *Singin' in the Rain*, *Casablanca*, and *Harvey*. Even more hard-nosed classical Hollywood cults do not seem immune to it. Sue Harper and Vincent Porter (1996)

have argued that crying at the movies, and indeed at certain movies ("weepies") needs to be seen in the context of immediate postwar society, as a mechanism to be understood not just in relation to the film being screened but to the wider cultural atmosphere and its audience's sensitivities. Both Smoodin and Harper and Porter allude to the fact that crying is connected with audiences' re-imaginations of history. What crying at the seasonal re-runs of classical Hollywood cults indicates, then, is the performative – though not less sincere – articulation of nostalgia.

Conclusion

As classical Hollywood cults moved from the theater to television, new cults occupied the slots they left open at inner-city repertory theaters. Even staunchly traditionalist bastions of classical Hollywood reverence, such as cinematheques or film museums, saw themselves gradually open up their schedules to newer cults. When home-viewing media made their entrances, they drew on fringe and niche specialist cults at the expense of classical Hollywood cults. By and large, classical Hollywood cults remained stuck in the television medium. Since 2000, prestige up-market editions of classical Hollywood cult films have propelled a wider availability, but this has not yet led to a systematic revival.

The consequence of this development has been a gradual disappearance of classical Hollywood cults from studies of cult cinema. Peary's first volume of *Cult Movies* (1981) lists 41 classical Hollywood films, out of a total of 100. In his subsequent collections that ratio declined drastically. Umberto Eco's (1986) seminal essay on *Casablanca* was still largely aimed at classical Hollywood cults. A few years later, J. P. Telotte (1991b) balanced discussions of the classical cult film (*Casablanca*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Beat the Devil*) with that of midnight movies. So did Anne Jerslev (1992), who drew equally on *The Big Sleep* and *Pink Flamingos* to argue her case that cult movies are intertextual.

Over the last decade, overviews of cult cinema have tended to further reduce their attention to classical Hollywood cults. Apart from *The Wizard of Oz*, *Casablanca*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Rebel without a Cause*, *The Sound of Music*, and a few others, there remains little or no consensus about classical Hollywood cults among recent studies and overviews of cult cinema. This narrowing of the perspective also affects how some of the themes classical Hollywood cults highlighted, such as gaiety, or nostalgia, are remembered.

As a result, we should perhaps worry for what Svetlana Boym (2001) has called the limited "future of nostalgia." The danger exists that classical Hollywood cults will soon be cast out of considerations of cult cinema altogether. Before long, the current nostalgia *within* classical Hollywood cults may soon be replaced by a longing *for* classical Hollywood cults.

Notes

1. One of the most recent directors of classical Hollywood to receive a European cult following is Edgar Ulmer (Isenberg 2004; Herzogenrath 2009; Rayns 2009). Ulmer's cult status has led to an annual convention, the *Ulmerfest*, in his hometown in the Czech Republic.
2. Probably the most notorious example is one of Cary Grant's outbursts of frustration in *Bringing up Baby* (the film can be seen as one extended pratfall). Forced by circumstances to wear a lady's negligee, he bumps into a respectable, elderly woman who confronts him with the peculiarity of his outfit and asks him why he is wearing these "idiotic clothes." He shouts: "Because I just went gay all of a sudden."
3. When the Pickwick Theatre near Chicago invited one of the child actors to a screening of *It's a Wonderful Life*, 3000 people attended.

18

Cult Horror Cinema

The term "cult" is probably at its most mobile, and in the most danger of being over-used, when it is discussed in relation to the horror genre. As a descriptive or critical category, a historical tradition, or a set of routines, "cult horror" is simultaneously a very slippery concept as well as a site of partisan entrenchment. In this chapter we will try to offer accounts of both, conflicting, positions, by approaching cult horror from three angles: cult horror as a subcategory within the horror genre (i.e. as a label that some horror films receive); cult horror as a specific historical tradition and cultural sensibility with repercussions for both the horror genre and the concept of cult (i.e. as a moment within the history of both cult cinema and horror cinema); and cult as an asset of a number of ways in which viewers have used opportunities created by producers to cultify certain horror films (i.e. as a sort of elevation of the cultural status and value of horror movies).

Cult Horror as a Subgenre of Horror

Approaching cult horror as a subdivision of horror, as a distinction within the genre, creates a big complication, namely that for a lot of vernacular surveys, overviews, and reports, the terms cult and horror are almost synonymous – even if this is not always articulated explicitly. There is a historical aspect to this conflation between cult cinema and the horror genre, that goes back to the early 1920s and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. As we have seen, Potamkin (2008: 27) calls it the "cult film par excellence." Peary (1981: 48) praises it as the "first *horror* film of real, lasting quality." To many, *Caligari* is horror because it is cult and cult because it is horror. The controversies it caused in several markets etched its reputation as a "wretched story" deep into the minds of viewers who felt at odds with mainstream cinema. When surrealist René Crevel wrote on his admiration for *Caligari* in 1927 the phrase "Caligari's madness" had sunk into both cult and horror parlance. (Hammond 2000: 57–58).

Ever since *Caligari*, numerous other conflations have persisted, with the confusing result that sometimes there is no longer a distinction between "horror" and "cult." The conflation is not helped by the fact that academic studies of the effects and impacts of horror films on viewers employ arguments and language that are also used to describe cult audiences – both in negative views (that see these viewers as addicted victims) and in positive ones (that see these viewers as empowered agents). Moreover, hardly ever do such studies appear to offer examples of horror that are not also widely recognized as film cults. A cursory look at web sites, blog sites, and online criticism delivers a plethora of illustrations of the continued presence of this conflation.[1]

If we look at attempts that place cult horror within the genre of horror as a subdivision that does not conflate with the entire genre, two interconnected characteristics appear: cult horror films are bad and break taboos. For Bartlomiej Paszylk (2009), cult horror films are a "genre within a genre," or horror outside the mainstream of horror. Their uneasy fit within formats, failure to provide programmatic pleasure, and lack of easy availability makes them

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cult. Paszylk also notes that cult horror film punishes viewers "by reveling in its own vulgarity or badness" (2009: 1). For Welch Everman too, cult horror films are first and foremost "bad horror films" (1993: 1), which he initially sees as an aesthetic judgment of under-achievement coupled with low production values and small budgets. Yet he immediately adds that some cult horror films are so bad they are good, and that much of the badness lies in how they subvert politics of representation. He thereby moves the focus from the aesthetic quality of the picture to its political position.

Like so many critics and scholars, Everman asserts that most horror films are essentially conservative in their message. Monsters are threats to cultural order and they must be destroyed through extreme means. Cult horror films, however, add subversions, ambiguities, and contradictions so that it becomes unclear whether or not restoration of the order is a good thing, or the ends justify the means, or the film itself is actually siding with its story. Decades after its original release, Siegfried Kracauer used this line of reasoning to attack *Caligari* for its reactionary ideology (Kracauer 1959: 66–67). Although Kracauer's interpretation was later nuanced, it decalibrated the status of *Caligari* for a long time. In his analysis of horror, *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King (1981: 154–230) arrives at the insight that cult horror movies have conflicting political leanings; their politics are not tabloid editorials but rather muddled, confused utterances. Paszylk, Everman, and King devote considerable attention to illustrations of how cult horror films push the boundaries of taste by breaking taboos. For King, they are "a sort of picture that doesn't want to score political points but to scare the hell out of us by crossing certain taboo lines" (King 1981: 156). For Everman, this means that these films are "all kind of offbeat, kind of weird, kind of strange" (Everman 1993: 1). Or even "too weird," as Paszylk remarks (2009: 1).

The focus on breaking taboos is also a central element of other uses of the term cult horror. Such uses most frequently occur in the margins of works on extreme horror cinema. Their appearance in these works illustrates the close affiliation between high degrees of explicit violence, fear, and bodily mutilation and the cult status of a horror film – the more radical a horror film's depictions of bodily harm, and the bigger the taboo it is breaking (or the "weirder" it is), the more likely it is to attract a cultist audience and be labeled cult. A good example is Mikita Brottman's (1997) analysis of "cinema vomitif," which concentrates on extreme horror films that have elicited a visceral reaction from audiences. Although Brottman argues for a distinction between the offensive films she analyzes and "cult bad movies," the way she approaches case studies such as *Freaks*, *Blood Feast*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Cannibal Holocaust* nevertheless positions these films as cults. Similar approaches can be found in David Kerekes and David Slater's (2000) critical overview of "death cinema from mondo to snuff." In fact, the application of superlative adjectives such as "shocking," or "nasty" has become a proxy indication of the cult status of some horror films.[2] Publishing houses such as Creation Books, Headpress, and FAB Press, and fan magazines such as *Fangoria*, *Cinefantastique*, *Ecran fantastique*, and *Gorezone* employ the term cult regularly when discussing taboo-breaking horror.

Cult Horror as a Historical and Cultural Sensibility

A more specific use of the term cult horror refers to one period in the history of horror cinema that has become a cult in itself. This period runs roughly from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s. During this time horror cinema developed such a rabid cult reputation that it caused a radical change in the components that characterize the general term "cult." At the same time, it was a period in which the horror genre as a whole was so visibly prominent within popular culture discourse (yet so reviled) that it almost became a synonym for cult cinema in general. Following Lawrence O'Toole's (1979), this period is often described as the *cult of horror*.

The cult of horror comes out of a sensibility that is strongly linked to the 1960s counterculture. Vilified by reviewers, eschewed by large theaters, and most difficult to distribute, films such as *Carnival of Souls*, *Blood Feast*, *Rape of the Vampire*, and *Night of the Living Dead* appeared in niche markets seemingly out of nowhere. The independent origin of these films, produced in defiance of industry routines and

practices, gave them a flavor of countercultural resistance, which was bolstered through their alignment with campus radicalism and the burgeoning subculture of comic books.

Through the 1970s, this alignment developed into the cult of horror. It was spearheaded by a relatively small cohort of high-profile controversies, in particular those involving *Night of the Living Dead*, *Last House on the Left*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *Shivers*. Facilitated by increasingly lenient censorship regulations, these films presented themselves as radical, political, and independent-minded. Their horror involved starkly realistic depictions of the detailed, explicit, and abusive violation of bodily integrity – with rape and cannibalism taking a prominent place. One of the most powerful elements of the films spearheading the cult of horror was that literally anyone could become a monster, within an instant, and most characters would at some point become monstrous. This meant that audiences had no recourse for their emotional investments into characters (there were no heroes to save the day), which added a very bleak tone to the films' endings. The stories ceased to be about defending normality (white, middle-class, individualist, capitalist, patriarchic, monogamous, meritocratic society) against an outside threat (often a seductive, egalitarian, hereditary, communal collective, such as a sect, a coven, an orgy, or socialism). Instead, stories emphasized the defense of oneself against a threat within, which often led to sacrificial death or suicide.

As Robin Wood (1979) has remarked, such presentations of violence appeared to claim direct cultural relevance for a generation of viewers that wanted their anxieties about the Vietnam war, civil rights riots, the breakdown of the nuclear family and traditional role models, and the uncertainties caused by the economic crisis, addressed in uncompromising terms. In all their directness these films remained ambiguous – with open endings, undefeated monsters, unresolved trauma, and an overall tone of despair about the possibility of survival in a world gone mad. In addition, much screen time was devoted to building a close attachment to the monster (and its values of unrepressed desire and sexuality), and to showing in precise detail its crimes and destruction. In films such as *Suspiria*, *Day of the Dead*, or *City of the Living Dead* explicit imagery of death and flesh wounds, aided by special effects, emphasized every detail of the violent abuse of the human body, and the literal violation of bodily integrity (the last frontier of humanity) – thus blurring the border between good and evil, man and monster. On top of this, these films added the assumption that the source of evil was directly connected to historical and contemporary forms of waste, such as warfare, pollution, excess, over-consumption, gluttony, and greed – combating the idea of progress. The fact that these films were also rife with references to the legacy of the genre gave them a reach beyond any immediate appeal.

At least as important as their content and style was the way these films found their audiences. Without elaborate publicity campaigns, and distributed outside regular markets, they shocked audiences because they appeared out of nowhere, at matinees, inner city theaters, on the midnight movie circuit, and on college campuses. These sudden receptions provoked reactions from authorities that led to political backlash, bans, and police seizures. Before long, each of these films acquired a huge cult reputation (Peary 1981; Skall 1993: 307–309; Staiger 2000; Heffernan 2004; Mathijs 2003a: 109–126).

These films caused a paradigm shift for both the horror genre and the concept of the cult movie. All of a sudden, *Daughters of Darkness*, *The Blood Splattered Bride*, or *The Wicker Man* were no longer merely exploitation movies, but explorations of modern man's paranoid victimization by a civilization gone berserk. The change led to numerous imitations and a drastic shift in modes of practice towards much more grisly realist and cynical horror with a single-minded investment in mutilating normalcy (Holthof 1980). Above all, it gave horror cultism a pressing purpose and cultural mission, aligning it with counter-cultural dissidence as well as aesthetic vanguardism. By the end of the 1970s, at the time when O'Toole coined the phrase "cult of horror," the change had impacted on all of popular culture. O'Toole argues that North America was "hell-bent for horror," and that the popularity of the scary movie genre reached gigantic proportions: everything from *Halloween*, through *Suspiria*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *The Brood* to *Alien* seemed a big success and also appeared to touch a cultural nerve, especially with younger generations of

avid moviegoers, devouring horror with insatiable appetite. Beyond movies, horror imagery found public release, and wide fandom, through comic books, heavy metal music, punk rock, and literature (Stephen King, Ann Rice). Nor was the change limited to a few countries. American, Italian, Canadian, and French horror may have stood out because of the international distribution of the films of George Romero, John Carpenter, Dario Argento, Lucio Fulci, David Cronenberg, and Jean Rollin, but markets around the world were affected by the new development. O'Toole even connects the cultist adoration for horror with contemporary religious cults (like the Jonestown one, but also underground gatherings of real-life vampires), and threats of real horror (Skylab falling from the sky, industrial pollution, nuclear meltdown, cancer), inferring that they are signs of a society looking for certainties where there are none. For O'Toole, that fear explains much of the appeal of horror *as a cult*. He quotes Romero: "the rationale is, since this is the way we're going why not celebrate it" (quoted in Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 259). O'Toole sees as the cult of horror's main components the emphasis on body horror (the monster comes from inside, or near you), the refusal to provide a comforting ending (either everyone dies or there is a "big question mark"), and the exposition of fanaticism (not just in the portrayal of characters, but also in the relentless drive of horrific events happening on screen – there seem to be no more rest points).

Throughout much of the 1980s, this arrangement of subculture, counter culture and popular culture around horror extended into a veritable cult industry. New production, distribution, and promotion practices, combined with innovative modes of reception, helped establish a worldwide fascination with the horror genre that spawned celebrations of the most diverse kinds. Companies such as New Line Cinema produced wildly successful franchises. New Line first made its name distributing *Pink Flamingos* and *The Hills Have Eyes* across campuses throughout the 1970s, then distributed the splatter cult phenomenon *The Evil Dead*, and finally became "the house that Freddy built" – producing the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise. The rise of video saw specialty labels such as Vipco make horror even more widely available. Many distribution companies started out in video, such as Vestron, which started out by releasing films such as *House on the Edge of the Park* on VHS. Hollywood studios followed suit, financing the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* franchises and bankrolling a score of Stephen King adaptations. There was also a dramatic increase in specialist festivals, such as those of Sitges, Avoriaz, Porto, and Brussels (see Chapter 3). These festivals became instrumental in extending the reach of the cult of horror and giving it a historical grounding through the re-appraisal of older horror films (thus appropriating much of the genre's legacy into the cult, without much distinction in terms of quality, as the newfound cult appeal of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* testifies). Fanzines such as *Fangoria*, *Gorezone*, and *Halls of Horror* became hugely popular, partly as outlets that defended the cult of horror against its detractors (especially policymakers anxious to regulate the video market), but also as platforms on which distinctions within the cult of horror would be explored. Ian Conrich observes how disagreements between fans of monster characters such as Michael Myers (*Halloween*), Freddy Krueger (*Nightmare on Elm Street*) and Jason Voorhees (*Friday the 13th*) would be fought out in the same magazines that promoted the cult of horror, and how this combination of discourses is a sign of the cult-ness of all horror of the time (Conrich 1997, 2000). Similarly, Kate Egan (2007: 106–109) notes how a newcomer fanzine such as *The Dark Side* would place itself and its readers in opposition to other fanzines (such as *Fangoria*), thus establishing what she calls a "reader/editor collective."

Fan publications also promoted interest in aspects of production culture previously under-appreciated. The most important of these was the craft of special effects. Within the cult of horror special effects became the most celebrated production value, a logical consequence of the cult's investment in explicit depictions of injuries and bodily mutilations. Their elaborate effects made films such as *Suspiria*, *Scanners*, *The Beyond* or the remake of *The Thing* objects of cult fascination. Make-up and creature artists such as Tom Savini, Rob Bottin, Dick Smith, or Chris Walas became heroes of the cult of horror (Mathijs 2010c). The cult of horror furthermore extended into areas usually unaffected by cultism, such as academic scholarship. Spurred on by fanzines' aesthetic vanguardism scholars and critics started to bestow auteurist interpretations upon

directors such as Argento, Cronenberg, Craven, or Romero. In 1979, the festival of Toronto was among the first to hold a horror-film retrospective (during which directors debated scholars). Soon, other festivals followed suit. By the middle of the 1980s academic presses were printing scholarly essays and books on the "new horror film" (Grant 1984; Brophy 1986).

By the second half of the 1980s, sequels, remakes, television spin-offs, and highly mannerist exercises in gore began to overshadow the subcultural and countercultural aspects of the cult of horror. Extremely violent and highly intertexual homages such as *Re-Animator*, *Return of the Living Dead* or *The Hitcher* continued to attract cultist receptions, as did attempts to re-radicalize the politics of the cult of horror through films such as *Hellraiser* or *Nekromantik*. But by the beginning of the 1990s the cult of horror had largely dissipated across numerous niches and subgenres, such as zombie horror, voodoo horror, body horror, giallo horror, Euro trash, serial killer and slasher horror, neo-gothic horror and postmodern pastiches of horror, some of which, such as *Edward Scissorhands* and *Man Bites Dog*, would *still* find cult followings.

The impact of the cult of horror continues to skew debates. Its ferocious appropriation of the history of the genre has made it difficult to assess the cultural contexts of cult horror prior to the 1970s. Its long tail of sequels, remakes, pastiches, and re-imaginations has added an emphasis on reflexivity to cult horror discussions (as we will see further on), but also an impression that it is virtually impossible to escape the framework of the cult of horror even after it passed its prime.

Cult Monsters

In between a perspective that sees cult horror as a subgenre engulfing part of the horror genre, and one that sees cult horror as one specific moment in the history of both cultism and the horror genre, lies an angle that attempts to pinpoint modes of operation and reception that the horror genre and cultism share, and which would explain why certain horror films gain cult reputations and some do not. The issue in identifying these modes is less one of aesthetic or cultural analysis, and more one of isolating the uses viewers make of opportunities offered to them by the practices (of films) that give them the chance to identify a film as cult horror. Sometimes, the study of these uses and practices offers only acquaintance-knowledge, but occasionally it offers deep insights in the kinds of processes that equip certain horror films with (degrees of) cult reputations. We will start with uses and practices that are usually more closely associated with the textual properties of films, namely modes of monstrosity, and modes of reflexivity and hybridity, and then move on towards more reception-oriented ones.

One of the defining traits across all instances of cult horror is the attention that fans and critics give to its monsters. Visit any horror fan convention or festival and invariably the monsters achieve most of the attention and praise. Cosplay and costume dress parties accentuate that appeal in very visible ways. There is a lot of mileage in discussing particular instances of representations of monstrosity and the specific cult reputations they achieve separately, especially since over the decades there have been wildly different responses to them, which have often been linked to either specific aesthetic innovations or particular cultural anxieties. Examples of the first instance are the cult appeal of the acting performances of Lon Chaney ("the man of a thousand faces"), whose portrayals of disfiguration and madness in films such as *Phantom of the Opera*, *The Unknown* and *London after Midnight* caused furor (Havis 2008: 6–8), and the cult reputation of a film such as *I Walked with a Zombie* that did not contain a marketable monster, and that was almost void of explicit violence, showcasing instead long, dreamlike and silent passages with lyrical background ambiance rife with sexual suggestion (Havis 2008: 26–28). Examples of the second instance are the cultist adoration for dehumanized creature monsters such as those in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Godzilla* or *Them!* as symbols of social fears and reflections of Cold War anxieties and xenophobia (Hentzi 1993; Jancovich 1996), or the cult appeal for depictions of monstrosity such as those in *Videodrome*, *Man bites Dog*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Ringu*, or *Paranormal Activity* that focus on the complicity of audiovisual media, especially user-friendly video cameras, in determining what exactly constitutes a monster. As Brigid Cherry (2010: 185–199) points out, the marketing of these films via social network media that rely on roughly the

same technologies as the ones on display in the films appears to make the very consumption of these films an accomplice in the processes of representation they are critiquing.

While such monster-specific interpretations certainly help explain specific cult receptions, it is equally useful to look at what holds all of these appeals together, and to investigate which kinds of processes underlie all modes of use and practice involving monsters that lead to assignations of cult for horror films. Generally speaking, there are six kinds of monsters that are regarded as significant in triggering cult reputations: "creatures," "werewolves," vampires," "serial killers," "zombies," and "the media." What all of these share in their monstrosity is that they desire to consume humans. They literally threaten the disintegration of the human body through anthropophagy – the act of being devoured by another human body. As we saw in Chapter 9, it has frequently been argued that such moments of abjection – instances of violent penetration *and* metaphors for sexual penetration – are key to any cult reputation of movies. What we would like to add with regard to their occurrence in horror films is that the way in which the consumption of humans is portrayed by monsters – for instance through the biting of humans by vampires, zombies, or werewolves or the "sliming" of humans by creatures –makes the act of devouring humans the center of attention in the uses and practices that lead to cult horror reputations. It becomes the dominant mode, cue, or clue around which cult status is organized. We noted in Chapter 1 how cult receptions are often arranged around contentious nodes of extrinsic and intrinsic references. "Consumption of humans" is one such node, of overriding importance.

This is most infamously the case with a slate of Italian mondo films that depict or suggest cannibalism quite directly. The most notorious of these is *Anthropophagus*. It features a scene in which a serial killer strangles a pregnant woman, pulls the fetus (actually a skinned rabbit) out of her womb and devours it. The scene landed the film on the "video nasties" list (Egan 2007). It also fueled speculations that the film was a snuff movie. This controversy greatly aided its cult reputation. A number of cannibal-mondo films, such as *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Cannibal Ferox*, have become renowned for their radicalism in special effects (which are unusually convincing for films with such small budgets) (Goodall 2006).

Even in less radical form the trope of consumption of humans tends to dominate modes of practice and use – it simply cannot be pushed to the side of a story without viewers picking up on it and making it the centerpiece of interpretation. The cannibalistic motive in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* overruns several other tropes of violence, disability, and sexual violence in the film, and, as Brottman (1997) shows, in doing so it pushes to the fore an interpretation of the film as a criticism of how industrial modes of production push rural communities out of business and into abjection – an interpretation that even achieves portraying the violent family as victims of progress. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* has become paradigmatic in setting the tone for such interpretations. Similar considerations have also affected the cult receptions of *The Tenderness of the Wolves*, *The Cannibal Man*, and *The Fan*, to give a few examples that demonstrate that this is not a region-specific mode of usage – even if it can be explained as such (Hantke 2005; Mathijs 2006).

A motive that often occurs in connection with the consumption of humans is that of the serial killer. Mark Seltzer (1998) discusses how serial killers negotiate (or fail to negotiate) a "leaky self" through the possession and consumption of humans. In doing so, Seltzer shows how the phenomenon of the serial killer – and the public's fascination with it – needs to be seen in the wider context of the perception of the public sphere as pathological, dominated by the development of impersonal and inhumane "machine violence" unleashed by industrialization. Seltzer notes how serial killers move in the margins of such developments – on the borders of rural and urban centers, dependent on systems such as assembly-line labor, fast-food chains and postal systems that are simultaneously modern and outdated. Brian Jarvis (2007) makes the link between consumption, serial killers, and cannibalism more overtly, and stresses how it affected the ways in which the *Hannibal* films, *Se7en*, and *American Psycho* were read by audiences, and how these readings led to the cultification of these films. In his analysis of German serial killers' American reputation, Steffen Hantke (2005) develops a similar argument. Much of the cult reception of *The Hitcher*, too, focuses on the parallel

between fast food (a burger) and cannibalism (a finger in the burger), both of which it cleverly links to the mutilations of bodies through torture.

Various instances of cult horror demonstrate how uses and practices of the mode of consuming the human body can be widened to include self-consumption, media consumption and capitalist consumption (and even greed), and the parallels between these (Guerrero 1990; Mathijs 2003b; MacKinnon 2005). For some critics such practices and uses amount to tangents and conjectures rather than insights. But the backgrounds of distinction, taste, and connectedness against which these uses and practices operate are instrumental for how cult reputations are arrived at. To put it bluntly, *even* if an interpretation of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* as a metaphor for AIDS would be incorrect epistemologically, the very existence of such interpretations, and indeed their prevalence, is evidence of how discourses surrounding certain horror films are cultified – affected by processes that draw them into connections and link them with beliefs that become true through the very fact that they are made and defended. Such practices and uses have influenced – for instance – interpretations of *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead* (Heffernan 2004; Loudermilk 2003), and helped them achieve cult status. Similarly, they have helped werewolf movies such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* become a cult (Jancovich 1996); and they have aided the cult reputations of vampire films such as *Near Dark* (Powell 1994).

There are numerous complications affecting the mode of the monster's consumption of humans – for instance the degree of humanity a monster is given. Often, monsters are given human-like emotions, or made to look romantic, lonesome, and tragic rather than merely menacing. Such complications can feed or obstruct the processes described above. It is also worth noting that processes pushing a mode of practice and use occasionally wear off, or become hyperbolically reflexive or even parodic. This happened in the wake of films such as *Twilight* and *Shaun of the Dead* and books such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Grahame-Smith 2009). In such instances, however, processes of determining the degree of cult of a horror film move into a different frame of reference, namely reflexivity and/or hybridity.

Reflexivity and Hybridity

A second mode of uses and practices governing the degree of cultism assigned to horror films that we want to single out concerns reflexivity and hybridity – or the self-conscious ways in which horror films that comment upon their own status as horror plays a role in the kind of cult appeal they have.

The point of departure here is that horror films obtain and maintain cult reputations by stretching and bending categories and by alerting audiences that they are doing this. Sometimes it seems such stretching and bending is merely a form of going against expectations. Vampire and werewolf subgenres, for instance, go through cycles of stagnation and innovation, with cult status bestowed upon films interrupting the flow of development – *Rape of the Vampire* and *Ginger Snaps* are two cases in point. It is important to note that the vitality of discourses surrounding these perceptions of interruption is more important to the cult reputations of the films than the degree of accuracy they contain. In other words, there only needs to be a discussion about how and if films are effectively rupturing the flow of development, but that discussion does not require either a resolution or indeed a change in assessment in comparison to prior discussions. Argento and Fulci's films remained associated with the giallo even after they had moved away from it, and their increasingly uneasy relationship with the giallo enhanced their cult status. Similarly, the *Friday the 13th* series remained for many cultists *the* totemic slasher franchise, even after it had started incorporating supernatural elements – and even crossed over into the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise with *Freddy vs. Jason* (Hills 2007). The *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise, on the other hand, increased its cult potential by overloading its sequels *Freddy's Revenge* and *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* with queer subtexts or self-reflexivity (Benshoff 1997: 246–249). Equally, films such as *Snuff*, *Faces of Death*, and *Gimme Shelter* are forever fenced together as "snuff" even if their differences outrank their similarities, and the evasiveness of the very category snuff adds to their cult status.

At the same time as stressing their contested place within microscopic niches, most critics also note the generic hybridity of horror films known as cult.

While conforming to standards of subgenres and factions within the genre the cult horror film also appears to cross over between these subdivisions. This is best illustrated by what Joan Hawkins (2000) calls "art-horror," namely films produced and received as art-cinema *as well as* genre cinema. In many cases, the term art-horror relates to the inability of – mostly non-American – films with features of the horror genre to fit within existing routines of marketing, distribution, and reviewing.[3] Their isolated appearance in the market greatly reduces, and sometimes eliminates, the canvassing functions of these routines, giving audiences "unprepared" and "direct" access to the movies, thereby enhancing their chances of attracting uses and practices that show characteristics of cult receptions. Examples of art-horror go back to the very beginnings of horror. In the immediate wake of *Caligari* several European films with expressionist styles and horrific themes received cult reputations. *Nosferatu: Symphonie des Grauens* and *Häxan* attracted special attention for pushing boundaries in representing the macabre (their characters Dracula and Satan were deemed particularly grotesque), for their explicit sexuality and cruelty, and for their strong suggestions that evil was grounded in nature at large. The surrealists adored *Nosferatu* and *Häxan*. Because each of these films also played fast and loose with their source materials, controversies quickly arose, leading to bans, cuts, and confusions over final versions of the films. This only added to their cult appeal (French and French 1999: 151; Hammond 2000: 154; Stevenson 2006).

Hawkins further isolates film such as *Freaks*, *Eyes without a Face*, and some films by Paul Morrissey and Jess Franco, as key examples of mixes of horror and the avant-garde. *Freaks*, in particular, refused to be pigeonholed. Its seemingly classic story-within-a-story portrayal of a troupe of circus "freaks" enacting revenge upon their bullies caused outrage, inverted so many production standards, and was so politically volatile that it caused a controversy that led to numerous bans, until a rediscovery as a midnight movie at the end of the 1990s. *Freaks* went further than all other horror films of the time (and many years later) by distributing aspects of physical monstrosity across virtually all characters in the film and challenging the audience to decide for themselves if any of the ensuing violence can be justified.

As Kevin Heffernan (2004, 2007) observes, Mario Bava's films *Black Sunday* and *Lisa and the Devil*, and Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* also cross over between various subdivisions of the horror genre. This made it much more of a challenge to market them. It also proved a hurdle for reviewers, who often dismissed them. As a result, these films gave the impression they happened upon audiences, which further aided their cult reputations. A similar hybridity affects the status of films such as *Baise-moi* or *Salò*, which in spite of protest by critics are co-opted into cult horror because of their extreme imagery and taboo-breaking themes. In some instances, this hybridity has been used as a conscious strategy by filmmakers, to help films stand out from the rest of the market. A good example of this is *Daughters of Darkness*, whose cult reputation comes from being repeatedly labeled the most artistic vampire film (Everman 1993: 68–71; Mathijs 2005b).

Cult horror is further known for its extreme relationship to reflexivity, a mechanism associated with hybridity. It has been abundantly argued that reflexivity is a staple characteristic of horror that comes with the high degree of formulaic-ness and genre-mixing found in the genre (Wood 1979; Brophy 1986). In general, a horror film is more likely to be received as cult when it digresses from the contemporary degree of reflexivity. Cult horror is therefore usually either highly reflexive, or has a very low degree of reflexivity. In the latter case the emphasis is instead on the realism or directness of the horror – which amplifies the impression that the film is breaking taboos. It invites receptions of the film as even more shocking. Examples include the early receptions of *Night of the Living Dead* and *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*. These films do include reflexive moments (think of the camcorder scene in *Henry*) but such instances were ignored in receptions that saw the films as shockingly realistic. High reflexivity is often regarded as a key characteristic of sequels, prequels, spoofs, remakes, and franchise features. The quintessential example here is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, whose reflexivity is so recognizable that the film ceases to be seen as horror at all. Other examples include *Return of the Living Dead*, *Man bites Dog*, and *Tesis*. In many cases, discussions about the cult status of a horror film revolve around the degrees of reflexivity that can be attributed to it, at various points during the

reception trajectory of the film. Janet Staiger found, for instance, that many of her students viewed *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as a highly reflexive film, even treating it as homage to *Psycho*, whereas earlier receptions had treated it as a misogynist and insensitive critique of changing labor relations in rural America. As Staiger concludes, both receptions are not in opposition with each other. Instead, they typify the cult status of *Chainsaw*'s status, with the reflexivity acting as a *mediator* of the initially strongly received offensiveness of the movie (Staiger 2000: 179–187).

Reflexivity is applied in cult horror films in two major ways: as a framing of the narrative as a story-within-a-story, and as the presence of media reflecting on media. Examples of the first, which found its ways into the horror genre from *Caligari*, include *Freaks*, *Snuff*, and *Cannibal Holocaust*. Early examples of reflexivity through the presence of media include the film crew in *King Kong*, and a late-night bill of cheap movies in *The Blob* (Kawin 1992: 247–253; French and French 1999: 36). Frequently, cult horror films combine framing with media reflexivity. A good example of an in-depth exploration of this combination is *Videodrome*. Its cult reputation is largely dependent upon its reception as a treatise on reflexivity and media (Lucas 2008). At its broadest, reflexivity features the use of clichéd characters or the use of cameo roles, such as Barbara Steele in *Piranha* or *Shivers*. At its most specific – and most challenging – it features the use of objects planted for detection by committed fans. Masks and chainsaws are among the most totemic props.

Cult Horror Receptions

In conclusion we will look at some of the reception uses and practices that govern the labeling of horror films as cult. As the above discussions demonstrate, the role of the audience in determining the cult status of horror films is high, even in efforts that only want to consider cult horror through its textual properties.

Above all, cult horror receptions are noisy. The release of horror movies that go on to develop cult appeal is often met with outrage and controversies, be it for their crude depictions of monstrosity or their threatening, absurdist, or nihilist atmospheres. This has been the case from *Caligari* over *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to *Ichi the Killer* (Budd 1990; Peary 1981; Mes 2004). Such aversion is in no small way helped by the fact that horror cinema in general remains reviled by moral majorities, eschewed by policymakers, and dismissed by critics. Partly in reaction to this, fans' appreciations of horror have become more exclamatory and superlative. There is a historical distinction here that needs to be addressed. Until the 1970s, this procedure of adversity, often followed by rallies to a film's defense, was a major mechanism through which horror films achieved cult status. It gave fans the chance to proliferate themselves as a subculture, with its own taste formations and canons independent of the impositions of mainstream culture. With the acceleration that became known as the "cult of horror" in the 1970s and 1980s, however, and in the wake of the far-reaching controversy over video nasties (see Egan 2007), these reactions and subversive attitudes became so entrenched that they led to a systematized cultism that no longer existed uniquely in a playful opposition to mainstream culture, but that also acted as a counter culture that held up a mirror to hypocrisies in society – especially those regarding moral panics, gender struggles, and xenophobic fears. The economic viability of the cult of horror also meant cultist appreciation of horror could function on itself, separate from the mainstream, which it did not need anymore. Before long, however, the same mechanisms that had once separated cult horror from mainstream horror were being replicated *within* the cult of horror, with subgenres and subdivisions pitched against each other as much as in reaction to objections and moral panics from outside horror culture. To some extent this means that cult horror receptions mimic receptions of genre, and that issues of "purity" and distinctions between "hardcore" and "pseudo" fans – distinctions between center and periphery in other words – continue to be performed on the smallest possible levels of mirco-cultism. The loud rhetoric used by fans to separate "gore" and splatter from each other is a good indication.

Secondly, and as a consequence, cult horror receptions refuse to disappear. After their initial noisy receptions, subsequent generations of fans reassess and celebrate the cult status, either by highlighting its formal qualities in defense of any reactionary criticisms, or by isolating newly found subtexts with

political and cultural significance. The fact that cult receptions remain volatile for long periods of time aids such re-evaluations. Re-releases for niche markets and retrospectives at festivals accompany them. For instance, around the time when the midnight movie phenomenon started gaining momentum thanks to *Night of the Living Dead*, *Freaks* and *Häxan* were also being re-released. About a decade later, New Line Cinema, which had its finger on the pulse of campus cults, captured the rights to redistributing *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, exactly at a time when these films were being recognized as inspirations for the cult of horror.

The endurance of cult horror's receptions ultimately enables canonization, and the referencing of these films' iconography as homage in newer horror films. Again, it was at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s that significant accelerations in this process occurred. The popularity of horror in the burgeoning video market, but also the birth of numerous horror festivals, helped establish mechanisms for continued reassessment that immortalized numerous cult horror films. Television, too, helped a great deal to sustain cult reputations. Decades after their initial releases many of the 1950s creature movies saw their cult status reinforced as a result of late-night cable television programming. For American audiences, the show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (or MST3K) became instrumental in resurrecting horror exploitation from the vaults and reintroducing it to new generations of fans. MST3K hosts provided voice-over commentaries of the films, mocking them for their badness while praising their audacity. Before long, "MST3K" became a marker for the cult reputations of 1950s and 1960s exploitation horror.

Thirdly, horror cultism is very recognizable, because of the steadfastness of its symbols, and the visibility this gives to its fandom. Cult monsters, an important set of symbols, are instantly identifiable. Vampires, werewolves, mad doctors, phantoms, zombies, serial killers, giant bugs, and knife, razorblade, and chainsaw wielding maniacs like Freddy, Jason, Michael Myers, and Leatherface have spearheaded an array of monster designs easily marked by a small number of defining accessories such as fangs, fur, or masks. In other words, there are fixed templates for most cult horror monsters, most of which received a set identity – and matching talents and looks – before the 1960s. These templates have also given cult horror fandom a high visibility, not only in illustrations in fanzines but also at conventions, festivals, fan gatherings, or rereleases, where costumes, accessories, and paraphernalia mimicking favored monsters are celebrated through dress-up contests and vampire balls (Van Extergem 2004; Hills 2010b), and even within popular culture in general, where these monsters and their iconography have received shorthand recognition (if not always respectability). In general, cult receptions are more strongly associated with horror films that have established templates for monsters (the original *Frankenstein*), or that have deviated ostensibly from such templates (*I Walked with a Zombie*, or *The Bride of Frankenstein*, especially in its representation of "the bride"). Once more, the period of the cult of horror changed the parameters of this recognizability, as horror films that took chances in renewing the iconography became attractors for cult appreciation (Nakahara 2010). Films such as *Martin* and *The Brood* owe a great deal of their cult reputation to the ambiguity that was the result of blurring representations of monstrosity with realistic features. This left the original Universal horror films with the respectful status of "elders of the tribe" – a respect that is neatly illustrated by the enduring appeal of the label "Universal horror," an admiration for the original actors (Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, Elsa Lanchester), and an absolute reverence for "original Frankenstein" or "original Dracula" dresses at costumed galas at festival and conventions (Van Extergem 2004). Ironically, the enduring cult reputation of the original monsters had the effect that many of the films in which they appeared are now excluded from cult horror overviews, often with the excuse they are too popular.

Finally, horror cultism has a distinct ritual quality – a tradition of repetitiveness that has clichés eagerly anticipated and loudly cheered, but that also has a distinct thrill of "newness." This is exemplified in cultist reception traditions such as the "initiation viewing" experience, "sleepover scary movie" traditions, and "midnight" events. The cult status of films such as *Last House on the Left*, *I Spit on your Grave*, *Cannibal Holocaust*, *The Evil Dead*, and *Ringu* depends on the sustained re-establishment of such instances across generations of horror viewers. This repetitiveness has

led researchers and policymakers to express concern over the effects of repeatedly watching horror. Rape-revenge movies and mondo films in particular have consistently been under scrutiny for allegedly promoting misogyny, misanthropy, and violence. So have films whose viewing has been associated with violent crimes (such as *Child's Play III*) (Hill 1997; Goodall 2006; Mathijs and Mendik 2008a: 371–372). In his overview of horror theories, Matt Hills (2005) challenges this form of criticism profoundly. Andrew Tudor (1989: 212) argues that to blame horror films for violence in society would be "pernicious scapegoating, since . . . we simply do not live in a world in which discrete cultural experiences have dramatic measurable effects. We live, rather, in elaborate interlocking systems, the elements of which are in constant interaction." The latter part of Tudor's reasoning stresses exactly the function repetition has played in cult horror. The repetitiveness of its receptions has enhanced the recognizability and, therefore, cultural sedimentation and canonization of sub- and countercultural viewing strategies of cult horror into near-mainstream practices, perpetually enhancing opportunities for an enduring visibility of cult horror. A good example of this is the cross-generational passing on of the cult of horror. As the editors of *Cineaste* put it in 2009: "The illicit thrill of the macabre unites the generations weaned on *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine and pre-cable telecasts of the legendary Universal pictures of the Thirties with the generation that grew up on *Fangoria* and DVDs of Michael, Jason, and Freddy" (*Cineaste* 2009: 1). Through mechanisms associated with repetition, cult horror amplifies both the potential for desensitizing effects and the ability to take charge of complicated networks of meaning across generations.

Notes

1. The fast-changing nature of many of these sites and online presences makes it difficult to single out examples, but here are a few: monstersatplay.com (accessed July 26, 2010), the online debate on cult horror movies hosted at helium.com (accessed July 26, 2010).
2. See, for instance, books by Curci (1996), Schoell (1985), Godin (1994), and Balun (1992).
3. We acknowledge there is a competing use of the term art-horror, as proposed by Noel Carroll (1990). Because Carroll's discussion of art-horror refers exclusively to textual properties and is geared more towards a systematic understanding of the aesthetics of horror, we do not include it in our debate here.

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Cult Science Fiction Cinema

Along with the horror film, science fiction cinema is a genre that has often been closely connected to cult cinema. Rather than delve too deeply into the quite complex issues related to definitions of the science fiction film, we will here include films that have largely been received as science fiction texts (although it is not always the case that films are categorized within one particular generic framework). We will nevertheless emphasize a few important traits that have distinguished science fiction as a distinctive genre before moving on to more specifically cult-related issues. Science fiction is commonly associated with speculative fiction based around current scientific theories and/or technologies; it is concerned with themes including space exploration, time travel, alien encounters, and humans' relationships with machines. It can also be concerned with questions about what it is to be human (Telotte 1995) or attempts to reconcile man with the unknown (Sobchack 2001: 63).

The first part of this chapter will also treat fantasy as a related genre, especially with regard to the public presence of both science fiction and fantasy. Even though fantasy has sometimes been distinguished from science fiction in the sense that the former deals with impossible worlds while the latter deals with possible worlds (Grant 1999: 17), they nevertheless share a number of overlaps, not just on a textual level (their status as speculative fiction) but also on the broader cultural level (many awards ceremonies, festivals, and fan conventions will cover science fiction and fantasy). We will further address some of the other elements of fantasy in Chapter 20, when we analyze the story worlds of blockbusters.

Dedicated Followers

Science fiction and fantasy have become heavily associated with dedicated followings by a number of fans, perhaps more so than any other genre (with the possible exception of horror). While fandom in general is covered in Chapter 5 (with references to *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*), it is necessary to add some details of the relation between science fiction and fandom here. While our focus is on cult film, science fiction is nevertheless a genre that has given rise to fandom across other media platforms, including fiction, comic art, gaming, and television, and these sometimes overlap. Joe Sanders has noted that English-language science fiction fans had organized into communities by the 1930s, creating networks with their own publications, social norms and vocabularies (cited in Karpovich 2007: 7). Publishing ventures among science fiction fans led to the development of a number of fanzines, and then to the establishment of conventions, both of which emerged in the 1930s (Hansen 1994; Bacon-Smith 2000: 12). Today a large number of science fiction conventions exist, including those that address the genre across different media (such as the *Worldcon*, which started as a literary convention but has broadened to encompass other media), or those that are based around a particular media platform (such as the network of European Fantastic Film Festivals discussed in Chapter 3). There are also those which address a specific title, such as *Star Wars* conventions (e.g. *Star Wars Celebration Europe*), and some revolving around a particular segment of science fiction fandom

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(such as *Wiscon*, a festival devoted to feminist issues within the genre).

Conventions and fanzines have long provided visible manifestations of science fiction fandom: the former in allowing fans from different areas to convene in a common location to attend events and converse, the latter in providing a platform for fan expression and knowledge (see Chapters 4 and 5). The large amount of fanzines related to science fiction have been supplemented by a number of more "professional" magazines, whose market presence also testifies to a dedicated fan base wanting to gain information and opinion related to the genre. Fanzines have been produced regularly within the science fiction community and have often included content such as articles, reviews, fan art and letters. In their dissemination of knowledge and opinion they have demonstrated a passionate commitment to the expression and sharing of expertise. As Michelle Pierson has argued in discussing the fanzine *Photon* (devoted to the "fantastic" film and running between 1963–1977): "Cultures of connoisseurship and fandom cultivate an attentional complex in which it not only becomes important to 'pay attention' at the movies but also to attend to discussion and evaluation after the fact" (Pearson 2002: 71–72). The sense in which many science fiction and fantasy fans have not only treated cultural objects with avid seriousness, but have done so within a generic area that has traditionally been held in low esteem by the critical establishment, has heightened the cult aura sometimes attached to this broad and loose community. As Tulloch and Jenkins have pointed out, science fiction fans have often been "pathologized" within mainstream media and the academy (1995: 10–18). This can lead to the strengthening of bonds between like-minded fans, though this should not disguise the fact that many subgroups exist within the science fiction fan community.

One important area in which science fiction (SF) cinema has gained close fan scrutiny is the field of special effects. Within formal critical circles special effects have often been dismissed or overlooked as filmic moments less central than more conventional critical topics such as narrative, drama, and character development. Within serious SF and fantasy publications, such as *Photon* and *Cinefantastique* (1967–2006), however, there developed a close analysis and appreciation of special effects work. Out of this, visual effects creators could gain a reputation; one of the most prominent in the history of science fiction and fantasy cinema has been Ray Harryhausen, who even had a fanzine devoted to him (*FHX*, which ran for four issues between 1971 and 1974). Other notable effects creators who have contributed distinctive work to SF films include Dennis Muren (who co-directed monster movie *Equinox* before supervising the miniature special effects for *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park*), John Dykstra (who worked most notably on *Star Wars*), Douglas Trumbull (*2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) and Stan Winston (*Aliens*, *Predator*). Much of the close scrutiny of visual effects among segments of fan communities would eventually feed into an increasing tendency (both within academia and, to a lesser extent, among critics) to treat special effects work as a serious aesthetic realm in its own right. Such attention has grown in tandem with both the movement of SF cinema towards a more central position within mainstream cinema production, and an increasing respectability for the genre (which still, nevertheless, sometimes carries with it the taint of disreputability).

Even as science fiction filmmaking has become a more prominent staple of mainstream cinema since the 1980s, fans can still play a crucial role in maintaining a cult following by distinguishing their understanding and appreciation of the text from those more "mainstream" elements which tend to be associated with consumerism and which are perceived as catering to a more general audience. As Nathan Hunt has argued in analyzing the reception of *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* within the fan-oriented magazine *SFX*, fans could create ownership of the film "through supposedly superior textual and extra textual knowledge of the film, and this ownership was itself used to distinguish the magazine's appreciation of the film from that of mainstream publications" (Hunt 2003: 190–191). A text can thus become the site of both mainstream success and enjoyment, yet still retain a cult following through a more particular following by fans utilizing trivia and connoisseurship to distinguish their appreciation from more "general" pleasures. On a more obvious level, some SF films can accrue cult value through a clear identity outside of the mainstream in terms of their budget and box office, by gaining smaller

followings from people who may claim that such films offer greater intellectual and/or emotional rewards than their mainstream generic counterparts.

One particular field in which fans have been able to proudly proclaim their obsessive knowledge and expertise is in relation to Japanese *anime* science fiction, which has gained particular cult followings in America and Europe. Anime in general has given rise to large numbers of specialist clubs, fanzines and networks devoted to the mode, with many fans trading information and materials. Science fiction anime films are a particularly significant component of this mode of production. *Akira* generated a particular cult following and triggered an international fan base for the medium, despite the fact that it was a commercial flop on its original release in Japan. *Ghost in the Shell* is another notable cult sci-fi anime entry, a cyberpunk adaptation of Masamune Shirow's manga which also spawned a sequel with a cult reputation, *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (for more on anime and its fans see Chapter 11).

The possession of expertise and the participation in fan-based activities can also extend to the production of "fan art," which includes fiction, paintings, songs, and other related creative artifacts. Of particular importance to this chapter is the increase in fan films, which often use favored texts as springboards from which to spin new fictions. These films are very much cult-flavored in that they are not only (often) expressions of love for a particular film, but are also made for a like-minded community. Fan films, which according to Gwenllian Jones have existed since the early 1970s, tend to be shown at private gatherings, conventions and, more recently, online (2002: 169). Online distribution of fan films – in line with the increased access to film production via relatively affordable digital filmmaking tools – has increased the previously limited networks by which such films gained exposure. Henry Jenkins (2003) has argued that the Web "has made it possible for alternative media productions of all kinds to gain greater visibility and to move beyond localized publics into much broader circulation." While online fan films remain largely seen by other fans, some can cross over to a broader audience through the buzz surrounding them on the Web. Films that do this are cults not merely in their relation to a source text (or texts) and dissemination amongst a community, but also through gaining their own cult followings as "small" films that gain enthusiastic audiences principally via word-of-mouth. Two particularly notable fan films that have achieved this status are the *Star Wars* fan films *Troops* and *George Lucas in Love*. Both films employ intertextuality in order to create parodic effects: *Troops* mixes *Star Wars* with references to the television documentary *Cops* in order to create "an ironic explanation for events that remain enigmatic in the original film" (Brooker 2002: 185), while *George Lucas in Love* mixes parts of Lucas's biographical history with *Shakespeare in Love* in humorously speculating on the creative origins of *Star Wars*. The success of both films led to Kevin Rubio and Joe Nussbaum entering the industry and working in a "professional" capacity, a process that, according to Will Brooker, many fans aspire to, thereby conceiving of their films as "calling cards and potential springboards to careers in the movie industry" (Brooker 2002: 175). Thus, although the science fiction community constitutes the core audience for such films, this community is never hermetically sealed from the broader culture and can feed into it in important ways. A mainstream film such as *Galaxy Quest* takes the fan adoration for science fiction as the core point of its narrative – with *Alien*'s Sigourney Weaver reprising her role as the strong female astronaut (a role she also resumes in *Avatar*).

Pulp Fictions

While many science fiction films were made previous to the 1950s, their actual status as science fiction is sometimes debatable as they would not have been termed as such at the time; thus Christine Cornea labels such pre-1950s films "proto science fiction" (2007: 9). The 1950s witnessed the first real "boom" in SF film production, particularly in the United States, where it tended to have a reputation as a "lowbrow" genre. Many such productions were low-budget pictures, though there were exceptions to this: medium and larger budgeted science fiction pictures – such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *The War of the Worlds*, and *Forbidden Planet* – were produced by the studios, for example. On the main, however, such productions were generally expensive risks for the studios. Low-budget science fiction pictures, alongside horror pictures, could often count on an eager teenage

audience and proved a more reliable source of revenue (Doherty 2002: 118–119). It is because this first sustained wave of science fiction films was generally associated with negative qualities – low budgets, cheap sets and effects work, wooden acting – that a number of films which emerged from it have come to be loved as cult objects. Much of the cult attachment to these films, then, is connected to celebration of enjoyably "bad" films, a phenomenon which is covered more fully in Chapters 3 and 8.

Enjoying "bad" science fiction films from the 1950s can be attributed to a number of factors. Obviously, the idea of celebrating marginal products condemned by the mainstream may well be one crucial factor: it is, for example, common for such films to be celebrated in a generally condescending manner, as texts that can be laughed at as opposed to culturally "worthy" objects (though there will be exceptions to this). Other factors may include the gulf between reality and fantasy that feeds into these films in particularly marked ways. A number of science fiction texts can be seen to revolve around a fantasy/reality axis, but in many of the cheap SF films of the 1950s this tension becomes overtly evident: it is inscribed upon the product not just on the level of content, but also economically. That is, attempts to create an audiovisual world of the imagination conflict with the financial realities of production, and in many films this gap between practical reality and imaginary fantasy is emphatically underscored by, in particular, cheap mise-en-scène and effects work. Hence the cult affection for films such as *The Giant Claw*, the Sam Katzman production in which a giant alien bird is realized through a rather clumsily controlled puppet; or for the now infamous *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, which marries its low-budget with emphatic incompetence, and by doing so has provided ironic pleasure for many. The affection for such low-budget SF fare may also be related to nostalgia: for a period when imagining the future was more quaint and innocent, or before science fiction had fully entered the mainstream and turned sophisticated and serious.

Both the above films' cult status is heightened by their relation to auteur figures (see Chapter 6), even if Ed Wood and Sam Katzman have gained a status for their incompetence and opportunism more than for their artistry as such. Other auteur figures can help to raise the profile of cheap SF films through being centrally involved in their productions. Roger Corman is one of the most notable examples here, helping to elevate the status of films such as *Day the World Ended* and *Attack of the Crab Monsters*. In the 1960s, however, Corman began to produce and direct slightly more ambitious movies that, while still modestly budgeted, gained more respect as serious works. Thus, in 1963 he made the acclaimed *X: The Man with the X-ray Eyes*, which starred Ray Milland as a scientist whose experiments led him to see through objects. Later, in 1975, he produced the cult SF satire *Death Race 2000*, which revolves around a race in which drivers run over pedestrians in order to gain points. Edgar G. Ulmer is another B-movie "auteur" who is judged to have created some distinctive films despite the rather paltry budgets he often worked with. Though more noted for his horror film *The Black Cat* and, in particular, his bare-budget noir *Detour*, he also produced a number of science fiction films including *The Man from Planet X*, *The Amazing Transparent Man*, and *Beyond the Time Barrier*. Unlike a figure such as Wood, both Corman and Ulmer have often been judged talented creative figures, particularly when the budgets of their films are taken into account. Thus, while Ulmer's science fiction films are not typically heralded as great works, moments from them can be extracted by critics and presented as evidence of his talent, which manages to make itself felt even when handling the most hackneyed material. For example, Erik Ulman writes of *Beyond the Time Barrier*:

> Ulmer uses the insistent triangles and inverted pyramids of the interior of Texas State Fairgrounds to invent consistently interesting compositions and environments. In addition, Allison's arrival at the ruined base is beautifully shot, and its genuine desolation creates an interesting contrast with the unreality of Allison's first view of the citadel. (Ulman 2003)

There are other low-budget SF films from this period that have gained a more canonic place within film culture but which nevertheless assumed such a position through first gaining attention in more cultish circles. One particularly notable example is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which began life as a drive-in movie and became, in the words of Michael Sragow, "one of

those tribal teenage totems . . . that got passed from town to town through pop cultural osmosis" (2008: 75). From such humble beginnings the film became an important entry into science fiction cinema, its status elevated in line with Siegel's subsequent auteur credentials and three remakes that are often unfavorably compared to the more modestly budgeted 1956 version (Philip Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Abel Ferrara's *Body Snatchers*, and Oliver Hirschbiegel's *The Invasion*).

Siegel's film concerns the story of human beings being replaced by aliens, who assume the outward appearance of the bodies they have colonized. It has been interpreted both as an anti-Communist parable *and* as a text critical of the red scare mentality pervasive during the Cold War climate when it was both produced and initially released. These "contradictory" interpretations are an important reason why the film gained cult status (Peary 1981: 157) and they point to how significant social events can often produce interpretive frameworks by which films are valued and contested. It is also the case that there is an ambiguity at the heart of the film: a textual indeterminacy that aids fan speculation and can be considered a contributory factor to its cult status. In addition to it being read as a Cold War parable, it can also open out to more general speculation that is not so rooted in a particular historical context. The themes of paranoia and conformism which run through the film, for example, can relate to a number of fears that individuals experience within variable social contexts, and these have arguably become more relevant in contemporary social life.

Science Fiction Spaces

One particular appeal of SF films is the creation of detailed environments that are strikingly different from those that we experience in our daily lives. As Vivian Sobchack has argued, science fiction enjoys "particular representational freedom as a genre of the fantastic" and "concretely 'real-izes' the imaginary and speculative in the visible spectacle of a concrete image" (1999: 124). The creation of imaginary spaces can lead to cultic followings through inducing a sense of wonder and leading to subsequent investigations of such spaces through re-readings, in which the detailed mise-en-scène excites "reflection or speculation about the diegetic reality and the text's underlying ideas" (Britton 2009: 344). As Matt Hills has written in relation to the cult response to *Blade Runner*: "Its hyperdetail also textually incites a desire to see more – to identify the mass of design objects jumbled within the frame; to catalogue and comprehend special effects sequences" (Hills 2011). The "hyperdetailed" worlds created by particular science fiction films may therefore engender a push-and-pull between being awed and overwhelmed by the audiovisual spectacle, and a mastering of that world in order to better understand how its magic is materially produced (Figure 19.1).



Figure 19.1 The "hyperdetailed" world of *Blade Runner*.

The dystopian space of the future is one of the most important types of alternative world-making within science fiction films, and characterizes a number of cult films emerging from the genre. One particular type of dystopian city is the "dark city," as outlined by Janet Staiger (1999), which characterizes a strain of science fiction filmmaking that intersects with film noir. Staiger argues that such films are also marked by a sense of postmodern conflation – that is, they incorporate motifs relating to the past, the present and the future – and decay (1999: 100). Perhaps most importantly, she notes that the darkness and generally chaotic design of many such filmic environments "permit labyrinthine cities where only overhead schematics provide a sense of orientation" (1999: 100), a point that relates to the idea of a "hyperdetailed" world. Further, Staiger also notes that science fiction films using dark cities are often critical of consumerist lifestyles: space in many such films is often presented as commodified (littered with advertising boards and screens, and corporate logos). Such broad social commentary may

also contribute to the cult status of some of these films, in that cult cinema has often (though not always) been connected to anti-establishment themes and appeals. Three films featuring "dark cities," which have also gained a substantial cult following are the aforementioned *Blade Runner*, *Brazil*, and *Dark City*. *Brazil* is set in a futuristic (or possibly alternate), Orwellian universe marked by clunky technology and a complex bureaucratic structure which leads to general chaos and inefficiency. Its status as a cult film was very much heightened by the tussles Gilliam had with Universal over its decision to release a truncated and lighter version of the film in the United States, and this was further heightened by a five-disc Criterion laserdisc release of the film, which featured two versions, documentaries and a host of other material (this was subsequently released on DVD). *Dark City* features a world that cannot be fully grasped because it is subject to alteration by a group of beings called The Strangers. The Strangers not only alter the environment, they also control the lives of the inhabitants of a city that is always dark because people fall unconscious during daytime. *Dark City* was also a film that suffered cuts and, partly in response to its cult following, was subsequently released on DVD in a "director's cut" version.

Many dystopian, hyperdetailed SF films have been linked by critics and commentators to *Metropolis*, a film that has gained a cult status for its seminal position within the history of science fiction cinema, and which could be considered a "canonical" cult film. While it has enjoyed a prestigious position within cinema as a whole (not just within the science fiction genre), it has accrued added cultic values through the following means: as a film that is often referenced within a large number of texts including films, television programs and music videos (in addition to its numerous mentions within reviews); as a film which many science fiction/fantasy followers feel the need to refer to and watch as a crucially important part of their generic heritage; and as an "incomplete" film that exists in a number of different versions. The version of the film which premiered in Berlin was considered too long and so edits were subsequently made for its theatrical release. Different versions have since proliferated, but more recently new footage was discovered in an archive in Argentina, leading to a restoration project and the creation of what many excited film buffs are anticipating as the "definitive" version. The film's mise-en-scène, in particular its effects work and architectural designs, continues to fascinate numerous viewers and filmmakers to this day and is undoubtedly a crucial factor that has led to its cult position.

For Sobchack, science fiction films can not only visualize the impossible or the speculative, they can also envisage things that exist yet which are beyond the confines of normal vision, such as elements that are too small or too distant:

> The SF film gives us images – even if manufactured – of the immense and the infinitesimal. Extrapolating from known and accepted science, these film images derive their power to induce wonder in the viewer not from the imaginativeness of their content, but from the imaginativeness of their stance and their scope. (Sobchack, 1999: 101)

The creation of such imaginative worlds can produce films which do indeed "induce wonder" in particular viewers, sometimes leading to repeat viewings and a desire to find out more about how these films were created. One such film is *Fantastic Voyage*, in which a team of specialists are shrunk in order to enter a scientist's brain and perform an operation. The film creates a speculative environment of an enlarged brain, through which characters have to navigate. This inner geography was created through miniatures, wirework, and light displays; the latter drew from the psychedelic light shows gaining popularity within countercultural environments and which were used in clubs and rock concerts.

An interesting cult film which provides a speculative insight into what could possibly lie beyond the confines of normal human vision is John Carpenter's *They Live*. In this film, construction worker George Nada (Roddy Piper) finds a box of sunglasses and, after taking a pair, finds that they enable him to see the world in new ways: subliminal messages on magazines and billboards are revealed (such as "obey," "consume," "marry and reproduce"), while he is also able to detect that a number of human beings are actually aliens in disguise. *They Live* also, crucially, provides a very blunt anti-consumerist, anti-authoritarian message which is a

frequent theme across a number of cult SF texts. Made in reaction to the Reagan administration that was in power at the time of production, the film allegorizes the conformist, consumer-driven ideology of Reaganism as an alien invasion which has succeeded through subliminal brainwashing techniques.

Other cult SF films notable for their creation of virtual spaces include *Tron*, which takes place inside of a video game and *eXistenZ*, which takes place within a virtual reality (VR) environment. *Tron*, though a flop at the time, has since become appreciated within specialist circles for its imaginative visual look but was considered too unusual at the time of release to be embraced by large audiences; while *eXistenZ* can be considered cult because of its director's broader cult standing.

Art/Independent Science Fiction

While we have mentioned how the low status of science fiction has often strengthened its cult pedigree, there are also a number of more serious and/or respected films that have been made within the genre "Art" films and/or films emerging from the low-budget, independent production sphere that may also gain cult status through various means. One such appeal, outlined by Cornea (2007: 74–102), is an appeal to countercultural sensibilities. She claims a cycle of "new art" science fiction films emerged in the wake of the success of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and that many of these films were influenced by a new wave of science fiction literature (including Michael Moorcock and J.G. Ballard). *2001* itself, while including a journey to outer space, also concerned the effects of such a journey upon consciousness, including experiential time-space disruptions, the inclusion of abstract effects, and ambiguous moments that led to a number of speculative interpretations. The film adhered more closely to conventions associated with "art house" cinema – such as its slow pace and its refusal to arrive at any neat conclusions – than it did to mainstream cinema, even though it was produced by a major studio on a significant budget. Kubrick is a director who has been recognized as creating an authorial art cinema from within the studios and this has enhanced his cult reputation. Two other SF films he made can also be considered cult films: *Dr Strangelove or: How I Stop Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* and *A Clockwork Orange*. The former transformed Peter George's novel *Red Alert* (1958) into a satirical romp and was embraced, in particular, by college audiences who enjoyed its absurd critique of Cold War politics. *A Clockwork Orange*'s cult value was heightened by its withdrawal from circulation in the UK by Kubrick himself, following reports of copycat violence in relation to the film. It could only be seen through illegal screenings and, later, through pirated video cassettes; it only became legally available in the UK for public viewing in 2000.

Another noteworthy cult SF art film released in the 1970s was Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, which starred David Bowie as an alien (Thomas Jerome Newton) visiting earth to set up a corporation so that he can fund the building of a rocket ship which can distribute water back to his drought-ridden planet. This story, however, increasingly fades into the background of a film which is more concerned with examining the mutual interactions between the alien and a few human characters. It is, as Justin Smith has written, an "example of an oblique, unorthodox take on the sci-fi genre" (2010: 146). The rather elliptical narrative and perplexing temporal transitions led to some critics dismissing the film when it was initially released, yet it has grown in status with age and through repeated viewings. The film's puzzle-like narrative and its lingering, poetic images fused with a consumerist critique in showing Newton's quest being undercut through succumbing to human vices such as alcoholism and media-addiction, the latter memorably visualized by a wall of TVs with which he surrounds himself. The cult status of the film is also enhanced by the inclusion of David Bowie, who appears in a role that gelled with his public persona at the time: an otherworldly and enigmatic presence.

A later film which shared *The Man Who Fell to Earth*'s focus on a human-looking alien attempting to adapt to life on earth is *The Brother from another Planet*. The alien, known as "Brother" (Joe Morton) is, like Newton, subject to the projections of the humans that he encounters in the film. As he is also mute, his identity is being constantly constructed by others throughout the film. As the film is set in Ellis Island – the official gateway for immigrants arriving in New York harbor

between 1892 and 1954 – and includes a multiracial cast of characters, it uses a science fiction framework to explore racial issues overtly. The Brother himself is black *and* an escaped slave (although it is established that there is no actual differentiation between skin colors on his native planet). The film has been embraced by many as an example of "Afrofuturism," the fictional blending of SF and the addressing of racial issues from an African-American perspective. Such interest has grown in order to counter the largely white nature of the majority of science fiction texts in the past. Another cult film which has been hailed as an example of Afrofuturism is *Space Is the Place*, a cheap film which was based around the world-views of, and also starred, the colorful and uncompromising jazz musician Sun Ra.

The Brother from another Planet is also notable for its rather unremarkable mise-en-scène: it is not a film that creates an elaborate spatial universe. Instead, the film uses recognizable and "realistic" settings and distinguishes itself as science-fiction through occasional, and often low-tech, special effects (the spaceship landing at the beginning, the Brother taking his eye out in order to use it as a monitor) and the presentation of other significant narrative information. A number of other films which include what could be termed "mundane" settings are also commonly identified as cult films. Often the mundane nature of the sets within such films is connected to budgetary restraints, which is also why they will often feature effects work only occasionally, if at all. Yet mundane sets can also play an important part within the film as a whole. Thus, in Jean-Luc Godard's typically perverse take on the genre, *Alphaville*, the future city portrayed looks exactly like 1960s Paris: this can be seen either as a deflation of utopian techno-futurist speculations, or/and it can act as a satiric critique of contemporary society, as Alphaville is a dystopian, surveillance-saturated metropolis in which emotion has been extinguished.

Repo Man also incorporates SF elements and takes place within a mundane, shabby part of Los Angeles. In fact, the unspectacular environment is a central motif of the film. The run-down neighborhood blocks and derelict spaces are bland geographical markers which impact upon the psyches of the characters, fueling, in particular, the nihilist aggression of the punks. The blandness of the environment is mirrored by the deliberate strategy to label all food and drink in uniform designs, shed of any brand names (also a sly critique of consumerism). The main character Otto (Emilio Estevez) finds a purpose in this environment through becoming a car repossession man, fueled by amphetamines and excitement, which places him apart from "ordinary" people (his mentor, Bud (Harry Dean Stanton), at one point exclaims "ordinary fucking people, I hate 'em"). This leads to him getting caught up in a plot involving a very strange 1964 Chevy Malibu (whose trunk contains mysterious properties, in a nod to *Kiss Me Deadly*, one of its many popular culture references) and ultimately acts as a time machine. Once again, the low-tech effects are highlighted here in that the Malibu's glowing properties were created through reflective paint. Another punk sci-fi cult film made around the same time, which like *Repo Man* became a popular staple of the early 1980s midnight movie circuit in the United States, is *Liquid Sky*. The film revolves around the New York "New Wave" scene, in which heroin consumption is rife. Among this junky scene lands an alien looking for its own heroin fix, but who finds its needs can be satisfied by a chemical released by the human brain during orgasm. As with *Repo Man*, punk lifestyles and attitudes are meshed with science fiction motifs to depict outsider lifestyles and embrace deviance.

A more recent example of a low-budget sci-fi with a "mundane" setting is *Primer*, which was made for a staggeringly low cost of $7000. (The production of this film is already becoming a part of its cult stature, made as it was on 16 mm film without hardly any wasted film because of cost restraints; it was nevertheless blown up to 35 mm for theatrical release and this added $30 000 to its budget (Taubin 2008: 80).) Arguably the most cultish component of the film, however, is the manner by which it creates a dizzying vortex of a narrative via its time-travel inside time-travel sequences, which cumulatively spiral into perplexing configurations and invite speculative interpretations. This links to two modalities that Hills has argued are recurrent across a number of cult films: first, "explicitly addressing questions of identity in a 'philosophical' or existential register" (through the proliferation of the same people existing in different temporal moments, which leads one to question if one version of a character is more or less "authentic"

than any other); secondly, the ability to "provoke moments of 'ontological shock' which can be, in one example, 'characterized . . . by plot twists reorienting the viewer's understanding of narrative events" (Hills 2008a: 444).

The use of time-travel as a basis to explore particularly philosophical questions can be seen as a key feature in many "art house"/cult sci-fi films, and a particularly renowned example is Chris Marker's *La Jetée,* which has shown daily within a Parisian theater to a small clique of dedicated fans for a number of years (Cohen 2003: 150). This short film –described by Marker as a "photo-roman" – consists of still pictures bar one exception. It concerns a man who is captured in a post-nuclear, underground world, and subject to time-travel experiments. It presents a narrative which includes speculation upon memory and identity, but also extends this philosophical tone to explore the paradoxes of time travel. As Jonathan Romney (2007) has argued, its narrative is "a Möbius strip, returning paradoxically to its point of origin to swallow its own tail and engender itself once more." And, of course, the meditation on time is formally explored in a manner that leads audiences to encounter cinematic time in a much different manner than they are accustomed to, through the slow unfolding of continuous still images combined with voice-over narration and occasional sound effects. This film itself inspired cult director Terry Gilliam's more conventional, yet still rather labyrinthine feature *Twelve Monkeys*.

There are a number of characteristics which recurrently feature within the independent and/or "art cinema" areas of cult SF cinema, some of which overlap with cult SF more generally. While not every such film will share all of these characteristics (that there is no exact textual formula for a cult film means that we have to allow for contingency), the frequent textual features that typify art/independent cult SF films are: mundane and realistic settings, which are often (in the lower-budget bracket of such films) related to budgetary constraints and can be signified through predominantly location shooting and/or through stripped-down studio sets, and also through cinematographic markers such as grainy footage, hand-held camera work, and/or monochrome film stock; philosophical speculations about problems such as the nature and future of human existence or the complexities of theoretical problems (e.g. the possibility and consequences of time travel); and a willingness to embrace narrative experimentation, particularly through a heightened *ambiguity* which can open the film to multiple interpretations.

Conclusion

As we have shown, science fiction cinema has been a particularly important genre within cult cinema. Yet, while we have pointed to a number of significant elements that have led to its embrace by fans and other avid viewers, it is not possible to pin these down in any definitive manner. Certainly, the speculative nature of SF filmmaking is important: it can create spaces for people to explore and map details, think through philosophical issues, and to become immersed in fantastical worlds. Yet not only can this occur in a variety of forms – both low-budget and high-budget, serious and camp – it also does not exhaust the processes by which cult status is secured. Not only do social, technological, and aesthetic developments lead to fresh avenues by which cultism can emerge, but cult cinema has always consisted of films that seem to buck general patterns, prove exceptions to norms.

Nevertheless, as science fiction is a generic mode that has been frequently concerned with technologies and their social applications, it is very likely that it will continue to be produced and consumed. As technologies continually change and, in their turn, impact upon social formations in complex ways, films will continue to reflect upon such changes through imaginative fictions. New technologies impact upon the field of production and consumption, generating new tools to produce and distribute films, and new modes of receiving films and networking with others in order to respond to them. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the notion of "transmedia storytelling" – in which fictional universes from one media form spill over into other media – is a particularly notable example that enables cult followings to materialize. It is expected that a number of new formations will also emerge in the coming future, though the shape of such configurations and their social consequences is perhaps best left to SF creators to imagine.

20

Cult Blockbusters

The tendency to include blockbusters in discussions of cult cinema is often at odds with more classical analyses of cults, and there is some debate about whether or not bringing blockbusters into considerations of cult cinema makes the whole enterprise redundant (Stanfield 2008). After all, if something as intuitively antithetical to cult cinema as a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster can be studied as a cult, then why not accept that all kinds of films can? Does it not invalidate the term cult as a category? This line of argument is often found among critics and scholars of cult cinema who limit their definition of cult cinema to certain periods (preferably the 1970s) or to certain offbeat properties of films (preferably those countering dominant tastes).[1] Against that stands a school of thought which asserts that if one takes into account some of the salient features of the production, content, style, and receptions of blockbusters, and study how these interact to form reputations and cultural statuses, we not only see the same mechanisms as with cult cinema, we actually observe cinema cultism at work. Matt Hills has repeatedly argued for the inclusion of blockbusters in discussions of cult cinema, as part of a particular process of "cultification." He writes:

> Cult responses can inhabit the "mainstream" (as do *Star Wars* fans), treating blockbusters differently, and living with them over time rather than merely occupying an evanescent moment of multiplex omnipresence. Fan devotion and "excess and controversy" need not be articulated, they can be two distinct lines of cultification. Cult is "in" the mainstream now; within its terms of reference even if the two labels haven't fully collapsed together. Supposedly "mainstream" films can become cultified by the "unfolding consumption" of online fans who anticipate a release, follow production rumors and news, attend screenings, download material, and then debate meanings, await DVD versions, and so on. (Hills 2008b)

As we have observed throughout this book, the term "cult" is no longer necessarily avoided by mainstream industries. More and more, producers openly court the status, hedging their bets on both mainstream and cult receptions, hoping it will bring in unexpected surplus revenue – unpredictable but equally welcome. For Hills, it does not make sense to create distinctions between the kinds of receptions classic cult films receive and the kinds some blockbusters get – both attract cultist celebrations, and the differences between them are more those between insistencies on categorization than between the characteristics of products or audience reaction. If one looks at the following of the *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, or *The Lord of the Rings* films there is, according to Hills, no reason to not see them as equally close to cult cinema than to traditional cinema. In fact, Hills suggests, one can even see internal distinctions within cult blockbusters, typified by attempts to separate "legitimate" cult blockbusters from hyped or inauthentic ones (Hills 2006b: 160–171).

Supersize Cult

One of the most visible reasons to bring blockbusters into a discussion of cult cinema, and to discern a type of

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film that would be the cult blockbuster, is their disproportionate size. This may seem counterintuitive. Usually, cult films are thought of as small in budget, tiny in their market share, and niche in their appeal. Blockbusters, on the other hand, have big budgets, a huge market share (often programmed to either swallow or avoid competition and to maximize exposure), and aim for the greatest common denominator with immediate availability to as wide an audience as possible. Small cult films demand to be liked by a few (and are often demanding in *how exactly* they would like to be liked at all). Blockbusters do not even require admiration or appeal, they merely want admissions and aggregates. Based on these oppositions there is no reason why blockbusters would become cults. Yet when discussions around blockbusters become dominated by a preoccupation with exaggerated size, to the extent that they are seen almost uniquely as deviant, obese monstrosities they have de facto become ready to be treated as cults. In short, blockbusters are big; cult blockbusters are too big.

A first issue here concerns budget and revenue. Blockbusters are expensive to make – this is part of the reason why they are called blockbusters. But when the size of the budget and the operation exceeds that of what is considered appropriate or acceptable, when boundaries of moderation and modesty in the making of a film are trampled and outstrip the rhetoric of efficiency – what Jerome Stolnitz (1960b) has called the "economy of action" – the production is often referred to as a "monstrosity." Similarly, blockbusters are measured according to their success – it is another reason to call them blockbusters. But whenever the achievements of a blockbuster surpass expectations well beyond what studios are anticipating (and that means beyond the kind of ready-statements of exceeded expectations studios are all too keen to release), when they do not just reach the top but go "over the top," or when the gross taking has become "too gross" (to use two preferred metaphors of industry commentators), they are prone to attract a kind of attention that is equal to cultism. This not only applies to successful films but also to those that have become disproportionate failures. The inability of films such as *Heaven's Gate*, *Last Action Hero*, and *Waterworld* to become the successes they were supposed to become has created cultist followings partly because of the magnitude of the failure, and of the way in which this failure was commented upon – often encapsulated in the phrase "just what were they thinking?" In sum, whenever budget and revenue take on grotesque characteristics, and can only be described in exaggerated terms, they become deviations from normal consumption and appreciation patterns. They become exceptional in much the same way smaller cult films do.

Beyond budget and profit, the culturally most tangible aspect of cult blockbusters' supersized-ness is that they are everywhere. They are what Thomas Austin has called "dispersible texts":

> the dispersible text is ... at the hub of a triple movement: a centrifugal dynamic of aperture and extension via satellite texts, mirrored by a centripetal force which refers consumers from these texts to the film, and a further impetus to buy spin-off goods after leaving the cinema. These processes of dissemination, recruitment, and ancillary consumption are anticipated and enabled by the particular construction of the dispersible text. [They] multiply and complicate the promises, interpretations, and invitations-to-view offered on behalf of the film (Austin 2002: 29–30).

In a "normal" reception the centripetal force eventually wins out, converging all views into a few preferential and acknowledged meanings, and consumptions, of a film. But in some cases the "talk" generated by the centrifugal dynamic of aperture and extension prevents such convergence. Research into films such as *Judge Dredd* or *The Lord of the Rings* (Barker and Brooks 1997; Barker and Mathijs 2007) has demonstrated the extent to which the centrifugal dynamic can take over a film's reception up to the point where the film itself seems to matter no longer and hype appears to perpetuate independently from feeders by the industry.[2] In the prefiguration of *The Return of the King* industry attempts to control the hype were met, and occasionally obstructed by a "chaotic diversity" of centrifugal discourses fanning out in all kinds of unexpected directions, each with its own high degree of investment (Biltereyst, Mathijs, and Meers 2007: 48–49, 57). Whenever the subsequent dispersion stretches beyond what is considered "hype," and a film's popularity is sustained beyond release-related periods of time, and whenever such chaotic diversity becomes a force equal to the efforts of the marketers

and producers, it becomes a strong indicator of a blockbuster's cult appeal. Again it is the extremity of the size of dispersion that makes the real difference. When the consumption of a blockbuster is not merely accompanied but in fact *constructed* through satellite texts and dispersed discourses it develops characteristics strikingly similar to those of cult viewing, such as multiple exposure, immersion, and the invitation to create interpretations far beyond the single film-text. In such a case, the dispersion is cultist.

Added to these mechanisms of dispersion are issues of length, of the film, the franchise, and of the audience reaction. Blockbusters are often longer in duration than regular films, which makes going to see them an endeavor of bigger proportions: queues are longer, and their visibility attracts more attention from other media, who are subsequently eager to label the phenomenon as a hype, a craze, or a cult. The effort to go see such a phenomenon is easily presented as one that requires "endurance," leaving much room for reflection on the physical aspects of watching such a film. Likewise, the aspect of immersion is described more often as "total." Amplifying those associations are marathon screenings or serialized franchises in which all of the episodes are viewed in succession, "extended" cuts with "new previously unseen" bonus materials, and the persistent or repeat viewing attitudes of audiences who return to see these movies more than once – an attitude confounded of course by the fact that blockbusters' bigger market share reduces the choice to go see other movies. As with budget, revenue, and satellite texts, the difference between a cult blockbuster and a "normal" one lies in the degree to which the size of the endeavor is one of the key features in its reception.

The supersized aspects of budget, revenue, dispersion, and length became tropes in the reception of blockbusters since the mid 1970s, and they have been eagerly linked to the films' contents. From early examples onwards, such as *Towering Inferno*, *Jaws*, or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, to so-called high-concept blockbusters such as *Die Hard*, *The Abyss*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Speed*, critics and audiences drew parallels between the size of the operation, their reception, and their content (big towers, big shark, big dinosaurs, big spaceships, big bus, etc.). It might not merely be a coincidence that one of the most popular scenes from *Jaws* contrasts the supersized shark with the boat hunting it: "You're gonna need a bigger boat" says a stricken Martin Brody (Roy Scheider) upon first seeing the shark. He even says it twice. A few years later, the X-wing fighters in *Star Wars* are equally direct in pointing to size as a marker of attention when they approach the enemy Death Star: "Look at the size of that thing!", one exclaims.

Until the late 1990s remarks about size were offset by other observations, so that the oversize trope did not come to dominate the discourse of blockbusters. But the late 1990s started a trend to have the size of some blockbusters become the *only* noteworthy point of attention. As we have observed above, it coincided with the introduction of cult blockbusters as a noteworthy albeit contentious part of cult cinema. This evolution is best characterized by the production and reception of *Titanic*, a film about a big boat and a big catastrophe, which was almost uniquely described along metaphors of its oversized dimensions, its mass. Kevin Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (1999: 1) single out size as the predominant factor of the phenomenon; in fact they use the term "most" four times in the first two sentences of their introduction: twice to refer to the size of the boat, and twice to refer to the reception of the film. In his discussion of *Titanic*, Martin Barker (2001: 88) describes it as a "bloated leviathan" before detailing its epic proportions. Before it was released, *Titanic* was predicted not just to be a flop but to become "the turkey to out-gobble them all" (Shone 2004: 251). When it became evident the film was an unparalleled box-office success, the tenor of comments changed, but not the metaphors or rhetoric: super-size still dominated the debates. The size of the audience and the size of its repeat-viewing appetite, the often-commented on super-inflated budget that required the collaboration between two major studios (20th Century Fox and Paramount), the size of the risk, and director James Cameron's triumphant shout "I'm the King of the World" when he picked up a record number of Academy Awards (biggest possible of any film awards), all contributed to this impression of oversized-ness. If we look at the long-term reception of *Titanic*, its oversized-ness has remained a key factor, now no longer in attempts to praise the film, but rather in efforts to diminish its significance: too long, too bloated, too self-indulgent, it is frequently

cited as one of the worst films ever exactly because of its gluttony – a sort of cult reception trajectory in reverse.

Retrospectively, the trope of supersized-ness also helps explain some of the cult reputations of films that have stood at odds with other cults: Hollywood films such as *Gone with the Wind*, or, outside Hollywood, *Metropolis*. Perhaps most symptomatic for this retroactive application is the cult reputation of *King Kong*, of which Cynthia Erb shows just how much it hinged on the motive of size, or "scale" as a contemporary critic referred to it: a mammoth of an ape, big showmanship, barnum promotion, and huge success (Erb 1998: 49–63).

Supersized-ness thus becomes a key identifier for cult blockbusters. Since *Titanic*, it has characterized the receptions of franchises such as the *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Harry Potter*, and films such as *The Dark Knight* and *Avatar*. Their receptions contain references to disproportionate size at virtually every level of debate, from the ones mentioned above (length, dispersion, revenue, and so on) to details such as the size of the appeal of a star (Johnny Depp and Heath Ledger), the expansion of a bosom (there were numerous discussions about the increase in size of Keira Knightley's chest in *Pirates*), or a segment of the audience (too young, too loud, too hyper). Above all other examples stands what is, next to *Titanic*, the XXL in cult blockbusters, namely *The Lord of the Rings*, a films whose epic scale of operation, exposure, length, and appeal eclipsed that of nearly every film before it. Fittingly, in an article discussing the upcoming release of the first *Lord of the Rings* film, the *Village Voice* connected its supersized-ness to its cult status when it remarked that: "hype easily self-assassinates, but *LOTR* may be immune to excess ... Because of its extra-cinematic life, it can't escape being a monument to its own built-in cult, which is roughly the size of humanity" (Atkinson 2001).

Content and Style of Cult Blockbusters

Cult blockbusters have in common with cult cinema that they present illogical, unhinged stories with lots of visual excess, offering manifestations that invite visceral instead of interpretive reactions. Because of this they are often called meaningless: void of relevance for our world, escapist or mere spectacle.

Let us start with the story-worlds, the fictional universes within which the stories unfold. Most movies known as cult blockbusters have what could be called built-in cult potential. In many cases this means that they are based on source materials that have already developed cult followings. Adaptations of comics and books are the most common examples, with *Batman*, *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* among the best-known cases in point. *Titanic* was based on the sinking of the actual ship *Titanic* in 1912, an event several critics have described as having a cult reputation in popular memory (Barker 2001; Kern 1983). *Pirates of the Caribbean* was based on a theme park ride which itself was inspired by the cults of pirates, Maroons, yardies, and Rastafaris. In the case of *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* inspiration was drawn from an amalgamate of sources, many of which had cult status – ranging from previous cult films (Kurosawa's samurai films, westerns, adventure movies of the 1930s, etc.) to comic books (*Tintin*). The adaptation of cultist source materials necessitates the compression, elimination, or addition of many elements of the original story-world for transfer to the screen. Debates about which parts of the source material are truthfully transferred, part of what we have labeled the centrifugal dynamic of the dispersible text, often expressed in public forums, ensure that the screen adaptation quickly becomes a feature of the cult of the original material regardless whether the adaptation efforts are appreciated or not. It sneakily penetrates it as it were – before the actual film is released.

The second aspect of the cult blockbuster's story-world that we would like to touch upon is its "mythical" nature. We analyzed the connection between cults and myths in Chapter 12, and we addressed story-worlds in science-fiction in Chapter 19, but some elaboration is required here. Cult blockbusters invariably hint at worlds – or world systems – that are lost in time, either locked in a certain historical era decidedly not ours, far in some fictitious past or future time, or outside conceptions of history altogether. Yet, at the same time, there is the perception that there is some spillover into the present, some ephemeral impact in that the story-worlds appear to present foundational narratives for our

world – the same way myths are foundational stories for the ideologies and morals of civilization. In attempting to achieve this spillover, these story-worlds weave a fair lot of history (and pseudo-history) into their fabric, especially of instances in which tensions between a largely disorderly but appealing world and a highly ordered but unattractive world run high. Through this method, cult blockbusters' story-worlds present an ideological framework that pertains to expose the problems of "our times" by offering purity of vision and by presenting a snapshot of unsullied time not yet tainted by real-politics. In terms of visual representation, the story-worlds are often shrouded in mystical symbolism. They consist of an amalgam of apocalyptic, utopian, and dystopian thought, an assembly of Western myths, legends, and religious beliefs (Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist in particular, but also various pantheistic beliefs), a mix of aesthetic heritages (romanticism, Greek antiquity, Gothic styles of the Middle Ages, expressionism), and a variety of political philosophies. With regard to politics, cult blockbusters' story-worlds show a preference for small-scale participative democracy and class collaboration, enlightened absolutism, ecologism, and tribalism. They favor a fair degree of anti-hegemonic sentiments (even anarchism), often in romanticized form, especially in the form of bands of pirates, rangers, or rebels. Generally, vast organizations and collectives such as empires and bureaucracies are seen as evil. Furthermore, people and groups are often reduced to the skills and functions they perform ("warrior," "priest," "pirate," and so on), which, incidentally, puts them in a skilled-laborer class. Selected individuals are often endowed with super-powers and magic ("the ring," "the force," "the grail," "the mark," etc.), aided by secretive, sectarian organizations who guard "true knowledge" – models of inspiration here include a wide variety of militia and orders, from the Praetorian guards and the Knights Templar over wandering samurai, the SS, and buccaneers, to Tibetan monks. These alternative universes are not uniquely populated by humans either; they frequently include alien creatures and part-human life forms, a further reference to mythological conceptions of the world, from before history began, when humans would still share the world with beings that are not human – dryads, nymphs, elves, fauns, satyrs, centaurs, titans, gods, demons, trolls, orcs, talking bugs, and shapeshifters.

Put together, these imaginings attempt to evoke a "past" or "future" time when "pure" instances of mystical experiences are possible, and they ask audiences to "imagine" the deep connection between these worlds and an "original" cult feeling, and experience, if only remotely, some of the exhilaration of being connected with "true life force." The films that go the furthest in shaping an entire alternative universe and a coherent world system (complete with alternative historiography) often get the biggest cult following. Examples are *Batman*'s Gotham City, *The Lord of the Rings*' Middle Earth, *Harry Potter*'s parallel Muggle and Wizard worlds, and *Star Wars*' Expanded Universe (which is also the name of all the licensed fictional background used in spin-offs, merchandise, and other media – an indication if ever there was one of the conflation between centripetal and centrifugal dynamics in the dispersible text that is the *Star Wars* franchise).

Many critics of cult blockbusters use the formulaic application of the above-mentioned inspirations, and indeed the implications these have for representations of groups of people as an argument against their acceptance as "legitimate cults." It is worth bearing in mind that this formula is not so much the result of the exhaustion of inspiration. Rather, it is the effect of the overly systematic use of a small array of textbooks that condense the diversity of myths into *monomyths*. This term describes the process of reducing the common denominator of known myths to one single narrative, in particular that of the "hero's journey." Eileen Meehan and Deborah Tudor (2010) argue that post-1990s cult blockbusters' reliance on monomyths is indicative of, and runs parallel with, the political perspective of neo-liberalism, reflected in numerous references to class distinctions, for instance in *Titanic*, *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

As important as their story-worlds' cult potential is the "look" of cult blockbusters. Generally speaking, cult blockbusters provide spectacle – and indeed make a spectacle of themselves – through visual excess or cinematic trickery, dazzling the audience by showing vertiginous, breathtaking imagery through camera pyrotechnics and special effects. According to theories of film aesthetics, excess is an element of style that falls outside the regular framework because it does not

occur in support of the story world or the plot (Thompson 1977). It works separately, often overshadowing other elements of a film. In the case of cult blockbusters, where regularities are already skewed because of factors such as size, the stylistic overkill produced by excess not only augments the story, it becomes its substitute, demanding a high degree of emotive involvement from the viewer. Reviewers often employ the metaphors of a rollercoaster or a car chase to refer to this mechanism. Aggregates of excess become spectacles. Just like the arenas of the theme park or the racing circuit within which the ride or chase happen, they connect to the wider affective range of experience and impression of excess, to its mode of reception. Cult blockbusters excel in spectacle. The canal chase in *Terminator II: Judgment Day*, and the flight from the Orcs in Moria and the Balrog on the Bridge of Khazad Dum in *The Lord of the Rings* are good examples. In each of these examples, movement, tricks, speed, and a quick succession of situations dictate a rhythm and pace that Murray Pomerance regards as all-engrossing. Here is how he describes its occurrence during a *Stars Wars* screening for a thousand-strong audience on Times Square:

> We are always sacrificing the progression of a story by succumbing to fascination. When the Millennium Falcon slips into hyperdrive, we choose to forget where we are, how we have come to be here, what has been happening, where we are going, all in the name of gaining the fullest possible consideration of the myriad stars stretching themselves swiftly into light beams against the black, black curtain of space ("WO!" screamed that audience, in unison) (Pomerance 2007: 22–23).

Such a description fits neatly that of the phenomenal experience we highlighted in Chapter 1. One or two such instances do not suffice to abandon attention for narrative progression for longer than a few moments, argues Pomerance. The "effects chain" of blockbusters, as he calls it, does not eliminate the story. With cultist viewers, however, who are already familiar with the story, who will take the spectacle not for what it stands for but as a goal in itself, and who might even have seen the film before, indulgence in vertiginous moments such as the one Pomerance describes *will* replace attention for the story as a focus of attention.

As can be deduced from Pomerance's example, the main tool here is the use of special effects, a core element of cult blockbusters ever since *Star Wars*. In Chapters 2, 18 and 19 we have devoted some special attention to the cult of special effects. Here, we will concentrate solely on the so-called "Big effects" that are so typical for cult blockbusters. Besides yet another reference to size, "big effects" are the kind that demand notice, not just for their quantitative presence, but for their dominance in the reception of the film they feature in. In their analysis of the unsuccessful blockbuster *Judge Dredd*, Barker and Brooks (1997: 283) observe how the young boy fans so dedicated to comic books and blockbusters appreciate just how much special effects are a "balancing act" that marries elements of the implied story-world with elements of the achievement: "[they] hover between being about the world their special effects imply ... and about special effects and the wizardry of the movies themselves." Further research on films such as *Titanic* and *Starship Troopers* suggests that the degree to which special effects dominate the reception of certain blockbusters is a key determinant in having them accepted as "big" – grand in size and certainly grand through their prevalence as a point of reference in the reception (Barker 2001). Overall, then, excessive demonstrativeness becomes a key attraction for cult blockbusters (Lichtenfeld 2007).

Turkey Plucking: The Critical Reception of Cult Blockbusters

At the Cannes festival of 1997, Bruce Willis caused uproar among the critical community by answering hostile comments on *The Fifth Element* with the suggestion that: "nobody up here pays attention to reviews ... most of the written word has gone the way of the dinosaur" (Boorman and Donahue 1998: 1). Besides yet another reference to size, Willis's reference to unfavorable criticism is a paramount element of cult blockbusters. With their supersized budgets and appeal, clichéd story-worlds, and overblown special effects cult blockbusters have been a particular target of reviewers, and, as such, their negative evaluations have aided their cult status. In

fact, as "turkeys," they have come to occupy a critical category of their own. As Tom Shone writes: "In an age of marketing overload, the plucking, basting, and roasting of turkeys would become something of a cathartic public ritual, somewhere between an exorcism and a witch hunt, with the press in the role of witchmaster general" (Shone 2004: 211).

The main characteristics of the negative reviews of cult blockbusters are a frustration with waste, a refusal to acknowledge creative input (especially with regard to directors as *auteurs*), and a view on its audience as illiterate, indiscriminate, and shallow. The frustration with waste is – of course – connected to the supersize and excess of the films, and to the belief that anything so overly big, plump, glitzy, or extravagant could be "efficient," "good," or "proper cinema." The prime example here is *Titanic*, which was being prepared for what Shone has called "critical snobbery at its most knock-kneed" months before it was released (Shone 2004: 261). The industry press lambasted it for half a year before it was released, because it was so big – with cruel puns on the size and fate of the ship linked to that of the movie. Critics were mildly hostile towards the plumpness of the narrative (describing it as a "predictable" film with no "surprises"), or downright condescending towards its popularity with teenage girls' repeat viewing – another form of waste. Even when *Titanic* turned out to be a grand box office success, critics would reflect on what a shame such greed was for "real cinema." In the case of films such as *Heaven's Gate*, *Last Action Hero*, *Cutthroat Island*, *Waterworld*, or *Catwoman*, which were not only critical but also commercial failures, dismal critical ratings are often regarded (rightfully or wrongfully so) as the catalysis of the lack of popular appeal, reflecting the vox populi. In such cases, criticism takes on something of a performative element, decorating its frustration with the film with trivia, witty observations, descriptions of anachronisms, and even campy elements that all function to humiliate the film. Notably, female performers in cult blockbusters are given harsh criticism; infamous examples include Sharon Stone, Geena Davis, and Halle Berry (for her role in *Catwoman* which won her a Raspberry Award, see Chapter 3).

Creative labor in cult blockbusters in general is almost never accorded critical praise. This is perhaps most acutely visible through "adverse auteurism," or the snubbing of directors of cult blockbusters. This criticism is a logical consequence of the frustration with waste. Instead of auteurs cult blockbuster directors are called "dinosaurs" or "moguls" (yet more references to supersized-ness). High-profile directors such as Michael Cimino, John McTiernan, Renny Harlin, Kevin Reynolds, and Kevin Costner, have repeatedly been ridiculed for their box-office failures. Even perpetually successful directors and producers such as James Cameron, Michael Bay, and Luc Besson, who have made multiple blockbusters with cult followings, are permanently struggling to receive recognition for their work. Their mode of operation is often considered aggressive, bullish, and dictatorial, and their aesthetics are regarded as overly simplistic, even fascist. This vilification has given these directors and producers cultist reputations as the "men you'd love to hate," and it has given films such as *Rambo* (for which Cameron wrote the screenplay), *Terminator II: Judgment Day*, *The Fifth Element*, and the *Matrix* trilogy notoriously unhinged long-term receptions. The DVD receptions of these films, for instance the discussions surrounding the "place" of Michael Bay's films on the cinephile DVD label Criterion, or Cameron's entitlement to awards (especially with regard to *Avatar*), have a key place in these continuous contentions. Ironically, this criticism helps instigate a fractured trajectory that characterizes the reception of cult auteurs.

Added to disdain for their size and make up, glee about their potential failure, and misrecognition for their makers, critics view the spectators of cult blockbusters with contempt. This contempt is most often expressed in remarks about largesse, illiteracy, and shallowness. Critics assume readily that whoever displays a cultist fascination with blockbusters has not (yet) met the "proper films." Such remarks about cult blockbuster audiences are often peppered with observations about the average age of viewers (not yet considered to be mature enough), about their attention span (supposedly shorter than every other generation's), and about their addiction to fads and hypes. In often highly charged language, critics view audiences of blockbusters as susceptible to films presented as "hot" but without the faculties to turn them into something "cool."

The Audience Reception of Cult Blockbusters

If we look closely at those films most often called cult blockbusters it becomes clear that part of their audience make up – *within* the mass appeal as it were – exists of a core of devotees and followers whose actions are very cultist – if not in nature or intention then at least in their perception.

To begin with, there is a striking gender-uniformity in the cultist audience celebration of blockbusters. In our examples on special effects we have alluded to the appeal of these production values with young boys. Similarly, we have observed in Chapter 10 how the cult following of *Titanic* has a gender-specific element in that it was "not the huge number of fans that might make [it] cult but rather the way in which it was celebrated through all-girl repeat viewings" (Mathijs and Mendik 2008b: 5). Within the most devoted audience segments of *The Lord of the Rings*, too, gender-uniform constellations of "spiritual journey ladies" and "lonely epic males" stood out (Barker and Mathijs 2007). The research of Barker and Brooks on the reception of *Judge Dredd* has become paradigmatic, at least methodologically, for several other analyses of types of fandom that show cultist features, in which issues of gender and class are isolated. Research on mainly male fans of the *Resident Evil* franchise, fans of Sylvester Stallone, and female fans of Sharon Stone confirm such gender specificities (Lay 2007; Huffer 2007; Feasey 2003).

To an extent, these observations on cultism and blockbusters match sociological research on the tastes of lower-class audiences as "univorous." The opposite of "omnivorous taste," univorous taste is arranged around a narrow pattern of strong preferences for very few products, with the function of solidifying a group-identity (Peterson 1992; Bryson 1997).[3] Univorous taste confirms the position cult blockbusters hold as among the lowest possible in terms of cultural standing (even among cult films). It is a position they share with other types of cinema and media known for their solicitation of extreme emotion (soap, family life oriented reality TV, porn, extreme horror, hyperbolic melodrama). Among the most visible articulations of the cultist reception of blockbusters symptomatic for univorous taste are repeat group viewing, "swooning" (fanning adoration, often in the form of fake fainting) and "posturing" (prominent positioning of the body to indicate an ease with and control over the immediate social environment). All three are seen as group activities associated with unsophisticated puberty behavior. This negative connotation is a legacy from the use of the term to describe 1950s and 1960s youth culture, when it was used in connection to unruly and deviant gang, crowd or mass behavior (Cohen 1972). From that legacy also comes a connotation with gender-uniformity: repeat-viewing groups are usually made up of same-sex pals; swooning is for girls, and posturing for boys. When such terms and connotations are adopted in current debates about girl groups repeatedly watching *Titanic*, teenage girls voicing their adoration for *The Lord of the Rings*, or young boys expressing their fascination with *300* or *Robocop* through posturing, those forms of celebrations are portrayed as a sort of disruptive behavior typical of hardcore cults, a threat to "normal" society even.

Much of the cultism around blockbusters is more elusive than the category of "univorous taste" leads us to believe, and it is extremely hard to research. The release strategy of blanket market saturation makes it hard to discern cultist activities during the first months of release. Only in the longer term, when prolonged runs at theaters are accompanied by reports of demographic oddities in attendance does cultism become a term of reference. Even then it remains difficult to assess, and in most cases evidence remains either anecdotal or impossible to separate from the cultural mainstream – as we remarked in Chapter 1, it led reviewers of *The Lord of the Rings* to comment that the oft-used term "geekdom" does not fully capture what is no longer a subculture "but a formative force in the cultural imagination of our times" (Biltereyst, Mathijs, and Meers 2007: 46).

There are only two real moments that enable the measurement of cultist receptions of blockbuster, and both are open to manipulation. The first preempts the film's general release. As we have outlined above, blockbusters try to attract extra attention to their upcoming release through a range of prefigurative initiatives. One such initiative with high cultist potential is the premiere. Blockbusters aiming for a



Figure 20.1 Fans of *The Lord of the Rings* dressed up to attend the premiere of the Firefly fanseries at the Norwescon 33 convention in April 2010. Photo by Michael Hanscom of Norwescon (www.norwescon.org).

cult following often receive unusual slots at multiplex theaters. In keeping with the legacy of cult cinema traditions these are frequently midnight screenings, occasionally coupled to marathons sessions of previous installments in the franchise. In the case of cult blockbusters such premieres are known to attract dress-up attendance, as has been the case with *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or *Indiana Jones* premieres. The combination of the midnight hour and the dress-up occasion gives audiences an opportunity to publicly display their cultism. The second moment occurs years after the initial release, at specially staged activities such as conventions or fan gatherings. Here too, screenings of the film are organized at times and venues already indicative of devoted following. Often it has members-only or exclusive access. Both moments have two characteristics common for cultist gatherings: they pair a common cause with a high degree of "camaraderie." Indeed, research on the networks of repeat viewers of *The Lord of the Rings* stressed "friendship" as a prime marker for cultist blockbuster viewing (Biltereyst, Mathijs, and Meers 2007: 57) (Figure 20.1).

One final aspect of the audience reception of cult blockbusters that deserves attention is its celebration through performative actions, including tongue-in-cheek parodies of fandom. These performances build on the public's general knowledge of, and ambiguous feeling towards, blockbusters to create outrageous and hilarious interpretations and re-imaginations. In a sense, these performances use the imagery of excess blockbusters are known for and give it a twist. As such, these performances of fandom build on the concepts of appropriation and bricolage singled out in Chapter 5. But, just like the blockbusters they use as their point of departure, they often go a few steps further in the hyperbole efforts – and their ridicule. The two most visible types of such outings are "queering" and "slash-fiction." We discussed queering in Chapter 10, as a cultist appropriation of meanings that enabled the performance of gendered receptions. Its main aim is to point to ambiguous portrayals of masculinity (and the ideologies these embed) in blockbuster cinema by using highly sophisticated strategies of interpretation on films that were purportedly single-minded, straightforward (with the pun on the word "straight" intended), and crude in their presentation of masculinity. As we have indicated in Chapter 5, slash fiction is, like fan fiction, the creation of fictional tales based on the characters, narratives and story-worlds of blockbusters. But it combines the reverent tone towards the original that is typical for much fan fiction with a mocking attitude and the rearrangement of meanings of the original through same-sex and pornographic innuendo. Since such alterations are often laid out in new products (online stories, prints, posters, re-edits of clips, etc., and even some newly shot work) there is a creative and productive aspect to slash fiction. Because slash fiction enhances visibility, adds to the liveliness of reception, and challenges taste norms and standards of industrial practice (including copyright) blockbusters that are frequently slashed are more likely to develop cult reputations – as if slash fiction uncovers their "dark side" and gives them a more rebellious attitude. Among the most consistently slashed are the *Harry Potter* franchise, *Star Trek*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Star Wars*. Each of these series has been criticized for its conservative politics, and in each case slash fiction has given it a somewhat more edgy and less conformist reputation.

Conclusion: Calculation and Spontaneity

The methods used by slash fiction and ironic performances are, of course open to endorsement or

adoption by the industry. This is often part of an attempt to gain some form of control over those forms of celebration, and to invite audiences of new work to accept it as cultist – but "cultist" as labeled by the industry instead of by audiences. In a sense, then, self-ridiculing instances in films such as *Men in Black* (where Will Smith is appalled to find his "super weapon" is actually tiny), or in advertisements in which director Michael Bay demands everything to be "awesome" (while blowing up his pool and barbeque), signal a continuation of struggles between the industry and audiences over the legitimacy of terms such as cult and blockbuster, and their combinations. It is even addressed in erotic spoofs of blockbusters, such as *Lord of the G-Strings* (Hunter 2006; also see Chapter 10).

This overt danger of reappropriation explains perhaps why, even amid the acrimony towards the cult appeal of some blockbusters, only a few of them are easily accepted into the cult canon. *Waterworld*, *Showgirls*, or *Judge Dredd* are such commercial disasters, and *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* have such devoted followings, and all of these are bathed in such visual excess and mythical story-worlds, that their cultist receptions cannot be ignored. Curiously, however, when faced with such evident cultism, most critics and fans appear to want to save themselves from the potentially negative connotations of the term "blockbuster," so they drop the term altogether and *only* employ the label cult.

Notes

1. Many of the contributions to *Cineaste*'s 2008 symposium on cult cinema expressed this concern.
2. Martin Barker has called such dynamics "ancillary materials," and Ernest Mathijs refers to them as "ancillary discourses" (Barker 2004; Mathijs 2005b).
3. We should note that research that identifies univorous taste is frequently methodologically ill-equipped to detect complex patterns of interpretation among audiences because it cannot probe beyond audiences' utterances, which might not always be perfectly formulated. It is a problem similar to the anxiety of cult consumption we observed in Chapter 10.

21

Intertextuality and Irony

The last two chapters in this book discuss modes and themes that revolve around the self-consciousness of film cultism, as a knowing mode of engagement with both the film text and the audience that, frequently, leads to *performed* cultism. In this chapter we focus on intertextuality and irony. Both have appeared several times in the course of this book, most prominently as viewing positions or modes of reception that are significant elements in establishing cult status. We discussed ironic viewing positions particularly in Chapter 8, while intertextuality in classical Hollywood cults, in the cult of horror, and in meta-cultism is addressed in Chapters 17, 18, and 22. Throughout this chapter we will mainly focus on cult film texts (the films themselves), though we cannot totally extract textual workings from their contextual surroundings, so the role of the reader will still assume an important position.

Among the most prominent terms that play a role within cult cinema are parody, pastiche, irony, and related terms such as satire. These modes, to varying degrees, can be understood as forms of intertextuality: where one text refers to another text or, more frequently, to a number of other texts. For Umberto Eco, in a seminal essay on the cult film, this form of intertextual quotation was a crucial element of cult films: if a film is made up of a number of intertextual references it becomes a patchwork in which any part of that film can be dislocated from the whole. This process gives rise to the "glorious ricketiness" that Eco saw as a particularly important quality of the cult film (1984: 198–199). More recently, Matt Hills has argued that the self-conscious interrogation of genre conventions is one particular "modality" recurrent across a number of cult film texts, particularly through a "display of intertextual subcultural capital" (2008a: 44).

Let us start by outlining some of the terms that we will be using in this chapter: many of them are related, but they also have been distinguished in particular ways. *Parody* is a process of reworking a text, or textual elements, in a manner that attempts to mock the reworked text(s). As Dan Harries has pointed out, parody depends on an oscillation between similarity and difference: there needs to be a recognizable congruence between the text referred to and the new text for parody to function, but a disparity between the texts must be apparent for the parodic effect to be successful (Harries 2000: 6; 25). *Satire*, by contrast, tends to refer not so much to the mocking of aesthetic forms recurrent across prior texts, but of social attitudes and/or behaviors (Dyer 2007: 41). The terms need not be mutually exclusive, as parodic discourse can also be satiric: for example, an artwork may parody and mock a former text (or set of texts) *and* also critique social attitudes related to such texts. Another concept related to parody is *pastiche*: like parody, pastiche depends upon imitation of other texts and relies upon the reader to "get it" in order to fully work, but unlike parody it does not mock or satirize; it is, as Frederic Jameson pointed out, "blank parody" (1983: 114). *Irony* refers to a mode of discourse in which an utterance is double-coded: a conventional sentence may be spoken which actually means something else, but only an initiated audience will understand this other meaning, while the uninitiated may only interpret the overt meaning.

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Irony overlaps with parody, pastiche, and satire to the extent that all these processes involve transforming conventionalized codes into other codes, "an activity that results in the possible recognition of incongruity between the two codes" (Harries 2000: 30).

Cult Parody

It should be pointed out that the functions of parodic art can vary a great deal. Even though there has been a tendency for critics to focus on the subversive nature of parody it is, as Simon Dentith argues, "politically and socially multivalent" (2000: 28). Parody can be used for socially progressive or conservative purposes, or it may be wielded for primarily comic intent. Actually gauging the purpose of parodic content can itself be difficult, as such an assessment will need to be cognizant of the social context within which the work was produced and the intentions of the parodist(s). Furthermore, the purpose of the content may not always be successful due to the range of interpretive possibilities that any work can generate. Nevertheless, to parody another work, or other works, does often entail an evaluative stance towards the material being referred to, as it generally involves mockery. Within this mocking cultural mode there nevertheless exist degrees of criticism, from gentle mockery to acerbic ridicule. Such mockery can, however, exist alongside a more loving stance toward the object being mocked on occasions. An example of such loving mockery can be found in the cult film *This Is Spinal Tap*; while the film makes fun of some of the ridiculous aspects associated with heavy metal music, there is also an evident fondness for the culture and, in particular, for the characters. The film is, therefore, "mocking, yet reverent" (de Seife 2007: 9).

According to Harries, film parody creates an oscillation between similarity and difference through three central categories: *lexical*, *syntactic*, and *stylistic* (2000: 9).[1] The lexical refers to the iconographic elements of a film, such as setting, costumes, and characters; the syntactic refers to the plot and structure of the film; the stylistic refers to the expressive cinematic techniques used, such as camera movement, editing, sound. It is often the case in parody, Harries argues, that at least one of these category levels needs to be retained (in order to produce a resemblance to the parodied text), while at least one other level is altered. Similarity and difference can also occur within the same category, so that a dominant referent can be evoked and then disrupted. Harries provides an example of this in *Blazing Saddles* where a pack of cowboys riding through open plains (evoking, through costume and landscape, the Western) eventually come across a toll booth, a lexical unit incongruous with the genre and which therefore is intended to produce a comic effect.

Much of Mel Brooks's oeuvre relies on spoof and parody, and his earlier films in particular have garnered a cult status. His directorial debut, *The Producers*, undertook a typical cult journey in becoming a cultural phenomenon after initial hostile reviews and a disappointing box-office performance. Although the film is, overall, more of a farce than a parody, it does contain parodic components. In particular, the Broadway musical featured within the film, *Springtime for Hitler*, relies on the incongruity of generic expectations to create its comedy. The encasing of serious content (the Nazi invasion of Europe) within the syntactic and stylistic confines of a musical was, at the time it was made, comic because the manner in which it combined these generic units was considered to be outrageously inappropriate. After this film Brooks moved much more into a spoof-parody mode, in particular creating comic material out of specific genres (horror with *Young Frankenstein*, the Western with *Blazing Saddles*, science-fiction with *Spaceballs*), a particular mode of cinema (silent filmmaking conventions in *Silent Movie*) and techniques primarily associated with a respected film director (Hitchcock in *High Anxiety*).

Another Jewish American comedian with cult appeal who – at least earlier in his career – utilized parody on numerous occasions is Woody Allen (in particular, he has a solid cult reputation in France, with many small Paris cinemas regularly screening films from his catalog). Allen often incorporated parodic sketches both within his films at certain moments, and sometimes across whole films. In the latter category we could include both *Sleeper*, which parodies science fiction filmmaking, and also the "mockumentary" *Zelig*. The latter film concerns a "human chameleon" and inserts Allen's eponymous character into actual

documentary footage to provide a convincing illusion of his actual presence at historical events. The generic simulation is further enhanced by the inclusion of real public figures, such as Susan Sontag and Saul Bellow, providing commentary on the figure of Zelig. Allen had already used the technique of having a real, extratextual figure entering the narrative (and thus pulling the narrative out of its textuality as it were) in *Annie Hall*, a film Danny Peary (1989: 20) sees as Allen's most beloved cult picture. In a scene in which the philosophy of Marshall McLuhan is briefly discussed, an annoyed Allen stops the narrative, pulls McLuhan into the frame and asks him to give his view on the matter. Other Allen films are more diffuse parodies: *Love and Death*, for example, mainly targets Russian novelists such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, but also includes numerous references to other films, in particular the works of Ingmar Bergman; whereas the compendium film *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)* contains send-ups of a variety of different artists and forms, including Shakespeare, Antonioni and television game shows. *Stardust Memories*, which French and French (1999: 202) regard as the "key film in the cult of the Woodman" parodies the system of art house cinema, and puts the films of Federico Fellini, in particular his already self-reflexive $8^1/_2$, through the mangle.

Parody's importance as a cultic form of filmic expression is that it relies upon broader cultural knowledge to function effectively. In this sense, it can sometimes appeal to a prominent sector of cult cinephiles: viewers with an extensive knowledge about cinema as a whole, gained through heavy viewing and associated information seeking. Extensive use of parody will more likely be fully understood by such viewers, who will have an increased likelihood of spotting the allusions at work in a parodic text. This would indicate that there is an elitist dimension to parody and associated intertextual forms which rely upon knowledge of other texts in order to be fully understood. To some extent this may be the case, though it is a point which needs qualification. First, as Richard Dyer has argued in discussing pastiche (which we will come to later), this elitist dimension (which also applies to parody) does not overlap with elites as socially defined: pastiche (and parody) occurs as much in popular and mass culture as it does in middle and high-brow culture. It could be posited, then, that it is a kind of populist/popular elitism: this relates to a number of processes connected to cultism, particularly the ways in which cultism often revolves around substantial knowledge and understanding of a range of popular texts. Secondly, we also need to understand the ways in which an appeal to people who "get it" works by a matter of degrees. It is not often the case that one set of viewers "gets" a parody and another set doesn't. This is because there will often be a number of references to other works within a given parodic film, which means that the amount of references recognized may vary a great deal from viewer to viewer. It is often the case that many parodic films will tend to function in a manner that minimizes the exclusivity of their operations: this is achieved through scattering references so that a film does not necessarily depend on the recognition of one referent text, and also by creating scenes that can function effectively even if the parodic referent is not spotted. A typical instance of the latter case is to create a comic scene which parodies another film, but which also can be interpreted as comic by viewers who do not possess the knowledge of the parodied text. It may be the case that certain parodic functions may fail if a crucial referent is not identified: for example, would *Zelig* "work" without knowledge that it is parodying the documentary? Would *Blazing Saddles* "work" without any knowledge of the Western film? They would probably not, though we would not want to rule out the possibility that "naïve" appreciation of these films cannot occur. This process of "getting it" is, however, only an extension of the intertextual regime upon which everyday film viewing depends. If we do not possess broader generic knowledge then it may also be the case that we may not "get" "straight" genre movies, because genres depend on a set of conventions which "specify the ways in which the individual work is to be read and understood, forming the implicit context in which that work acquires significance and meaning" (Ryall 1997: 328). This itself is an extension of culture in general, because no text (whether it be a film, a piece of writing, even an everyday utterance) can be understood in isolation, but "always appears to us as emerging from some other text" (Iampolski 1998: 15).

Parody often draws attention to the generic codes that viewers often take for granted. Many parodic films

are created when particular generic conventions have become routine to the point of cliché. If, at the broadest level, parody operates by spoofing the most clichéd examples of generic formulae, one could postulate that "cult" parodic films will tend to send up more specialist material, or at least material that itself has a particularly marked relation to cult cinema. This is certainly the case regarding one of the most well-known cult films, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which contains a number of parodic references to cult films including *Frankenstein* and *King Kong*, as well as referencing a slew of cheap science-fiction pictures. It is also the case with *Play it Again, Sam*, which sends up the cult classic *Casablanca* and is all about the cultic fascination that the film, in particular Bogart's character, exerts on Allan Felix (Woody Allen). Inevitably, comic results are produced by the gap between what Allan is (a neurotic nerd) and what he aspires to be (tough and cool). John Carpenter's *Dark Star*, meanwhile, spoofs science-fiction cinema, including the portentous cult film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Nevertheless, the often unpredictable quotient involved in cult cinema means that, while lampooning other cult and/or obscure material may be more likely to lead to cult status, this is not necessarily the case.

Often, it is hard to tell whether the high amount of tongue-in-cheek plagiarism of story-worlds, costumes or props, characters, and broad narrative lines is the result of comic genius, an attempt to tap into the eagerness of cultist audiences, a form of homage to the original, or just plain laziness. The cult status of the films of the British comedy team Monty Python, especially *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (a spoof of the Arthur myth) and *Life of Brian* (a spoof of the life of Jesus Christ), has, over the years, been considered a mix of each of these components. For some, Monty Python is ridiculous, for others silly, for others yet it is ultra-clever, and for many it is all of that – cult because of how it unhinges notions of humor. Since the 1990s, films such as *Mars Attacks!*, *Men in Black*, and *Galaxy Quest* have proved that mainstream audiences can sustain and even celebrate mockery. Even the cheekiest spoofs, such as erotic spoofs of blockbusters, have adopted the parody mode. In fact, their existence, and the degree of fidelity, crassness, or lack of production-value can be regarded as an indication of the cult appeal of the blockbuster they are spoofing. Production company Seduction Cinema, which labels itself as "cult" in its marketing, has made a name for itself as producer of erotic spoofs. Among the most visible have been *Lord of the G-Strings*, *Spiderbabe*, and *Batbabe: The Dark Nightie* (see Hunter 2006).

Cult Pastiche

Pastiche is closely related to parody: both modes draw attention to the conventions of generic discourse through a combination of imitation and discrepancy. Yet, while the two forms often overlap and are sometimes employed similarly, pastiche does not tend to contain the satirical, mocking nature of parody. Richard Dyer (2007: 47–48) has argued that three main factors need to be taken into account when distinguishing between pastiche and parody: *paratextual* factors, which relates to how a film is presented (for example, advertising and critical reaction may point out that a film is a pastiche); *contextual* factors, where we need to work out, for example, what decisions informed the work; and *textual* factors. Of course, there may be difficulties in arriving at any straightforward decision even when considering these elements because contradictory evidence may exist: a film may be advertised as a pastiche while more commonly identified as a parody by critics; different people who worked on the film may provide conflicting information about the reasons behind particular imitative strategies; while, as Dyer has pointed out, the textual distinctions between pastiche and parody are often not clearly marked but are a matter of degree. Ultimately, Dyer argues that whether we treat a text as pastiche or parody is a matter of how particular readers draw upon paratextual, contextual, and textual evidence to construct valid arguments which illuminate the texts concerned (2007: 48).We should point out here, though, that Dyer himself draws a distinction between *pasticcio* and *pastiche* (the latter word deriving from the former).

Pasticcio refers to a work that incorporates a number of references to, or quotations from, heterogeneous works, creating a multivocal play of competing textualities. An example of this would be the conscious placing of generic clues and cues in a film in order to

provide a wink to the in-the-know audience. Two examples of this with great currency in cult cinema are rabbits and chainsaws. Over the years, the referencing of rabbits has become a key component of cult films, from *Harvey* over *Rabbit's Moon*, *Weekend*, *El Topo*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Night of the Lepus*, *Nekromantik*, *Akira*, *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, to *The Lord of the Rings*.[2] The genealogy of this reference can probably be traced, for instance, to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (see Brooker 2004) or performance artist Joseph Beuys' use of rabbits as symbolic figures (and many folkloric uses of the animal well before that), but that genealogy matters less than the interrelationships and associations these references generate. By the time *Donnie Darko*, *Gummo*, *House of a 1000 Corpses*, and *Inland Empire* referenced rabbits, the trope had become a key marker in cult cinema. With chainsaws, a genealogy runs from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, over films such as *Motel Hell*, *Scarface*, *The Evil Dead*, *Bad Taste*, and *The Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*, to *Pulp Fiction*, *American Psycho*, and *Chainsaw Sally*. In each of its appearances in these films – most of which are spoofs of some kind – the chainsaw signals a moment of pasticcio, of simultaneously acknowledging a solid place in a generic tradition started by *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (as is observed by Kermode 2001), yet also pulling it out of this narrow generification. In *Pulp Fiction*, the chainsaw is one of a series of weapons Butch (Bruce Willis) considers using to liberate someone from torture. In the end Butch settles for a samurai sword – a weapon with a similar function as pasticcio.

For the larger part of his study, Dyer focuses on a specific form of pastiche, where instead of specific tools or moments, the overall work itself is signaled as imitative of other work(s) in some way (2007: 9–48). One particular genre that Dyer characterizes as marked by pastiche, and which has also spawned a number of cult films, is the spaghetti western. He argues: "The very fact of a Western being made not in the American West or even North America, and at a time when Hollywood Western production was considerably diminished, may suggest that at the very least it is apt to be pastiche, to be not the real thing and evidently conscious of it" (Dyer 2007: 102). Many spaghetti westerns, he argues, produce displays of "generic form qua generic form" (2007: 102), characteristically "take a standard formal procedure of the Western and then exaggerate and intensify it, to the point that it is carrying most of the force rather than the action it is disclosing" (2007: 105). We can relate such remarks to the frequency of stylistic excess within a number of cult films, because many such films intensify standard generic Western traits, heightening elements such as violence and formal expressiveness (for example, exaggerated close-ups, music that incorporates "extra-musical" sounds such as gunshots and cracking whips). It is perhaps this playful renegotiation of traditional Western traits which led to the critical dismissal of these films at the height of their production (in the 1960s), but also led to them building up a cult following. They were dismissed on the one hand, but perversely appreciated on the other, for being mere stylistic exercises that stripped the western of its moral dimensions to create cynical, nihilistic works.

The works of Leone are the best known spaghetti westerns, and it is his rather lavish *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and, even more so, *Once Upon a Time in the West* that have, in particular, come to earn critical respect over the years while also maintaining a cult status. *Once Upon a Time in the West*, in particular, is a film built from the history of the American Western, but which transforms previous motifs, themes and moments into something distinctive. According to Christopher Frayling, the film "is an anthology of great sequences from the Hollywood Western, lovingly re-created before being turned inside out" (2008: 55): the film includes a large number of citations from other westerns, including *High Noon*, *The Iron Horse*, *Johnny Guitar*, *Man of the West*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *The Searchers*, and *Shane* (2008: 59–63). This citational pastiche running through the film also informs Morricone's score, which quotes from Mozart's *Don Giovani* and Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* (French and French 1999: 157). Spaghetti western producers themselves showed awareness of how their films were pastiches too. *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *My Name Is Nobody* used iconic actor Henry Fonda against type. In *Once Upon a Time in the West* Fonda's character is killed dramatically, in a duel, after it is revealed just how cruel he was. In *My Name Is Nobody* his demise is presented as much more matter-of-fact, a riddance without even the generic convention of a decent duel. Alex Cox (2010: 8) gives

a good illustration of spaghetti westerns' pastiche awareness folding onto itself in his discussion of the cult reputation of *Rita of the West*, a spaghetti western that was intended to emulate *Django* – and which introduced Terrence Hill (who would go on to *My Name Is Nobody*) to the genre. In *Rita of the West*, Django reappears as a character, as does a character resembling Clint Eastwood from Leone's films, mixed into a structure that is as much a musical (with Italian pop star Rita Pavone) as it is a western.

Dyer, in analyzing relationships between pastiche, genre, and history, also analyzes the concept of *neo-noir*: films that consciously rework the visual style and/or mood of the film noir of the 1940s and 1950 and which emerged in the 1980s. It was the first cycle of neo-noir that Frederik Jameson focused on in his discussion of postmodern pastiche. Neo-noir has continued to be used up until the current date, and a number of such films have gained cult status, including *Lost Highway*, *Memento*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Usual Suspects*, as well as the noir-inflected science fiction film *Blade Runner*. As film noir is itself a controversial genre – in that it defines a body of films that were never identified as such at the time of their release – the increasing appeal of neo-noir not only functions in cultifying films that serve as crucial reference points, but actually plays a part in strengthening the existence of film noir as a generic category. As Dyer argues, "pastiche contributes not only to fixing the perception of the genre that it pastiches but to identifying its very existence. Moreover, in the case of neo-noir, it contributes to making the case for something whose existence is in fact problematic" (2007: 128–129).

The director and production team of Joel and Ethan Coen, who enjoy a cult reputation, have been most drawn to noir as an influence in their filmmaking. The Coens are often identified with genre pastiche (e.g. screwball comedy in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, the gangster film in *Miller's Crossing*) and have included a vast range of intertextual references within their films. The noir-inflected crime film has, however, been one of the most prominent generic features of their work and informs, in different ways, *The Big Lebowski*, *Blood Simple*, *Fargo*, and *The Man Who Wasn't There*. While their debut feature *Blood Simple*, which established their reputation, was a fairly "straight" take on hard-boiled crime, their biggest cult favorite *The Big Lebowski* can be considered a noir in disguise (as a buddy comedy). *Lebowski* uses a noir-ish plot influenced by Raymond Chandler, and twists it into absurd, incongruous directions. As J.M. Tyree and Ben Walters (2007: 48) have pointed out, Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* had already updated Chandler by replacing the cool, cynical, witty detective typified by Bogart with the rambling, laidback, and rather dim Elliot Gould. Altman's film is among the Coen brothers' favorite and also informs their film, but *The Big Lebowski* takes the initial plot mechanics of Chandler further into uncharted, and comic, territory by placing the most incongruous and reluctant character at the heart of its story (the Dude, a dope-smoking slacker who likes to bowl). The film is very much informed by the twin processes of pastiche and incongruity. Situations, imagery, and characters that are often borrowed, share the same space without any apparent logic. For Tyree and Walters, though, the film is not merely an "empty" exercise in pastiche; rather, the film is actually about pastiche, for within the film many of the characters are not who they seem and "put on" an identity (2007: 38). In a similar way, *The Big Lebowski* is a film that "puts on" the surface accoutrements of a buddy comedy while structurally adhering to a noir-type thriller. Surface appearances throughout the film are deceptive, apart from the Dude and Walter, who end the film by going bowling, unchanged by their adventures in deceptive pastiche.

The Cult of Irony and "Smart" Film

One film director who has often used pastiche within his work is Todd Haynes, who established a reputation as a cult director with *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, a film that gained cult status after it was removed from public exhibition (due to infringing the copyright of the Carpenters' music) and went on to gain an enthusiastic following among those who exchanged bootleg copies of the film on VHS cassette (Davis 2008; Hilderbrand 2009). *Superstar* itself relied on intertextual irony through using a well-known children's toy product – the Barbie doll – to act out the life and times of Karen Carpenter (from mainstream 1970s chart-toppers The Carpenters). Haynes played upon the knowledge of Barbie's wholesome reputation by

inserting such dolls within a story that focused on bulimia and anxiety, thus producing a satiric comment on fame and beauty within American society. This cultish reputation has tended to stay with Haynes, and he has gone on to create films which very much draw on a variety of intertextual devices. For example, his Sirk-inspired *Far from Heaven* told a 1950s story in a style influenced by a number of 1950s Hollywood melodramas, but with a few differences – such as its explicit tackling of homosexuality, its swifter editing pace, its musical score (Dyer 2007: 175). Haynes also makes use of pastiche in his film *Poison*, both in the segment "Hero" – which pastiches documentary reconstruction – and "Horror," which recreates the stylistic ambience of a 1950s low-budget, science fiction/horror film. His music-themed films *Velvet Goldmine* and *I'm Not There*, meanwhile, use a number of pastiche moments to evoke the times that they recreate, such as music videos, references to David Bowie and Marc Bolan, and *Citizen Kane* in the former, and the Dylan documentary *Don't Look Back* in the latter.

Haynes has been linked to a mode of filmmaking that Jeffrey Sconce (2002) has labeled "smart cinema." Sconce argued that a number of recent American films, existing on the fringes of the independent and the mainstream industry (and which some would perhaps term as belonging to the hybrid territory of "indiewood"), are marked by a sense of ironic distance, as well as by a "predilection for irony, black humour, fatalism, relativism and ... nihilism" (Sconce 2002: 350). The importance of this "smart" corpus of filmmaking to cult cinema is through its mode of address. Sconce argues:

> To speak in an ironic tone is instantly to bifurcate one's audience into those who "get it" and those who do not. The entire point of ironic address is to ally oneself with sympathetic peers and to distance oneself from the vast "other" audience, however defined, which is often the target of the speaker's or artist's derision. (2002: 352)

These films, then, tend to create an "us" and "them" mentality, which extends to the way they are marketed: to young, educated "bohemian" audiences and contrasted to mainstream Hollywood fare (positioned as smarter). This very much fits into a cult mentality: an "us versus them" mentality incorporated into the texts and aimed at niche audiences. Such audiences may very well enjoy the privileged position that they assume when watching such films; these films may, in their "smartness," assure viewers that they are superior to the average audience (often labeled as mainstream).

Pastiche and the ironic distance that marks smart films are connected to the extent that both speak in a language of quotation marks. Though they are often perceived as symptoms of postmodernity, they are expressive techniques that have rich histories, stretching back long before the mid twentieth century. It has been argued, nevertheless, that ironic discourse has increased in more recent times: Nicholas Rombes argues that it has grown in tandem with the rise of television (2005: 73), while Harries contends that since the 1970s we have been living in an "age of irony" (2000: 21). The particular form of ironic discourse evident in a number of American independent films from the 1990s onwards is often (though not always) a sarcastic and cynical form of irony. Sconce, in his analysis of smart cinema, claims that many critics have linked this cynical, disenchanted ironic mode to "Generation X." Generation X was a term lifted from the title of Douglas Coupland's eponymous 1991 novel and which referred, in the early 1990s, to smart, highly educated men and women who had missed out on the economic growth enjoyed by baby boomers and who were accused by the older generation of laziness, cynicism, sarcasm, and of being apolitical. Such laziness and cynicism, however, was often linked to the fact that this generation saw their elders as selling out to the forces they once claimed to fight (Sconce 2002: 355). Distrustful of consumer capitalism yet also resigned to it, this generation were seen to practice a form of "ironic cultural consumption," in which popular culture was discussed in quotation marks: it could be enjoyed yet one could also distance oneself from it at the same time (Sconce 2002: 356). Among the films that drew at least part of their cult status from this, are *Slacker* and the slightly more hyperbolic *Office Space* and *Idiocracy* (all hailing from Austin, Texas; see Macor 2010).

One movie that would seem to encapsulate "ironic cultural consumption" is *Ghost World*. Adapted from Daniel Clowes's graphic story, the film concerns two

female school-leavers negotiating their identities, futures, and culture. Both Enid (Thora Birch) and Rebecca (Scarlett Johansen) approach almost everything ironically, through which they can express their disgust with contemporary culture, but also enjoy a modicum of sarcastic satisfaction. An example is their visit to a 1950s diner, an establishment that rather lamely attempts ersatz simulation and which ironically appeals to them through its "badness." However, when Enid and Rebecca have to get jobs they are placed much more within cultural milieus that they are used to mocking from a distance. This leads to a split between the characters: Rebecca starts to take her job more seriously in her attempts to save money to move out of her parents', and thus adopts a more mature, less ironic approach. Enid, though, continues to adopt her sarcastic mien, which leads to increasing alienation (she is sacked from a cinema she works at as such an attitude is not countenanced). Their friendship is further tested when Enid begins to hang around the elder Seymour, in whom she detects – with his love for old 78 rpm records and hatred of modern culture – an authenticity lacking in her current generation.

Ghost World concerns the difficulties that some people have relating to aspects of modern life, but also the difficulty in relating to aspects of it when surrounded by people who will knock you down for doing so. Ironic sarcasm can liberate people from such pitfalls, but it also offers its own problems, namely an inability to identify with anything and thus an increasing alienation from life. It is difficult to detect an ultimate standpoint of the film: while Enid's excessive irony is seen as problematic, it also offers its pleasures and the film would seem to side with her over Rebecca, whose increasing conventionality is presented as rather staid and unattractive. Seymour's retreat from modern life does not seem to offer an answer, either, as he ends the film by moving back with his mother. The film appears to adopt a somewhat distanced, even ironic, mode of narration itself, not identifying firmly with any figure, and perhaps hinting at the complexities of negotiating modern life.

The idea of "distanced" narration links with Sconce's assertion that many "smart films" employ a *blank style*: "an attempt to convey a film's story, no matter how sensationalistic, disturbing, or bizarre, with a sense of *dampened affect*" (2002: 359). Such a technique is evident in the work of Todd Solondz, whose work is typified by an aggressively sarcastic distancing from characters. Solondz presents his material in a thoroughly mocking way, to the extent that many of his films are drenched in irony. In *Happiness*, for example, distance occurs both among characters and between characters and viewers: through sarcastic remarks, awkward silences, character placement within frames, and through the "ironic" use of music (such as light, breezy muzak accompanying scenes that are often anything but light and breezy in tone). The effect is to undercut the positive surface sheen of suburban America as empty, alienating, and demoralizing (hence the ironic title of the film itself). While satires of middle-class suburbia are nothing new, *Happiness* intensifies many themes to a generally uncomfortable degree through its cruel humor and bleak outlook. This has led some critics to bemoan Solondz as nihilistic and misanthropic. Even in more tender moments, where we are perhaps meant to sympathize with characters, the overall tone is often infused with ironic distance. For example, when Allen (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and Kristina (Camryn Manheim) form a bond and dance, the potential tenderness of the scene is undermined through Air Supply's "All Out of Love" playing over the speakers. It may be the case that Solondz was not deliberately using this song ironically, but as a rather over-sentimental, 1980s ballad the song would seem to represent the rather gauche, middle-class values that he is attacking.

Solondz was increasingly referred to as a cult director within film magazines and other critical writing after releasing *Happiness*, a film which pushed smart cinema into particularly uncomfortable, cringe-inducing places and therefore gained extra cult kudos for its ability to disgust some audiences. The film invited a large amount of controversy (another factor common among cult reputations) for its pedophilia theme and this limited its distribution (Sundance Film Festival even refused to accept the film due to its controversial themes). Solondz was promoted as a nerd who was nevertheless cool and savvy, a figure who fitted into the "geek chic" trends that emerged in the late 1990s. He continues to create rather hermetically sealed filmic worlds that tend to relate to other films he has made: thus, the character of Mark Weiner from *Welcome to the Dollhouse* reappears in *Palindromes*, while Solondz's *Life*

during Wartime is a sequel to *Happiness* which uses different actors to play the same characters from that film.

Conclusion: Reflexivity and Anti-illusionism

During the 1970s and into the 1980s there emerged a kind of academic cult around reflexive films. One particular genre that made extensive use of the possibilities of reflexivity is the horror genre. Because of its peculiarities we have expanded on this particular application in Chapter 18. Reflexivity influenced cult cinema well beyond the horror genre, especially through the influence by the ideas of Brecht. Among sections of academic film studies there was an interest in left-wing politics and how film could be used in a "progressive" direction. Many academics considered a large percentage of commercial filmmaking ideological in the sense that it represented an illusory world that people were encouraged to become absorbed in for merely escapist purposes. It was against such illusory practices that reflexive strategies became of interest, as reflexivity was a process that drew attention to the film itself and therefore went against the general illusory processes at work in many narrative films. As Robert Stam has argued, "While illusionist art strives for an impression of spatio-temporal coherence, anti-illusionist art calls attention to the gaps and holes and seams in the narrative tissue. To the suave continuities of illusionism, it opposes the rude shocks of rupture and discontinuity" (1992: 7).

While theorists saw differences among particular reflexive strategies – between, for example, the stark "structural-materialist" films of Peter Gidal and the playful reflexivity of Chuck Jones's animated *Duck Amuck* – reflexive techniques nevertheless demanded attention because of their ability to disrupt the illusory flow of narrative fiction. As such, Hollywood films that were particularly reflexive accrued interest for the ways that they tapped into the concerns of the film studies agenda. One prominent mode – which would also have appealed to those studying film to the extent that it mirrored their own discipline – is films either about filmmaking or film spectatorship. *Sunset Boulevard*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Rear Window*, and *Peeping Tom*, for example, became important films in this respect, and could be classed as "academic cults" for the widespread analyses they inspired within university research and teaching. In *Rear Window*, Jeffries (James Stewart) is immobilized in a wheelchair and watches different people in the flats opposite. Jeffries is both a model of spectatorship because of his immobile gazing, but also a metaphor for the director in that he chooses different lenses to watch and chooses which scenes to focus on (Stam 1992: 46). *Peeping Tom* concerns the serial-killer cameraman Mark Lewis (Karlheinz Böhm) and probes into the sadistic, dark side of filmmaking. As a film that was critically mauled on its release and which later became acclaimed it also underwent a reception trajectory common to many cult films. Another cult film concerning filmmaking is Peter Bogdanovich's *Targets*. This Roger Corman production features Boris Karloff as an ageing actor (Byron Orlok – the surname recalling Graf Orlok, aka "Nosferatu") who feels that his films have become redundant in the modern, violent world. Intertwined with this plot is a story of a man who randomly kills people with his shotgun. At the end of the movie the two strands collide at a drive-in screening (of Karloff in *The Terror*), and the meeting of "old" and "new" horror come face to face, with Orlok eventually emerging triumphant.

While interest in reflexive techniques largely stemmed from a political interest in filmmaking, the 1980s saw a wider interest in reflexive techniques with the rise of postmodernism in the academy. As reflexive, intertextual, and ironic techniques proliferated, it became somewhat difficult to uphold a belief that such techniques were themselves necessarily radical or critical. David Foster Wallace bemoaned the increasing use of ironic techniques in relation to consumerist lifestyles within literature in 1993 as being empty rather than critical. Such techniques may have once proved critical devices that drew attention to the hollowness of consumer culture, but these devices had since been appropriated by that very culture: many advertisements, for example, employ a self-mocking irony (Wallace 1997: 52). Likewise, within cinema, the proliferation of parody and irony has led Harries to contend that we now live in a "culture steeped in irony; an era where postmodern activity has become more the norm than any sort of alternative practice," a

process he terms "ironic supersaturation" (Harries 2000: 3). It is clear, then, that in an age when parody, irony, and associated modes have become so common, such techniques will vary in status and intention: they will not necessarily become cult films, but some of them will; they are not necessarily going to be critical of the status quo, though the adoption of irony does not render them incapable of criticism.

Notes

1. He is here drawing on the work of Rick Altman (1986 and 1999).
2. For a list of almost 100 cult movies with rabbits, see the thread "rabbits and cult cinema," at: http://cultmediastudies.ning.com/forum/topics/rabbits-and-cult-cinema?id=2098248%3ATopic%3A7829&page=1#comments.

22

Meta-cult

Our final chapter is an attempt to think about the ways in which "cult" has increasingly and consciously been used within various realms of culture – including reviewing, marketing, film production – so that cultural artifacts positioned as cult have become much more commonplace. In his book *Metaculture*, Greg Urban (2001: 3) writes that "metaculture is culture about culture," and argues that metaculture is important in aiding the circulation of cultural objects: it can, for example, draw attention to art works and help overcome the "forces of dissipation to which culture, moving through the world, is subject" (2003: 38). In a similar manner, we can think of the idea of "meta-cult" (used by Eco in his classic 1986 article, but here used in a slightly broader sense) as not only related to discourses which frame a particular work as cult, but also more generally to works which self-consciously draw on cult – *cult as performing cult* as it were. There has undoubtedly been an increase in such meta-cultural processes in recent times, and these can be grouped into three broad categories. First, the discursive uses of "cult" in relation to films by critics, academics, and other types of audiences; secondly, filmmakers who self-consciously draw on cult and who may also become important commentators on cult cinema; thirdly, industrial mechanisms which employ cult as a categorical and/or marketing tool. We will deal with these three issues in more detail before moving on to reflect upon some changes that have resulted in the emergence of these trends.

Cult Discourses

Historically, the term "cult" was employed sporadically in relation to movie-going as far back as the 1920s, usually to negatively describe particular audiences without relation to specific films. The actual term "cult film" (or "cult movie") began to be employed around the mid 1970s to describe films that were being watched repeatedly, usually at either college venues or at midnight screenings (present knowledge points towards this phrase being applied first within the United States, though more research arguably needs to be undertaken to investigate this issue).

This is also the time when the word "cult" itself became present in the marketing of films, as a tool to attract audiences and capture a place in the market (we addressed this partly in Chapter 2). *Harold and Maude*, for instance, had been dismissed by critics, but had managed to "hang on by word of mouth for two years in Detroit, and over three at the Westgate theatre in suburban Minneapolis, largely *because* the studio had invested little or no publicity in the film" writes Greg Taylor (1999: 119). He continues: "Encouraged, Paramount revived *Harold and Maude*, carefully marketing it as a cultist gem (starting with test-runs at New York's counterculture Thalia and Elgin)." That was 1974. Two years later, the poster for John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) announced it as the "cult film of the year".[1] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* too, was

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explicitly marketed as cult, as was the release of *Eraserhead*.

By and large, films that gained cult followings tended to be older films (which may or may not have been popular in their day) which had found a new audience, or newer films that had taken time to build up a small, devoted following. These processes reflect Telotte's distinction between the "classical cult film" and the "midnight movie" (1991a: 10–11), though this designation is slightly too neat, as Telotte focuses on once-mainstream Hollywood movies in the former category and low-budget, newer movies in the latter. This overlooks newer, larger budget films that gained cult followings (such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*) as well as more obscure, older films (such as *Detour*).

The 1980s were a period when the term was employed on a more regular, albeit gradual, basis. Alongside the increasing utilization of the phrase there was a gradual broadening of its application: this may have resulted partially from semantic circulation (i.e. the increasing spread of the term led to some using it in different ways than others, either through vagueness of explication and understanding, or through deliberately employing it in a novel manner), but we also need to be aware of the rise of home video during the 1980s, which offered a new platform by which films could gain cult reputations. Cult was now a process not merely limited to the public sphere of the cinema theater, but which had now spilled over into domestic space. This process further alerted some commentators to think about cult films in relation not just to video, but also to television. This was particularly so within the United States, where the variety of cable channels led to a number of specialized – or niche – channels. Thus, in 1984, *New York Times* critic Peter Kerr noted that the cable channel Bravo (formed in 1980) specialized in cult films (Kerr 1984: 28). Notably, he used cult to refer to "obscure" and "offbeat" fare, so that it signified a text's cultural status and broad textual qualities. This semantic expansion resulted from people observing how a number of films with cult reputations also shared certain qualities, thus leading to cult being employed in some contexts as a label describing a certain kind of film.

The 1980s was a period when a few academic studies of cult film emerged and this increased throughout the 1990s, alongside the continued proliferation of the concept more generally. This was also a decade that saw the emergence of two particularly important technologies which would impact upon the phenomenon of the cult film: the internet and DVDs. While the internet had existed for some time, it was only in the early 1990s – with the emergence of the World Wide Web – that it became available to the general public, though it would take time to filter into many people's lives. DVDs entered the consumer marketplace in the late 1990s and outstripped home video in terms of rapid take-up. Both the internet and DVDs would increase in popularity in the 2000s, a decade which gave rise to further developments that impacted upon the phenomenon of cult cinema. These include: increasingly fast broadband connections, which further led to a growth in file sharing; blogging; social networking sites; and YouTube, to name only a few examples. Discursively, the web has been host to an even greater proliferation of writings on cult cinema (mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5) which enables people to encounter such talk on a more regular basis (particularly if they are, as researchers, looking for cult film discussions), and therefore creates a kind of loop: the more that people witness a particular term being employed, the more likely it is to seep into their vocabulary and potentially infuse their talk.

Self-conscious Cultism

We use the term "self-conscious cultism" to refer to the ways in which filmmakers themselves can actively draw upon cult film history to imbue their own films with cult value. Such maneuvers may not necessarily guarantee cult status as it is traditionally conceived, but the continual mutations of cult cinema as a discourse should alert us to the importance of such processes. In this sense, cult film could be viewed as having moved beyond its origins as referring to particular receptions of films, shooting off in a number of different directions. As Matt Hills has argued, accounts which construct cult as merely a matter of audience response "fail to consider the duality of cult: that is, 'cult' status can arise both through audiences' discourses and through production or textual strategies" (2008a: 448). He goes on to claim that

cult's meanings have developed historically, and that we now need to consider its use as:

> a category and discourse by filmmakers and publicists, as well as its wider circulation as a discourse in scholarly and journalistic work. What "cult" demonstrates, rather well, is that a film category may emerge as an audience/critical discourse, but can then mutate into a form of generic contract, or a form of interpellative marketing, or a series of production/textual strategies. (2008a: 449)

In this sense, the self-conscious cultism of filmmakers should be considered an important part of the cult film phenomenon, marking a stage in cult cinema history whereby the term has infused film culture to a significant extent.

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 6, both Joe Dante and Tim Burton can be seen as notable examples of filmmakers who have self-consciously drawn upon cult cinema within their own work. They both, for example, employ references to a number of films that have themselves been considered as cult films. Dante himself has a background steeped in cult-related activities: he not only gained filmmaking experience working with cult auteur Roger Corman, he also wrote reviews for the *Castle of Frankenstein* – a journal devoted to horror film and related culture – in the early 1960s. His knowledge of a wide range of films, particularly more exploitation fare, has fed into his filmmaking practice. His first film was actually a compilation of clips assembled from films, commercials, and trailers, entitled *Movie Orgy*, and this compulsion to reference other filmmaking would feed into his later work. His first film for Corman's New World Pictures – *Hollywood Boulevard* (co-directed with Allan Arkush, 1976) – would continue this trend by pastiching low-budget pictures and incorporating stock footage from other films. Even when he made more commercial films for the studios, his parading of cult knowledge has continued: from *Innerspace*, a virtual remake of *Fantastic Voyage*, to the William Castle-inspired *Matinee*, and his regular employment of cult actors such as Dick Miller, Kevin McCarthy and Kenneth Tobey. As Martyn Bamber has written (2003): "Dante's love of movies – particularly B-movies – oozes off the screen and you get the sense that he wants to share that love with his audience as well."

This is also the case with Burton, another filmmaker who grew up loving exploitation films, many of which have since become associated with cult cinema. His short film *Vincent* was about his obsession with cult star Vincent Price, who would later appear in Burton's feature *Edward Scissorhands*, in what would turn out to be his last appearance. Christopher Lee is another cult actor who has appeared in Burton's movies, one of which – *Sleepy Hollow* – was a homage to the Gothic horror films produced by Hammer Studios. Burton would revisit his love for low-budget, disreputable sci-fi films in his *Mars Attacks!*, but it his more loving homage to cult director Ed Wood – *Ed Wood* – which perhaps stands as his ultimate meta-cult statement. Burton's films are not only infused with particular references to the cult films that he grew up with, they are also more generally permeated with "cultishness" on a textual level: his tendency to create strange, fantastical worlds (particularly notable at the level of design) and his thematic obsession with outsiderness, for example, are both features that have been considered important in many cult films.

A number of other directors can be seen as self-consciously cult in a similar manner. Quentin Tarantino, in particular, has drawn on his film-going experiences within his own work and peppered his films with a number of filmic references. In his more recent films, in particular, he has almost been engaged in a form of cult fan filmmaking on a large scale, from the martial arts-inspired *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, his homage to grindhouse cinema *Death Proof* – occasionally presented as a double "grindhouse" package alongside Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* – and his most recent *Inglourious Basterds*, a "revisioning" of Enzo Castellari's movie *Inglorious Bastards*. Tarantino also plays the part of the cultist more generally, in expressing his adoration for the phenomenal experience of watching cult movies:

> I always remember back in the days when I was a film-geek, hanging out with my friends, how we were always trying to see the sort of film that you couldn't see, like Jodorowsky's *El Topo*: it was completely out of circulation, there was no way you could see it ... One of us would get a copy, a horrible screwed up one – the more screwed up it was the cooler it was – we'd sit around and watch this bad copy, (oh man, so cool, get this ripped, crappy, old copy of *El Topo*, look at that, oh boy! You know!) (Tarantino 1995)

Tarantino also presents himself as a cultist by appearing in many documentaries on cult films and filmmakers: these include a documentary on Sam Fuller, *The Typewriter, the Rifle and the Movie Camera*, and a film about Australian exploitation cinema, *Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation!*. He has also set up a short-lived company in 1995, Rolling Thunder Pictures, with Bob and Harvey Weinstein, to release older exploitation films and market them to new audiences. Though this was short-lived – releasing a few films such as *Switchblade Sisters*, *The Beyond*, and *Mighty Peking Man* – the films were subsequently released on DVD with Tarantino's name and face on the covers. All these activities show that Tarantino himself is a meta-cult director: not only does he enjoy his own cult following, but through his films and other activities he attempts to draw attention to the cult movies that he admires and thus broaden their viewership. While this does not always work out as intended (hence the short life of Rolling Thunder Pictures), Tarantino is nevertheless an important figure who has the potential to draw attention to more obscure cult movies. In short, he can use his (large) cult status to further create cult auras around other (smaller cult) films. He is among a number of filmmakers who also comment upon, and therefore contribute to, the values associated with particular cult films. Joe Dante is a similar figure in this regard, having contributed to DVD extras of cult films: for example, he discusses the cult status of *Spider Baby* on MPI's 2007 DVD (in a featurette titled "The Hatching of Spider Baby"). Dante has also drawn attention to a number of older films – some already established cult films, others perhaps potential cults – through his *Trailers from Hell* web site, in which himself and a number of other directors (such as Eli Roth, Larry Cohen, and Allison Anders) introduce and comment on film trailers and outline the personal significance of the film under discussion.

Less established directors can also draw upon, and contribute to the field of, cult cinema, in a bid to gain an audience within a competitive film market. This is not an entirely new phenomenon – Richard Elfman's *Forbidden Zone*, for example, drew upon a variety of disreputable genre traditions and mixed them together in a particularly self-conscious manner – but it does seem to be increasing in line with the growing awareness of cult cinema. While it is not possible to exhaustively outline films which self-consciously draw on cult film, we will devote brief attention to three more recent examples. First, Don Coscarelli's *Bubba Ho-tep*, a film based on a story by a cult writer (Joe R. Lansdale), featuring an actor with a dedicated cult following (Bruce Campbell), and based around a dead star (Elvis Presley) with a huge cult aura. It draws on the horror genre but mixes this with very quirky humor and a bizarre form of alternate history: Elvis is still alive and living in a retirement home (having swapped identities with an Elvis impersonator) and then becomes involved in a battle with an evil Egyptian entity. In its genre mixing and incorporation of different cult personalities, the film seems designed to be "cultish." Secondly, *Viva* is a film that consciously mimics elements of 1970s sexploitation films, incorporating colorfully gaudy decor and costumes, deliberately campy acting, and drawing upon the work of directors such as Russ Meyer and Radley Metzger. The result is a pastiche that acknowledges the cult reputation that many films from this subgenre of filmmaking have garnered. It can thus be considered a film which reflects upon the cult of a particular type of film from a particular era, but in doing so also positions itself as a potential cult itself. Such positioning was certainly aided by its UK DVD release, which was released on the Cine-Excess imprint of Nouveaux Pictures, a label aiming to release cult films aimed at both the general consumer and the educational sector. Thirdly, *In Bruges*, the feature debut of theater maker Martin McDonagh, is a homage to numerous cult elements, most notably cult cinema's obsession with grotesque and disabled bodies (see Chapter 9). Jordan Prentice plays the role of a foul-mouthed, womanizing, and arrogant dwarf-actor in a European horror movie filmed in Bruges (very much in the tradition of *Daughters of Darkness* it seems), the shooting of which is upset by a war between Irish gangsters. In general, dwarves in cult films merely figure as "being there," but in *In Bruges*, the emphasis is instead placed on how non-cute and ill-tempered Prentice's character is. This makes *In Bruges* both a pastiche and a critique. Soon after its release, *In Bruges* was being touted as a cult film on the website "The Cult," the official site of *Fight Club* writer Chuck Palahniuk.

Cult Positioning

The idea of positioning or framing films as cult is the final important consideration that we will discuss in this chapter, and it is a process that is occurring on a number of different levels. First, "cult" is now being used by the industry as a term by which to promote and/or to categorize films. This can occur within the marketing of films for theatrical screenings and DVD release, as well as by retail outfits. The aforementioned *Viva*, for example, not only parades its cult references within the film text but also through associated promotional discourse. Thus, press for the film claims that: "VIVA is a cult freak-out retro 1970's spectacle ... VIVA is a highly stylized film that draws on classic exploitation cinema for its look and characters" (www.lifeofastar.com/viva.html). And to use a non-exploitation example as well: upon the DVD release of Peter Watkins's *Punishment Park*, Chris Fujiwara in the Boston Phoenix referred to it as a "cult hit waiting to happen," a claim that was promptly put on the cover of subsequent editions of the DVD.

The use of the term "cult" within promotion is certainly growing, as is the use of the term within critical reviews. If cult is designated by reviewers then this can itself feed back into promotional discourse. An example of this can be detected in the DVD release of *Christmas on Mars*, a low-budget science fiction film featuring music act The Flaming Lips. A film that only had a limited theatrical release, it was nevertheless positioned as a cult movie by *New York Times* writer Andy Webster, who placed it in a lineage of music-related films such as *Head* and *Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same*, and wrote that these "were endearingly ragged projects, destined for cult status" (2008: 10). Cult cinema was further evoked through referencing other cult films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Dark Star* and cult filmmaker David Lynch. The quote "destined for cult status" was then used on some of the posters that accompanied the DVD release of the film, while promotion for the DVD used the same quote as one of "3 reasons to buy this film."

It is not just films themselves that are subject to cult positioning: DVD companies, for example, are increasingly adopting cult as a category to use within their catalogs. Thus, one of the most prestigious DVD companies, Criterion – well known for its high-quality transfers and extra materials – includes a set of "themes" within its online catalog, one of which is "cult movies." The introduction to its range of cult movies claims that, with the wane of drive-ins and midnight movie screenings, the DVD has become a key means to access cult cinema, and continues to offer a short description: such films are considered to be "boundary-testing" and "delicately ride the line between pulp and art, always landing firmly in the latter camp." Criterion is a label that does not merely categorize films as cult, however: it is arguably a label that has itself become subject to a cult following. Many DVD collectors praise the label for the care that it puts into its releases and its reputation is reflected in the reliably high prices that it charges for its DVDs, a price that leaves those outside of the "Criterion cult" puzzled as to why anyone would pay so much. Thus, on an AV Forums discussion about rare DVDs, a poster comments:

> some peeps are just looney toons for the Crit label and will pay way above the odds for a version of a movie released by them just to add to their collection – doesn't matter if there's another version that's just as good/better available at a much lower price, it's the Criterion name that's all important! (Crazy Horse 2005)

It should come as no surprise that many of the DVDs cited as belonging to the rare – and therefore collectible and expensive – category are out-of-print Criterion releases. Further evidence of Criterion's cult status can be found in fan activities, which include a blog entitled "The Criterion Contraption," a series of writings based around the idea of watching every DVD in the Criterion collection, and an emerging trend to create imaginary Criterion DVD covers for films either not released in the series, or as alternate covers for those that have been released. Most of these can be found on Criterion's own forum, "The Auteurs," though they also appear on other forums and blogs, and have become a popular pastime among a certain section of cinema enthusiasts (Figure 22.1).

While other DVD companies may not enjoy the cult following enjoyed by Criterion, many do use cult, or cultish components, to either distinguish themselves and/or categorize products. This can take the simple

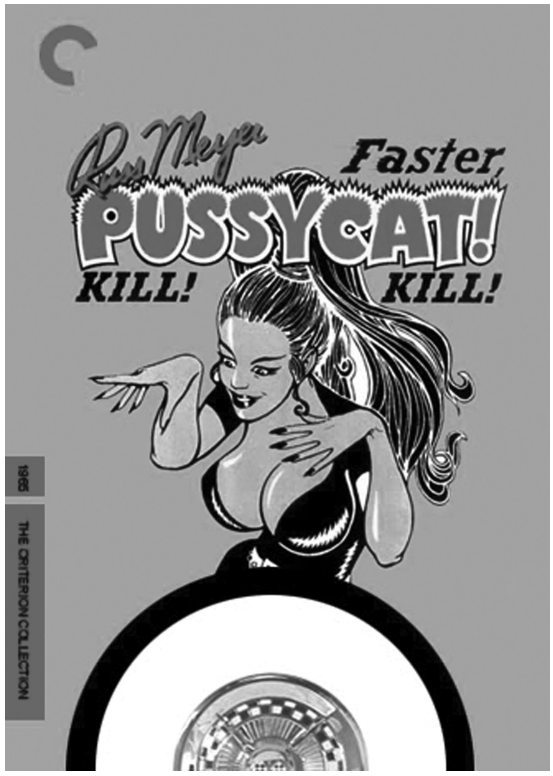


Figure 22.1 A piece of Criterion fan art: an imaginary cover for Russ Meyer's *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*

means of using "cult" as a generic category within their catalogs (this is used, for example, by Kino and Image Entertainment, both American companies), or it can take the form of companies that specialize in cult cinema, or have imprints that devote themselves to such fare. Companies such as Blue Underground (US), Mondo Macabro (US, with a UK arm), Synapse (US), Cult Epics (US), Fantoma (US) and Something Weird (US) can all be seen as specializing in cult cinema. Most of these companies specialize in lower-budget, exploitation films: Something Weird is dedicated to releasing obscure, unreleased titles from the 1930s–1970s; Blue Underground presents itself as continuing the tradition of grindhouse cinemas for a home movie age, though does not limit itself to a specific era of film production; Mondo Macabro focuses on global genre cinema, the majority of which is not well known by Western audiences. Not all films released by such companies are considered to be exploitation films, however: Fantoma, for example, has released films by Kenneth Anger; Synapse has released Leni Riefenstahl's controversial propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, and Cult Epics has released films by Fernando Arrabel and Jean Genet. While the word "cult" is not used by all of these companies, it often is: Blue Underground has a category entitled "Cult Classics"; Synapse has a range of films which it releases under the "Asian Cult Cinema Collection." Even when not explicitly used, it is hinted at in language that evokes cult.

There are also imprints of labels that attempt to position products as cult objects. These include, for example, Tartan's "Asia Extreme" imprint (UK, now defunct), and BFI's "Flipside" (UK). Tartan's "Asia Extreme" imprint grew out of its releases of *Ringu*, *Audition*, and *Battle Royale*, in 2001. After the films – in particular *Audition* – caused some controversial press responses, Tartan rebranded the films "Tartan Asia Extreme" in order to capitalize on such notoriety. This then led to a number of subsequent releases under the imprint, which by March 2005 constituted almost a third of Tartan's entire DVD output (Drew 2007: 53–54). Drew argues that Tartan targeted what it saw as an existing cult fan following for Asian genre films, but also marketed these films for "art-house" audiences (seen as favoring less obviously generic output and emphasizing stylistic appreciation, particularly through the lens of authorship). While these audience segments are not mutually exclusive, this twin demographic targeting could help maximize the films' appeal to specialized audiences within the UK. The BFI's "Flipside" label can also be seen as manifesting a growing awareness of the overlaps between cult/art-house audiences (Figure 22.2). The BFI has long been considered to be an institution that has nurtured the appreciation of film as art, but its recent DVD imprint focuses on obscure, and often eccentric, films from British cinema history. The press release for Flipside mentions "cult" twice and further illustrates how the BFI sees this series as broadening its audience by claiming that it "is likely to appeal to a diverse range of film fans, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the BFI's more traditional DVD and Blu-ray output."

While these smaller companies attempt to frame films as cult in order to appeal to a broader, albeit still "specialized" audience, major companies have also

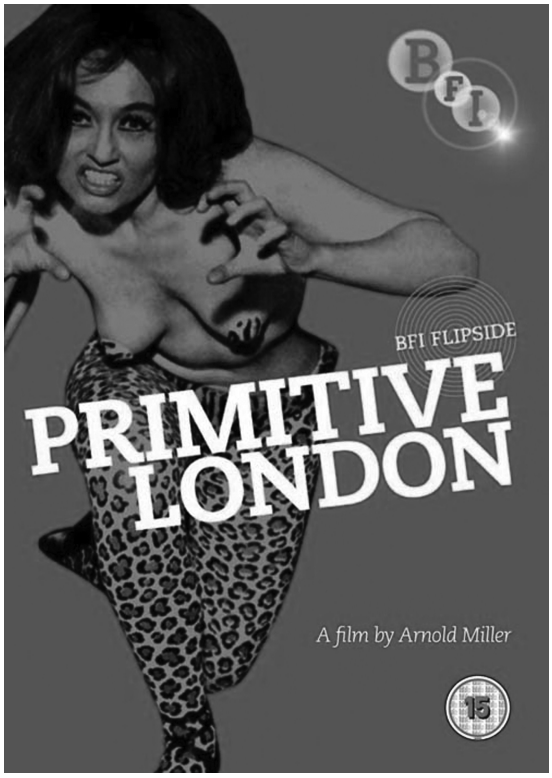


Figure 22.2 Cover of *Primitive London* DVD, part of the BFI Flipside DVD and Blu-ray collection. © 2009 BFI. Courtesy of the British Film Institute.

targeted films at cult film fans. These include: Universal's "Cult Cinema Collection," Warner's "Cult Camp Classics," and Twentieth Century Fox's/MGM's "Midnite Movies." The adoption of cult as a marketing strategy by major companies demonstrates a broader attempt to maximize audience appeal across their large range of titles. The majors will still pay most attention to marketing what they consider their "top" titles: contemporary, larger budgeted films, often featuring major stars. Nevertheless, it has been noted by many commentators that while such "hits" are still extremely important, there is now a growing market for "niche" cultural products, a phenomenon dubbed "The Long Tail" by Chris Anderson (2006). The growth of the internet has provided an ever-expanding network of online retail outlets which, because they do not need to store products in a single, physical retail outlet, can offer increasing amounts of goods (which people around the globe can order if they have access to the net and a suitable account with which to make payment). In addition to the proliferation of cultural information, the ability to share knowledge, and the emergence of recommendation suggestions (based on personal searches and purchases, on what other consumers have purchased in conjunction with particular products, and through consumer lists, for example), the internet provides enhanced opportunities to stumble upon a range of cultural objects.

Usually niches are heterogeneous and small. Anderson argues that because audiences are aware that pretty much everything is available to them at any time the aggregate of small sales can make a difference. He writes: "the combined value of modest sellers and quirky titles equals the sales of top hits" (2006: 1). The issue, then, becomes a matter of accessing audiences as "partners" in helping the marketplace distinguish between "kinds" of things wanted – to let the audience assist in selecting the categories of the catalog, and to allow for products to have a "long tail" and let them be available for extended periods of time, in small amounts. This comes very close to the situation of cult cinema, where there is constant demand in a relatively small market, and where there is a high insistence on self-selection of categories (such as underground, indie, countercultural, gore, splatter, camp, sex, chic, cool, hot, mondo, nasty, "head," "mindfuck," "rubber reality," etc.). Most online retailers have started marketing their "special interest" products in exactly these ways. Anderson argues that the "crap" that accumulates in this approach is necessary to separate the good from the bad stuff (a selection each audience segment makes differently), and because it gives recognition – it is as little fun to flip through a selection of films of which no one is even remotely familiar as it is to see only well-known titles (Anderson 2006: 116). "Niche culture" thus becomes increasingly important on both a cultural and an economic level: Drew (2007: 55) cites a Film Council report which claims that DVD sales of non-mainstream titles within the UK grew from 10 to 30% in 2005, a trend that is likely to continue. In such a climate, cult cinema could be considered a particularly notable concept through which the importance of niche culture is made sense of by consumers and retailers.

The "Midnite Movies" range of titles – drawing on a founding cult cinema exhibition context and usually

packaged as double bills – is another case of a DVD series gaining its own cult following. Not only has the series given rise to its own Yahoo discussion group – founded in 2004 and currently with over 700 members – but it has also led to a petition for reviving the series. In 2005, after a lengthy period in which nothing was released in the series, a petition was organized and advertised at the web site "DVD Drive-in." After almost 5000 online signatures were collected, Fox (who handle MGM's home video releases) decided to issue a new batch in the series in 2007 (making reference to the petition in a press release). No films in the series have been released since then, however, so the petition has been revived in order to request more releases (in the knowledge that a large number of titles owned by MGM have yet to see DVD releases). This process demonstrates the growth of what has been dubbed "consumer activism" (Jenkins 1992: 278), by which fans lobby media producers (or, in this case, distributors) to make changes in line with fans' wishes. Although such activities have long existed, the ability to connect with a large range of other fans over the internet has led to them becoming much more frequent. Companies may not always react to such activism in the ways that fans always wish, but there is an increased tendency to listen, and cater to, cult fans, particularly considering they are often heavy consumers of media consumables and early adopters of new technologies (Drew 2007: 61). Such awareness of the importance of the "cult consumer" is another reason as to why cult is increasingly incorporated into marketing strategies.

Alongside the growth of cultish DVD labels and series, cult is also utilized by some retail stores to categorize films, while many magazines and journals also position themselves as cult, or at least have cultish sections within their pages. While retail categorization is a relatively recent phenomenon, cult-inflected magazines and journals have existed for a long period. As mentioned in Chapters 4, 11 and 19, a number of fanzines were demonstrative of cult fandom, and such activities fed into a number of specialist prozines. Publications such as *Fangoria*, *Video Watchdog*, and *Asian Cult Cinema,* are just a small selection of specialist magazines which have catered to cult tastes for a number of years. In more recent times, a number of cult-related web sites have also emerged to expand such coverage. These include DVD news and review sites such as *DVD Drive-In*, *Mondo Digital* and *Eccentric Cinema*; a number of cult cinema blogs (e.g. *Mondo Esoterica*, *Moon in the Gutter*), plus ezines and ejournals which include a substantial focus on cult movies (including *Bright Lights Film Journal* and *Wormwood*). There also exist forums, discussion groups, and podcasts devoted to aspects of cult cinema that can be accessed via the web.

Conclusion

The examples of self-conscious cultist filmmakers, the rise in cult being employed as a discursive category within criticism and other forms of film writing, and the use of cult as an industrial category to position cultural products within the marketplace, demonstrate that cult has started to infiltrate film culture on a number of levels. As it has done so, its actual meanings have also broadened: this is because different agents may utilize the concept for different purposes (e.g. companies using it to market products; critics employing it to place a film within a specific tradition), and also because some will conceive of its meanings differently from others (so, for example, while some may use the term in a strict manner in an attempt to refer to a specific process, others may adopt it in a vaguer, looser manner).

Some critics and academics have expressed skepticism about the continued usefulness of "cult" as a concept because of these developments. In a 2008 symposium on cult film in the journal *Cineaste*, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Jeffrey Sconce, and Peter Stanfield all doubted whether the concept actually meant anything anymore. Stanfield, for example, writes:

> I am struck by how redundant the term has become. What once defined a rarefied, albeit often perverse set of critical practices that lay far beyond the purview of any officially sanctioned notion of "good taste," cult, like the now innocuous concept of "alternative" when affixed to a life style or consumption choice, is simply a term for any product or activity that can be pitched by commercial agencies as existing outside the mainstream. (2008: 49)

Such a comment, however, assumes that cult was never a commercial concept and that it is now merely a commercial category. While the concept has become increasingly used by commercial bodies to sell products, we hope to have shown that it is not *merely* a commercial term. And, while the commercialization of the term has undoubtedly intensified, it is historically inaccurate to claim that the concept has never previously been tainted by commercial interests. Such a view, also detectable within Sconce's comments in the symposium, suggests a nostalgic longing for a more "authentic" period in which cult cinema was the preserve of an elite few, and/or a more "personal memory" period that reflects the link between audiences' "moments of access" of certain movies and their own personal narratives (a parallel between critics' example of when cult films were "more authentic" and their teenage or college years is easily drawn).

We started our book with a discussion of the midnight movie as a paradigmatic exemplar of cult cinema. By the end of our book the picture regarding the midnight movie has become a lot more complex. Before jumping to the conclusion that the "golden period" of midnight movie screenings was a manifestation of a pure "bottom-up" process, whereby audiences themselves made a film cult without commercial influences, we should consider at least the following two processes. First, *Eraserhead*, now considered a seminal midnight movie, originally found it difficult to find *any* audiences: it was only because Elgin Theatre owner Ben Barenholtz continued to show it, that it eventually found an audience and developed a cult following. Without Barenholtz's role here, the film may not have become a cult film in the way that it did, thus alerting us to the importance not merely of audiences, but also of distributors, in the construction of a cult film. Barenholtz may have been an idiosyncratic, non-corporate business man, but he was a business man nonetheless. Secondly, *Pink Flamingos,* another seminal midnight movie, was marketed at midnight venues by its distributor New Line, and after it began to find an audience on this circuit New Line created a trailer for the film in which audiences were interviewed about their impressions of the film. A similar strategy underpinned New Line's re-release of *Night of the Living Dead*, a film it presented in its 1978 catalog as "that rare phenomenon, a film that found its audience entirely through word-of-mouth" (New Line Cinema 1978: 58).[2] Here, then, we can see that even by the late 1970s, films could be deliberately marketed at cult audiences and that such audiences could be "co-opted" for commercial purposes. The commercialization of cult may not have existed on the same scale as today, but then neither did the concept of cult circulate to the same extent as it does today. Its discursive proliferation and escalating commercialization have developed in tandem: we should not merely dismiss this and retreat into uncritical nostalgia, but instead seek to understand the increasing complexity of cult as a concept, the ways in which it is now used, in what contexts, and for what purposes.

We hope to have shown that cult is a term that now has more currency than ever, hence our assertion that we are now living in a "meta-cult" world, in which cult is used in increasingly self-conscious ways and in a number of different contexts. This is a process which does not extinguish its meanings but rather extends them and therefore requires of scholars further research into this important area of film culture.

Notes

1. With thanks to IQ Hunter for drawing our attention to this.
2. We would like to thank April Green and Dana Keller for their research into the New Line Cinema catalogs, and the University of Michigan's library for granting us access to that collection. This ongoing research project is supported by the University of British Columbia's Arts Undergraduate Research Grant RPB-12R46755.

Filmography

8½ (Fellini, Italy, 1963)
9½ Weeks (Lyne, USA, 1986)
24 Hour Party People (Winterbottom, UK, 2002)
The 36th Chamber of Shaolin (Liu, Hong Kong, 1978)
42nd Street (Bacon, USA, 1933)
200 Motels (Palmer/Zappa, USA, 1971)
300 (Snyder, USA, 2006)
2000 Maniacs (Lewis, USA, 1964)
2001: A Space Odyssey (Kubrick, UK/USA, 1968)
Aag/Flames (Varma, India, 2007)
The Abyss (Cameron, USA, 1989)
The Acid Eaters (Mabe, USA, 1968)
The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes (Brakhage, USA, 1971)
The Adventures of Baron Munchausen (Gilliam, UK/West Germany, 1988)
L'Âge d'or (Buñuel/Dali, France, 1930)
Aguirre, Wrath of God (Herzog, West Germany, 1972)
Akira (Ôtomo, Japan, 1988)
Alfred Packer: The Musical (aka *Cannibal! The Musical*) (Parker, USA, 1993)
Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves (Lubin, USA, 1944)
Alice in Acidland (Donne, USA, 1969)
Alice's Restaurant (Penn, USA, 1969)
Alien (Scott, USA/UK, 1979)
Aliens (Cameron, USA/UK, 1986)
All about Eve (Mankiewicz, USA, 1950)
All that Heaven Allows (Sirk, USA, 1955)
Allures (Belson, USA, 1961)
Alone. Life Wastes Andy Hardy (Arnold, Austria, 1998)
Alphaville (Godard, France/Italy, 1965)
The Amazing Transparent Man (Ulmer, USA, 1960)
American Psycho (Harron, USA, 2000)
Angel Heart (Parker, USA, 1987)
The Animatrix (Chung/Jones/Kawajiri/Koike/Maeda/Morimoto/Watanabe, USA, 2003)
Annie (Huston, USA, 1982)
Annie Hall (Allen, USA, 1977)
The Anniversary (Baker, UK, 1968)
Antonio das Mortes (Rocha, BRA, 1969)
Anthropophagus (D'Amato, Italy, 1980)
The Arena (Carver/D'Amato, USA, 1974)
Artificial Intelligence: AI (Spielberg, USA, 2001)
Ashes of Time (Kar Wai, Hong Kong, 1994)
Assault on Precinct 13 (Carpenter, USA, 1976)
Astro Boy (Tezuka, Japan, 1963)
Atamé (Almodovar, Spain, 1990)
Attack of the Crab Monsters (Corman, USA, 1957)
Audition (Miike, South Korea/Japan, 1999)
Avatar (Cameron, USA/UK, 2009)
Awakening of the Beast (Marins, Brazil, 1970)
Back to the Future (Zemeckis, USA, 1985)
Bad Taste (Jackson, New Zealand, 1987)
Baise-moi (Despentes/Coralie, France, 2000)
Barfly (Schroeder, USA, 1987)
Barbarella (Vadim, France/Italy, 1968)
Basic Instinct (Verhoeven, USA/France, 1992)
Batbabe: The Dark Nightie (Bacchus, USA, 2009)
Batman (Burton, 1989)
The Battle of Brazil (Matthews/Criterion, USA, 1996)
Battle Royale (Fukasaku, Japan, 2000)
Battlefield Earth (Christian, USA, 2000)
Battleship Potemkin (Eisenstein, Soviet Union, 1925)
Be Kind Rewind (Gondry, UK/USA, 2008)

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Beat the Devil (Huston, USA, 1953)
The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (Lourié, USA, 1953)
Begotten (Merhige, USA, 1990)
Behind the Green Door (Mitchell/Mitchell, USA, 1972)
The Believers (Schlesinger, USA, 1987)
Belle de jour (Buñuel, France, 1967)
The Beyond (Fulci, Italy, 1981)
Beyond the Time Barrier (Ulmer, USA, 1960)
Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (Meyer, USA, 1970)
The Big Heat (Lang, USA, 1953)
The Big Lebowski (Coen/Coen, USA/UK, 1998)
The Big Silence (Corbucci, Italy, France, 1968)
The Big Sleep (Hawks, USA, 1946)
The Bigamist (Lupino, USA, 1953)
Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey (Hewitt, USA, 2001)
The Bishop's Wife (Koster, USA, 1947)
Black Caesar (Cohen, USA, 1973)
The Black Cat (Ulmer, USA, 1934)
Black Emanuelle (Albertini, Italy, 1975)
Black Mama White Mama (Romero, USA, The Philippines, 1973)
Black Sunday (Bava, Italy, 1960)
Blackboard Jungle (Brooks, USA, 1955)
Blacula (Crain, USA, 1972)
Blade Runner (Scott, USA/Hong Kong, 1982)
The Blair Witch Project (Myrick/Sánchez. USA. 1999)
Blast! (Williams, USA, 1972)
The Blank Generation (Kral/Poe, USA, 1976)
Blazing Saddles (Brooks, USA, 1974)
The Blob (Yeaworth Jr/Doughten Jr, USA, 1958)
Blood Feast (Lewis, USA, 1963)
Blood from the Mummy's Tomb (Holt/Carreras, UK, 1971)
Blood on Satan's Claw (Haggard, UK, 1971)
Blood Simple (Coen/Coen, USA, 1984)
The Blood Splattered Bride (Aranda, Spain, 1972)
Blow Job (Warhol, US, 1963)
Blue Steel (Bigelow, 1990)
Blue Sunshine (Lieberman, USA, 1978)
Blue Velvet (Lynch, USA, 1986)
The Blues Brothers (Landis, USA, 1980)
Body Snatchers (Ferrara, USA, 1993)
Bolero (Derek, USA, 1984)
The Boogeyman (Lommel, USA, 1980)
Born in Flames (Borden, USA, 1983)
À bout de souffle (Godard, France, 1960)
Boyz N the Hood (Singleton, USA, 1991)
Braindead (Jackson, New Zealand, 1992)
Bram Stoker's Dracula (Coppola, USA, 1992)
Branded to Kill (Suzuki, Japan, 1967)
Brazil (Gilliam, UK, 1985)
The Bride of Frankenstein (Whale, USA, 1935)
Bring me the Head of Alfredo Garcia (Peckinpah, USA/Mexico, 1974)
Bringing up Baby (Hawks, USA, 1938)
The Brood (Cronenberg, Canada, 1979)
The Brother from another Planet (Sayles, USA, 1984)
Bubba Ho-tep (Coscarelli, USA, 2002)
Bubblegum Crisis (Akiyama/Gôda/Hayashi/Obari/Takayama, Japan, 1987)
A Bullet for the General (Damiani, Italy, 1966)
Burden of Dreams (Blank, USA, 1982)
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Wiene, Germany, 1920)
Café Flesh (Sayadian, US, 1982)
La cage aux folles (Molinaro, France, 1978)
Caged Heat (Demme, USA, 1974)
Caligula (Brass/Guccione, Italy/USA, 1979)
Cannibal Ferox (Lenzi, Italy, 1981)
Cannibal Holocaust (Deodato, Italy, 1979)
Cannibal Girls (Reitman, Canada, 1973)
The Cannibal Man (de la Iglesia, Spain, 1972)
Captain Blood (Curtiz, USA, 1935)
Carnival of Souls (Harvey, USA, 1962)
Carrie (De Palma, USA, 1976)
Casablanca (Curtiz, USA, 1942)
Cat People (Tourneur, USA, 1942)
Catwoman (Pitof, USA, 2004)
Chafed Elbows (Downey Sr., US, 1966)
Chainsaw Sally (Burril, USA, 2004)
Un Chant d'Amour (Genet, France, 1950)
Chelsea Girls (Morrissey/Warhol, USA, 1966)
Un Chien Andalou (Buñuel/Dali, France, 1920)
Child's Play III (Bender, USA, 1991)
A Chinese Ghost Story (Ching, Hong Kong, 1987)
Chinese Opium Den (Edison, USA, 1894)
Christiane F (Edel, West Germany, 1981)
Christmas on Mars (Coyne/Beesley/Salisbury, USA, 2008)
Ciao! Manhattan (Palmer/Weisman, USA, 1972)
Citizen Kane (Welles, USA, 1941)
City of the Living Dead (Fulci, Italy, 1980)
City on Fire (Lam, Hong Kong, 1987)
Clockers (Lee, USA, 1995)
A Clockwork Orange (Kubrick, UK/US, 1971)

Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Spielberg, USA, 1977)
The Cobra Woman (Siodmak, USA, 1944)
Coffy (Hill, USA, 1973)
College (Keaton/Horne, USA, 1927)
Conan the Barbarian (Milius, US, 1982)
The Connection (Clarke, USA, 1963)
Control (Corbijn, UK/USA/Australia/Japan, 2007)
The Cook, the Thief, his Wife, and her Lover (Greenaway, UK/The Netherlands, 1989)
The Cool and the Crazy (Witney, USA, 1958)
Crash (Cronenberg, Canada/UK, 1996)
Cry-Baby (Waters, USA, 1990)
Cry of the Banshee (Hessler, UK, 1970)
Cube (Natali, Canada, 1997)
Cure (Kurosawa, Japan, 1997)
Cutthroat Island (Harlin, USA, 1995)
Dance, Girl, Dance (Arzner, USA, 1940)
Dark City (Proyas, Australia/USA, 1998)
The Dark Knight (Nolan, USA, 2008)
Dark Star (Carpenter, USA, 1974)
Dark Water (Nakata, Japan, 2002)
Daughters of Darkness (Kümel, Belgium/France/West Germany, 1971)
Dawn of the Dead (Romero, USA, 1978)
Day of the Dead (Romero, USA, 1985)
The Day the Earth Stood Still (Wise, USA, 1951)
Day the World Ended (Corman, USA, 1955)
Dazed and Confused (Linklater, USA, 1993)
Dead or Alive (Miike, Japan, 1999)
Deadly Weapons (Wishman, USA, 1972)
Death Proof (Tarantino, USA, 2007)
Death Race 2000 (Bartel, USA, 1975)
The Decline of Western Civilization (Spheeris, USA. 1981)
Debbie Does Dallas (Clark, USA, 1978)
Deep Throat (Damiano, USA, 1972)
Deliverance (Boorman, USA, 1972)
Demon Seed (Cammell, USA, 1977)
Desperate Living (Waters, USA, 1977)
Detour (Ulmer, USA, 1975)
The Devil in Miss Jones (Damiano, USA, 1973)
The Devils (Russell, UK, 1971)
Le Diable est parmi nous (Beaudin, Canada, 1972)
Die Hard (McTiernan, USA, 1988)
Dirty Dancing (Ardolino, USA, 1987)
Django (Corbucci, Italy/Spain, 1966)
La Dolce Vita (Fellini, Italy, 1960)
Don't Look Back (Pennebaker, USA, 1967)
Donnie Darko (Kelly, USA, 2001)
Dr Strangelove or: How I Stop Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb (Kubrick, UK, 1964)
Dracula (Browning, USA, 1930)
Driller Killer (Ferrara, USA, 1979)
Drugstore Cowboy (Van Sant, USA, 1989)
Duck Amuck (Jones, USA, 1953)
Duck Soup (McCarey, USA, 1933)
Dune (Lynch, USA, 1984)
East of Borneo (Melford, USA, 1931)
Easy Rider (Hopper, USA, 1969)
Ecstasy (Machaty, Czech Republic, 1933)
Ed Wood (Burton, USA, 1994)
Edward Scissorhands (Burton, USA, 1990)
El Topo (Jodorowsky, Mexico, 1970)
The Elephant Man (Lynch, USA, 1980)
Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals (D'Amato, Italy, 1977)
Emmanuelle (Jaeckin, France, 1973)
Emperor Tomato Ketchup (Terayama, Japan, 1971)
Empire (Warhol, USA, 1964)
Enter the Dragon (Clouse, Hong Kong/USA, 1973)
Equinox (Woods/Muren/McGee, USA, 1970)
Eraserhead (Lynch, USA, 1976)
Even Dwarfs Started Small (Herzog, Germany, 1970)
Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask) (Allen, USA, 1972)
The Evil Dead (Raimi, USA, 1981)
Evil Dead II (Raimi, USA, 1987)
eXistenZ (Cronenberg, Canada/UK, 1999)
Eyes without a Face (Franju, France, 1958)
The Exorcist (Friedkin, USA, 1973)
Faces of Death (Le Cilaire, USA, 1979)
Fascination (Rollin, France, 1979)
Fame (Parker, US, 1980)
The Fan (Schmidt, Germany, 1982)
Fantastic Voyage (Fleischer, USA, 1966)
Fantômas (Feuillade, France, 1917-19)
Far from Heaven (Haynes, USA, 2002)
Fargo (Coen/Coen, USA, 1996)
Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (Meyer, USA, 1965)
Female Trouble (Waters, USA, 1974)
Ferris Bueller's Day Off (Hughes, US, 1986)
Fight Club (Fincher, USA/Germany, 1999)
The Fifth Element, (Besson, France, 1997)
Final Fantasy (Sakaguchi, Japan, 2001)

The Final Comedown (Williams, USA, 1972)
Fist of Fury (Lo, Hong Kong 1972)
Fitzcarraldo (Herzog, Peru/West Germany, 1982)
Five Deadly Venoms (Cheh, Hong Kong, 1978)
Flaming Creatures (Smith, USA, 1963)
Flavia the Heretic (Mingozzi, Italy/France, 1974)
Flesh (Morrissey, USA, 1968)
The Flower Thief (Rice, USA, 1960)
Footlight Parade (Bacon, USA, 1933)
For Y'ur Height Only (Nicart, The Philippines, 1981)
Forbidden Planet (Wilcox, USA, 1956)
Forbidden Zone (Elfman, USA, 1982)
Foxy Brown (Hill, USA, 1974)
Frankenstein (Whale, USA, 1931)
Freaks (Browning, USA, 1932)
Freddy vs. Jason (Yu, USA, 2003)
Freeway Mad II: Confessions of a Trickbaby (Bright, USA, 1999)
Friday the 13th (Cunningham, USA, 1980)
From Dusk 'till Dawn (Rodriguez, US, 1995)
Fullmetal Alchemist (Mizushima, Japan, 2003-2004)
Full Metal Yakuza (Miike, Japan, 1997)
Galaxy Quest (Parisot, USA, 1997)
Game of Death (Clouse, Hong Kong/USA, 1978)
Gas! – Or – How it Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save it (Corman, USA, 1970)
George Lucas in Love (Nussbaum, USA, 1999)
Gestapo's Last Orgy (Canevari, Italy, 1977)
Ghost in the Shell (Oshii, Japan/USA, 1995)
Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence (Oshii, Japan, 2004)
Ghost World (Zwigoff, USA, 2001)
Gimme Shelter (Maysles/Maysles, USA, 1970)
The Giant Claw (Sears, USA, 1957)
Ginger Snaps (Fawcett, Canada, 2000)
Ginger Snaps II: Unleashed (Sullivan, Canada, 2003)
Ginger Snaps III: Ginger Snaps Back (Harvey, Canada, 2004)
The Girl Can't Help it (Tashlin, USA, 1956)
Glen or Glenda (Wood Jr, USA, 1953)
Go Fish (Troche, USA, 1994)
The Godfather (Coppola, USA, 1972)
The Gods Must Be Crazy (Uys, Botswana/South Africa, 1980)
Godzilla (Honda, Japan, 1954)
Gold Diggers of 1933 (LeRoy, USA, 1933)
Gone with the Wind (Fleming, USA, 1939)
The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (Leone, Italy/Spain/West Germany, 1966)
Gordon's War (Davis, USA, 1973)
The Gospel According to St. Matthew (Pasolini, Italy, 1964)
La grande bouffe (Ferreri, France/Italy, 1973)
Grease (Kleiser, USA, 1978)
Grease 2 (Birch, USA, 1982)
The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle (Temple, UK, 1980)
Grindhouse (Rodriguez/Roth/Tarantino/Wright/Zombie, USA, 2007)
Groove (Harrison, USA, 2000)
Gummo (Korine, USA, 1997)
Gun Crazy (Lewis, USA, 1950)
Habit (Larry Fessenden, USA, 1997)
Hairspray (Waters, USA, 1988)
Halloween (Carpenter, USA, 1978)
Hallucination Generation (Mann, USA, 1966)
Hannibal (Scott, USA, 2001)
Happiness (Solondz, USA, 1998)
The Happiness of the Katakuris (Miike, Japan, 2001)
Happy Together (Kar Wai, Hong Kong, 1997)
Hard Boiled (Woo, Hong Kong, 1992)
A Hard Day's Night (Lester, UK, 1964)
The Harder They Come (Henzell, Jamaica, 1972)
Harlis (Van Ackeren, Germany, 1972)
Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle (Leiner, USA/Canada/Germany, 2004)
Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay (Hurwitz/Schlossberg, USA, 2008)
Harold and Maude (Ashby, USA, 1971)
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Columbus, USA, 2001)
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (Columbus, USA, 2002)
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (Cuarón, USA, 2004)
Harvey (Koster, USA, 1950)
Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages (Christensen, Denmark/Sweden, 1922)
Head (Refelson, USA, 1968)
Heart of Glass (Herzog, West Germany, 1976)
Heat (Morrissey, USA, 1972)
Heaven's Gate (Cimino, US, 1981)
Heavy Metal (Potterton, Canada, 1981)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (Mitchell, USA, 2001)
Heimat (Reitz, Germany, 1984)

Help! (Lester, UK, 1965)
Hellraiser (Barker, UK, 1987)
Hellzapoppin' (Potter, USA, 1941)
Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno (Bromberg/Medrea, France, 2009)
Henry and June (Kaufman, USA, 1990)
Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer (McNaughton, USA, 1990)
High Anxiety (Brooks, USA, 1977)
High Noon (Zinnemann, USA, 1952)
High School Confidential! (Arnold, USA, 1958)
The Hills Have Eyes (Craven, USA, 1977)
Hiroshima Mon Amour (Resnais, France, 1958)
Histoire d'O (Jaeckin, France, 1975)
The Hitcher (Harmon, USA, 1985)
The Hitch-Hiker (Ida Lupino, USA, 1953)
Holiday (Cukor, USA, 1938)
Hollywood Boulevard (Arkush/Dante, USA, 1976)
The Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers (Ray, USA, 1988)
The Holy Mountain (Jodorowsky, Mexico/USA, 1973)
House of a 1000 Corpses (Zombie, USA, 2003)
House on Haunted Hill (Castle, USA, 1959)
House on the Edge of the Park (Deodato, Italy, 1980)
The Hudsucker Proxy (Coen/Coen, UK/Germany/USA, 1994)
Human Traffic (Kerrigan, UK/Ireland, 1999)
I Drink your Blood (Durston, USA, 1970)
I Saw What You Did (Castle, USA, 1965)
I Spit on your Grave (Zarchi, USA, 1978)
I Walked with a Zombie (Tourneur, USA, 1943)
I Was a Teenage Werewolf (Fowler Jr., USA, 1957)
I Will Walk Like a Crazy Horse (Arrabal, France, 1973)
Ichi the Killer (Miike, Japan, 2001)
Idiocracy (Judge, USA, 2006)
If.... (Anderson, UK, 1968)
Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS (Edmonds, USA/West Germany, 1975)
I'm Not There (Haynes, USA/Germany, 2007)
Imitation of Life (Sirk, USA, 1959)
In a Lonely Place (Ray, USA, 1950)
In Bruges (McDonagh, UK/USA, 2008)
In the Realm of the Senses (Oshima, Japan, 1976)
Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (Anger, USA, 1954)
Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (Spielberg, USA, 1984)
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (Spielberg, USA, 1989)
Inferno (Argento, Italy, 1980)
Inglorious Bastards (Castellari, Italy, 1978)
Inglourious Basterds (Tarantino, USA/Germany, 2009)
Inland Empire (Lynch, France/Poland/USA, 1996)
Innerspace (Dante, USA, 1987)
The Invasion (Hirschbiegel, USA/Australia, 2007)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Siegel, USA, 1956)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Kaufman, USA, 1976)
Invocation of my Demon Brother (Anger, USA, 1969)
The Iron Horse (Ford, USA, 1924)
Irréversible (Noé, France, 2002)
The Isle (Ki-Duk, Korea, 2000)
It's Alive (Cohen, USA, 1974)
It's a Wonderful Life (Capra, USA, 1946)
Jackie Brown (Tarantino, USA, 1997)
Jailhouse Rock (Thorpe, USA, 1957)
Jaws (Spielberg, USA, 1975)
Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Akerman, Belgium, 1975)
La Jetée (Marker, France, 1962)
Joe's Apartment (Payson, USA, 1996)
Johnny Guitar (Ray, USA, 1954)
Jubilee (Jarman, UK, 1978)
Judge Dredd (Cannon, USA, 1995)
Ju-on: The Grudge (Shimizu, Japan, 2002)
Jurassic Park (Spielberg, USA, 1993)
Justine De Sade (Pierson, France, 1972)
Kill Bill Vol. 1 (Tarantino, USA, 2003)
Kill Bill Vol. 2 (Tarantino, USA, 2004)
The Killer (Woo, Hong Kong, 1989)
Killer Nun (Berruti, Italy, 1978)
The Killing (Kubrick, USA, 1956)
Kimba, the White Lion (Yamamoto/Tezuka, Japan, 1966/1994)
King Kong (Cooper/Schoedsack, USA, 1933)
King Lear (Godard, USA, 1987)
King of New York (Ferrara, USA, 1990)
King Solomon's Mines (Thompson, USA, 1985)
Kiss Me Deadly (Aldrich, USA, 1955)
Koyaanisqatsi (Reggio, USA, 1982)
Lady Terminator (Djalil, Indonesia, 1988)
Lapis (Whitney, USA, 1966)
Last Action Hero (John McTiernan, USA, 1993)
Last House on the Left (Craven, USA, 1972)
Last Tango in Paris (Bertolucci, Italy, 1972)
Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same (Clifton/Massot, UK/USA, 1976)
Legend of the Overfiend (Takayama, Japan, 1987-1995)

The Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires (Baker, UK/Singapore, 1974)
Life during Wartime (Solondz, USA, 2009)
Life of Brian (Jones, UK, 1979)
Lightning over Water (aka *Nick's Movie*) (Ray, Sweden/West Germany, 1980)
Liquid Sky (Tsukerman, USA, 1982)
Lisa and the Devil (Bava/Leone, Italy/Germany/Spain, 1974)
The Living End (Araki, USA, 1992)
Living in Bondage (Rapu, Nigeria, 1992)
London after Midnight (Browning, USA, 1927)
The Long Goodbye (Altman, USA, 1973)
The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (Jackson, USA/New Zealand, 2001)
The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (Jackson, USA/New Zealand/Germany, 2002)
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (Jackson, USA/New Zealand/Germany, 2003)
Lord of the G-Strings: Femaleship of the String (West, USA, 2003)
Lords of Dogtown (Hardwicke, USA, 2005)
Lost Highway (Lynch, France/USA, 1997)
Love and Death (Allen, France/USA, 1975)
Love Me Tender (Webb, USA, 1956)
Lucifer Rising (Anger, USA, 1980)
M (Lang, Germany, 1931)
Á ma soeur (Breillat, France, 2003)
Macabre (Castle, USA, 1958)
Mad Max (Miller, Australia, 1979)
Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior (Miller, Australia, 1981)
Mädchen in Uniform (Sagan/Froehlich, Germany, 1931)
Magic Boy (Daikuhara/Yabushita, Japan, 1959)
Magical Mystery Tour (Harrison/Knowles/Lennon/McCartney/Starr, UK, 1967)
The Maltese Falcon (Huston, USA, 1941)
Man Bites Dog (Belvaux/Bonzel/Poelvoorde, Belgium, 1992)
Man of the West (Mann, USA, 1958)
Man Facing Southeast (Subiela, Argentina, 1986)
The Man from Planet X (Ulmer, USA, 1951)
The Man Who Fell to Earth (Roeg, UK, 1976)
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (Ford, USA, 1962)
The Man Who Wasn't There (Coen/Coen, USA/UK, 2001)
The Man with the Golden Arm (Preminger, USA, 1955)
Maniac (Esper, USA, 1934)
Manos, the Hands of Fate (Warren, USA, 1966)
Mariken van Nieumeghen (Stelling, The Netherlands, 1974)
Mars Attacks! (Burton, USA, 1996)
Martin (Romero, USA, 1977)
Matinee (Dante, USA, 1993)
The Matrix (Wachowski/Wachowski, USA/Australia, 1999)
Mean Streets (Scorsese, USA, 1973)
Medea (Pasolini, Italy, 1969)
Meet me in St. Louis (Minnelli, USA, 1944)
Memento (Nolan, USA, 2000)
Men in Black (Sonnenfeld, USA, 1997)
Metropolis (Lang, Germany, 1927)
Mighty Peking Man (Ho, Hong Kong, 1977)
Mildred Pierce (Curtiz, USA, 1945)
Miller's Crossing (Coen/Coen, USA, 1990)
Miracle on 34th Street (Seaton, USA, 1947)
The Misfits (Huston, USA, 1961)
Mommie Dearest (Perry, USA, 1991)
Mondo Cane (Cavara/Jacopetti/Prosperi, Italy, 1962)
Mondo Hollywood (Cohen, USA, 1967)
Monterey Pop (Pennebaker, USA, 1968)
Monty Python and the Holy Grail (Gilliam/Jones, UK, 1975)
More (Schroeder, West Germany/France/Luxembourg, 1969)
Mortal Inheritance (Amenechi, Nigeria, 1996)
Motel Hell (Connor, USA, 1980)
Movie Orgy (Dante, USA, 1968)
Mr. Nice Guy (Kam-Bo, Hong Kong, 1997)
Ms. 45 (Ferrara, USA, 1981)
My Best Fiend (Herzog, UK/Germany/Finland/USA, 1999)
My Bloody Valentine (Mihalka, Canada, 1981)
My Darling Clementine (Ford, USA, 1946)
My Name Is Bruce (Campbell, USA, 2007)
My Name Is Nobody (Valerii/Leone, Italy/France/West Germany, 1973)
My Neighbor Totoro (Miyazaki, Japan, 1988)
My Own Private Idaho (Van Sant, USA, 1992)
Myra Breckenridge (Sarne, USA, 1970)
Naked Killer (Yiu-Leung, Hong Kong, 1992)
The Nanny (Holt, UK, 1965)

Narcotic (Esper/Sodar't, USA, 1933)
Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind (Miyazaki, Japan, 1984)
Near Dark (Bigelow, USA, 1987)
Nekromantik (Buttgereit, West Germany, 1987)
Nekromantik 2: Der Todesking (Buttgereit, Germany, 1991)
Neon Genesis Evangelion (Anno, Japan, 1995)
New Jack City (Van Peebles, USA, 1991)
New Wave Hookers (Dark, USA, 1985)
Night of the Hunter (Laughton, USA, 1955)
Night of the Lepus (Claxton, USA, 1972)
Night of the Living Dead (Romero, USA, 1968)
The Night Porter (Cavani, Italy, 1974)
Nightmare on Elm Street (Craven, USA, 1984)
Nightmare on Elm Street II: Freddy's Revenge (Sholder, USA, 1985)
Nosferatu: Symphonie des Grauens (Murnau, Germany, 1922)
Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation! (Hartley, Australia/USA, 2008)
Nothing (Natali, Canada, 2003)
Les Nuits Fauves (Collard, France, 1991)
Oedipus Rex (Pasolini, Italy, 1967)
Of Freaks and Men (Balabanov, Russia, 1998)
Office Space (Judge, USA, 1999)
Oldboy (Park, Korea, 2003)
Once Upon a Time in the West (Leone, Italy/USA, 1968)
Ong-bak (Pinkaew, Thailand, 2003)
The Opening of Misty Beethoven (Metzger, USA, 1976)
Orphée (Cocteau, France, 1950)
Otaku No Video (Mori, Japan, 1991)
Out of the Past (Tourneur, USA, 1947)
Outrageous! (Benner, Canada, 1977)
Owo Blow: The Genesis (Ogidan, Nigeria, 2007)
Palindromes (Solondz, USA, 2004)
Pandora's Box (Pabst, Germany, 1927)
The Panic in Needle Park (Schatzberg, USA, 1971)
Paranormal Activity (Pelti, USA, 2007)
The Passion of Joan of Arc (Dreyer, France, 1928)
The Passion of the Christ (Gibson, USA, 2004)
Peeping Tom (Powell, UK, 1960)
Peggy Sue Got Married (Coppola, USA, 1986)
Performance (Cammell/Roeg, UK, 1970)
Personal Best (Towne, USA, 1982)
Le petit amour (Varda, France, 1988)
Phantom of the Opera (Julian, USA, 1924)
Pink Flamingos (Waters, USA, 1972)
Pink Floyd: The Wall (Parker, UK, 1982)
Piranha (Dante, USA, 1978)
The Pirate (Minnelli, USA, 1948)
Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (Verbinski, USA, 2003)
Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest (Verbinski, USA, 2006)
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End (Verbinski, USA, 2007)
Plan 9 from Outer Space (Wood Jr., USA, 1959)
Planet of the Apes (Schaffner, USA, 1968)
Planet Terror (Rodriguez, USA, 2007)
Play it Again, Sam (Ross, USA, 1972)
Point Break (Bigelow, USA, 1991)
Poison (Haynes, USA, 1991)
Porcile (Pasolini, Italy, 1969)
Predator (McTiernan, USA, 1987)
Primer (Carruth, USA, 2004)
Prince of Darkness (Carpenter, USA, 1987)
Primitive London (Miller, UK, 1965)
Princess Mononoke (Miyazaki, Japan, 1997)
Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (Elliott, Australia, 1994)
The Producers (Brooks, USA, 1968)
Prophecy (Frankenheimer, USA, 1979)
Psycho (Hitchcock, USA, 1960)
Psych-Out (Rush, USA, 1968)
Psychomania (Sharp, UK, 1973)
Pull My Daisy (Frank/Leslie, USA, 1959)
Pulp Fiction (Tarantino, USA, 1994)
Punishment Park (Watkins, USA, 1971)
Quadrophenia (Roddam, UK, 1979)
Quatermass and the Pit (Baker, UK, 1967)
Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man (Rice, US, 1963)
A Question of Silence (Gorris, The Netherlands, 1982)
Rabbit's Moon (Anger, USA, 1950)
Race with the Devil (Starrett, USA, 1975)
The Rainbow Thief (Jodorowsky, UK, 1990)
Raiders of the Lost Ark (Spielberg, USA, 1981)
Rambo: First Blood Part II (Cosmatos, USA, 1985)
Rape of the Vampire (Rollin, France, 1968)
Rear Window (Hitchcock, USA, 1954)
Rebel without a Cause (Ray, USA, 1955)
Reefer Madness (aka *Tell Your Children*) (Gasnier, USA, 1936)

Re-Animator (Gordon, USA, 1985)
Re-Entry (Belson, USA, 1964)
Repo Man (Cox, USA, 1984)
Reservoir Dogs (Tarantino, USA, 1992)
Resident Evil (Anderson, UK/France/Germany, 2002)
Return of the Living Dead (O'Bannon, USA, 1985)
Ride Lonesome (Boetticher, USA, 1959)
Ride the High Country (Peckinpah, USA, 1962)
Ringu (Nakata, Japan, 1998)
Rio Bravo (Hawks, USA, 1959)
Rita of the West (Baldi, Italy, 1967)
Robocop (Verhoeven, USA, 1987)
Robot Monster (Tucker, USA, 1953)
Rock 'n' Roll High School (Arkush, USA, 1979)
Rock around the Clock (Sears, USA, 1956)
Rock, Rock, Rock! (Price, USA, 1956)
The Rocky Horror Picture Show (Sharman, UK/USA, 1975)
Romance (Breillat, France, 1999)
The Room (Wiseau, USA, 2003)
Rose Hobart (Cornell, USA, 1936)
Rosemary's Baby (Polanski, USA, 1969)
Sailor Moon (Sato, Japan, 1992)
Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Pasolini, Italy, 1975)
Salon Kitty (Brass, Italy, Germany, 1976)
Santa Fe Satan (McGoohan, UK/USA, 1974)
Santa Sangre (Jodorowsky, Mexico/Italy, 1989)
The Saragosa Manuscript (Has, Poland, 1965)
Scanners (Cronenberg, Canada, 1981)
Scarface (De Palma, USA, 1983)
Schoolgirl Report (Hofbauer, GER, 1971–1975)
Scorned (Stevens, USA, 1994)
Scorpio Rising (Anger, USA, 1964)
SCUM Manifesto (Seyrig/Roussopoulos, France, 1976)
The Searchers (Ford, USA, 1956)
The Serpent and the Rainbow (Craven, USA, 1987)
Se7en (Fincher, USA, 1995)
Seven Samurai (Kurosawa, Japan, 1954)
Sex and Zen (Mak, Hong Kong, 1991)
Sex and Zen III (Chang, Hong Kong, 1998)
Sex: The Annabel Chong Story (Lewis, USA, 1999)
Shaft (Parks, USA, 1971)
Shaft in Africa (Guillerman, USA, 1973)
Shake, Rattle and Rock! (Cahn, USA, 1956)
Shakespeare in Love (Madden, USA/UK, 1998)
Shane (Stevens, USA, 1953)
Shaun of the Dead (Wright, UK/France, 2004)
Shivers (Cronenberg, Canada, 1975)
Shogun Assassin (Houston, Japan/USA, 1980)
Sholay (Sippy, India, 1975)
The Shooting (Hellman, USA, 1967)
Showgirls (Verhoeven, France/USA, 1995)
Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist (Dick, USA, 1997)
Silence of the Lambs (Demme, USA, 1991)
Silent Movie (Brooks, USA, 1976)
Singin' in the Rain (Donen/Kelly, USA, 1952)
Sins of the Fleshapoids (Kuchar, USA, 1965)
Sissi (Marischka, 1955)
Sissi, the Young Empress (Marischka, Austria, 1956)
Sissi, Fateful Years of an Empress (Marischka, Austria, 1957)
Skidoo (Preminger, USA, 1968)
Slacker (Linklater, USA, 1991)
Sleep (Warhol, USA, 1963)
Sleep with Me (Kelly, USA, 1994)
Sleeper (Allen, USA, 1973)
Sleepy Hollow (Burton, USA/Germany, 1999)
Smithereens (Seidelman, USA, 1982)
Snakes on a Plane (Ellis, USA, 2006)
Snuff (Findlay/Fredriksson/Nuchtern, US, 1976)
Some Like it Hot (Wilder, USA, 1963)
Suicide Club (Sono, Japan, 2002)
The Sound of Music (Wise, USA, 1965)
Space Is the Place (Coney, USA, 1974)
Spaceballs (Brooks, USA, 1987)
Spartacus (Kubrick, USA, 1960)
Speed (de Bont, USA, 1994)
Spider Baby (Hill, USA, 1968)
Spiderbabe (Crash, USA, 2003)
Spirits of the Dead (Vadim/Malle/Fellini, France/Italy, 1968)
Splice (Natali, Canada/France, 2010)
A Star Is Born (Cukor, USA, 1954)
Star Trek (Desilu Productions, Norway Productions, Paramount Television, USA, 1966–1969)
Star Wars (Episode I: The Phantom Menace) (Lucas, USA, 1999 US)
Star Wars (*Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (Lucas, USA, 2002)
Star Wars (Episode III: Revenge of the Sith) (Lucas, USA, 2005)

Star Wars (Episode IV: A New Hope) (Lucas, USA, 1977)
Star Wars (Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back) (Kershner, USA, 1980)
Star Wars (Episode VI: Return of the Jedi) (Marquand, USA, 1983)
Stardust Memories (Allen, USA, 1980)
Starship Troopers (Verhoeven, USA, 1997)
Starship Troopers 2: Hero of the Federation (Tippett, USA, 2004)
Stop Making Sense (Demme, USA, 1984)
Strange Days (Bigelow, USA, 1995)
Straw Dogs (Sam Peckinpah, USA, 1971)
Streets of Fire (Hill, USA, 1984)
Successive Slidings of Pleasure (Robbe-Grillet, France, 1974)
Suicide Club (Sono, JAP, 2001)
Sullivan's Travels (Sturges, USA, 1941)
Sunset Boulevard (Wilder, USA, 1950)
Super Fly (Parks Jr, USA, 1972)
Super Fly T.N.T. (O'Neal, USA, 1973)
Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story (Haynes, USA, 1988)
Suspiria (Argento, Italy, 1977)
Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (Van Peebles, USA, 1971)
Switchblade Sisters (Hill, USA, 1975)
Sylvia Scarlett (Cukor, USA, 1935)
Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (Park, Korea, 2002)
The Tall T (Boetticher, USA, 1957)
Tank Girl (Talalay, USA, 1995)
Targets (Bogdanovich, USA, 1968)
Tarzan the Ape Man (Van Dyke, USA, 1932)
Tarzan and his Mate (Gibbons, USA, 1934)
Taxi Driver (Scorsese, USA, 1976)
Teenage Zombies (Warren, USA, 1957)
The Tenderness of the Wolves (Lommel, Germany, 1973)
Tenebrae (Argento, Italy, 1982)
Terminal Island (Rothman, USA, 1973)
Terminator II: Judgment Day (Cameron, USA, 1991)
The Terror (Corman, USA, 1963)
Tesis (Amenabar, Spain, 1996)
Tetsuo, Man of Iron (Tsukamoto, Japan, 1989)
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper, USA, 1974)
Them! (Douglas, USA, 1954)
They Live (Carpenter, USA, 1988)
The Thing (Carpenter, USA, 1982)
Thirteen (Hardwicke, USA, 2003)
This Filthy World (Garlin, USA, 2006)
This Is Spinal Tap (Reiner, USA, 1982)
Thriller – A Cruel Picture (Vibenius, Sweden, 1973)
Thundercrack! (McDowell, USA, 1975)
The Tingler (Castle, USA, 1959)
Titanic (Cameron, USA, 1997)
Tokyo Decadence (Murakami, Japan, 1992)
Tommy (Russell, UK, 1975)
Top Gun (Scott, USA, 1986)
Top Hat (Sandrich, USA, 1935)
Touch of Evil (Welles, USA, 1958)
A Touch of Zen (Hu, Hong Kong, 1969)
Towering Inferno (Guillermin/Allen, USA, 1974)
Trainspotting (Boyle, UK, 1996)
Trash (Morrissey, USA. 1970)
The Trip (Corman, USA, 1967)
Triumph of the Will (Riefenstahl, Germany, 1935)
Trog (Francis, UK, 1970)
Troll 2 (Fragasso, Italy, 1990)
Tron (Lisberger, USA/Taiwan, 1982)
Troops (Rubio, USA, 1998)
Trouble Every Day (Denis, France/Germany/Japan, 2001)
Trouble Man (Dixon, USA, 1972)
Turkish Delight (Verhoeven, The Netherlands, 1973)
Tusk (Jodorowsky, France, 1980)
Twelve Monkeys (Gilliam, USA, 1995)
Twilight (Hardwicke, USA, 2008)
The Typewriter, the Rifle and the Movie Camera (Simon, USA/UK, 1996)
Two Lane Blacktop (Hellman, USA, 1971)
Unico (Hirata/Tezuka, Japan, 1981)
The Unknown (Browning, USA, 1927)
Up in Smoke (Adler, USA, 1978)
The Usual Suspects (Singer, USA, 1995)
Vampire Princess Miyu (Hirano, Japan, 1988)
Vampyr (Dreyer, France/Germany, 1932)
Vampyros Lesbos (Franco, West Germany/Spain, 1971)
Velvet Goldmine (Haynes, UK/USA, 1998)
The Velvet Vampire (Rothman, USA, 1971)
Videodrome (Cronenberg, Canada, 1983)
Vincent (Burton, USA, 1982)
Vinyl (Warhol, USA, 1965)
Violent Cop (Kitano, Japan, 1989)

Visitor Q (Miike, Japan, 2001)
Viva (Biller, USA, 2007)
Viva la muerte (Arrabal, France/Tunisia, 1971)
Wanda, the Sadistic Hypnotist (Coraito, USA, 1969)
The War Game (Watkins, UK, 1965)
The War of the Worlds (Haskin, USA, 1956)
The Warriors (Hill, USA, 1979)
Waterworld (Reynolds, USA, 1995)
We Can't Go Home Again (Ray, USA, 1976)
Weekend (Godard, France/Italy, 1967)
Welcome Home Brother Charles (Fanaka, USA, 1975)
Welcome to the Dollhouse (Solondz, USA, 1995)
Wes Craven's New Nightmare (Craven, USA, 1994)
What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (Aldrich, USA, 1962)
When Harry Met Sally (Reiner, USA, 1989)
When Night Is Falling (Rozema, Canada, 1994)
The Wicker Man (Hardy, UK, 1973)
The Wild Angels (Corman, USA, 1966)
The Wild Bunch (Peckinpah, USA, 1969)
Wild at Heart (Lynch, USA, 1990)
The Wild One (Benedek, USA, 1953)
Wild in the Streets (Shear, USA, 1968)
Wings of Desire (Wenders, Germany, 1987)
Witchfinder General (Reeves, UK, 1968)
The Wizard of Oz (Fleming, USA, 1939)
Woodstock (Wadleigh, USA, 1970)
The World's Biggest Gang Bang (Bone, USA, 1995)
WR: Mysteries of an Organism (Makaveyev, Yugoslavia, 1971)
X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes (Corman, USA, 1963)
Yantra (Whitney, USA, 1957)
Yojimbo (Kurosawa, Japan, 1961)
Young Frankenstein (Brooks, USA, 1974)
Zelig (Allen, USA, 1983)
Zero de conduite (Vigo, France, 1933)
Ziegfried Follies (Ayers/Del Ruth/Lewis/Minnelli/Pye/Sidney/Walters, USA, 1945)
Zombie Flesh Eaters (Fulci, Italy, 1979)

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Figure 7.1 Year – 1936; Country – USA; Produced and directed by Joseph Cornell.

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Figure 15.1 Year – 1968; Country – UK/USA; Produced and directed by Stanley Kubrick.

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21
MIDNIGHT MOVIES

Carter Moulton

Midnight *movies*

Though the term "midnight movies" appears in trade journals as early as the 1920s to describe the methods by which a filmmaker might construct an "'apparent' night scene" while shooting in daylight (Richardson 1927), its relationship to "cult" or "underground" film begins in the 1950s and early 1960s. As local television stations began dumping low-budget films into their late-night time slots, outside the home, midnight screenings of "obscene" films like Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* and Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* were being cancelled by city officials and theater managers who were concerned that the "low quality of the underground" might damage their theater's reputation (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 51). Over the course of the 1960s, though, a number of moviehouse owners in New York and Los Angeles began to recognize the potential of the underground market as a means of drawing in a younger generation of "countercultural" filmgoers, many of whom were marginalized by mainstream culture along the lines of class, sexuality, and politics. Ben Barenholtz of the Elgin Theater in New York opened his doors to the idea of midnight screenings in 1970, hoping they "would attract hipsters, encourage a sense of 'personal discovery,' and stimulate word of mouth" (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 93).

The first film to find lasting success at the Elgin was Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970), an apocalyptic Mexican western with bizarre religious symbolism, explicit gore and sexuality, and "freakshow" characters who rebel against their oppressors. The film received next-to-no advertising, but word-of-mouth buzz helped *El Topo* sell out the Elgin for six straight months. This word-of-mouth snowballed into public discourses with help from celebrity endorsements (John Lennon championed the film) and mainstream media coverage (the *Village Voice* referred to *El Topo* at the Elgin as a ritualistic experience akin to "midnight mass") (O'Brien 1971).

Following the success of *El Topo*, the midnight movie circuit exploded into a vibrant and lucrative model of alternate cinema exhibition. Scholar and filmmaker Stuart Samuels (2005) canonizes *El Topo* and five other films – *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *The Harder They Come* (1972), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *Eraserhead* (1977) – as the definitive midnight movies "hits," although many more films gained traction on the midnight circuit. Older exploitation movies and "forgotten crap" (Patterson 2007) like *Reefer Madness* (a 1936 film about the life-threatening dangers of marijuana) and *Freaks* (a 1932 film

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about circus "freaks" which was banned for 30 years in the United Kingdom), also held regular midnight slots throughout the 1970s.

Scholars have taken two major approaches when researching the midnight movie phenomenon. The first, "midnight *movies*," approaches midnight movies as a set of cult films and emphasizes the aesthetics, narratives, themes, genres, and production and distribution histories of these "successful" midnight texts. And because the phenomenon emerged in a time of (counter) cultural anxiety and precariousness, midnight movies have been conceptualized as a group of transgressive movies with "radical aesthetics," camp, taboo or exploitative content, "graphic depictions of sex and violence," "explorations of immorality," and an "anti-establishment stance" (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 14). A few highlights include zombie cannibalism in *Night of the Living Dead*, incest and coprophagia in *Pink Flamingos*, transvestism in *Rocky Horror*, drug use in *The Harder They Come*, and the infamous freak "baby" in *Eraserhead*. This has led to the proposition that aesthetic and stylistic transgression (Grant 1991), sexual excess (Studlar 1991), or subversive racial politics (Kinkade & Katovich 1992) are core characteristics of the midnight movie. Others such as Gregory Waller (1991) examine the genres of midnight movies, noting that oppositional or lowbrow faire was the most fertile for cultivation on the 1980s midnight circuit, in the form of comedies which challenged "good" taste (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*), heavy-metal movies (*Pink Floyd: The Wall*), and campy horror films (*An American Werewolf in London*).

In addition to their transgressive images and themes, midnight movies have also been categorized by their failures. The backstories of Ed Wood's "failure" as an auteur and Bela Lugosi's "failed" comeback inject so-bad-they're-good movies like *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and *Glen or Glenda?* with a cultish aura. Similarly, films which flopped during their original release were picked up and embraced by the midnight circuit. *The Harder They Come*, *Rocky Horror*, and *Night of the Living Dead* all constituted critical and commercial failures when they were first released in the United States – the latter even failed elementary distribution procedure when it entered the public domain by way of a forgotten copyright notice.

While these insights are invaluable, one problem with "midnight *movie*" approaches when taken alone is that they often use the terms "midnight movie" and "cult film" synonymously, at times even interchanging one for the other within the same sentence. The conflation of these two terms not only diminishes the intricacies and relevance of "midnight movies" as both a concept and an experience, but it also leads scholars to either privilege a select grouping of films or to paint an unnecessarily-nostalgic "golden age" in film history rather than to examine a cultural practice which continues to evolve today. As a result, scholars sometimes engage in what Matt Hills (2015: 104) calls a "mainstreaming discourse" which frames technological advancements that offer ever more accessible and "easy" forms of consumption – the VCR, Netflix, and YouTube – as detrimental to the subcultural capital of cult fandom. Hoberman, for instance (1983: 328), suggests that by the end of the 1980s "serious" midnight movies were fading and that "students no longer head to cinemas at midnight looking for a participatory and collective experience that might change their lives." Indeed, the arrival of the VCR prompted many of the original midnight theaters to close their doors by the end of the 1980s (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 14) and only a handful of "midnight *movies"* would gain traction over the next three decades, among them *Liquid Sky*, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, Donnie Darko,* and *The Room*.

Yet, while the 1980s and 1990s lacked new midnight-movie "originals," they gave rise to important trends which wholly contradict the "midnight *movies*" approach: most notably a co-option of midnight exhibition practices by mainstream multiplex cinemas and Hollywood distributors. In 1980, for instance, a number of theaters held midnight premiere screenings of S*tar Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*. Echoing the media coverage of *El Topo* ten years

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earlier, The Seattle-Post Intelligencer (Egan 1980) described these screenings as religious, ritualistic experiences: "The midnight show was for the most religious of followers, and that showed in the instant recognition every nuance and slice of trivia evoked." Franchise and tentpole releases like *Star Wars Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi* (1983), *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992), *Jurassic Park* (1993), and *Titanic* (1997) also received limited midnight premieres throughout this period.

The monumental midnight release of *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) precipitated a model in which midnight premieres became not only normalized as an exhibition practice but also packaged and sold as exclusive "events." This co-option of midnight consumption culture emerged as a mode of harnessing the fleeting nature of time to construct more exclusive, inaccessible spaces within a mainstream market of accessibility and social acceleration (Hills 2015). Other factors that propelled the co-option process include an increasing cultural fascination with box-office numbers and records, the instantaneity of social media and digital word-of-mouth, a sharp collapsing of a film's average theatrical run and theatrical window, and a heightened debate over public and private modes of consumption (Moulton 2014: 361).

Since 2000, multi-film franchises like *Harry Potter*, *The Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Transformers,* and Marvel's "Cinematic Universe" continue to break midnight box-office records. In 2015, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2's* midnight record of $43.5 million – which constitutes an incredible 11% of its domestic revenue – was shattered by *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* ($57 million).[1] Midnight premieres are now often pushed to earlier, Thursday-evening time slots – a move that began with *The Matrix Reloaded* in 2003 (10 P.M. showing) and intensified in 2012 after the shooting in Aurora, Colorado at a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises.*

In addition to midnight blockbuster premieres, midnight cinemagoing continues today primarily in two other forms: a "meta-midnight" circuit and "experiential cinema" (Atkinson & Kennedy 2016a). The first, a "meta-midnight" circuit, which flows through college towns and independent cinemas around the world, continues the regular screening of cult films at midnight. Film festival programming like the Toronto International Film Festival's "Midnight Madness" and South-By-Southwest's "Midnighters" also fit into this meta-midnight model, wherein audiences are "aware of the legacy of the midnight movie phenomenon" and contribute to the "heritage of the phenomenon by keeping it alive" (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 15). The notion that meta-midnight audiences are cognizant of a cinemagoing tradition larger than themselves makes sense given the "just-before-my-childhood" nostalgia – films like *Back to the Future*, *The Goonies*, *Ghost World*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Labyrinth*, and *Blue Velvet* – that pervades the meta-midnight circuit today. Additionally, these films allow a slightly older group of filmgoers to revisit their childhood favorites while displaying a "badge of honor" – a retroactive, pre-subcultural capital in the form of memories and lived experience (Hills 2015: 108).

Second, "experiential cinema," or what Donna de Ville (2011: 1) calls "full immersion film events," constitute more explicitly-thematized and social exhibition contexts which are usually offered as one-off or semi-annual special events. Experiential cinema programming enhances and augments film screenings through "synchronous live performance, site-specific locations, technological intervention, social media engagement, and all manner of simultaneous interactive moments including singing, dancing, eating, drinking, and smelling" (Atkinson & Kennedy 2016a: 139). In this market, specialty exhibitors – including the Alamo Drafthouse, Rooftop Cinema Club, Secret Cinema, and the El Capitan Theatre – often become the subject of cult followings themselves (de Ville 2011: 14). Special-event offerings such as quote-a-longs (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *The Princess Bride)* and sing-a-longs (*Frozen*, *The Sound of Music*) also belong in this category.

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Fitting the widespread incorporation of midnight exhibition into textual or aesthetic approaches to midnight movies presents a challenge, since many mainstream films – especially blockbusters – simply cannot be explained using a model which emphasizes oppositional aesthetics, transgressive textuality, or commercial failure. Mathijs and Sexton (2011: 215) make an attempt by proposing that these newer midnight blockbusters might also be explained through excess, as being "too big," "supersized" texts which cram every nook of public culture with their special effects and "illogical, unhinged stories." They (2011: 217) and other scholars have also cited the pre-sold, intertextual nature of blockbusters to suggest that such films often contain "built-in cult potential" found either in related materials that already have cult followings (books, video games, theme park rides, board games, previous films) or in "pre-existing worlds" in which fans can easily enter ("The Wizarding World," Middle-Earth, or Gotham City).

A second approach to midnight movies, which examines the social, participatory, collective practices involved in midnight exhibition and filmgoing, provides a broader conceptual framework for understanding the connections between films as diverse as *Freaks, Harold and Maude*, and *Iron Man*. Shifting the emphasis to "*midnight* movies," this approach treats midnight movies as "the most social form of cinemagoing" (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 301) and refuses to strip films from their indispensable reception contexts. Here, midnight movies are defined not as a group of films or aesthetics but as distinct phenomenological events in the spaces where films, screens, and cult audiences meet. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I build on this work by conceptualizing "*midnight* movies" through four specific phenomenological sensations: *exclusivity*, *liveness*, *collectivity,* and *thematic immersion* – or, an intense closeness with the themes of the film text. Recent trends in blockbuster exhibition emphasize that the employment of "midnight" here is not necessarily literal but evokes cultified cinemagoing practices – such as long lines, sing-a-long participation, costuming, trivia, fan performance, prop-use, etc. – set apart from everyday, conventional modes of filmgoing.

Midnight movies

Exclusivity

Midnight movies bring with them a "sense of a truly unique, forbidden experience" set apart from the rest of the world (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 160). Writing on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, J.P. Telotte (1991: 103) also observes this "magical change or transformation" of the cinema auditorium at midnight, as onscreen media and offscreen activities construct an energy and aura unbeknownst to and set apart from "ordinary" cultural rhythms. This phenomenological exclusivity, or the notion that audiences feel as if they are taking part in a more "eventful," "special" form of cinemagoing, is *constructed* and *experienced* by both fan and industry practice, namely through modulations in *temporality* (the amount of time spent at the theater, the late-night showtime), *sociality* (the intensification of audience participation and interaction), and *materiality* (the construction of a themed environment which surrounds the film screening). Most obviously, the hour of midnight itself brings with it a certain built-in exclusivity since, by attending a movie in the late hours of the night – when much of the outside world is fast asleep – audiences distinguish themselves from more accessible, "mainstream" modes of cinema consumption.

Undoubtedly the most-studied midnight movie, *Rocky Horror* points to another form of exclusivity which emerges through social and participatory activity. In the autumn of 1976, a group of cinemagoers began "talking back" to characters, providing "counterpoint dialogue" in the form of "wisecrack retorts" such as answering rhetorical questions or mocking and scolding onscreen characters – "Buy an umbrella, you cheap bitch!" was yelled when Janet

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uses a newspaper to shield herself from the rain (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 176). A few weeks later, coinciding with Halloween, fans began dressing up as *Rocky Horror* characters. Prop-aided activities were soon worked into the script: bells were rung; rice, hot dogs, toast, playing cards, and toilet paper were tossed around; water guns were fired, umbrellas were opened – activities which, importantly, coincided with specific scenes of the film. Costumed characters began running to the front of the auditorium to perform mid-screening "floor shows" – the most notable being "The Time Warp" – ranging from improvisational lip-synching to highly-choreographed dance sequences.

Because the social and participatory experience of *Rocky Horror* is so potent and phenomenal, it sometimes obscures the larger system of midnight filmgoing in which it is situated. The link between "midnight movies" and participatory cinemagoing can be found as early as the 1930s, when films were screened at midnight as part of "formal affairs" such as fundraisers and political conventions. These upper-class functions – which brought with them an additional class-based form of exclusivity – enveloped film screenings in social activities such as "patriotic dances," banquet dinners, and as one journalist observed at the midnight gala of *Broadway To Hollywood*, "general hoop-la outside the theater while the invited audience was gathering" (Mantle 1933).[2] Some of the earliest midnight exhibitions in 1960s New York also constituted "social events" where drugs, live music, and conversation all figured into the experience – they were "a lot like a party," as Andy Warhol remembered them (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 177). The most widely-used prop in midnight movie history, marijuana, perfumed the screenings of *El Topo*, *Reefer Madness*, *The Harder They Come,* and *Eraserhead*; at revival screenings of *Night of the Living Dead*, sections of campy dialogue were spoken in unison (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 126); live performance, scratch-n-sniff "Smell-O-Vision" cards, and complimentary "Pink Phlegmingo" vomit bags accompanied screenings of John Waters' *Multiple Maniacs*, *Polyester*, and *Pink Flamingos*, respectively*;* theaters in Australia screened *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* in "Dragarama" by installing disco balls and colored lights which were activated during the film's final party scene (Cettl 2010: 8).

Today's midnight exclusivity builds on earlier exhibition traditions. Whereas *Rocky Horror* exhibitors circulated pre-printed tickets and allowed advanced-booking, today's promotional campaigns for cult blockbusters liken the ticket-purchasing process to a Broadway show, calling on audiences to "Pre-book your tickets to the 3D event of the year" (Moulton 2014: 363); 1970s New York theaters permitted marijuana use in the auditorium, while contemporary exhibitors favor on-tap alcohol at their midnight programs; variations of the disco-induced "Dragaramas" of *Priscilla* continue at Secret Cinema's dance-party productions of *Grease* and *Dirty Dancing*; and, like the distribution of vomit bags at screenings of *Pink Flamingos*, exhibitors today provide free whoopee cushions (*Labyrinth*), inflatable "Inigo Montoya" swords (*The Princess Bride*), and franchise-specific "giveaways."

A few examples of these midnight giveaways include IMAX's "12:01" poster series for blockbusters such as *Cinderella, The Avengers* and *Skyfall*; collectible figurines at *The Amazing Spider-Man*; temporary tattoos at *Divergent*; and Harry Potter-inspired 3D glasses at *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*. For premiere screenings of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, theater lobbies were transformed into storefronts for "Galaxy Premiere" merchandise, including individually numbered collectable tickets (30,000 were printed) inlaid with gold foil and tucked between sheets of acrylic. These "exclusive" giveaways in particular incentivize midnight screenings and make holdable an otherwise-immaterial experience of cinemagoing.

These examples may at first appear to contradict the grassroots, word-of-mouth spirit of midnight cinemagoing since, as properties of conglomerate Hollywood, their screenings are highly constructed, controlled, and commercial. Yet, as Mathijs and Sexton remind us (2011: 242),

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even the midnight movies of the '60s and '70s did not emerge through a purely "'bottom-up' process." The implications here are threefold. First, it illustrates that pre-co-opted midnight movies were always in a sense co-opted, made possible and *constructed* by exhibitors and distributors. Consequently, "events that are 'manufactured, packaged, and controlled' should not necessarily be regarded as negating cult value" (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 242).[3] Second, it means acknowledging the existence of power hierarchies among and within midnight communities. McCulloch (2011: 200–201), Mathijs and Sexton (2011: 176), and Grant (1991: 130) note that midnight participation is often accompanied by an "implicit pressure" to follow and conform to those with more knowledge, experience, and in turn, control in shaping midnight practices. Third, as Mark Jancovich (2002: 314) points out, although midnight movies first emerged and continue to be embraced as liberatory spaces for marginalized and underrepresented communities, midnight audiences "do not share a single, and certainly not a uniformly oppositional, attitude" toward mainstream society. They function not through a mechanism of opposition to mainstream but through a subcultural identity predicated on distinctiveness, "rarity," and "exclusivity" (Jancovich 2002: 309). Seen in this light, the cult value of blockbuster premieres and experiential cinemas resides in their ability to construct phenomenologically exclusive reception spaces – spaces which are felt as distinct from but in reality are shaped through commercial media industries.

Secret Cinema, a London-based experiential cinema company, offers highly-thematized screening events in which fans, explorable film-specific sets, and hired actors coalesce in ways that both intensify the film's reception and craft phenomenologically new, alternate narratives within the film's thematic framework. They promote their experiential screenings through a motto of "Tell No One," a model which invites fans to purchase expensive tickets without knowing which film will be screened – or even where it will be screened. Through an "aesthetic of secrecy" (Kennedy & Atkinson 2016b: 254), Secret Cinema's promotional campaigns drop thematic clues in social media spaces in the form of atmospheric trailers, carefully-worded riddles, and half-obscured photographs. Nick Curtis of *The Evening Standard* (2012) describes his ticket-purchasing experience as such:

> In November I attended Secret Cinema's screening of Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption*. After signing up online, I was issued with a new identity, Hal Wood, by the 'State of Oak Hampton' and told to report to Bethnal Green Library one Sunday evening. There were obscure clues to the film's identity (I thought it was *12 Angry Men*), hints that 1940s-style men's suits would be suitable apparel, under which guests should wear long johns and a T-shirt, for reasons that later became apparent.

Here, exclusivity is constructed by purposely concealing information in a medium and a market which typically provide instant gratification and open access.

Crucially, once midnight fans step into these reception spaces, they construct their own iterations of exclusivity and eventfulness through a process of "cultification" (Hills 2006: 162) in which typical, everyday cinemagoing practices are "cultified" through *elongated*, *immediate*, and *intense* fan engagement. Just as cult fans engage with movie texts over a long period of time by quoting, re-watching, and discussing, midnight fans also *elongate* the "ordinary" practice of going to the cinema. They purchase tickets days or weeks in advance; they anticipate, consume, and theorize pre-textual material – sometimes attending other film screenings just to catch the premiere of a teaser trailer; they re-watch the film to rehearse their cues; they buy props or stitch costumes; they plan pre-screening meet ups and contests; and they arrive to the theater hours or days early for a spot in line; and they socialize before, [sometimes] during, and

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after a film's screening. Hoberman & Rosenbaum (1983: 181) note that *Rocky Horror* queues became social events in and of themselves, spaces where fans would "swap information, sing and dance on the sidewalk, compare their costumes," and discuss potential mid-screening cues. *Star Wars: Episode I* fans displayed this social elongation on national TV during CNN's "live, exclusive" interviews of fan queues. More recently, Hogwarts "house parties," official *Hobbit* "line parties," and more casual tailgating continue to cultify cinemagoing by expanding and stretching the spatiotemporal practice of moviegoing in outward directions.

Liveness and collectivity

Midnight fans also cultify and experience a mode of cinemagoing that is distinct from mainstream cinema receptions because of its heightened sense of "liveness." Martin Barker's work (2013: 57) compares various fields – sports studies, television studies, film studies, music studies, among others – to conclude that most scholars conceptualize liveness as a phenomenon which arises through a *simultaneity* of production and reception, a *bodily co-presence* between performers and viewers, and an *experienced risk* wherein "the performance is not 'locked,' and might be shaped by the audience's responses." This would seem to disqualify the pre-recorded, non-present, packaged experiences cinema offers its viewers; but at midnight, fans themselves become producers, performers, and shapers of textual and discursive meaning – as illustrated by Nick Curtis' aforementioned transformation into "Hal Wood." John Fiske (1992: 37) refers to these fan contributions as "enunciative productivities."

During midnight screenings of *The Room,* for instance, "fans" refashion themselves into improvisers, impersonators, cultural critics, and Tommy-tormentors as they dress up in tuxedos, throw footballs around the auditorium, toss spoons at the sight of the stock photo artwork in Tommy's Apartment, and cheer on the camera – "Go! Go! Go!" – as it yet again transitions between scenes by tracking across the Golden Gate Bridge. At other midnight events, franchise-specific information is shared and debated during trivia, costume, and impersonation contests; fan performances of original songs and poems pepper familiar worlds with new stories and emotional associations; costumed fans actively "try on" different identities, negotiating and articulating the (often hilarious) differences between superheroes and themselves. These live-action role plays may become quite intense – lightsaber or spell-casting duels in the cinema lobby, for instance – and serve as pre-textual entertainment for all midnight attendees. Borrowing from other "live" formats such as theater (role-playing), concerts (performance), sporting events (tailgating), and game shows (trivia), these enunciations transform cinemas into themed, electrically live spaces of participation distinct from the pre-programmed, prizeless, and unspecific nature of conventional pre-screening entertainment.

Experiential cinema, the most phenomenologically "live" of the midnight categories, may utilize outdoor or open-air screening spaces (Street Food Cinema and Rooftop Cinema Club), themed menus ("Tattoine Sunset" cocktails served at *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*) or live scoring (performances of John Williams' score alongside *Home Alone*) to infuse screenings with new, unorthodox sensory experiences (Atkinson & Kennedy 2016a). Fans who attend Alamo Drafthouse: Rolling Roadshow's annual "*Jaws* On The Water" view *Jaws* atop floating inner-tubes while scuba divers swim underneath and grab at their legs (de Ville 2011: 3). Secret Cinema plants performers – whose job often concerns pushing an event narrative forward – among the also-costumed audience, making attendees and actresses indistinguishable from one another. At productions of *Casablanca*, audiences might be invited to dance by a charming stranger, questioned by immigration officers, or approached by a "Hungarian wife who needs money to fly to the sanctuary of America" (Kingsford-Smith 2013) – or, at Secret Cinema's *28*

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Days Later, they might find themselves covered in fake blood, strapped into laboratory beds, and "forced" to watch the film. It should be noted that even in these industry-constructed spaces of extreme phenomenological immediacy, fans play an active role in contributing to and reshaping them.

Regardless of the degree to which "liveness" imbues a midnight movie experience, midnight fans feel a sense of "alive-ness," what Barker calls "eventness," or "the creation of and participation in senses of heightened cultural togetherness" in the contexts of what fans perceive to be a once-in-a-lifetime gathering (2013: 57). This construction of subcultural togetherness begins merely by showing up to the "once-in-a-lifetime" event. Here the act of "having been there" is an "authenticating experience" which acts as a form of subcultural capital (Hills 2015: 105). The prestige and self-love that accompanies "having been there" denotes a level of commitment; it may indeed involve the hour of midnight (a commitment to stay awake), the price (a commitment to pay), the duration (a commitment to endure), the logistics (a commitment to research and plan ahead), or the location (a commitment to travel). Midnight fans actively choose to take part in a more inaccessible, taxing form of cinemagoing. They therefore tend to make assumptions about and project themselves onto other attendees, positing them as more committed, knowledgeable, and like-minded than typical cinemagoers (Moulton 2014: 371; de Ville 2011: 12).

Driven by this "impression of a collective effort," (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 19) midnight crowds emerge as partly-imagined communities built on respect, affection, collectivity, homage, and camaraderie (Kawin 1991: 24; Mathijs & Mendik 2007: 4–8). Non-communal or negative behavior which might rupture this communalistic energy is regarded as violative (Moulton 2014: 372), and, while midnight fans can acquire subcultural capital through the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of a costume (Hills 2002: 133), the prestige that accompanies a trivia prize, or the laughter that follows a funny comment, fans who flaunt or try too hard to earn subcultural capital are often met with rejection (McCollugh 2011: 211).

Thematic immersion

In this final section, I want to suggest that cultified sensations of exclusivity, liveness, and (sub) cultural togetherness – when experienced in thematically-continuous screening spaces – can propel a process of *thematic immersion* in which fan phenomenologies move inward through the screen from the cinema auditorium into the thematic world of the text – *and that they do so collectively.* This notion of perceptual inward movement into the thematic world of the film is not a radically new idea. Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983: 16) hint at it when they liken midnight movie viewing to Catholic transubstantiation, as "a spiritual passage from the physicality of a seat in a darkened theater to the physicality of an imaginary time-space continuum." Kinkade and Katovich (1992: 196) also write of an escapist "merging with the film." Mathijs and Sexton (2011: 18) emphasize the closeness "to the screen (enthrallment with the giant canvas), to fellow viewers (huddled together in communion), and to the subject matter (overly close-reading of themes and motives)."

Elsewhere (Moulton 2014: 374), I have mobilized Charles Acland's work on themed spaces (2003: 95) to argue that the intensified, continuous theming of reception spaces – either through industry constructions (franchise-specific decorations, hired performers, and giveaways) or fan constructions (costuming, prop-use, role-playing, and conversations) – can play a meaningful pre-textual role in the cultivation of phenomenological immersion and serve "as an entryway paratext for the movie to come." Literal examples of themed entryways are often observed in experiential cinema. For instance, The Alamo Drafthouse "erected a wooden house filled with

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25,000 flies through which patrons could pass to attend" *The Amityville Horror* (2005) (de Ville 2011: 10); or take their presentation of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), which was held at Leatherface's house – complete with "skin lamps and rotting bones" – and accompanied with headcheese hors d'oeuvres. De Ville (2011: 10) shows how these pre-textual, themed exhibition practices actually date back to the traveling roadshow exhibitions of the 1920s and William Castle's horror-movie gimmickry of the 1950s. Castle would not only thematize lobby displays but also stage pre-screening activities which tapped into the thematics (often anxiety and dread) of the upcoming film – such as signing waivers and life insurance policies or, at screenings of *Les Diaboliques* (1955), situating ambulances outside and nurses inside cinema auditoriums (Clepper 2016).

In spaces where such intense thematic immersions are not offered by the industry, the many cultified cinemagoing practices discussed in this chapter offer a way of filling cultural lack (Fiske 1992: 33). As a diverse variety of film-specific enunciations coalesce, fans find themselves in an environment in which onscreen characters, songs, and objects obtain tangible presence off-the-screen. Fans thusly move closer to the fictional world, "a little way out of normal structures and arguably into a liminal border zone between the real world and the diegesis, where the viewer eats the same snacks or wears the same outfits as the characters on screen" (Brooker 2007: 155). Will Brooker, who focuses primarily on television viewing, writes that pre-viewing and viewing rituals allow fans to access and experience "flow," a term borrowed from psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe the total "sense of immersion, where the everyday is transcended and the participant enters a different state of being, a form of communion with a text, with a process, and sometimes with other participants" (2007: 152). Pre-viewing and viewing rituals, Brooker writes, include both simple practices such as providing commentary, turning off lights, and silencing phones and more extensive practices such as "dressing up for a *Star Wars* home screening in Queen Amidala lipstick with Leia hair-buns while feasting on 'Wookie Cookies' and 'Yoda Soda'" (2007: 155).

Brooker's framing of thematic ritual as a gateway to immersion allows room for both the midnight viewing performances (*Rocky Horror*, *The Room*) and outbursts (*Troll 2*, *Freaks*, *Pink Flamingos*) during repeated immersion experiences and the intensification of everyday cinematic viewing etiquette – such as "don't talk," and "don't text" – during first-time immersions (blockbuster premieres, in particular). However, Brooker's argument (2007: 159) puts forth the notion that this phenomenological immersion into the diegesis "does not seem dependent on the company of others." This hiccup contradicts scholarship on both classic midnight movies (Wood 1991: 160; Austin 1981) and newer midnight experiences (Moulton 2014; Klinger 2007) which observes that fans experience inward sensations of immersion while also retaining an appreciation and a sense of belonging with each other even after "flow" begins.

Midnight blockbuster attendees, for instance, describe midnight audiences as more "quiet," "respectful," and "appropriate" than "everyday" audiences (Moulton 2014: 374–375). That is, midnight audiences laugh, cheer, and cry at the "right" times. Take this fascinating account from a fan as he recalls his first midnight screening of *Batman* (1989):

> The movie kicked off at midnight and … *those loud fuckers made this one of the best moviegoing experiences of my life*. As the opening credits rolled, *the theater roared with applause*. With each name that appeared, *the crowd got louder*. Somewhere around Bob Ringwood and Danny Elfman, *the place was going bananas*. And then this popped up on the screen: "Songs Written and Performed By Prince." *The crowd booed like mad*. And then, just as quickly it started recognizing *how hilarious it was that they cheered* everything except Prince and then *they started laughing*. I mean … wow, this was already an

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> awesome time! *The crowd achieved self-awareness and a singular mind* at this moment. And throughout the rest of the movie, *it carried us through* the soon-to-be classic one-liners, action sequences and reveals.
>
> ("FlashBack 66: *Batman* (1989)," emphasis added)

These observations speak to Julian Hanich's (2014: 339) work on collective viewing, where he argues that a "higher level" of continuous – what he calls "thematic" – recognition and appreciation of other fans can occur in "specific moments of high emotionality and collectivity." In this instance, immersion and enjoyment are increased as moviegoers perceive each other to be "acting jointly" and "feeling jointly" as they watch the film together. Put another way, midnight fans in particular remain aware of the synchronicity and harmony with which the community *jointly acts*, whether in the form of unified participation cues during *Rocky Horror* (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 176; Wood 1991: 157; Grant 1991: 130) or the "appropriate," well-timed emotional responses at midnight blockbuster premieres.

The phenomenological sensation of "homecoming" (Brooker 2007: 163) in a thematically-continuous space with assumedly like-minded people strengthens the sensations of what Hanich (2014: 344) calls "we-intention": *practical collective intentionality* (as midnight fans we have a common goal to enjoy the midnight experience together), *cognitive collective intentionality* (we share a common knowledge, opinion, or taste), and *affective collective intentionality* (we have a common mood, emotional response or energy). This suggests that fans would rather enter into an immersive experience of "flow" with others rather than journey there alone. Viewed in this context, we might rethink cultified cinemagoing not as a practice set apart from or in resistance to conventional consumption but as a blueprint of moving beyond it, of setting the terms for fans to become immersed in a themed world made up of both physical and filmic elements – an immersion, as Andrew Sarris once wrote, "beyond all reason" (Telotte 1991: 5).

As this chapter has shown, we need to undertake a holistic approach to *midnight movies,* one which both digs deeper into the forms of immersion at midnight movie events and re-examines specific *midnight* cinemagoing practices in relation their *movies*' thematic framework or diegetic world. How might watching *Eraserhead* or *Donnie Darko* in a sparsely attended theater while the outside world is fast asleep funnel phenomenologies into textual themes of isolation, death, and dreams? How does thematic immersion function when pre-or-mid-viewing enunciations are shifted to post-viewing environments, like the two-day "Lebowskifest" in which fans screen *The Big Lebowski* and head to bowling alleys the following night? Might there be a thematic connection between so-bad-they're-good films and the collective heckling that occurs at their viewings, in which socially "bad" behavior is used to construct "good" sensations of community? How might midnight blockbusters' recent shift toward a decentralized "first" through earlier time slots affect sensations of exclusivity and participatory culture? There are many questions to answer – and the clock is ticking.

Notes

1 It should be noted that *The Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* record included only midnight screenings while *The Force Awakens* screenings began at 7 P.M. (through midnight) on Thursday and included marathon ticket sales, which were sold for as much as $59.99 each.

2 For additional examples see "City to welcome FIDAC Tomorrow," in *The New York Times*, September 14, 1930, pp. 33; "Midnight Movie Stars Kay Kyser: 'That's Right, You're Wrong'" in *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 14, 1939, p. 8; and "ODD Fraternity To Entertain At Swimming Party This Evening," in *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 19, 1938, pp. 11.

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3 I am by no means negating or calling into question the role of fans in the creation of midnight cinema-going experiences, and indeed, the commercial failures of overly-designed midnight faire such as the *Rocky Horror* sequel *Shock Treatment* or the more recent *Snakes On A Plane* speak to that power.

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ideological manipulation by apparatuses and elites than in bottom-up subcultural resistances. Its emphasis on digging out "moments" of subversion provides continuity to the "gaps and fissures" analysis of 1970s Marxist semiotics, but introduces a new vocabulary of "negotiation" and "contestation" which come from a Gramscian framework. At the same time, cultural studies adopted a less militant approach toward cultural products, one that reflects the general decline of political radicalism, and the entangled social positioning of contemporary radicals themselves, who no longer boycott the system but rather work to various degrees within it. Key to cultural studies is the idea that culture is the site of conflict and negotiation within social formations dominated by power and traversed by tensions having to do with class, gender, race, and sexuality. In Britain cultural studies began by being more oriented toward issues of class; it came to engage issues of gender and race relatively "late." In 1978 the Women's Study Group lamented the "absence from CCCS of a visible concern with feminist issues." And in the 1980s cultural studies was challenged to pay more attention to race, partly under the influence of US cultural studies, which has tended to focus more on gender and race than on class.

At its best, cultural studies locates moments of subcultural subversion and resistance; at its worst, it celebrates fandom and consumerism as exercises in untrammeled freedom. It often has an ambivalent attitude toward its mass-mediated objects of study, an ambivalence in some ways reminiscent of film semiology's simultaneous love for and distance from classical cinema. It is fond of oxymoronic responses like "complicitous critique" (Linda Hutcheons), finding mass-culture, as Eve Sedgewick has put it, always "sort of transgressive, and sort of hegemonic." The articulations of these complexities at times become formulaic. Meeghan Morris (in Mellencamp, 1990, p. 20) laments the fact that "thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption are being run off under different names with minor variations." At the Urbana Cultural Studies Conference, Tony Bennett mocked the "consumer pleasure as resistance" school which consists of "sleuthing for subversiveness where one would least expect to find it."

Cultural studies becomes depoliticized when it loses sight, as it sometimes does, of the unequal power relations within which spectators engage with texts, at which point it lapses into what David Morley (1992) calls the "don't worry, be happy" American school of cultural studies. Morley's comment implies that Americans have depoliticized the insights of the founders of cultural studies. (One senses here a left version of the old European lament about the history-less barbarians on the other side of the Atlantic.) Within the United States, ironically, these same cultural studies scholars are demonized by neo-conservatives as "tenured radicals" who have "politicized" the university and corrupted youth. It is also ironic that a certain strand of cultural studies, best exemplified by John Fiske, emphasizes the freedom and resistance in the sphere of consumption just when the field of production is more and more concentrated, more and more subject to the power of vast corporations like Viacom and of megamoguls like Rupert Murdoch, a time when most alternative productions, including even European art cinema, are being frozen out by blockbuster films and media mega-conglomerates.

The Birth of the Spectator

In the late 1960s Roland Barthes had prophesied the "death of the author" and the "birth of the reader." Yet in a sense it is a misnomer to speak of the birth of the spectator in film theory, since film theory has *always* been concerned with spectatorship. Whether in Munsterberg's idea that film operates in the mental sphere, or in Eisenstein's faith in the epistemological leaps triggered by intellectual montage, or in Bazin's view of the spectator's democratic freedom to interpret, or in Mulvey's concern with the male gaze, virtually all film theories have implied a theory of spectatorship.

In the 1970s theory psychoanalyzed the pleasures of the cinematic situation as such. In the 1980s and 1990s analysts became more interested in socially *differentiated* forms of spectatorship. This move

gave expression to a shift that had already taken place in literary studies, variously called reader response theory (Stanley Fish, Norman Holland) or reception theory (associated especially with the Constance School of Reception Aesthetics). Hans Robert Jauss's historicizing approach, a synthesis of Formalism and Marxism, was complemented by Wolfgang Iser's examination of the interaction between the reader and a "virtual" text which requires readerly "concretization." The emphasis in reception theory on "filling in the gaps of the text" can be seen, in retrospect, as ideally suited to a medium like the cinema where the spectator is necessarily active, obliged to compensate for certain lacks – the lack of a third dimension, for example – and literally sees darkness much of the time.

The spectator was now seen as more active and critical, not the passive object of "interpellation" but rather at once constituting and constituted by the text. *Contra* earlier apparatus theory, it was now argued that the strong subject-effects produced by narrative cinema were not automatic or irresistible, nor could they be separated from the desire, experience, and knowledge of historically situated spectators, constituted outside the text and traversed by sets of power relations such as nation, race, class, gender, and sexuality. Stuart Hall, borrowing from Umberto Eco and Frank Papkin, anticipated and concretely shaped this shift in his influential essay "Decoding and Encoding" (1980). For Hall, mass-media texts do not have a univocal meaning but can be read differently by different people, depending not only on their social location but also on their ideologies and desires. Rejecting the tradition which sees the subject of the media as simply "spoken" by ideological structures and discourses, Hall sees texts (in this case televisual texts) as susceptible to diverse readings based on political–ideological contradiction. Hall posits three broad reading strategies in relation to dominant ideology: (1) the *dominant* reading produced by a viewer situated to acquiesce in the dominant ideology and the subjectivity it produces; (2) the *negotiated* reading produced by the viewer who largely acquiesces in dominant ideology, but whose real-life situation provokes specific "local" critical inflections; and (3) the *resistant* reading produced by those whose social situation and consciousness place them in a directly

oppositional relation to dominant ideology. Resistant reading on one axis (e.g. class), I would add, might go hand-in-hand with a dominant reading on another axis (e.g. race), along all the permutations of social identity and affiliation. David Morley, complicating Hall's tripartite schema, argued for a discursive approach that would define spectatorship as the "moment when the discourses of the reader meet the discourse of the text" (Morley, 1980).

Text, apparatus, discourse, and history, in sum, are all in play and in motion. Neither text nor spectator is a static, pre-constituted entity; spectators shape and are shaped by the cinematic experience within an endless dialogical process. Cinematic desire is not only intra-psychic; it is also social and ideological. Any truly comprehensive ethnography of spectatorship must distinguish multiple registers: (1) the spectator as fashioned by the text itself (through focalization, point-of-view conventions, narrative structuring, mise-en-scène); (2) the spectator as fashioned by the (diverse and evolving) technical apparatuses (Cineplex, IMAX, domestic VCR); (3) the spectator as fashioned by the institutional contexts of spectatorship (social ritual of moviegoing, classroom analysis, cinémathèque); (4) the spectator as constituted by ambient discourses and ideologies; (5) the actual spectator as embodied, raced, gendered, and historically situated. The analysis of spectatorship must therefore explore the gaps and tensions among the different levels, the diverse ways that text, apparatus, history, and discourse construct the spectator, and the ways that the spectator as subject–interlocutor also shapes the encounter.

In the 1880s and 1990s, film scholars paid increasing attention to the historically conditioned nature of spectatorship. The history of cinema, in this sense, is not just the history of films and filmmakers, but also the history of what meanings successive publics have attributed to film. Thus we find studies of the demographics of the movie audience in terms of age and class. The special issue of *Iris* (1990) on "Early Cinema Audiences" provides a good example of this tendency, where diverse authors (Richard Abel, Janet Staiger, Elena Degrado) discuss such diverse issues as the class composition of the audience, urbanization and the growth of the moviegoing public,

and the development of a cinematic "imaginary." In *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (1991), Miriam Hansen examines the role of the "fan," and specifically the cult of Valentino. In *Interpreting Films* (1992), finally, Janet Staiger overviews contemporary reception theory in film, subdividing the field into (1) text-activated; (2) reader-activated; and (3) context-activated theories. Within an approach she calls "historical–materialist," Staiger explores the reception of a wide range of films (from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *Zelig*) to demonstrate the historical/contextual shaping of interpretation.

Although film theory had known since Mulvey that spectatorship was gendered, 1980s theory was also beginning to recognize that spectatorship was also sexualized, classed, raced, nationed, regioned, and so forth. The culturally variegated nature of spectatorship derives from the diverse locations in which films are received, from the temporal gaps of seeing films in different historical moments, and from the conflictual subject-positionings and community affiliations of the spectators themselves. In its quasi-exclusive focus on sexual as opposed to other kinds of difference, and in its privileging of the intrapsychic as opposed to the intersubjective and the discursive, psychoanalytic film theory often elided questions of culturally inflected spectatorship. In an essay on black spectatorship Manthia Diawara stressed the racial dimension of spectatorship, arguing that black spectators cannot "buy into" the racism of *Birth of a Nation*. They disrupt the functioning of Griffith's film, rebelling against the "order" imposed by its narrative. For black spectators, the character Gus, as a blackface incarnation of lust and violence, clearly cannot represent blacks but only white prejudice toward blacks. bell hooks, meanwhile, spoke of the "oppositional gaze" of black female spectators. That blacks under slavery and segregation were punished for the very act of looking, hooks argues, generated a "traumatic relationship to the gaze." The existence of black women within white supremacist culture, she continues, problematizes and complexifies the issue of female identity, representation, and spectatorship. Critical black female spectators implicitly construct a theory of looking relations where "cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation" (hooks, 1992, p. 115).

At the same time, there is no racially, culturally, or even ideologically circumscribed essential spectator – *the* white spectator, *the* black spectator, *the* Latino/Latina spectator, *the* resistant spectator. These categories repress the heteroglossia within spectators themselves. Spectators are involved in multiple identities (and identifications) having to do with gender, race, sexual preference, region, religion, ideology, class, and generation. Moreover, socially imposed epidermic identities do not strictly determine personal identifications and political allegiances. It is not only a question of what one is or where one is coming from, but also of what one desires to be, where one wants to go, and with whom one wants to go there. Within a complex *combinatoire* of positions, members of an oppressed group might identify with the oppressing group (Native American children rooting for the cowboys against the "Indians"; Africans identifying with Tarzan; Arabs with Indiana Jones), just as members of privileged groups might identify with the struggles of oppressed groups. Spectatorial positioning is relational: communities can identify with one another on the basis of a shared closeness or on the basis of a common antagonist. Spectatorial positions are multiform, fissured, schizophrenic, unevenly developed, culturally, discursively, and politically discontinuous, forming part of a shifting realm of ramifying differences and contradictions (Shohat and Stam, 1994).

If spectatorship is on one level structured and determined, on another it is open and polymorphous. The cinematic experience has a ludic and adventurous side as well as an imperious one; it fashions a plural, "mutant" self, occupying a range of subject positions. One is "doubled" by the cinematic apparatus, at once in the movie theater and with the camera/projector and the action on screen. And one is further dispersed through the multiplicity of perspectives provided by even the most conventional montage. Cinema's "polymorphous projection-identifications" on a certain level transcend the determinations of local morality, social milieu, and ethnic affiliation (see Morin, 1958). Spectatorship can become a liminal space of dreams and self-fashioning. Through the psychic chameleonism of spectatorship, ordinary social positions, as in carnival, are temporarily bracketed.

Building on Michel de Certeau's notion of reading as poaching,

Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* analyses the phenomenon of fan culture. Fans, Jenkins notes, "rewrite" their favorite shows through a panoply of techniques: recontextualization, expansion of timeline, refocalization, moral realignment, genre shifting, crossovers, character dislocation, personalization, emotional intensification, and eroticization. Fandom, then, has an element of empowerment: "Fans are poachers who get to keep what they take and use their plundered goods as the foundations for the construction of an alternative cultural community" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 223).

But if 1970s theory was unduly pessimistic and defeatist, current theory has perhaps swung a bit too far in the opposite direction. Media theorists have stressed spectatorial agency and freedom, ironically, just as media production and ownership have become ever more centralized. Resistant readings, moreover, depend on a certain cultural or political preparation that "primes" the spectator to read critically. In this sense one might question the more euphoric claims of theorists such as John Fiske, who see TV viewers as mischievously working out "subversive" readings based on their own popular memory. Fiske rightly rejects the hypodermic-needle model of media influence that sees TV viewers, for example, as passive drugged patients getting their nightly fix, reduced to "couch potatoes" and "cultural dupes." He rightly suggests that minorities, for example, "see through" the racism of the dominant media. But if disempowered communities can decode dominant programming through a resistant perspective, they can do so only to the extent that their collective life and historical memory have provided an alternative framework of understanding. In the case of the Gulf War, for example, the majority of American viewers lacked any alternative grid to help them interpret events, specifically a view rooted in an understanding of the legacy of colonialism and its particular complexities in the Middle East. Primed by the sheer inertia of orientalist discourse, they gave credence to whatever views the Administration chose to present.

Cognitive and Analytic Theory

Much of the 1980s and 1990s were devoted to revising, if not dismantling, the premises of 1970s screen theory. During this period theorists like Noël Carroll and David Bordwell attacked with iconoclastic glee and "the-emperor-has-no-clothes" irreverence virtually all its major tenets. (The targets of these provocations reacted with olympian hauteur, rarely deigning to respond.) Representing the "postanalytic" tradition, meanwhile, Richard Allen and Murray Smith criticized the philosophical overreaching of screen theory:

> *What is striking about the Continental philosophy that has been taken to the cinema is the way in which extraordinarily sweeping claims that pertain to the end of epistemology, the construction of the subject, or theses concerning the ultimate constituents of reality, are all rooted in one aspect of the cinema – the causal or indexical nature of the photographic image – as if within this feature of cinematic representation somehow lies an answer to every question we might seek to ask about the cinema (and even modern-ity or knowledge in general!). (Allen and Smith, 1997, p. 22)*

The postanalytic thinkers accused screen theory of a number of dubious argumentative strategies: deferential appeals to authoritative figures; the misleading use of examples and analogies; the refusal to submit arguments to empirical test: the strategic use of willful obscurity (ibid., p. 6). The "Continentals," in turn, saw analytic philosophy and its cinematic offshoots as arid, trivial, apolitical, and narrowly technical, a professionalist evasion of social and intellectual responsibility.

The "cognitive theory" movement, which loosely includes such diverse figures as Gregory Currie, Torben Grodal, Edward Branigan, Trevor Ponech, Murray Smith, Noël Carroll, and David Bordwell, began – if one sets aside "proto-cognitivists" like Munsterberg and the filmolinguists – gains force in the 1980s. Cognitivism looks for more precise alternative answers to questions raised differently about film reception by semiotics and psychoanalytic theory. Cognitivism has been a continuing thread, although by no means the *only* thread,

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'Trashing' the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style

JEFFREY SCONCE

> *Nobody likes movies like* Teenagers from Outer Space *or* Wrestling Women vs. the Aztec Mummy *save any loon sane enough to realize that the whole concept of Good Taste is concocted to keep people from having a good time, from reveling in a crassness that passeth all understanding. . . . But fuck those people who'd rather be watching* The Best Years of Our Lives *or* David and Lisa. *We got our own good tastes . . .*[1]

Written five years before Pierre Bourdieu published his monumental study on the social construction of taste, Lester Bangs's diatribe against a nebulously defined group of cultural custodians epitomizes Bourdieu's contention that 'tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others'. 'It is no accident', writes Bourdieu, 'that when they have to be justified, they are asserted negatively, by the refusal of other tastes'.[2] Thus, in the spirit of Lester Bangs, the editors of *Zontar*, a Boston-based fanzine devoted primarily to the promotion of 'badfilm', note that their publication 'is *not* for the delicate tastebuds of the pseudo-genteel cultural illiterati who enjoy mind-rotting, soul-endangering pabulum like *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* and the other white-boy 'new-age' puke-shit served up from the bowels of PBS during pledge-week'.[3] Meanwhile, a 1990 issue of *Subhuman*, a fanzine featuring articles on cinematic manifestations of

1 Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), pp. 122–3.

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 57.

3 *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, vol. 1, no. 1, n.p.

'necrophilia, 3-D surrealism, animal copulation, pregnant strippers, horror nerdism, and bovine flatulence', labels itself a journal of 'eccentric film and video kulture'.[4]

4 *Subhuman*, no. 15, front cover.

The stridently confrontational tastes espoused by Bangs, *Zontar* and *Subhuman* over this fifteen-year period describe the gradual emergence of a growing and increasingly articulate cinematic subculture, one organized around what are among the most critically disreputable films in cinematic history. Publications devoted to this 'trash' cinema include such magazines, fanzines and makeshift journals as *Psychotronic Video*, *Zontar*, *Subhuman*, *Trashola*, *Ungawa*, *Pandemonium*, and the RE/Search volume, *Incredibly Strange Films*.[5] The most visible document of this film community is Michael Weldon's *Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*, a subterranean companion to Leonard Maltin's *Movies On TV*, which catalogues hundreds of bizarre titles culled from Weldon's late-night television viewing marathons in New York City. Taken together, the diverse body of films celebrated by these various fanzines and books might best be termed 'paracinema'. As a most elastic textual category, paracinema would include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as 'badfilm', splatterpunk, 'mondo' films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography. Paracinema is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. In short, the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic 'trash', whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture. In doing so, paracinema represents the most developed and dedicated of cinephilic subcultures ever to worship at 'the temple of schlock'.[6]

5 'Fanzines' are home-produced, photocopied magazines circulated among fans and devoted to an often narrow area of interest in popular culture.

6 *Temple of Schlock* is another fanzine dedicated to this cinema.

The caustic rhetoric of paracinema suggests a pitched battle between a guerrilla band of cult film viewers and an elite cadre of would-be cinematic tastemakers. Certainly, the paracinematic audience likes to see itself as a disruptive force in the cultural and intellectual marketplace. As a short subject, this audience would be more inclined to watch a bootlegged McDonald's training film than *Man with a Movie Camera*, although, significantly, many in the paracinematic community would no doubt be familiar with this more respectable member of the avant-garde canon. Such calculated negation and refusal of 'elite' culture suggests that the politics of social stratification and taste in paracinema is more complex than a simple high-brow/low-brow split, and that the cultural politics of 'trash culture' are becoming ever more ambiguous as this 'aesthetic' grows in influence. In recent years, the paracinematic community has seen both the institutionalization and commercialization of their once

renegade, neo-camp aesthetic. Although paracinematic taste may have its roots in the world of 'low-brow' fan culture (fanzines, film conventions, memorabilia collections, and so on), the paracinematic sensibility has recently begun to infiltrate the avant garde, the academy, and even the mass culture on which paracinema's ironic reading strategies originally preyed. Art museums that once programmed only Italian Neo-Realism or German Neo-Expressionism now feature retrospectives of 1960s Biker films and career overviews of exploitation auteurs such as Herschell Gordon Lewis and Doris Wishman. No doubt to the dismay and befuddlement of cultural hygienists like Allan Bloom and James Twitchell, academic courses in film studies increasingly investigate 'sleazy' genres such as horror and pornography. Recently, the trash aesthetic has even made inroads into mainstream popular taste. The ironic reading strategies honed by the badfilm community through countless hours of derisive interaction with late-night science fiction are now prepackaged for cable in programmes such as *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*. Similarly, Turner Network Television now presents a weekly sampling of the paracinematic pantheon in Friday night, '100% Weird' triple features. Even Blockbuster video, America's corporate bastion of cinematic conservatism, features a 'le bad' section in many of their stores, where patrons can find the work of John Waters, William Castle and other 'disreputable' filmmakers. Perhaps most incredibly, *Batman*'s director Tim Burton recently directed a multi-million dollar biopic of Ed Wood Jr, the director of such paracinematic classics as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) and *Glen or Glenda* (1953), an artist who himself never spent over a few thousand dollars on any one picture.[7] Clearly, in cinematic circles of all kinds, there has been a significant realignment on the social terrain of taste, a powerful response to what has been termed 'the siren song of crap'.

7 In a fittingly perverse tribute to Wood, Burton's film won widespread critical acclaim and yet bombed at the box office, making less than six million dollars on its initial release in the USA.



A key element in the paracinematic aesthetic is the 'gore' film, a genre that most fans argue debuts with Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963). Lewis is often acclaimed for the decidedly 'unartful' presentation of his gore set pieces. Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

At first glance, the paracinematic sensibility, in all its current manifestations, would seem to be identical to the 'camp' aesthetic outlined by Susan Sontag some thirty years ago. Without a doubt, both sensibilities are highly ironic, infatuated with the artifice and excess of obsolescent cinema. What makes paracinema unique, however, is its aspiration to the status of a 'counter–cinema'. Whereas 'camp' was primarily a reading strategy that allowed gay men to rework the Hollywood cinema through a new and more expressive subcultural code, paracinematic culture seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic 'art', aggressively attacking the established canon of 'quality' cinema and questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthete discourses on movie art. Camp was an aesthetic of ironic colonization and cohabitation. Paracinema, on the other hand, is an aesthetic of vocal confrontation.

Who, exactly, is the paracinematic audience at war with, and what is at stake in such a battle? Consider the following diatribe from *Zontar*:

> Where the philosophical pygmies search the snob-ridden art galleries, flock to the false comfort of PBS-produced pseudo-gentility, WE look elsewhere. We seek the explanations for the decline of Hu-Manity in the most debased and misunderstood manifestations of the IDIOT CULTURE. Monster movies, comic books, cheap porn videos, TV preachers, of course!!! But we search ever deeper into the abyss. The Home Shopping Network. Late-Night Cable TV-Product Worship-Testimonial Shows. Tiffany Videos. We leave purity to those other assholes. The search for BADTRUTH is only for the brave few, like you, whose all-consuming HATE is powerful enough to resist the temptations of REFINEMENT, TASTE, and ESCAPISM – the miserable crumbs tossed from the table by the growing mass of REPUBLICAN THIRTYSOMETHING COUNTRY-CLUB CHRISTIAN ZOMBIES who now rule this wretched planet.[8]

8 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

The paracinematic audience promotes their tastes and textual proclivities in opposition to a loosely defined group of cultural and economic elites, those purveyors of the status quo who not only rule the world, but who are also responsible for making the contemporary cinema, in the paracinematic mind, so completely boring. Nor does the paracinematic community care much for the activities of film scholars and critics. For example, an editor of *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, a sister publication of *Zontar*, encourages readers to hone their knowledge of trash-culture classics ridiculed by the academy (in this case the sword and sandal epic, *The Silver Chalice* [Victor Saville, 1954]), thereby 'amazing your friends and embarrassing the jargon-slinging empty-headed official avatars of critical discourse'.[9]

9 *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, vol. 1, no. 1, n.p.

At times, factions of the paracinematic audience have little patience even for one another. This rift is perhaps most pointedly embodied by

the competing agendas of *Film Threat* and *Psychotronic Video*, two fanzines turned magazines with international circulations that promote rival visions of the 'trash' aesthetic. While *Psychotronic* concentrates on the sizable segment of this community interested in uncovering and collecting long lost titles from the history of exploitation, *Film Threat* looks to transgressive aesthetics/genres of the past as avant-garde inspiration for contemporary independent filmmaking, championing such 'underground' auteurs as Nick Zedd and Richard Kern. In a particularly nasty swipe, a subscription form for *Film Threat* features a drawing of the 'typical' *Film Threat* reader, portrayed as a dynamic, rockabilly-quiffed hipster surrounded by admiring women. This is juxtaposed with a drawing of the 'typical' *Psychotronic* reader, depicted as passive, overweight and asexual, with a bad complexion.

Despite such efforts at generating counter-distinction within the shared cultural project of attacking 'high-brow' cinema, the discourses characteristically employed by paracinematic culture in its valorization of 'low-brow' artefacts indicate that this audience, like the film elite (academics, aesthetes, critics), is particularly rich with 'cultural capital' and thus possesses a level of textual/critical sophistication similar to the cineastes they construct as their nemesis. In terms of education and social position, in other words, the various factions of the paracinematic audience and the elite cineastes they commonly attack would appear to share what Bourdieu terms a 'cultural pedigree'.[10] Employing the terminology of US sociologist Herbert Gans, these groups might be thought of as radically opposed 'taste publics' that are nevertheless involved in a common 'taste culture'. As Gans writes: 'Taste cultures are not cohesive value systems, and taste publics are not organized groups; the former are aggregates of similar values and usually but not always similar content, and the latter are aggregates of people with usually but not always similar values making similar choices from available offerings of culture'.[11]

Whether thought of as a subculture, an aesthetic or a sensibility, the recent flourishing of paracinema represents not just a challenge to aesthete taste, but the larger fragmentation of a common taste culture, brought about by various disaffected segments of middle-class youth. Although it would be difficult to define the precise dimensions or identify the exact constituency of this particular taste public, I would argue that the paracinematic community, like the academy and the popular press, embodies primarily a male, white, middle-class, and 'educated' perspective on the cinema. Representations of this 'community' are rare, but can be glimpsed, among other places, at the fringes of Richard Linklater's ode to baby-buster anomie, *Slacker* (1991). Linklater documents the desultory activities of bored students, would-be bohemians and miscellaneous cranks, all of whom exist at the economic and cultural periphery of a typical college town.[12] In a more reflexive turn, a fanzine from San Francisco describes the world of 'low-life scum', disheveled men in their twenties manifesting 'a

10 For a more detailed discussion of the cultural pedigree, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 63.

11 Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 69–70.

12 In the film's most explicit nod to the paracinematic mentality, one particularly deranged character bases his elaborate conspiracy theories on the 'truth' to be found in late-night, science-fiction movies.

fascination with all things sleazy, bizarre, and macabre'.[13] Paracinematic interests also often intersect with the more familiar subcultures of science-fiction fandom. Regardless of their individual interests and ultimate allegiances, however, the paracinematic audience cultivates an overall aesthetic of calculated disaffection, marking a deviant taste public disengaged from the cultural hierarchies of their overarching taste culture.

Such acrimonious battles within a single taste culture are not uncommon.[14] As Bourdieu writes: 'Explicit aesthetic choices are in fact often constituted in opposition to the choices of the groups closest in social space, with whom the competition is most direct and most immediate, and more precisely, no doubt, in relation to those choices most clearly marked by the intention (perceived as pretension) of marking distinction vis-a-vis lower groups'.[15] As the alienated faction of a social group high in cultural capital, the paracinematic audience generates distinction within its own social space by celebrating the cultural objects deemed most noxious (low-brow) by their taste culture as a whole. Paracinema thus presents a direct challenge to the values of aesthete film culture and a general affront to the 'refined' sensibility of the parent taste culture. It is a calculated strategy of shock and confrontation against fellow cultural elites, not unlike Duchamp's notorious unveiling of a urinal in an art gallery. As Bourdieu states: 'The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated'.[16] By championing films like *2000 Maniacs* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1964), *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (Doris Wishman, 1965), and *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (Ray Dennis Steckler, 1963), and by associating themselves with home shopping networks,

13 *Murder Can Be Fun*, no. 5, n.p.

14 This particular struggle over cinematic taste also takes place in a variety of cultural contexts. For an account of the cultivation of a disreputable aesthetic in Swedish youth culture, see Göran Bolin, 'Beware! Rubbish! Popular culture and strategies of distinction', *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1994), pp. 33–49.

15 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 60.

16 Ibid., pp. 56–7



Histrionic acting is a hallmark of the paracinematic aesthetic. Here, having rolled a 'Yankee' down a hill in a barrel spiked with nails, two psychotic boyscouts admire their handiwork in Herschell Gordon Lewis's *2000 Maniacs* (1964). Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

pornography and TV preachers, this community is, in effect, renouncing its 'cultural pedigree' and attempting to distance itself from what it perceives as elite (and elitist) taste.

Despite the paracinematic community's open hostility to the 'jargon-slinging avatars of critical discourse', many scholars see this trend towards the valorization of 'trash' at work in the academy itself, especially in the realm of media studies. In ' "High culture" revisited', for example, Jostein Gripsrud argues that a major segment of contemporary media scholars routinely attacks all forms of high culture while indiscriminately valorizing mass culture in its place. As Gripsrud states somewhat sarcastically, 'Presenting oneself as a soap-fan in scholarly circles could be considered daring or provocative some ten years ago. Nowadays it is more of a prerequisite for legitimate entry into the academic discourse on soaps in some Anglo-American fora.'[17] Gripsrud speculates that this proclivity among many contemporary scholars to condemn high culture and valorize mass culture is a function of their unique trajectory in social space. 'Such upwardly mobile subjects are placed in a sort of cultural limbo, not properly integrated in the lower-class culture they left, nor in the upper-class high culture they have formally entered. Since they are newcomers, they are faced with a need to make choices concerning what to do in and with their acquired position.'[18] Gripsrud believes that the valorization of mass culture serves as a form of 'symbolic homecoming' that allows such scholars to 'strive for or pretend re-integration into the classes they once left, preferably as "leaders" in some sense, "voices" for the people'.[19]

17 Jostein Gripsrud, ' "High culture" revisited', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1989), p. 198.

18 Ibid., pp. 196–7.

19 Ibid., p. 197.

Gripsrud's depiction of the intellectual in limbo is a particularly apt description of the contemporary graduate student, the figure within the institution of the academy who is perched the most precariously between the domains of cultural, educational and economic capital. Not surprisingly, paracinematic culture is a particularly active site of investment for many contemporary graduate students in film studies. Often, the connections between graduate film study and paracinematic culture are quite explicit, since many students now pursuing an advanced degree in film began as fans of exploitation genres such as horror and science fiction. Some students retain their interest in trash culture as a secret, guilty pleasure. Others, however, increasingly seek to focus their work on these previously marginalized and debased forms of cinema. Influenced by the importation of cultural studies to the USA during the 1980s, and writing in the wake of film scholars who were increasingly willing to address traditionally 'untouchable' cinematic genres such as horror and pornography, many students in media studies wish to continue pushing the limits of the traditional cinematic canon and the constraints of conventional academic enterprise. At stake is a sense of both institutional and cultural distinction. As John Fiske writes, 'Many young fans are successful at school and are steadily accumulating official cultural capital, but wish to differentiate themselves, along the axis of age at least, from the

social values and cultural tastes (or habitus) of those who currently possess the cultural and economic capital they are still working to acquire'.[20] As paracinematic texts and concerns increasingly infiltrate film studies, however, many graduate students find themselves caught between the institutional discourses (and agendas) of the film elite as represented by the academy, and the 'fan' activities of the paracinematic community with which they feel a previous affinity. Raised in mass culture, such students are not always willing to give up the excesses of the drive-in for the discipline of Dreyer. The question is what to do with such textual experience and expertise.

20 John Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', in Lisa Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–4.

Debate within the academy over the politics of the canon is not new. Nor is it unusual for 'fan' cultures to make themselves heard within the academy (most film scholars, one would assume, study the cinema because they were a fan first). What is unusual in paracinematic culture's gradual infiltration of the academy is the manner in which this group so explicitly foregrounds the cultural politics of taste and aesthetics, not just in society at large, but within the academy itself. Graduate students with an interest in 'trash' cinema often find themselves in the ironic position of challenging the legitimacy of the very institution they are attending in order to obtain cultural validation and authority over issues of politics and taste. Such students are struggling to make the transition from a mere fan to an accredited scholar. Though both fan and scholar may be equally dedicated (and even knowledgeable) in their involvement with a particular cultural form, they differ tremendously in terms of their respective status within society as a whole. In a hierarchical social system marked by the differential circulation of cultural and economic capital, graduate students seeking to make this crucial transition of accreditation must submit themselves, quite literally, to the *discipline* of film studies in both its institutional and punitive forms. In doing so, the discipline works to shape both knowledge and taste, linking them in a process that is every bit as political in the academy as it is in the culture the academy seeks to study. As Bourdieu notes, 'At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness'.[21] In this way, the legitimizing function of the academy in issues of knowledge, taste and aesthetics works to conceal relations of power and control, both within the institution itself and the society that sanctions that institution's cultural authority.

21 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 57–8.

By challenging this disciplinary authority, the paracinematic audience, both academic and non-academic, epitomizes what Bourdieu terms the 'new style autodidact'. As described by Bourdieu, the autodidact is a figure alienated from the legitimate mode of educational and cultural acquisition. Estranged or excluded from legitimate modes of acquisition, autodidacts invest in alternative forms of cultural capital, those not fully recognized by the educational

system and the cultural elite. Bourdieu describes two backgrounds typical of this new style autodidact:

> 'middle-ground' arts such as cinema, jazz, and, even more, strip cartoons, science-fiction or detective stories are predisposed to attract the investments either of those who have entirely succeeded in converting their cultural capital into educational capital or those who, not having acquired legitimate culture in the legitimate manner (i.e., through early familiarization), maintain an uneasy relationship with it, subjectively or objectively, or both. These arts, not yet fully legitimate, which are disdained or neglected by the big holders of educational capital, offer a refuge or a revenge to those who, by appropriating them, secure the best return on their cultural capital (especially if it is not fully recognized scholastically) while at the same time taking credit for contesting the established hierarchy of legitimacies and profits.[22]

22 Ibid., p. 87.

The autodidact is a person who invests in unsanctioned culture either because he or she can 'afford' to, having already made a successful conversion of legitimate cultural and educational capital into economic capital, or who feel, because of their tentative and at times alienated relationship with 'legitimate culture', that such disreputable investments are more durable and potentially more 'rewarding'.

It should not be surprising, then, that paracinematic fans, as exiles from the legitimizing functions of the academy, and many graduate students, as the most disempowered faction within the academy itself, both look to trash culture as a site of 'refuge and revenge'. Such autodidacticism constitutes, for Bourdieu, a form of 'counterculture', one working to free itself from 'the constraints of the scholastic market'. 'They strive to do so by producing another market with its own consecrating agencies', writes Bourdieu, 'capable of challenging the pretension of the educational system to impose the principles of evaluation of competencies and manners which reign in the scholastic market.'[23] For its audience, paracinema represents a final textual frontier that exists beyond the colonizing powers of the academy, and thus serves as a staging ground for strategic raids on legitimate culture and its institutions by those (temporarily) lower in educational, cultural and/or economic capital. Such a struggle demonstrates that battles over the canon, in any discipline, are as much conflicts over the processes and politics by which an entire academic field validates its very existence and charts its own future, fought by groups within the academy as stratified in their institutional power as society at large is stratified in terms of cultural and economic power.

23 Ibid., p. 96.

On one hand, it would be easy to explain the turn towards trash cinema as yet another example of the generational politics of the canon in the academy, a struggle that legitimated cinema in the face of literature, Hollywood in the face of art cinema and, most recently, television in the face of Hollywood. But there is more here than a

struggle over the canon and the politics of object choice. The study of trash cinema suggests a struggle over the task of cinema scholarship as a whole, especially in terms of defining the relationship between aesthetics and cultural criticism. Whether attacking traditional cultural markets and intellectual institutions as a fan, or attempting to bridge the two worlds as a student, the paracinematic audience presents in its often explicit opposition to the agendas of the academy a dispute over *how* to approach the cinema as much as a conflict over *what* cinema to approach. At issue is not only which films get to be studied, but which questions are to be asked about the cinema in the first place. What I am interested in exploring in the remainder of this essay is the relationship between paracinematic culture and the aesthete culture this group associates with the academy, as well as the place of the contemporary graduate film student in bridging these two often antagonistic sensibilities. How are these groups similar, how do they differ and, perhaps most importantly, how might the trash aesthetic ultimately impact the academy? I am particularly interested in how the two communities approach issues of cinematic 'style' and 'excess'. I will argue that paracinema hinges on an aesthetic of excess, and that this paracinematic interest in excess represents an explicitly political challenge to reigning aesthete discourses in the academy. The cultural politics involved in this struggle, however, can be clarified by first examining similarities between aesthete and paracinematic discourses on cinema.

Counter-cinemas

Throughout the history of cinema studies as a discipline, the cultivation of various counter-cinemas, exclusive cinematic canons that do not easily admit the textual pleasures of more 'commonplace' audiences, has been a crucial strategy in maintaining a sense of cultural distinction for film scholars. Frequently, the promotion of such counter-cinemas has been organized around what has become a dominant theme in academic film culture: namely, the sense of loss over the medium's unrealized artistic and political potential. From this perspective, the cinema once held the promise of a revolutionary popular art form when, as Annette Michelson writes, 'a certain euphoria enveloped . . . early filmmaking and theory'. '[T]here was', she continues, 'a very real sense in which the revolutionary aspirations of the modernist movement in literature and arts, on the one hand, and of a Marxist or Utopian tradition, on the other hand, could converge in the hopes and promises, as yet undefined, of the new medium'.[24] Instead, these hopes were dashed by the domination of the public taste and mind by Hollywood cinema. And while there has never been a shortage of critical interest in the classical Hollywood cinema, championing counter-cinemas that break with the conventions of

24 Annette Michelson, 'Film and the radical aspiration', in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 472.

Hollywood production and representation remains a central project of film aesthetes and academics. This critical programme proceeds both artistically, by valorizing a body of 'art' films over the mainstream, commercial cinema, and politically, by celebrating those filmmakers who seem to disrupt the conventional narrative machinery of Hollywood.[25]

In cultivating a counter-cinema from the dregs of exploitation films, paracinematic fans, like the academy, explicitly situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents. United with the film elite in their dislike of Hollywood banality and yet frequently excluded from the circles of academic film culture, the paracinematic community nonetheless often adopts the conventions of 'legitimate' cinematic discourse in discussing its own cinema. As Fiske notes, fan groups are often 'aware that their object of fandom [is] devalued by the criteria of official culture and [go] to great pains to argue against this misevaluation. They frequently [use] official cultural criteria such as 'complexity' or 'subtlety' to argue that their preferred texts [are] as 'good' as the canonized ones and constantly [evoke] legitimate culture . . . as points of comparison.'[26] Elite discourse often appears either earnestly or parodically in discussions of paracinematic films. A fanzine review of the obscure 1964 film, *The Dungeons of Harrow*, is typical. The fanzine describes the film as 'a twisted surreal marvel, a triumph of spirit and vision over technical incompetence and abysmal production values. The film can be seen as a form of art brut – crude, naive, pathetic – but lacking the poetry and humor often associated with this style. Perhaps art brutarian would better serve to describe this almost indescribable work.'[27]

As in the academic film community, the paracinematic audience recognizes Hollywood as an economic and artistic institution that represents not just a body of films, but a particular mode of film production and its accompanying signifying practices. Furthermore, the narrative form produced by this institution is seen as somehow 'manipulative' and 'repressive', and linked to dominant interests as a form of cultural coercion. In their introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*, V. Vale and Andrea Juno, two of the most visible cultural brokers in the realm of paracinema, describe why low-budget films helmed by idiosyncratic visionaries are so often superior to mainstream, Hollywood cinema.

> The value of low-budget films is: they can be transcendent expressions of a single person's individual vision and quirky originality. When a corporation decides to invest $20 million in a film, a chain of command regulates each step, and no one person is allowed free rein. Meetings with lawyers, accountants, and corporate boards are what films in Hollywood are all about. . . . Often [low-budget] films are eccentric – even extreme – presentations by

25 For an influential account of such an agenda, see Peter Wollen's 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*', in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 120–29.

26 Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', p. 36.

27 *Subhuman*, no. 16, p. 3.

individuals freely expressing their imaginations, who throughout the filmmaking process improvise creative solutions to problems posed by either circumstance or budget – mostly the latter. Secondly, they often present unpopular – even radical – views addressing social, political, racial or sexual inequities, hypocrisy in religion or government; or, in other ways they assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality, violence, and other mores.[28]

28 V. Vale, Andrea Juno and Jim Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films* (San Francisco: RE/search Publications, 1986), p. 5.

Such rhetoric could just as easily be at home in an elite discussion of the French New Wave or the American New Cinema. Products of a shared taste culture, paracinematic cinephiles, like the scholars and critics of the academy, continue to search for unrecognized talent and long forgotten masterpieces, producing a pantheon that celebrates a certain stylistic unity and/or validates the diverse artistic visions of unheralded 'auteurs'.

Zontar, for example, devotes almost all of its attention to the work of Larry Buchanan, who is celebrated as 'the greatest director of all time' and as a maker of films that must be regarded as 'absolute and unquestionable holy writ'.[29] Elsewhere, *Zontar* hails Buchanan as 'a prophet of transcendental banality . . . who eclipses Bergman in evoking a sense of alienation, despair and existential angst'.[30] As this rather tongue-in-cheek hyperbole suggests, paracinematic culture, like that of the academy, continues to generate its own forms of internal distinction by continually redefining its vanguard, thereby thwarting unsophisticated dilettantes and moving its audience as a whole on to increasingly demanding and exclusive paracinematic films. In its contemporary and most sophisticated form, paracinema is an aggressive, esoteric and often painfully ascetic counter-aesthetic, one that produces, in its most extreme manifestations, an ironic form of reverse elitism. 'The fine art of great badfilm is not a laughing matter to everybody', says one fan. 'Its adherents are small in number, but fanatical in pickiness. Badness appreciation is the most acquired taste, the most refined.'[31]

29 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Invoking Larry Buchanan, the mastermind of films like *Mars Needs Women* (1966) and *Zontar the Thing from Venus* (1966), as a greater director than Ingmar Bergman, however, reaffirms that the paracinematic community defines itself in opposition not only to mainstream Hollywood cinema, but to the (perceived) counter-cinema of aesthetes and the cinematic academy. Again, as with any taste public, this elite cadre of 'aesthetes' cannot be definitively located in a particular author, methodology, or school of academic/journalistic criticism. Paracinematic vitriol also often ignores the fact that low-budget exploitation films have increasingly become legitimized as a field of study within the academy.[32] For purposes of distinction, however, all that is required is a nebulous body of those who do not actively advance a paracinematic aesthetic. As Vale and Juno state broadly in their introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*:

32 For examples of work on exploitation cinema produced within an academic context, see Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988); and Eric Schaefer, '"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": a history of exploitation films, 1919–1959' (Dissertation: University of Texas at Austin, 1994).

> This is a functional guide to territory largely neglected by the film-criticism establishment. . . . Most of the films discussed test the limits of contemporary (middle-class) cultural acceptability, mainly because in varying ways they don't meet certain 'standards' utilized in evaluating direction, acting, dialogue, sets, continuity, technical cinematography, etc. Many of the films are overtly 'lower-class' or 'low-brow' in content and art direction.[33]

33 Vale, Juno and Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films*, p. 4.

Vale and Juno go on to celebrate this cinema for its vitality and then identify what is at stake in this battle over the status of these films within the critical community. In a passage reminiscent of Bangs and Bourdieu, they state, 'At issue is the notion of 'good taste', which functions as a filter to block out entire areas of experience judged – and damned – as unworthy of investigation'.[34]

34 Ibid.

Style and excess

Graduate students entering the academy with an interest in trash cinema often wish to question why these 'areas of experience' have been 'judged and damned' by earlier scholars. But though they may attempt to disguise or renounce their cultural pedigree by aggrandizing such scandalous cultural artefacts, their heritage in a 'higher' taste public necessarily informs their textual and critical engagement of even the most abject 'low culture' forms. Gripsrud argues that 'egalitarian' attempts on the part of the culturally privileged to collapse differences between 'high' and 'low' culture, as noble as they might be, often ignore issues of 'access' to these two cultural realms. As Gripsrud writes, 'Some people have access to both high and low culture, but the majority has only access to the low one'.[35] Gripsrud describes high culture audiences that also consume popular cultural artefacts as having 'double access', and notes that this ability to participate in both cultural realms is not randomly distributed through society. As Gripsrud observes, 'The double access to the codes and practices of both high and low culture is a *class privilege*'.[36]

35 Gripsrud, 'High culture revisited', p. 199.

36 Ibid.

The phenomenon of double access raises a number of interesting political issues concerning the trash aesthetic. For example, when Vale and Juno write that these films address 'unpopular – even radical – views' and 'assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality [and] violence', this does not mean that paracinema is a uniformly 'progressive' body of cinema. In fact, in subgenres ranging from the often rabidly xenophobic travelogues of the 'mondo' documentaries to the library of 1950s sex-loop star Betty Page, many paracinematic texts would run foul of academic film culture's political orthodoxy. But, of course, this is precisely why such films are so vociferously championed by certain segments of the paracinematic audience, which then attempts to 'redeem' the often suspect pleasures of these films

through appeals to ironic detachment. Double access, then, foregrounds one of the central riddles of postmodern textuality: is the 'ironic' reading of a 'reactionary' text necessarily a 'progressive' act?[37]

As pivotal as double access is in considering conventional debates over representational politics, the influence of high cultural capital is equally foregrounded in how the academy, the paracinematic audience, and the students who claim membership in both realms attend to the question of cinematic style. Of course, the ability to attend critically to a concept such as style, whether it manifests itself in Eisenstein or a Godzilla movie, is a class privilege, requiring a certain textual sophistication in issues of technique, form and structure. Though paracinematic viewers may explicitly reject the pretensions of high-brow cinema, their often sophisticated rhetoric on the issue of style can transform low-brow cinema into an object every bit as obtuse and inaccessible to the mainstream viewer as some of the most demanding works of the conventional avant garde. Both within the academy and the paracinematic community, viewers address the complex relationship between cinematic 'form' and 'content', often addressing style for style's sake. This is not to say, however, that the paracinematic community simply approaches trash cinema in the same terms that aesthetes and academics engage art cinema. There is, I would argue, a major political distinction between aesthete and paracinematic discourses on cinematic style, a distinction that is crucial to the paracinematic project of championing a counter-cinema of trash over that of the academy. In other words, though the paracinematic community may share with academic aesthetes an interest in counter-cinema as technical execution, their respective agendas and approaches in attending to questions of style and technique vary tremendously.

For example, film aesthetes, both in the academy and in the popular press, frequently discuss counter-cinematic style as a strategic intervention. In this scenario, the film artist self-consciously employs stylistic innovations to differentiate his or her (usually his) films from the cultural mainstream. James Monaco's discussion of the French New Wave is typical in this regard. 'It is this fascination with the forms and structures of the film medium . . . that sets their films apart from those that preceded them and marks a turning point in film history'.[38] Similarly, according to David Bordwell's concept of parametric narration, a filmmaker may systematically manipulate a certain stylistic parameter independent of the demands of the plot. Such films are rare and are typically produced by figures associated with 'art cinema' (Bordwell identifies Ozu, Bresson and Godard as among those having produced parametric films). The emphasis here is on applied manipulation of style as a form of systematic artistic experimentation and technical virtuosity. 'In parametric narration, style is organized across the film according to distinct principles, just as a

37 Such debates, in turn, should not instantly assume that there only exists an impoverished, 'single access' reading of these films within 'low culture', suggesting formations that are without irony. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that an audience of any historical moment or cinematic habitus ever watched Russ Meyer's odes to castration anxiety and breast fetishism with a 'straight' face.

38 James Monaco, *The New Wave* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 9.

narrative poem exhibits prosodic patterning or an operatic scene fulfills a musical logic.'[39]

Paracinematic films such as *The Corpse Grinders* (Ted V. Mikels, 1972) and *She Devils on Wheels* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1968) rarely exhibit such pronounced stylistic virtuosity as the result of a 'conscious' artistic agenda. But this is not to say that issues of style and authorship are unimportant to the paracinematic community. However, rather than explore the systematic application of style as the elite techniques of a cinematic artist, paracinematic culture celebrates the systematic 'failure' or 'distortion' of conventional cinematic style by 'autuers' who are valued more as 'eccentrics' than as artists, who work within the impoverished and clandestine production conditions typical of exploitation cinema. These films deviate from Hollywood classicism not necessarily by artistic intentionality, but by the effects of material poverty and technical ineptitude. As director Frank Henenlotter (of the *Basket Case* series) comments, 'Often, through bad direction, misdirection, inept direction, a film starts assuming surrealistic overtones, taking a dreadfully cliched story into new frontiers – you're sitting there shaking your head, totally excited, totally unable to guess where this is going to head next, or what the next loony line out of somebody's mouth is going to be. Just as long as it isn't stuff you regularly see.'[40] Importantly, paracinematic films are not ridiculed for this deviation but are instead celebrated as unique, courageous and ultimately subversive cinematic experiences. For this audience, paracinema thus constitutes a true counter-cinema in as much as 'it isn't stuff you regularly see', both in terms of form and content. Henenlotter continues, 'I'll never be satisfied until I see every sleazy film ever made – as long as it's different, as long as it's breaking a taboo (whether deliberately or by misdirection). There's a thousand reasons to like these films.'[41]

While the academy prizes conscious transgression of conventions by a filmmaker looking to critique the medium aesthetically and/or politically, paracinematic viewers value a stylistic and thematic deviance born, more often than not, from the systematic failure of a film aspiring to *obey* dominant codes of cinematic representation. For this audience, the 'bad' is as aesthetically defamiliarizing and politically invigorating as the 'brilliant'. A manifesto on acting from *Zontar* further illustrates the aesthetic appeal of such stylistic deviation among this audience:

> Transparent play-acting; mumbling incompetence; passionate scenery-chewing; frigid woodenness; barely disguised drunkenness or contempt for the script; – these are the secrets of Zontarian acting at its best. Rondo Hatton's exploited acromegalic condition; Acquanetta's immobile dialogue readings; the drunken John Agar frozen to his chair in *Curse of the Swamp Creature*; – these great performances loom massively as the ultimate classics of

39 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 275.

40 Vale, Juno and Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films*, p. 11.

41 Ibid.

> ZONTARISM. These are not so much performances as revelations of Human truth. We are not 'entertained,' we rather sympathize with our suffering soul-mates on screen. These performances are not escapist fantasy, but a heavy injection of BADTRUTH.[42]

42 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

The Zontarian moment of the 'badtruth' is not unlike the Surrealist notion of the 'marvellous' (and indeed, the Surrealists were perhaps the first cinephiles with an interest in bad cinema).[43] As with the marvellous, the badtruth, as a nodal point of paracinematic style, provides a defamiliarized view of the world by merging the transcendentally weird and the catastrophically awful. Thus, rather than witness the Surrealists' vision of the exquisite chance meetings of umbrellas and sewing machines on a dissecting table, the paracinematic viewer thrills instead to such equally fantastic fabrications as women forced to duel in a syringe fight in the basement of a schizophrenic vaudevillian who has only moments earlier eaten his cat's left eyeball (*Maniac!* [Dwain Esper, 1934]), Colonial era witches and warlocks crushed to death by men in Levis corduroys who hurl bouncing Styrofoam boulders (*Blood-Orgy of the She-Devils* [Ted V. Mikels, 1973]), a down and out Bela Lugosi training a mutant bat to attack people wearing a certain type of shaving lotion (*The Devil Bat* [Jean Yarborough, 1941]), and leaping, pulsating brains that use their prehensile spinal cords to strangle unwary soldiers and citizens on a Canadian rocket base (*Fiend Without a Face* [Arthur Crabtree, 1958]).

43 For an example of this literature, see Ado Kyrou, 'The popular is marvelous', in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow* (London: British Film Institute, 1978).

Paracinematic taste involves a reading strategy that renders the bad into the sublime, the deviant into the defamiliarized, and in so doing, calls attention to the aesthetic aberrance and stylistic variety evident but routinely dismissed in the many subgenres of trash cinema. By concentrating on a film's formal bizarreness and stylistic eccentricity, the paracinematic audience, much like the viewer attuned to the innovations of Godard or capable of attending to the patterns of parametric narration described by Bordwell, foregrounds structures of cinematic discourse and artifice so that the material identity of the film ceases to be a structure made invisible in service of the diegesis, but becomes instead the primary focus of textual attention. It is in this respect that the paracinematic aesthetic is closely linked to the concept of 'excess'.

Kristin Thompson describes excess as a value that exists beyond a cinematic signifier's 'motivated' use, or, as 'those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces'.[44] 'At the point where motivation ends', Thompson writes, 'excess begins'.[45] '[T]he minute the viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning. . . . Excess does not equal style, but the two are closely linked because they both involve the material aspects of the film.'[46] Thompson writes of excess as an intermittent

44 Kristin Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', in Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, p. 130.

45 Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', p. 135.

46 Ibid., p. 132.

textual phenomenon, a brief moment of self-conscious materiality that interrupts an otherwise conventional, 'non-excessive' film: 'Probably no one ever watches only these non-diegetic aspects of the image through an entire film.' But, Thompson writes further, these non-diegetic aspects are nevertheless always present, 'a whole "film" existing in some sense alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching'.[47]

47 Ibid., pp. 132–3.

I would argue that the paracinematic audience is perhaps the one group of viewers that *does* concentrate exclusively on these 'non-diegetic aspects of the image' during the entire film, or at least attempts to do so. Like their counterparts in the academy, trash cinema fans, as active cinephiles practising an aesthetic founded on the recognition and subsequent rejection of Hollywood style, are extremely conscious of the cinema's characteristic narrative forms and stylistic strategies. But, importantly, while cinematic aesthetes attend to style and excess as moments of artistic bravado in relation to the creation of an overall diegesis, paracinematic viewers instead use excess as a gateway to exploring profilmic and extratextual aspects of the filmic object itself. In other words, by concentrating so intently on 'non-diegetic' elements in these films, be they unconvincing special effects, blatant anachronisms, or histrionic acting, the paracinematic reading attempts to activate the 'whole 'film' existing . . . alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching'. One could say that while academic attention to excess often foregrounds aesthetic strategies within the text as a closed formal system, paracinematic attention to excess, an excess that often manifests itself in a film's failure to conform to historically delimited codes of verisimilitude, calls attention to the text as a cultural and sociological document and thus dissolves the boundaries of the diegesis into profilmic and extratextual realms. It is here that the paracinematic audience most dramatically parts company with the aesthetes of academia. Whereas aesthete interest in style and excess always returns the viewer to the frame, paracinematic attention to excess seeks to push the viewer beyond the formal boundaries of the text.

Paracinematic excess: Ed Wood, Jr and Larry Buchanan

Ed Wood, Jr's status has long been high in the paracinematic community. Wood was an independent filmmaker in Hollywood during the 1950s, known primarily for his work with Bela Lugosi. His films are remarkably incompetent from a conventional perspective. Wood's dialogue was often awful, his actors alternately wooden and histrionic, and his sets pathetic and threadbare. Throughout his long career as a filmmaker, Wood was unable (or unwilling) to master the basics of continuity, screen direction or the construction of cinematic space. His *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is perhaps the most famous



Obsolescence as defamiliarization: an encounter with 'aliens' in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Ed Wood, Jr. 1959). Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

'badfilm' of all, having become badfilm's equivalent of *Citizen Kane* as an inventory of characteristically paracinematic stylistic devices. Though Wood's films were initially read as camp, the critical discourse within paracinematic literature surrounding Wood has since shifted from bemused derision to active celebration. No longer regarded as a hack, Wood is now seen, like Godard, as a unique talent improvising outside the constrictive environment of traditional Hollywood production and representation. As one fanzine comments, 'Wood's films are now appreciated less as models of incompetence, and more as the products of a uniquely personal and obsessive sensibility that best expresses itself through madly deconstructed narratives enacted by a gallery of grotesque castoffs from the fringes of Hollywood bohemia'.[48] This is certainly the perspective that dominates Tim Burton's cinematic treatment of Wood's career, *Ed Wood* (1994).

[48] *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

Wood's most notorious film and the movie that is central to his status as a paracinematic filmmaker is *Glen or Glenda*. As detailed extensively in Burton's biopic, Wood shot *Glen or Glenda* in 1953 to capitalize on the public hysteria surrounding the Christine Jorgenson sex-change operation. Also released under the titles *I Led Two Lives* and *I Changed My Sex*, the film purports to be an investigative examination of the sex-change issue. Instead, the film is an odd plea for public tolerance of transvestitism. The film's protagonist is a young man named Glen, a transvestite struggling with the decision of whether or not to tell his fiancee of his secret before their marriage. From this central conflict, Wood fashions a vertiginous film that in a bizarre and at times hallucinatory manner argues the virtues of transvestitism, giddily shifting from documentary to horror film, from police drama to sexploitation picture. In the midst of this generic turmoil, Bela Lugosi appears from time to time as a metanarrational

figure who punctuates the diegetic action with incomprehensible comments and bizarre non sequiturs.

A casebook example of stylistic deviation as the result of the unique conditions of production in exploitation cinema, *Glen or Glenda* is of particular interest for paracinematic viewers because of the extratextual identity of Ed Wood, Jr: Wood was himself a transvestite. He not only wrote and directed *Glen or Glenda*, but also starred as the troubled young transvestite, Glen. Fan legends (based on interviews with surviving crew members) have it that Wood directed most of the film while wearing his favourite chiffon housecoat and that he had an obsession with cashmere sweaters (a fetish dramatically enacted in the film's final scene). After his movie career ended in the 1960s, Wood went on to write a number of adult novels with transvestite storylines.[49]

This extratextual information about Wood is key to the paracinematic positioning of his films as a form of counter-cinema. Knowing this information allows the paracinematic fan to more fully appreciate the complexity of the cultural codes at work in a film like *Glen or Glenda*. John Fiske argues that the cultural elite 'use information about the artist to enhance or enrich the appreciation of the work'. Within fan culture, on the other hand, 'such knowledge increases the power of the fan to "see through" to the production processes normally hidden by the text and thus inaccessible to the non-fan'.[50] In the case of Ed Wood, Jr, the paracinematic aesthetic combines an elite interest in 'enriched appreciation' with a popular interest in seeing through 'production processes'. Paracinematic fans use their knowledge of Wood's real life to 'enhance or enrich' their engagement in his films, much as elites use their knowledge of Godard's various positions in relation to Marxism to inform their viewings. Vital to paracinematic pleasure, however, is this process of 'seeing through' the diegesis. For a sophisticated paracinematic viewer, *Glen or Glenda* is compelling because it seemingly presents both the textual and extratextual struggles of a man set against the repressive constraints of 1950s sexuality, encoded in a style that also challenges the period's conventions of representation. Paracinematic fans appreciate films such as *Glen or Glenda* not only as bizarre works of art, but as intriguing cultural documents, as socially and historically specific instances of artifice and commentary. Set against the bland cultural miasma of the Eisenhower years, Wood and his film stand out as truly remarkable figures.

This interest in collapsing the textual and the extratextual, the filmic and the profilmic, is especially pronounced in Zontarian interest in Larry Buchanan, a Dallas filmmaker who made a number of AIP films for television in the mid sixties. Buchanan's films rank among the most low-budget productions ever attempted in commercial filmmaking. Often following scripts from old black and white features, these films were reshot in colour for the television market in two or

49 For a more complete biography of Wood, see Rudolph Grey, *Nightmare of Ecstasy: the Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 1992).

50 Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', p. 24.

three days for often less than a few thousand dollars. The finished products are a test of even the most dedicated paracinematic viewer's patience. With no money or time to reshoot, mistakes in dialogue, camera movement and sound recording remain in each film. The films are unwatchable for most mainstream viewers, and consequently have assumed an exalted status among the 'hardcore' badfilm faction of paracinematic culture.

As with the other visionary stylists in paracinema's shadow realm of autuerism, Buchanan is valorized for his unique artistic vision. *Zontar* positions Buchanan as a poor man's Carl Dreyer, celebrating his particularly bleak and sombre approach. Importantly, however, this bleak and sombre tone is as much a function of the conditions of production as the product of Buchanan's 'genius'. A common strategy when discussing Buchanan is to transform his films into profilmic parables of artistic tragedy. Differentiating Buchanan from the more accessible Ed Wood, Jr, for example, *Zontar*'s editors write, 'where Ed Wood's films ultimately reassure the comfortably "hip" viewer of the dynamic force of even the most downtrodden and despised corners of human experience, the films of Larry Buchanan can only induce a profound feeling of desperation, anxiety and terminal boredom. The texture is not that of a tatty side-show, but that of the endless despair and futility of human existence as reflected on the concrete pavement of a Dallas parking lot.'[51] The Zontarian transformation of Buchanan's work thus shifts the diegetic frame so that the action on the screen becomes but the trace of an isolated moment of desperate human activity, a farcical attempt at 'art' taking place on a particular day many years ago in someone's garage, on a Dallas parking lot.

51 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

A contributor to *Zontar* describes this moment of profilmic nausea as personally experienced in the climatic revelation of the monster in the concluding scenes of Buchanan's *Curse of the Swamp Creature*:

> Seldom, if ever, has a more disappointing final monster revelation scene been filmed. . . . The monster is unbelievably, spectacularly cheap. . . . 'It' appears dressed in a white hospital smock, with rubber monster-gloves and a minimal mask-piece consisting of two painted PING-PONG BALL EYES set into a rubber bow. A skin-head wig and a couple of cruddy fangs complete the 'monster suit' . . . which is more embarrassing than scary . . . the CREATURE itself must be the least convincing creation in monster movie history. This is, of course, a subjective area, but I would rate it far worse than the ROBOT MONSTER and at least as bad as the CREEPING TERROR . . . though of a different order, naturally. THE MASTER DIRECTOR actually compounds the failure of his creature by withholding it for so long. By building to his epic anti-climax Buchanan makes the SWAMP CREATURE itself the essence of disappointment and failure . . . translated into cheap

> rubber and ping-pong ball eyes. The SWAMP CREATURE'S scaly rubber fright-mask is composed of the very substance of despair.[52]

52 Ibid.

The swamp creature, intended to be a startling and menacing cinematic revelation, is, in the last analysis, simply an overweight actor standing in weeds with ping-pong balls attached to his eyes on a hot day in Dallas in 1966. For the paracinematic community, such moments of impoverished excess are a means toward collapsing cinema's fourth wall, allowing the profilmic and the extratextual to mesh with the diegetic drama. The 'surface' diegesis becomes precisely that, the thin and final veil that is the indexical mark of a more interesting drama, that of the film's construction and sociohistorical context.

The politics of excess

Thompson argues that the importance of excess is that it renews 'the perceptual freshness of the work' and 'suggests a different way of watching and listening to a film'.

> The viewer is no longer caught in the bind of mistaking the causal structure of the narrative for some sort of inevitable, true, or natural set of events which is beyond questioning or criticism. . . . Once narrative is recognized as arbitrary rather than logical, the viewer is free to ask why individual events within its structures are as they are. The viewer is no longer constrained by conventions of reading to find a meaning or theme within the work as the solution to a sort of puzzle which has a right answer.[53]

53 Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', pp. 140–1.

Excess provides a freedom from constraint, an opportunity to approach a film with a fresh and slightly defamiliarized perspective. As Thompson argues, through excess 'the work becomes a perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length, going beyond the strictly functional aspects'.[54] What the critical viewer does with this newfound freedom provided by the phenomenon of excess is, I would argue, a political question, and one that lies at the heart of the conflict between the counter-cinema of the academy and that promoted by paracinematic culture. The very concept of excess, after all, as a relativistic term that posits a self-evident 'norm', is an inherently political evaluation. Exploring these politics of excess presents a key area where students who possess a trash aesthetic may impact the academic institutions to which they belong by questioning the goals, strategies and techniques of academically enshrined versions of 'art' cinema and the 'avant garde'.

54 Ibid., p. 141.

Specifically, the trash aesthetic offers a potential critique of two highly influential methodologies in film studies: neoformalist analysis and theories of 'radical' textuality. Paracinema suggests that the

neoformalist emphasis on art as defamiliarization might be more complicated than the cataloguing of innovative, text-bound 'devices'. If the paracinematic community celebrates a film, either earnestly or parodically, as an invigorating artistic experience precisely because of its utter banality, does that constitute a form of defamiliarization? For whom and under what circumstances is any film defamiliarizing? Since any notion of aesthetics is inextricably linked to historical issues of representation and reception, what are the politics of a neoformalist analysis that ultimately constructs a hierarchy of 'skilled' and 'unskilled' audiences, artistic and non-artistic films? (Do we really want to claim that *Last Year at Marienbad* is somehow more 'artistic' than *Sweet Badass's Badass Song* or even *E.T.*? What exactly is the purpose of such aesthetic valuations other than to empower a certain critic or a certain cinema?) If nothing else, the trash aesthetic serves as a reminder that all forms of poetics and aesthetic criticism are ultimately linked to issues of taste; and taste, in turn, is a social construct with profoundly political implications.

Paracinema also offers a critique of the 'radical' aesthetic that seeks to liberate, or at least politically agitate, audiences through the application of disruptive textual devices, a project that coalesced in theoretical and critical writings in film studies during the 1970s and which continues to inform much work on avant-garde textuality. In many respects, paracinematic discourses on excess greatly resemble the symptomatic criticism so central to film studies during this formative period. As with the devotees of Sirk, Minnelli and Lewis, paracinematic viewers are interested in reading films 'against the grain', ever on the alert for the trash film equivalents of Comolli and Narboni's celebrated 'category e' films.[55] And, as in the counter-cinemas explicitly designed by Godard or covertly implanted by Sirk, paracinema's retrospective reconstruction of an avant garde through the ironic engagement of exploitation cinema's history is a 'politicized' cinema to the extent that it demonstrates the limitations and interests of dominant cinematic style by providing a striking counter-example of deviation.[56]

But while segments of academic film culture often appeal to a refined code of aesthetics to apprehend and explain the potentially disruptive forces of style and excess (an aesthetics most often intentionally applied by an 'artist' to be successfully decoded by an elite cinephile in a rarefied and exclusive circuit of textual exchange), paracinematic culture celebrates excess as a product of cultural as well as aesthetic deviance. Once excess cues the elite viewer to the arbitrary structure of a narrative, he or she can then study the 'perceptual field of structures' in the work itself in appreciation of artistic craftsmanship within a closed formal system. The paracinematic viewer's recognition of a narrative's artifice, however, is the first step in examining a field of structures within the culture as a whole, a passageway into engaging a larger field of contextual issues

55 See Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/ideology/criticism, Part I', *Screen*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1971), pp. 27–36.

56 In Wollen's account of Godard's significance as a radical filmmaker, he identifies 'seven cardinal virtues' of Godard's aesthetic that oppose the 'seven deadly sins' of orthodox cinema. Godard's counter-cinema is thus argued to feature 'narrative intransitivity' rather than 'narrative transitivity' – 'estrangement vs identification, foregrounding vs transparency, multiple diegesis vs single diegesis, aperture vs closure, un-pleasure vs pleasure, and reality vs fiction'. One cannot help but be struck by how certain paracinematic titles, especially genre hybrids like *Glen or Glenda*, match Wollen's criteria point by point. For a more complete account of these distinctions, see Wollen, 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*'.

surrounding the film as a socially and historically specific document. As a consequence, paracinema might be said to succeed where earlier more 'radical' avant gardes have failed. It is doubtful that *Tout Va Bien* (Jean-Luc Godard / Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1973), or *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) for that matter, ever 'radicalized' anyone other than fellow academy aesthetes. Perhaps paracinema has the potential, at long last, to answer Brecht's famous call for an anti-illusionist aesthetic by presenting a cinema so histrionic, anachronistic and excessive that it compels even the most casual viewer to engage it ironically, producing a relatively detached textual space in which to consider, if only superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation. In this respect, one might argue that while academy icons such as Godard and Sirk may have employed complex aesthetic strategies to problematize issues such as the construction of gender, Ed Wood Jr, by his own admission, actually fought in the Pacific during World War II with a pink bra and knickers worn underneath his combat fatigues. As to which form of political engagement and subsequent critical promotion by the academy will prove more provocative and productive, it is open for debate.

'Trashing' the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style

JEFFREY SCONCE

> *Nobody likes movies like* Teenagers from Outer Space *or* Wrestling Women vs. the Aztec Mummy *save any loon sane enough to realize that the whole concept of Good Taste is concocted to keep people from having a good time, from reveling in a crassness that passeth all understanding. . . . But fuck those people who'd rather be watching* The Best Years of Our Lives *or* David and Lisa. *We got our own good tastes . . .*[1]

Written five years before Pierre Bourdieu published his monumental study on the social construction of taste, Lester Bangs's diatribe against a nebulously defined group of cultural custodians epitomizes Bourdieu's contention that 'tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others'. 'It is no accident', writes Bourdieu, 'that when they have to be justified, they are asserted negatively, by the refusal of other tastes'.[2] Thus, in the spirit of Lester Bangs, the editors of *Zontar*, a Boston-based fanzine devoted primarily to the promotion of 'badfilm', note that their publication 'is *not* for the delicate tastebuds of the pseudo-genteel cultural illiterati who enjoy mind-rotting, soul-endangering pabulum like *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* and the other white-boy 'new-age' puke-shit served up from the bowels of PBS during pledge-week'.[3] Meanwhile, a 1990 issue of *Subhuman*, a fanzine featuring articles on cinematic manifestations of

1 Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), pp. 122–3.

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 57.

3 *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, vol. 1, no. 1, n.p.

'necrophilia, 3-D surrealism, animal copulation, pregnant strippers, horror nerdism, and bovine flatulence', labels itself a journal of 'eccentric film and video kulture'.[4]

4 *Subhuman*, no. 15, front cover.

The stridently confrontational tastes espoused by Bangs, *Zontar* and *Subhuman* over this fifteen-year period describe the gradual emergence of a growing and increasingly articulate cinematic subculture, one organized around what are among the most critically disreputable films in cinematic history. Publications devoted to this 'trash' cinema include such magazines, fanzines and makeshift journals as *Psychotronic Video*, *Zontar*, *Subhuman*, *Trashola*, *Ungawa*, *Pandemonium*, and the RE/Search volume, *Incredibly Strange Films*.[5] The most visible document of this film community is Michael Weldon's *Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*, a subterranean companion to Leonard Maltin's *Movies On TV*, which catalogues hundreds of bizarre titles culled from Weldon's late-night television viewing marathons in New York City. Taken together, the diverse body of films celebrated by these various fanzines and books might best be termed 'paracinema'. As a most elastic textual category, paracinema would include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as 'badfilm', splatterpunk, 'mondo' films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography. Paracinema is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. In short, the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic 'trash', whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture. In doing so, paracinema represents the most developed and dedicated of cinephilic subcultures ever to worship at 'the temple of schlock'.[6]

5 'Fanzines' are home-produced, photocopied magazines circulated among fans and devoted to an often narrow area of interest in popular culture.

6 *Temple of Schlock* is another fanzine dedicated to this cinema.

The caustic rhetoric of paracinema suggests a pitched battle between a guerrilla band of cult film viewers and an elite cadre of would-be cinematic tastemakers. Certainly, the paracinematic audience likes to see itself as a disruptive force in the cultural and intellectual marketplace. As a short subject, this audience would be more inclined to watch a bootlegged McDonald's training film than *Man with a Movie Camera*, although, significantly, many in the paracinematic community would no doubt be familiar with this more respectable member of the avant-garde canon. Such calculated negation and refusal of 'elite' culture suggests that the politics of social stratification and taste in paracinema is more complex than a simple high-brow/low-brow split, and that the cultural politics of 'trash culture' are becoming ever more ambiguous as this 'aesthetic' grows in influence. In recent years, the paracinematic community has seen both the institutionalization and commercialization of their once

renegade, neo-camp aesthetic. Although paracinematic taste may have its roots in the world of 'low-brow' fan culture (fanzines, film conventions, memorabilia collections, and so on), the paracinematic sensibility has recently begun to infiltrate the avant garde, the academy, and even the mass culture on which paracinema's ironic reading strategies originally preyed. Art museums that once programmed only Italian Neo-Realism or German Neo-Expressionism now feature retrospectives of 1960s Biker films and career overviews of exploitation auteurs such as Herschell Gordon Lewis and Doris Wishman. No doubt to the dismay and befuddlement of cultural hygienists like Allan Bloom and James Twitchell, academic courses in film studies increasingly investigate 'sleazy' genres such as horror and pornography. Recently, the trash aesthetic has even made inroads into mainstream popular taste. The ironic reading strategies honed by the badfilm community through countless hours of derisive interaction with late-night science fiction are now prepackaged for cable in programmes such as *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*. Similarly, Turner Network Television now presents a weekly sampling of the paracinematic pantheon in Friday night, '100% Weird' triple features. Even Blockbuster video, America's corporate bastion of cinematic conservatism, features a 'le bad' section in many of their stores, where patrons can find the work of John Waters, William Castle and other 'disreputable' filmmakers. Perhaps most incredibly, *Batman*'s director Tim Burton recently directed a multi-million dollar biopic of Ed Wood Jr, the director of such paracinematic classics as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) and *Glen or Glenda* (1953), an artist who himself never spent over a few thousand dollars on any one picture.[7] Clearly, in cinematic circles of all kinds, there has been a significant realignment on the social terrain of taste, a powerful response to what has been termed 'the siren song of crap'.

7 In a fittingly perverse tribute to Wood, Burton's film won widespread critical acclaim and yet bombed at the box office, making less than six million dollars on its initial release in the USA.



A key element in the paracinematic aesthetic is the 'gore' film, a genre that most fans argue debuts with Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963). Lewis is often acclaimed for the decidedly 'unartful' presentation of his gore set pieces. Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

At first glance, the paracinematic sensibility, in all its current manifestations, would seem to be identical to the 'camp' aesthetic outlined by Susan Sontag some thirty years ago. Without a doubt, both sensibilities are highly ironic, infatuated with the artifice and excess of obsolescent cinema. What makes paracinema unique, however, is its aspiration to the status of a 'counter–cinema'. Whereas 'camp' was primarily a reading strategy that allowed gay men to rework the Hollywood cinema through a new and more expressive subcultural code, paracinematic culture seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic 'art', aggressively attacking the established canon of 'quality' cinema and questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthete discourses on movie art. Camp was an aesthetic of ironic colonization and cohabitation. Paracinema, on the other hand, is an aesthetic of vocal confrontation.

Who, exactly, is the paracinematic audience at war with, and what is at stake in such a battle? Consider the following diatribe from *Zontar*:

> Where the philosophical pygmies search the snob-ridden art galleries, flock to the false comfort of PBS-produced pseudo-gentility, WE look elsewhere. We seek the explanations for the decline of Hu-Manity in the most debased and misunderstood manifestations of the IDIOT CULTURE. Monster movies, comic books, cheap porn videos, TV preachers, of course!!! But we search ever deeper into the abyss. The Home Shopping Network. Late-Night Cable TV-Product Worship-Testimonial Shows. Tiffany Videos. We leave purity to those other assholes. The search for BADTRUTH is only for the brave few, like you, whose all-consuming HATE is powerful enough to resist the temptations of REFINEMENT, TASTE, and ESCAPISM – the miserable crumbs tossed from the table by the growing mass of REPUBLICAN THIRTYSOMETHING COUNTRY-CLUB CHRISTIAN ZOMBIES who now rule this wretched planet.[8]

8 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

The paracinematic audience promotes their tastes and textual proclivities in opposition to a loosely defined group of cultural and economic elites, those purveyors of the status quo who not only rule the world, but who are also responsible for making the contemporary cinema, in the paracinematic mind, so completely boring. Nor does the paracinematic community care much for the activities of film scholars and critics. For example, an editor of *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, a sister publication of *Zontar*, encourages readers to hone their knowledge of trash-culture classics ridiculed by the academy (in this case the sword and sandal epic, *The Silver Chalice* [Victor Saville, 1954]), thereby 'amazing your friends and embarrassing the jargon-slinging empty-headed official avatars of critical discourse'.[9]

9 *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, vol. 1, no. 1, n.p.

At times, factions of the paracinematic audience have little patience even for one another. This rift is perhaps most pointedly embodied by

the competing agendas of *Film Threat* and *Psychotronic Video*, two fanzines turned magazines with international circulations that promote rival visions of the 'trash' aesthetic. While *Psychotronic* concentrates on the sizable segment of this community interested in uncovering and collecting long lost titles from the history of exploitation, *Film Threat* looks to transgressive aesthetics/genres of the past as avant-garde inspiration for contemporary independent filmmaking, championing such 'underground' auteurs as Nick Zedd and Richard Kern. In a particularly nasty swipe, a subscription form for *Film Threat* features a drawing of the 'typical' *Film Threat* reader, portrayed as a dynamic, rockabilly-quiffed hipster surrounded by admiring women. This is juxtaposed with a drawing of the 'typical' *Psychotronic* reader, depicted as passive, overweight and asexual, with a bad complexion.

Despite such efforts at generating counter-distinction within the shared cultural project of attacking 'high-brow' cinema, the discourses characteristically employed by paracinematic culture in its valorization of 'low-brow' artefacts indicate that this audience, like the film elite (academics, aesthetes, critics), is particularly rich with 'cultural capital' and thus possesses a level of textual/critical sophistication similar to the cineastes they construct as their nemesis. In terms of education and social position, in other words, the various factions of the paracinematic audience and the elite cineastes they commonly attack would appear to share what Bourdieu terms a 'cultural pedigree'.[10] Employing the terminology of US sociologist Herbert Gans, these groups might be thought of as radically opposed 'taste publics' that are nevertheless involved in a common 'taste culture'. As Gans writes: 'Taste cultures are not cohesive value systems, and taste publics are not organized groups; the former are aggregates of similar values and usually but not always similar content, and the latter are aggregates of people with usually but not always similar values making similar choices from available offerings of culture'.[11]

Whether thought of as a subculture, an aesthetic or a sensibility, the recent flourishing of paracinema represents not just a challenge to aesthete taste, but the larger fragmentation of a common taste culture, brought about by various disaffected segments of middle-class youth. Although it would be difficult to define the precise dimensions or identify the exact constituency of this particular taste public, I would argue that the paracinematic community, like the academy and the popular press, embodies primarily a male, white, middle-class, and 'educated' perspective on the cinema. Representations of this 'community' are rare, but can be glimpsed, among other places, at the fringes of Richard Linklater's ode to baby-buster anomie, *Slacker* (1991). Linklater documents the desultory activities of bored students, would-be bohemians and miscellaneous cranks, all of whom exist at the economic and cultural periphery of a typical college town.[12] In a more reflexive turn, a fanzine from San Francisco describes the world of 'low-life scum', disheveled men in their twenties manifesting 'a

10 For a more detailed discussion of the cultural pedigree, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 63.

11 Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 69–70.

12 In the film's most explicit nod to the paracinematic mentality, one particularly deranged character bases his elaborate conspiracy theories on the 'truth' to be found in late-night, science-fiction movies.

fascination with all things sleazy, bizarre, and macabre'.[13] Paracinematic interests also often intersect with the more familiar subcultures of science-fiction fandom. Regardless of their individual interests and ultimate allegiances, however, the paracinematic audience cultivates an overall aesthetic of calculated disaffection, marking a deviant taste public disengaged from the cultural hierarchies of their overarching taste culture.

Such acrimonious battles within a single taste culture are not uncommon.[14] As Bourdieu writes: 'Explicit aesthetic choices are in fact often constituted in opposition to the choices of the groups closest in social space, with whom the competition is most direct and most immediate, and more precisely, no doubt, in relation to those choices most clearly marked by the intention (perceived as pretension) of marking distinction vis-a-vis lower groups'.[15] As the alienated faction of a social group high in cultural capital, the paracinematic audience generates distinction within its own social space by celebrating the cultural objects deemed most noxious (low-brow) by their taste culture as a whole. Paracinema thus presents a direct challenge to the values of aesthete film culture and a general affront to the 'refined' sensibility of the parent taste culture. It is a calculated strategy of shock and confrontation against fellow cultural elites, not unlike Duchamp's notorious unveiling of a urinal in an art gallery. As Bourdieu states: 'The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated'.[16] By championing films like *2000 Maniacs* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1964), *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (Doris Wishman, 1965), and *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (Ray Dennis Steckler, 1963), and by associating themselves with home shopping networks,

13 *Murder Can Be Fun*, no. 5, n.p.

14 This particular struggle over cinematic taste also takes place in a variety of cultural contexts. For an account of the cultivation of a disreputable aesthetic in Swedish youth culture, see Göran Bolin, 'Beware! Rubbish! Popular culture and strategies of distinction', *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1994), pp. 33–49.

15 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 60.

16 Ibid., pp. 56–7



Histrionic acting is a hallmark of the paracinematic aesthetic. Here, having rolled a 'Yankee' down a hill in a barrel spiked with nails, two psychotic boyscouts admire their handiwork in Herschell Gordon Lewis's *2000 Maniacs* (1964). Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

pornography and TV preachers, this community is, in effect, renouncing its 'cultural pedigree' and attempting to distance itself from what it perceives as elite (and elitist) taste.

Despite the paracinematic community's open hostility to the 'jargon-slinging avatars of critical discourse', many scholars see this trend towards the valorization of 'trash' at work in the academy itself, especially in the realm of media studies. In ' "High culture" revisited', for example, Jostein Gripsrud argues that a major segment of contemporary media scholars routinely attacks all forms of high culture while indiscriminately valorizing mass culture in its place. As Gripsrud states somewhat sarcastically, 'Presenting oneself as a soap-fan in scholarly circles could be considered daring or provocative some ten years ago. Nowadays it is more of a prerequisite for legitimate entry into the academic discourse on soaps in some Anglo-American fora.'[17] Gripsrud speculates that this proclivity among many contemporary scholars to condemn high culture and valorize mass culture is a function of their unique trajectory in social space. 'Such upwardly mobile subjects are placed in a sort of cultural limbo, not properly integrated in the lower-class culture they left, nor in the upper-class high culture they have formally entered. Since they are newcomers, they are faced with a need to make choices concerning what to do in and with their acquired position.'[18] Gripsrud believes that the valorization of mass culture serves as a form of 'symbolic homecoming' that allows such scholars to 'strive for or pretend re-integration into the classes they once left, preferably as "leaders" in some sense, "voices" for the people'.[19]

17 Jostein Gripsrud, ' "High culture" revisited', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1989), p. 198.

18 Ibid., pp. 196–7.

19 Ibid., p. 197.

Gripsrud's depiction of the intellectual in limbo is a particularly apt description of the contemporary graduate student, the figure within the institution of the academy who is perched the most precariously between the domains of cultural, educational and economic capital. Not surprisingly, paracinematic culture is a particularly active site of investment for many contemporary graduate students in film studies. Often, the connections between graduate film study and paracinematic culture are quite explicit, since many students now pursuing an advanced degree in film began as fans of exploitation genres such as horror and science fiction. Some students retain their interest in trash culture as a secret, guilty pleasure. Others, however, increasingly seek to focus their work on these previously marginalized and debased forms of cinema. Influenced by the importation of cultural studies to the USA during the 1980s, and writing in the wake of film scholars who were increasingly willing to address traditionally 'untouchable' cinematic genres such as horror and pornography, many students in media studies wish to continue pushing the limits of the traditional cinematic canon and the constraints of conventional academic enterprise. At stake is a sense of both institutional and cultural distinction. As John Fiske writes, 'Many young fans are successful at school and are steadily accumulating official cultural capital, but wish to differentiate themselves, along the axis of age at least, from the

social values and cultural tastes (or habitus) of those who currently possess the cultural and economic capital they are still working to acquire'.[20] As paracinematic texts and concerns increasingly infiltrate film studies, however, many graduate students find themselves caught between the institutional discourses (and agendas) of the film elite as represented by the academy, and the 'fan' activities of the paracinematic community with which they feel a previous affinity. Raised in mass culture, such students are not always willing to give up the excesses of the drive-in for the discipline of Dreyer. The question is what to do with such textual experience and expertise.

20 John Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', in Lisa Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–4.

Debate within the academy over the politics of the canon is not new. Nor is it unusual for 'fan' cultures to make themselves heard within the academy (most film scholars, one would assume, study the cinema because they were a fan first). What is unusual in paracinematic culture's gradual infiltration of the academy is the manner in which this group so explicitly foregrounds the cultural politics of taste and aesthetics, not just in society at large, but within the academy itself. Graduate students with an interest in 'trash' cinema often find themselves in the ironic position of challenging the legitimacy of the very institution they are attending in order to obtain cultural validation and authority over issues of politics and taste. Such students are struggling to make the transition from a mere fan to an accredited scholar. Though both fan and scholar may be equally dedicated (and even knowledgeable) in their involvement with a particular cultural form, they differ tremendously in terms of their respective status within society as a whole. In a hierarchical social system marked by the differential circulation of cultural and economic capital, graduate students seeking to make this crucial transition of accreditation must submit themselves, quite literally, to the *discipline* of film studies in both its institutional and punitive forms. In doing so, the discipline works to shape both knowledge and taste, linking them in a process that is every bit as political in the academy as it is in the culture the academy seeks to study. As Bourdieu notes, 'At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness'.[21] In this way, the legitimizing function of the academy in issues of knowledge, taste and aesthetics works to conceal relations of power and control, both within the institution itself and the society that sanctions that institution's cultural authority.

21 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 57–8.

By challenging this disciplinary authority, the paracinematic audience, both academic and non-academic, epitomizes what Bourdieu terms the 'new style autodidact'. As described by Bourdieu, the autodidact is a figure alienated from the legitimate mode of educational and cultural acquisition. Estranged or excluded from legitimate modes of acquisition, autodidacts invest in alternative forms of cultural capital, those not fully recognized by the educational

system and the cultural elite. Bourdieu describes two backgrounds typical of this new style autodidact:

> 'middle-ground' arts such as cinema, jazz, and, even more, strip cartoons, science-fiction or detective stories are predisposed to attract the investments either of those who have entirely succeeded in converting their cultural capital into educational capital or those who, not having acquired legitimate culture in the legitimate manner (i.e., through early familiarization), maintain an uneasy relationship with it, subjectively or objectively, or both. These arts, not yet fully legitimate, which are disdained or neglected by the big holders of educational capital, offer a refuge or a revenge to those who, by appropriating them, secure the best return on their cultural capital (especially if it is not fully recognized scholastically) while at the same time taking credit for contesting the established hierarchy of legitimacies and profits.[22]

22 Ibid., p. 87.

The autodidact is a person who invests in unsanctioned culture either because he or she can 'afford' to, having already made a successful conversion of legitimate cultural and educational capital into economic capital, or who feel, because of their tentative and at times alienated relationship with 'legitimate culture', that such disreputable investments are more durable and potentially more 'rewarding'.

It should not be surprising, then, that paracinematic fans, as exiles from the legitimizing functions of the academy, and many graduate students, as the most disempowered faction within the academy itself, both look to trash culture as a site of 'refuge and revenge'. Such autodidacticism constitutes, for Bourdieu, a form of 'counterculture', one working to free itself from 'the constraints of the scholastic market'. 'They strive to do so by producing another market with its own consecrating agencies', writes Bourdieu, 'capable of challenging the pretension of the educational system to impose the principles of evaluation of competencies and manners which reign in the scholastic market.'[23] For its audience, paracinema represents a final textual frontier that exists beyond the colonizing powers of the academy, and thus serves as a staging ground for strategic raids on legitimate culture and its institutions by those (temporarily) lower in educational, cultural and/or economic capital. Such a struggle demonstrates that battles over the canon, in any discipline, are as much conflicts over the processes and politics by which an entire academic field validates its very existence and charts its own future, fought by groups within the academy as stratified in their institutional power as society at large is stratified in terms of cultural and economic power.

23 Ibid., p. 96.

On one hand, it would be easy to explain the turn towards trash cinema as yet another example of the generational politics of the canon in the academy, a struggle that legitimated cinema in the face of literature, Hollywood in the face of art cinema and, most recently, television in the face of Hollywood. But there is more here than a

struggle over the canon and the politics of object choice. The study of trash cinema suggests a struggle over the task of cinema scholarship as a whole, especially in terms of defining the relationship between aesthetics and cultural criticism. Whether attacking traditional cultural markets and intellectual institutions as a fan, or attempting to bridge the two worlds as a student, the paracinematic audience presents in its often explicit opposition to the agendas of the academy a dispute over *how* to approach the cinema as much as a conflict over *what* cinema to approach. At issue is not only which films get to be studied, but which questions are to be asked about the cinema in the first place. What I am interested in exploring in the remainder of this essay is the relationship between paracinematic culture and the aesthete culture this group associates with the academy, as well as the place of the contemporary graduate film student in bridging these two often antagonistic sensibilities. How are these groups similar, how do they differ and, perhaps most importantly, how might the trash aesthetic ultimately impact the academy? I am particularly interested in how the two communities approach issues of cinematic 'style' and 'excess'. I will argue that paracinema hinges on an aesthetic of excess, and that this paracinematic interest in excess represents an explicitly political challenge to reigning aesthete discourses in the academy. The cultural politics involved in this struggle, however, can be clarified by first examining similarities between aesthete and paracinematic discourses on cinema.

Counter-cinemas

Throughout the history of cinema studies as a discipline, the cultivation of various counter-cinemas, exclusive cinematic canons that do not easily admit the textual pleasures of more 'commonplace' audiences, has been a crucial strategy in maintaining a sense of cultural distinction for film scholars. Frequently, the promotion of such counter-cinemas has been organized around what has become a dominant theme in academic film culture: namely, the sense of loss over the medium's unrealized artistic and political potential. From this perspective, the cinema once held the promise of a revolutionary popular art form when, as Annette Michelson writes, 'a certain euphoria enveloped . . . early filmmaking and theory'. '[T]here was', she continues, 'a very real sense in which the revolutionary aspirations of the modernist movement in literature and arts, on the one hand, and of a Marxist or Utopian tradition, on the other hand, could converge in the hopes and promises, as yet undefined, of the new medium'.[24] Instead, these hopes were dashed by the domination of the public taste and mind by Hollywood cinema. And while there has never been a shortage of critical interest in the classical Hollywood cinema, championing counter-cinemas that break with the conventions of

24 Annette Michelson, 'Film and the radical aspiration', in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 472.

Hollywood production and representation remains a central project of film aesthetes and academics. This critical programme proceeds both artistically, by valorizing a body of 'art' films over the mainstream, commercial cinema, and politically, by celebrating those filmmakers who seem to disrupt the conventional narrative machinery of Hollywood.[25]

In cultivating a counter-cinema from the dregs of exploitation films, paracinematic fans, like the academy, explicitly situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents. United with the film elite in their dislike of Hollywood banality and yet frequently excluded from the circles of academic film culture, the paracinematic community nonetheless often adopts the conventions of 'legitimate' cinematic discourse in discussing its own cinema. As Fiske notes, fan groups are often 'aware that their object of fandom [is] devalued by the criteria of official culture and [go] to great pains to argue against this misevaluation. They frequently [use] official cultural criteria such as 'complexity' or 'subtlety' to argue that their preferred texts [are] as 'good' as the canonized ones and constantly [evoke] legitimate culture . . . as points of comparison.'[26] Elite discourse often appears either earnestly or parodically in discussions of paracinematic films. A fanzine review of the obscure 1964 film, *The Dungeons of Harrow*, is typical. The fanzine describes the film as 'a twisted surreal marvel, a triumph of spirit and vision over technical incompetence and abysmal production values. The film can be seen as a form of art brut – crude, naive, pathetic – but lacking the poetry and humor often associated with this style. Perhaps art brutarian would better serve to describe this almost indescribable work.'[27]

As in the academic film community, the paracinematic audience recognizes Hollywood as an economic and artistic institution that represents not just a body of films, but a particular mode of film production and its accompanying signifying practices. Furthermore, the narrative form produced by this institution is seen as somehow 'manipulative' and 'repressive', and linked to dominant interests as a form of cultural coercion. In their introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*, V. Vale and Andrea Juno, two of the most visible cultural brokers in the realm of paracinema, describe why low-budget films helmed by idiosyncratic visionaries are so often superior to mainstream, Hollywood cinema.

> The value of low-budget films is: they can be transcendent expressions of a single person's individual vision and quirky originality. When a corporation decides to invest $20 million in a film, a chain of command regulates each step, and no one person is allowed free rein. Meetings with lawyers, accountants, and corporate boards are what films in Hollywood are all about. . . . Often [low-budget] films are eccentric – even extreme – presentations by

25 For an influential account of such an agenda, see Peter Wollen's 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*', in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 120–29.

26 Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', p. 36.

27 *Subhuman*, no. 16, p. 3.

individuals freely expressing their imaginations, who throughout the filmmaking process improvise creative solutions to problems posed by either circumstance or budget – mostly the latter. Secondly, they often present unpopular – even radical – views addressing social, political, racial or sexual inequities, hypocrisy in religion or government; or, in other ways they assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality, violence, and other mores.[28]

28 V. Vale, Andrea Juno and Jim Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films* (San Francisco: RE/search Publications, 1986), p. 5.

Such rhetoric could just as easily be at home in an elite discussion of the French New Wave or the American New Cinema. Products of a shared taste culture, paracinematic cinephiles, like the scholars and critics of the academy, continue to search for unrecognized talent and long forgotten masterpieces, producing a pantheon that celebrates a certain stylistic unity and/or validates the diverse artistic visions of unheralded 'auteurs'.

Zontar, for example, devotes almost all of its attention to the work of Larry Buchanan, who is celebrated as 'the greatest director of all time' and as a maker of films that must be regarded as 'absolute and unquestionable holy writ'.[29] Elsewhere, *Zontar* hails Buchanan as 'a prophet of transcendental banality . . . who eclipses Bergman in evoking a sense of alienation, despair and existential angst'.[30] As this rather tongue-in-cheek hyperbole suggests, paracinematic culture, like that of the academy, continues to generate its own forms of internal distinction by continually redefining its vanguard, thereby thwarting unsophisticated dilettantes and moving its audience as a whole on to increasingly demanding and exclusive paracinematic films. In its contemporary and most sophisticated form, paracinema is an aggressive, esoteric and often painfully ascetic counter-aesthetic, one that produces, in its most extreme manifestations, an ironic form of reverse elitism. 'The fine art of great badfilm is not a laughing matter to everybody', says one fan. 'Its adherents are small in number, but fanatical in pickiness. Badness appreciation is the most acquired taste, the most refined.'[31]

29 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Invoking Larry Buchanan, the mastermind of films like *Mars Needs Women* (1966) and *Zontar the Thing from Venus* (1966), as a greater director than Ingmar Bergman, however, reaffirms that the paracinematic community defines itself in opposition not only to mainstream Hollywood cinema, but to the (perceived) counter-cinema of aesthetes and the cinematic academy. Again, as with any taste public, this elite cadre of 'aesthetes' cannot be definitively located in a particular author, methodology, or school of academic/journalistic criticism. Paracinematic vitriol also often ignores the fact that low-budget exploitation films have increasingly become legitimized as a field of study within the academy.[32] For purposes of distinction, however, all that is required is a nebulous body of those who do not actively advance a paracinematic aesthetic. As Vale and Juno state broadly in their introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*:

32 For examples of work on exploitation cinema produced within an academic context, see Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988); and Eric Schaefer, '"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": a history of exploitation films, 1919–1959' (Dissertation: University of Texas at Austin, 1994).

> This is a functional guide to territory largely neglected by the film-criticism establishment. . . . Most of the films discussed test the limits of contemporary (middle-class) cultural acceptability, mainly because in varying ways they don't meet certain 'standards' utilized in evaluating direction, acting, dialogue, sets, continuity, technical cinematography, etc. Many of the films are overtly 'lower-class' or 'low-brow' in content and art direction.[33]

33 Vale, Juno and Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films*, p. 4.

Vale and Juno go on to celebrate this cinema for its vitality and then identify what is at stake in this battle over the status of these films within the critical community. In a passage reminiscent of Bangs and Bourdieu, they state, 'At issue is the notion of 'good taste', which functions as a filter to block out entire areas of experience judged – and damned – as unworthy of investigation'.[34]

34 Ibid.

Style and excess

Graduate students entering the academy with an interest in trash cinema often wish to question why these 'areas of experience' have been 'judged and damned' by earlier scholars. But though they may attempt to disguise or renounce their cultural pedigree by aggrandizing such scandalous cultural artefacts, their heritage in a 'higher' taste public necessarily informs their textual and critical engagement of even the most abject 'low culture' forms. Gripsrud argues that 'egalitarian' attempts on the part of the culturally privileged to collapse differences between 'high' and 'low' culture, as noble as they might be, often ignore issues of 'access' to these two cultural realms. As Gripsrud writes, 'Some people have access to both high and low culture, but the majority has only access to the low one'.[35] Gripsrud describes high culture audiences that also consume popular cultural artefacts as having 'double access', and notes that this ability to participate in both cultural realms is not randomly distributed through society. As Gripsrud observes, 'The double access to the codes and practices of both high and low culture is a *class privilege*'.[36]

35 Gripsrud, 'High culture revisited', p. 199.

36 Ibid.

The phenomenon of double access raises a number of interesting political issues concerning the trash aesthetic. For example, when Vale and Juno write that these films address 'unpopular – even radical – views' and 'assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality [and] violence', this does not mean that paracinema is a uniformly 'progressive' body of cinema. In fact, in subgenres ranging from the often rabidly xenophobic travelogues of the 'mondo' documentaries to the library of 1950s sex-loop star Betty Page, many paracinematic texts would run foul of academic film culture's political orthodoxy. But, of course, this is precisely why such films are so vociferously championed by certain segments of the paracinematic audience, which then attempts to 'redeem' the often suspect pleasures of these films

through appeals to ironic detachment. Double access, then, foregrounds one of the central riddles of postmodern textuality: is the 'ironic' reading of a 'reactionary' text necessarily a 'progressive' act?[37]

As pivotal as double access is in considering conventional debates over representational politics, the influence of high cultural capital is equally foregrounded in how the academy, the paracinematic audience, and the students who claim membership in both realms attend to the question of cinematic style. Of course, the ability to attend critically to a concept such as style, whether it manifests itself in Eisenstein or a Godzilla movie, is a class privilege, requiring a certain textual sophistication in issues of technique, form and structure. Though paracinematic viewers may explicitly reject the pretensions of high-brow cinema, their often sophisticated rhetoric on the issue of style can transform low-brow cinema into an object every bit as obtuse and inaccessible to the mainstream viewer as some of the most demanding works of the conventional avant garde. Both within the academy and the paracinematic community, viewers address the complex relationship between cinematic 'form' and 'content', often addressing style for style's sake. This is not to say, however, that the paracinematic community simply approaches trash cinema in the same terms that aesthetes and academics engage art cinema. There is, I would argue, a major political distinction between aesthete and paracinematic discourses on cinematic style, a distinction that is crucial to the paracinematic project of championing a counter-cinema of trash over that of the academy. In other words, though the paracinematic community may share with academic aesthetes an interest in counter-cinema as technical execution, their respective agendas and approaches in attending to questions of style and technique vary tremendously.

For example, film aesthetes, both in the academy and in the popular press, frequently discuss counter-cinematic style as a strategic intervention. In this scenario, the film artist self-consciously employs stylistic innovations to differentiate his or her (usually his) films from the cultural mainstream. James Monaco's discussion of the French New Wave is typical in this regard. 'It is this fascination with the forms and structures of the film medium . . . that sets their films apart from those that preceded them and marks a turning point in film history'.[38] Similarly, according to David Bordwell's concept of parametric narration, a filmmaker may systematically manipulate a certain stylistic parameter independent of the demands of the plot. Such films are rare and are typically produced by figures associated with 'art cinema' (Bordwell identifies Ozu, Bresson and Godard as among those having produced parametric films). The emphasis here is on applied manipulation of style as a form of systematic artistic experimentation and technical virtuosity. 'In parametric narration, style is organized across the film according to distinct principles, just as a

37 Such debates, in turn, should not instantly assume that there only exists an impoverished, 'single access' reading of these films within 'low culture', suggesting formations that are without irony. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that an audience of any historical moment or cinematic habitus ever watched Russ Meyer's odes to castration anxiety and breast fetishism with a 'straight' face.

38 James Monaco, *The New Wave* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 9.

narrative poem exhibits prosodic patterning or an operatic scene fulfills a musical logic.'[39]

Paracinematic films such as *The Corpse Grinders* (Ted V. Mikels, 1972) and *She Devils on Wheels* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1968) rarely exhibit such pronounced stylistic virtuosity as the result of a 'conscious' artistic agenda. But this is not to say that issues of style and authorship are unimportant to the paracinematic community. However, rather than explore the systematic application of style as the elite techniques of a cinematic artist, paracinematic culture celebrates the systematic 'failure' or 'distortion' of conventional cinematic style by 'autuers' who are valued more as 'eccentrics' than as artists, who work within the impoverished and clandestine production conditions typical of exploitation cinema. These films deviate from Hollywood classicism not necessarily by artistic intentionality, but by the effects of material poverty and technical ineptitude. As director Frank Henenlotter (of the *Basket Case* series) comments, 'Often, through bad direction, misdirection, inept direction, a film starts assuming surrealistic overtones, taking a dreadfully cliched story into new frontiers – you're sitting there shaking your head, totally excited, totally unable to guess where this is going to head next, or what the next loony line out of somebody's mouth is going to be. Just as long as it isn't stuff you regularly see.'[40] Importantly, paracinematic films are not ridiculed for this deviation but are instead celebrated as unique, courageous and ultimately subversive cinematic experiences. For this audience, paracinema thus constitutes a true counter-cinema in as much as 'it isn't stuff you regularly see', both in terms of form and content. Henenlotter continues, 'I'll never be satisfied until I see every sleazy film ever made – as long as it's different, as long as it's breaking a taboo (whether deliberately or by misdirection). There's a thousand reasons to like these films.'[41]

While the academy prizes conscious transgression of conventions by a filmmaker looking to critique the medium aesthetically and/or politically, paracinematic viewers value a stylistic and thematic deviance born, more often than not, from the systematic failure of a film aspiring to *obey* dominant codes of cinematic representation. For this audience, the 'bad' is as aesthetically defamiliarizing and politically invigorating as the 'brilliant'. A manifesto on acting from *Zontar* further illustrates the aesthetic appeal of such stylistic deviation among this audience:

> Transparent play-acting; mumbling incompetence; passionate scenery-chewing; frigid woodenness; barely disguised drunkenness or contempt for the script; – these are the secrets of Zontarian acting at its best. Rondo Hatton's exploited acromegalic condition; Acquanetta's immobile dialogue readings; the drunken John Agar frozen to his chair in *Curse of the Swamp Creature*; – these great performances loom massively as the ultimate classics of

39 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 275.

40 Vale, Juno and Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films*, p. 11.

41 Ibid.

> ZONTARISM. These are not so much performances as revelations of Human truth. We are not 'entertained,' we rather sympathize with our suffering soul-mates on screen. These performances are not escapist fantasy, but a heavy injection of BADTRUTH.[42]

42 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

The Zontarian moment of the 'badtruth' is not unlike the Surrealist notion of the 'marvellous' (and indeed, the Surrealists were perhaps the first cinephiles with an interest in bad cinema).[43] As with the marvellous, the badtruth, as a nodal point of paracinematic style, provides a defamiliarized view of the world by merging the transcendentally weird and the catastrophically awful. Thus, rather than witness the Surrealists' vision of the exquisite chance meetings of umbrellas and sewing machines on a dissecting table, the paracinematic viewer thrills instead to such equally fantastic fabrications as women forced to duel in a syringe fight in the basement of a schizophrenic vaudevillian who has only moments earlier eaten his cat's left eyeball (*Maniac!* [Dwain Esper, 1934]), Colonial era witches and warlocks crushed to death by men in Levis corduroys who hurl bouncing Styrofoam boulders (*Blood-Orgy of the She-Devils* [Ted V. Mikels, 1973]), a down and out Bela Lugosi training a mutant bat to attack people wearing a certain type of shaving lotion (*The Devil Bat* [Jean Yarborough, 1941]), and leaping, pulsating brains that use their prehensile spinal cords to strangle unwary soldiers and citizens on a Canadian rocket base (*Fiend Without a Face* [Arthur Crabtree, 1958]).

43 For an example of this literature, see Ado Kyrou, 'The popular is marvelous', in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow* (London: British Film Institute, 1978).

Paracinematic taste involves a reading strategy that renders the bad into the sublime, the deviant into the defamiliarized, and in so doing, calls attention to the aesthetic aberrance and stylistic variety evident but routinely dismissed in the many subgenres of trash cinema. By concentrating on a film's formal bizarreness and stylistic eccentricity, the paracinematic audience, much like the viewer attuned to the innovations of Godard or capable of attending to the patterns of parametric narration described by Bordwell, foregrounds structures of cinematic discourse and artifice so that the material identity of the film ceases to be a structure made invisible in service of the diegesis, but becomes instead the primary focus of textual attention. It is in this respect that the paracinematic aesthetic is closely linked to the concept of 'excess'.

Kristin Thompson describes excess as a value that exists beyond a cinematic signifier's 'motivated' use, or, as 'those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces'.[44] 'At the point where motivation ends', Thompson writes, 'excess begins'.[45] '[T]he minute the viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning. . . . Excess does not equal style, but the two are closely linked because they both involve the material aspects of the film.'[46] Thompson writes of excess as an intermittent

44 Kristin Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', in Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, p. 130.

45 Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', p. 135.

46 Ibid., p. 132.

textual phenomenon, a brief moment of self-conscious materiality that interrupts an otherwise conventional, 'non-excessive' film: 'Probably no one ever watches only these non-diegetic aspects of the image through an entire film.' But, Thompson writes further, these non-diegetic aspects are nevertheless always present, 'a whole "film" existing in some sense alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching'.[47]

47 Ibid., pp. 132–3.

I would argue that the paracinematic audience is perhaps the one group of viewers that *does* concentrate exclusively on these 'non-diegetic aspects of the image' during the entire film, or at least attempts to do so. Like their counterparts in the academy, trash cinema fans, as active cinephiles practising an aesthetic founded on the recognition and subsequent rejection of Hollywood style, are extremely conscious of the cinema's characteristic narrative forms and stylistic strategies. But, importantly, while cinematic aesthetes attend to style and excess as moments of artistic bravado in relation to the creation of an overall diegesis, paracinematic viewers instead use excess as a gateway to exploring profilmic and extratextual aspects of the filmic object itself. In other words, by concentrating so intently on 'non-diegetic' elements in these films, be they unconvincing special effects, blatant anachronisms, or histrionic acting, the paracinematic reading attempts to activate the 'whole 'film' existing . . . alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching'. One could say that while academic attention to excess often foregrounds aesthetic strategies within the text as a closed formal system, paracinematic attention to excess, an excess that often manifests itself in a film's failure to conform to historically delimited codes of verisimilitude, calls attention to the text as a cultural and sociological document and thus dissolves the boundaries of the diegesis into profilmic and extratextual realms. It is here that the paracinematic audience most dramatically parts company with the aesthetes of academia. Whereas aesthete interest in style and excess always returns the viewer to the frame, paracinematic attention to excess seeks to push the viewer beyond the formal boundaries of the text.

Paracinematic excess: Ed Wood, Jr and Larry Buchanan

Ed Wood, Jr's status has long been high in the paracinematic community. Wood was an independent filmmaker in Hollywood during the 1950s, known primarily for his work with Bela Lugosi. His films are remarkably incompetent from a conventional perspective. Wood's dialogue was often awful, his actors alternately wooden and histrionic, and his sets pathetic and threadbare. Throughout his long career as a filmmaker, Wood was unable (or unwilling) to master the basics of continuity, screen direction or the construction of cinematic space. His *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is perhaps the most famous



Obsolescence as defamiliarization: an encounter with 'aliens' in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Ed Wood, Jr. 1959). Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

'badfilm' of all, having become badfilm's equivalent of *Citizen Kane* as an inventory of characteristically paracinematic stylistic devices. Though Wood's films were initially read as camp, the critical discourse within paracinematic literature surrounding Wood has since shifted from bemused derision to active celebration. No longer regarded as a hack, Wood is now seen, like Godard, as a unique talent improvising outside the constrictive environment of traditional Hollywood production and representation. As one fanzine comments, 'Wood's films are now appreciated less as models of incompetence, and more as the products of a uniquely personal and obsessive sensibility that best expresses itself through madly deconstructed narratives enacted by a gallery of grotesque castoffs from the fringes of Hollywood bohemia'.[48] This is certainly the perspective that dominates Tim Burton's cinematic treatment of Wood's career, *Ed Wood* (1994).

[48] *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

Wood's most notorious film and the movie that is central to his status as a paracinematic filmmaker is *Glen or Glenda*. As detailed extensively in Burton's biopic, Wood shot *Glen or Glenda* in 1953 to capitalize on the public hysteria surrounding the Christine Jorgenson sex-change operation. Also released under the titles *I Led Two Lives* and *I Changed My Sex*, the film purports to be an investigative examination of the sex-change issue. Instead, the film is an odd plea for public tolerance of transvestitism. The film's protagonist is a young man named Glen, a transvestite struggling with the decision of whether or not to tell his fiancee of his secret before their marriage. From this central conflict, Wood fashions a vertiginous film that in a bizarre and at times hallucinatory manner argues the virtues of transvestitism, giddily shifting from documentary to horror film, from police drama to sexploitation picture. In the midst of this generic turmoil, Bela Lugosi appears from time to time as a metanarrational

figure who punctuates the diegetic action with incomprehensible comments and bizarre non sequiturs.

A casebook example of stylistic deviation as the result of the unique conditions of production in exploitation cinema, *Glen or Glenda* is of particular interest for paracinematic viewers because of the extratextual identity of Ed Wood, Jr: Wood was himself a transvestite. He not only wrote and directed *Glen or Glenda*, but also starred as the troubled young transvestite, Glen. Fan legends (based on interviews with surviving crew members) have it that Wood directed most of the film while wearing his favourite chiffon housecoat and that he had an obsession with cashmere sweaters (a fetish dramatically enacted in the film's final scene). After his movie career ended in the 1960s, Wood went on to write a number of adult novels with transvestite storylines.[49]

This extratextual information about Wood is key to the paracinematic positioning of his films as a form of counter-cinema. Knowing this information allows the paracinematic fan to more fully appreciate the complexity of the cultural codes at work in a film like *Glen or Glenda*. John Fiske argues that the cultural elite 'use information about the artist to enhance or enrich the appreciation of the work'. Within fan culture, on the other hand, 'such knowledge increases the power of the fan to "see through" to the production processes normally hidden by the text and thus inaccessible to the non-fan'.[50] In the case of Ed Wood, Jr, the paracinematic aesthetic combines an elite interest in 'enriched appreciation' with a popular interest in seeing through 'production processes'. Paracinematic fans use their knowledge of Wood's real life to 'enhance or enrich' their engagement in his films, much as elites use their knowledge of Godard's various positions in relation to Marxism to inform their viewings. Vital to paracinematic pleasure, however, is this process of 'seeing through' the diegesis. For a sophisticated paracinematic viewer, *Glen or Glenda* is compelling because it seemingly presents both the textual and extratextual struggles of a man set against the repressive constraints of 1950s sexuality, encoded in a style that also challenges the period's conventions of representation. Paracinematic fans appreciate films such as *Glen or Glenda* not only as bizarre works of art, but as intriguing cultural documents, as socially and historically specific instances of artifice and commentary. Set against the bland cultural miasma of the Eisenhower years, Wood and his film stand out as truly remarkable figures.

This interest in collapsing the textual and the extratextual, the filmic and the profilmic, is especially pronounced in Zontarian interest in Larry Buchanan, a Dallas filmmaker who made a number of AIP films for television in the mid sixties. Buchanan's films rank among the most low-budget productions ever attempted in commercial filmmaking. Often following scripts from old black and white features, these films were reshot in colour for the television market in two or

49 For a more complete biography of Wood, see Rudolph Grey, *Nightmare of Ecstasy: the Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 1992).

50 Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', p. 24.

three days for often less than a few thousand dollars. The finished products are a test of even the most dedicated paracinematic viewer's patience. With no money or time to reshoot, mistakes in dialogue, camera movement and sound recording remain in each film. The films are unwatchable for most mainstream viewers, and consequently have assumed an exalted status among the 'hardcore' badfilm faction of paracinematic culture.

As with the other visionary stylists in paracinema's shadow realm of autuerism, Buchanan is valorized for his unique artistic vision. *Zontar* positions Buchanan as a poor man's Carl Dreyer, celebrating his particularly bleak and sombre approach. Importantly, however, this bleak and sombre tone is as much a function of the conditions of production as the product of Buchanan's 'genius'. A common strategy when discussing Buchanan is to transform his films into profilmic parables of artistic tragedy. Differentiating Buchanan from the more accessible Ed Wood, Jr, for example, *Zontar*'s editors write, 'where Ed Wood's films ultimately reassure the comfortably "hip" viewer of the dynamic force of even the most downtrodden and despised corners of human experience, the films of Larry Buchanan can only induce a profound feeling of desperation, anxiety and terminal boredom. The texture is not that of a tatty side-show, but that of the endless despair and futility of human existence as reflected on the concrete pavement of a Dallas parking lot.'[51] The Zontarian transformation of Buchanan's work thus shifts the diegetic frame so that the action on the screen becomes but the trace of an isolated moment of desperate human activity, a farcical attempt at 'art' taking place on a particular day many years ago in someone's garage, on a Dallas parking lot.

51 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

A contributor to *Zontar* describes this moment of profilmic nausea as personally experienced in the climatic revelation of the monster in the concluding scenes of Buchanan's *Curse of the Swamp Creature*:

> Seldom, if ever, has a more disappointing final monster revelation scene been filmed. . . . The monster is unbelievably, spectacularly cheap. . . . 'It' appears dressed in a white hospital smock, with rubber monster-gloves and a minimal mask-piece consisting of two painted PING-PONG BALL EYES set into a rubber bow. A skin-head wig and a couple of cruddy fangs complete the 'monster suit' . . . which is more embarrassing than scary . . . the CREATURE itself must be the least convincing creation in monster movie history. This is, of course, a subjective area, but I would rate it far worse than the ROBOT MONSTER and at least as bad as the CREEPING TERROR . . . though of a different order, naturally. THE MASTER DIRECTOR actually compounds the failure of his creature by withholding it for so long. By building to his epic anti-climax Buchanan makes the SWAMP CREATURE itself the essence of disappointment and failure . . . translated into cheap

> rubber and ping-pong ball eyes. The SWAMP CREATURE'S scaly rubber fright-mask is composed of the very substance of despair.[52]

52 Ibid.

The swamp creature, intended to be a startling and menacing cinematic revelation, is, in the last analysis, simply an overweight actor standing in weeds with ping-pong balls attached to his eyes on a hot day in Dallas in 1966. For the paracinematic community, such moments of impoverished excess are a means toward collapsing cinema's fourth wall, allowing the profilmic and the extratextual to mesh with the diegetic drama. The 'surface' diegesis becomes precisely that, the thin and final veil that is the indexical mark of a more interesting drama, that of the film's construction and sociohistorical context.

The politics of excess

Thompson argues that the importance of excess is that it renews 'the perceptual freshness of the work' and 'suggests a different way of watching and listening to a film'.

> The viewer is no longer caught in the bind of mistaking the causal structure of the narrative for some sort of inevitable, true, or natural set of events which is beyond questioning or criticism. . . . Once narrative is recognized as arbitrary rather than logical, the viewer is free to ask why individual events within its structures are as they are. The viewer is no longer constrained by conventions of reading to find a meaning or theme within the work as the solution to a sort of puzzle which has a right answer.[53]

53 Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', pp. 140–1.

Excess provides a freedom from constraint, an opportunity to approach a film with a fresh and slightly defamiliarized perspective. As Thompson argues, through excess 'the work becomes a perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length, going beyond the strictly functional aspects'.[54] What the critical viewer does with this newfound freedom provided by the phenomenon of excess is, I would argue, a political question, and one that lies at the heart of the conflict between the counter-cinema of the academy and that promoted by paracinematic culture. The very concept of excess, after all, as a relativistic term that posits a self-evident 'norm', is an inherently political evaluation. Exploring these politics of excess presents a key area where students who possess a trash aesthetic may impact the academic institutions to which they belong by questioning the goals, strategies and techniques of academically enshrined versions of 'art' cinema and the 'avant garde'.

54 Ibid., p. 141.

Specifically, the trash aesthetic offers a potential critique of two highly influential methodologies in film studies: neoformalist analysis and theories of 'radical' textuality. Paracinema suggests that the

neoformalist emphasis on art as defamiliarization might be more complicated than the cataloguing of innovative, text-bound 'devices'. If the paracinematic community celebrates a film, either earnestly or parodically, as an invigorating artistic experience precisely because of its utter banality, does that constitute a form of defamiliarization? For whom and under what circumstances is any film defamiliarizing? Since any notion of aesthetics is inextricably linked to historical issues of representation and reception, what are the politics of a neoformalist analysis that ultimately constructs a hierarchy of 'skilled' and 'unskilled' audiences, artistic and non-artistic films? (Do we really want to claim that *Last Year at Marienbad* is somehow more 'artistic' than *Sweet Badass's Badass Song* or even *E.T.*? What exactly is the purpose of such aesthetic valuations other than to empower a certain critic or a certain cinema?) If nothing else, the trash aesthetic serves as a reminder that all forms of poetics and aesthetic criticism are ultimately linked to issues of taste; and taste, in turn, is a social construct with profoundly political implications.

Paracinema also offers a critique of the 'radical' aesthetic that seeks to liberate, or at least politically agitate, audiences through the application of disruptive textual devices, a project that coalesced in theoretical and critical writings in film studies during the 1970s and which continues to inform much work on avant-garde textuality. In many respects, paracinematic discourses on excess greatly resemble the symptomatic criticism so central to film studies during this formative period. As with the devotees of Sirk, Minnelli and Lewis, paracinematic viewers are interested in reading films 'against the grain', ever on the alert for the trash film equivalents of Comolli and Narboni's celebrated 'category e' films.[55] And, as in the counter-cinemas explicitly designed by Godard or covertly implanted by Sirk, paracinema's retrospective reconstruction of an avant garde through the ironic engagement of exploitation cinema's history is a 'politicized' cinema to the extent that it demonstrates the limitations and interests of dominant cinematic style by providing a striking counter-example of deviation.[56]

But while segments of academic film culture often appeal to a refined code of aesthetics to apprehend and explain the potentially disruptive forces of style and excess (an aesthetics most often intentionally applied by an 'artist' to be successfully decoded by an elite cinephile in a rarefied and exclusive circuit of textual exchange), paracinematic culture celebrates excess as a product of cultural as well as aesthetic deviance. Once excess cues the elite viewer to the arbitrary structure of a narrative, he or she can then study the 'perceptual field of structures' in the work itself in appreciation of artistic craftsmanship within a closed formal system. The paracinematic viewer's recognition of a narrative's artifice, however, is the first step in examining a field of structures within the culture as a whole, a passageway into engaging a larger field of contextual issues

55 See Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/ideology/criticism, Part I', *Screen*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1971), pp. 27–36.

56 In Wollen's account of Godard's significance as a radical filmmaker, he identifies 'seven cardinal virtues' of Godard's aesthetic that oppose the 'seven deadly sins' of orthodox cinema. Godard's counter-cinema is thus argued to feature 'narrative intransitivity' rather than 'narrative transitivity' – 'estrangement vs identification, foregrounding vs transparency, multiple diegesis vs single diegesis, aperture vs closure, un-pleasure vs pleasure, and reality vs fiction'. One cannot help but be struck by how certain paracinematic titles, especially genre hybrids like *Glen or Glenda*, match Wollen's criteria point by point. For a more complete account of these distinctions, see Wollen, 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*'.

surrounding the film as a socially and historically specific document. As a consequence, paracinema might be said to succeed where earlier more 'radical' avant gardes have failed. It is doubtful that *Tout Va Bien* (Jean-Luc Godard / Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1973), or *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) for that matter, ever 'radicalized' anyone other than fellow academy aesthetes. Perhaps paracinema has the potential, at long last, to answer Brecht's famous call for an anti-illusionist aesthetic by presenting a cinema so histrionic, anachronistic and excessive that it compels even the most casual viewer to engage it ironically, producing a relatively detached textual space in which to consider, if only superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation. In this respect, one might argue that while academy icons such as Godard and Sirk may have employed complex aesthetic strategies to problematize issues such as the construction of gender, Ed Wood Jr, by his own admission, actually fought in the Pacific during World War II with a pink bra and knickers worn underneath his combat fatigues. As to which form of political engagement and subsequent critical promotion by the academy will prove more provocative and productive, it is open for debate.

READING *ROCKY HORROR*

The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture

Edited by
Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock



Reading *Rocky Horror*

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READING ROCKY HORROR

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Introduction

It's Just a Jump to the Left

The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock

It's Astounding

Seldom are genres—cinematic, literary, musical, or otherwise—defined by a *single* text. When discussing science fiction, for example, one is hard-pressed to point to a single film and say, "*That's* the one! *That's* the essence of science fiction." One could debate the question, of course—something both film scholars and cinema fans enjoy doing. Sticking with science fiction for a moment, is the definitive film something heady like *2001*? An immense commercial success like *Star Wars* or *Alien*? Perhaps a throwback to times gone by such as (to take just two titles referenced by *Rocky Horror* itself): *The Day the Earth Stood Still* or *Forbidden Planet*? Each film—and certainly many others—likely would find its proponents, and if one put their fans in a room together and let them hash it out, perhaps a consensus would emerge as to which film *is* science fiction in its essence—but I wouldn't bet on it!

Cult film, however, is a different animal. In broaching the topic of "cult," one hastens to acknowledge at the outset that not all critics and theoreticians agree on what exactly makes a cult film a cult film. In attempting to grapple with this question, film critics have lingered reverently over *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane*, wandered through the landscape of *El Topo*,

shuddered at *Night of the Living Dead*, and self-referentially scrutinized their own guilty pleasures at enjoying John Waters' decided decadence. However, although not all critics agree on what constitutes the nature of the cult film, like Justice Potter Stewart defining pornography, they seem to know it when they see it because there is general agreement that, whatever a cult film is, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is it. *Rocky Horror* is almost universally hailed, as Danny Peary puts it in his book *Cult Movies*, as "The undisputed king . . . no . . . *queen* of the Midnight Movie circuit," and as "the very definition of the term 'cult picture'" (302).[1] Among the most astounding features, then, of *Rocky Horror* is the astonishing fact that a diverse group of scholars and critics *agree* as to its unrivaled status as preeminent cult film—and when was the last time a group of academics and critics agreed on anything?

However, beyond the fact of critical agreement concerning the generic affinities of the movie and its iconic status as cult film, one must also reckon with its unrivaled longevity and commercial popularity. In these respects, *Rocky Horror* is also unique. Completed for approximately $1.5 million and released in September 1975 (where it did well in Los Angeles, but bombed throughout most of the rest of the United States), the film today—over 30 years later—remains a fixture of the Midnight Movie circuit and still draws crowds on a regular basis that come to participate in the *Rocky Horror* experience. In addition to playing weekly in many large cities, college campuses routinely screen the film, and in 2000, Broadway mounted a revival of the stage version of *Rocky Horror* that starred Dick Cavett, Tom Hewitt, Alice Ripley, and rocker Joan Jett and that ran for fifteen months.

Rocky Horror, it must be acknowledged, is the oddest of things: a relatively low-budget gender-bending mish-mash of genres that somehow manages to provoke a response—famously from its audience, which dances, talks back to the film, and acts out the action along with the characters—but also from the critics and from American culture in general. *Rocky Horror* has wormed its way into America's collective unconscious. It's a movie virtually everyone has heard of and from which many can quote or sing songs, even if they haven't seen it. It's a movie that inspired its own newsletter—*The Transylvanian*—and one that is referenced by *other* movies, notably *Fame* (1980), in which the main characters take in a showing. It's an infamous addition to the resumes of Tim Curry, Susan Sarandon, and Barry Bostwick—one that Curry at least has tried his hardest to omit, but that no one will let him forget.[2] Finally, it remains the only movie that inspires its fans to pack an eclectic suitcase full of props (including toilet paper, rice, newspaper, squirt guns, and lighters or flashlights) to take along to each presentation.

For these reasons—the film's iconic cult status and continued prominence in American popular culture—as well as for its general importance to the history of cinema, its subversive position in relation to dominant culture mores, and its generic transgressions, the film that Tim Curry hates to acknowledge demands discussion—indeed, almost begs for analysis—and this collection of essays aims to redress *Rocky Horror*'s neglect by film and cultural critics. Surprisingly, *Rocky Horror* has received only a limited amount of scrutiny from scholars and film critics, who in a handful of isolated articles (and one doctoral dissertation) have focused mainly on the film's status as a cult movie, on its audience, and on its gender politics. These are all important topics that will concern this volume as well, and the authors included here are indebted to the astute observations of J. Hoberman, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Robert Wood, Barry Keith Grant, James Twitchell, Timothy Corrigan, J. P. Telotte, and others. However, given *Rocky Horror*'s unique status in American and British culture, it's time now, over thirty years after the initial release of the film, to consider it more closely and to expand the parameters of the investigation.

Let's Go See the Man Who Began It

Before turning to specific analyses of *Rocky Horror*, some background into the history of the film may be helpful.[3] The brainchild behind *Rocky Horror* was English performer Richard O'Brien (who plays Riff Raff in the movie). Hoberman and Rosenbaum report that O'Brien had already appeared in British productions of *Hair* with future *Rocky Horror* performer Tim Curry and been dismissed from a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* directed by Jim Sharman (who would direct the *Rocky Horror* movie) when he decided in 1972 to create a rock musical originally entitled *They Came from Denton High* (4). *Denton High* subsequently became *The Rock Horroar Show* and then *The Rocky Horror Show*. O'Brien was able to attract the attention of British producer Michael White, whose extensive list of stage credits included *Oh! Calcutta* and *Sleuth* (Henkins 19), and director Jim Sharman and a stage production of *Rocky Horror* premiered in June 1973 at the Royal Court's experimental Theatre Upstairs—a sixty-three-seat venue in London's Chelsea, where O'Brien had previously played an extraterrestrial in Sam Shepherd's *The Unseen Hand* (Hoberman 6).

The original stage version of *The Rocky Horror Show*, which featured Tim Curry as Dr. Frank-N-Furter, as well as Richard O'Brien himself (Riff Raff), Patricia Quinn (Magenta), and Little Nell (Columbia), proved to be such a hit that it was relocated in London twice in quick succession, first to a converted movie house seating 270 on King's Road, and then to

the five-hundred-seat King's Road Theatre—where it would play for seven years. In 1973, the production was named "best musical" by the *London Evening Standard*, and Curry was singled out for his "Jagger-like performance" (Samuels 128).[4] By 1974, the show was "a genuine London phenomenon" (Hoberman 8) that attracted popular culture luminaries including Mick Jagger himself, as well as David Bowie, Lou Reed, and Tennessee Williams (Samuels 128). Samuels reports that there were even *Rocky Horror* weekend travel packages from Paris to London (129).

Actress Britt Ekland, who saw the London production multiple times, apparently enjoyed the production so much that she convinced her beau, American film and music producer Lou Adler, to accompany her to a performance and he reached an agreement with Michael White to produce an American production at his Los Angeles rock club, The Roxy, less than two days after taking in the performance in October 1973 (Hoberman 6). Adler brought over part of the London cast, including O'Brien, Curry, and Meatloaf (Meatloaf played both Eddie and Dr. Scott in the stage production) and premiered *Rocky Horror* in America at The Roxy on March 21, 1974, where it sold out for nine straight months (Samuels 130). Encouraged by the success of the American stage production, Adler invited Twentieth Century Fox executive Gordon Stulbert—and his children—to see the show, and Stulbert was impressed enough to agree to invest one million dollars on a film version. After a ten-month run at The Roxy, Adler closed the show in early 1975 to allow Curry to return to London to work on the film production. Filming was completed in eight weeks, primarily at Bray Studies—the one-time home of the Hammer horror films—and to a lesser extent at a nineteenth-century château used as a hideout by Charles de Gaulle during World War II (Hoberman 9; Samuels 131). For the film version, Meatloaf retained the role of Eddie, and Jonathan Adams, who had played the role of the Narrator in the original London cast, assumed the role of Dr. Scott. Charles Gray, famous for playing the evil Blofeld in the James Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever*, was added as the Narrator and, most notably, two Americans—Barry Bostwick, who had played the part of Danny Zuko in *Grease* on Broadway for two years, and actress Susan Sarandon—were added as Brad and Janet. Adler's plan was to bring the stage show to Broadway before the release of the film version. It was anticipated that the Broadway production would be as big a hit as *Grease* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* and therefore would serve as a major publicity vehicle for the film (Samuels 131). As soon as Curry and O'Brien had completed filming in London, they were brought to New York to work on the stage production, which was mounted at the Belasco Theater. For the Broadway production, the theater's usual orchestra seating was removed, and the space was reconfigured with 120 café tables.

The Rocky Horror Show opened on Broadway on March 10, 1975, and was an unmitigated critical and popular disaster. Reviews were savage (Rex Reed called it "trash" [Samuels 132]), the play was hissed and booed, and it lost four thousand dollars. The play ran for fifty performances before closing, and Twentieth Century Fox executives became nervous about the impending film release (Samuels 132).[5] Anxious executives were not soothed when the film version of *Rocky Horror*, entitled *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, previewed to poor response in Santa Barbara, California, in July 1975. The film was released on September 26, 1975, in Los Angeles and seven other American cities. In Los Angeles, it drew capacity crowds to the United Artists Westwood Theater; however, its performance elsewhere was dismal. The film grossed less than $400,000 in its first three weeks (Samuels 133) and was withdrawn by Fox before its planned New York City Halloween opening. In considering the Los Angeles success of the film and its dreadful performance elsewhere, Lou Adler and Tim Deegan, the publicist assigned by Fox to the film, discovered that many of the Los Angeles fans of the film were seeing it *repeatedly*. In consultation with Bill Quigley, a young publicist who worked for the New York–based Walter Reade theater chain, Deegan considered new ways to promote the film and was persuaded by Quigley to open *Rocky Horror* as a Midnight Movie at New York's Waverly Theater in Greenwich Village. *Rocky Horror* premiered at the Waverly at midnight on April Fool's Day (although technically, because it was midnight, it was April 2) in 1976, where it ran for a record-setting ninety-five weeks.[6] During this time, it opened as a Midnight Movie elsewhere, including Austin, Philadelphia, Toronto, Boston, and Tulsa. By the middle of 1978, *Rocky Horror* was playing at midnight on Fridays and Saturdays at over fifty locations around the United States (Samuels 134), and by end of the 1970s, Fox had two hundred prints of the film in constant circulation. The film reportedly grossed over $5 million a year (Hoberman 13). According to Samuels, "RHPS became the first motion picture to become a twice-weekly national institution. It spawned fan clubs, paraphernalia, posters, bumper stickers, record albums, videocassettes, pins, magazines, conventions, birthday parties, look-alike contests. A fan club for the film! The record album sold over one million copies. The RHPS phenomenon was born" (137).

Madness Takes Control

What makes *Rocky Horror* unique is the participatory nature of the audience response. As opposed to conventional viewing practices in which audience members sit quietly and absorb the presentation, attendees at

Rocky Horror shout remarks at the screen, dance along with the characters in the film, and vicariously participate in the onscreen action through the use of props—for instance (as all *Rocky* aficionados know), when it rains in the film, audience members shoot squirt guns in the air. Famously, many showings of *Rocky Horror* feature a simultaneous live performance referred to as the floor show or shadow cast, in which actors dressed as the film's characters lip sync the lines and mimic the motions of the onscreen characters. The film is, in Danny Peary's assessment, "the ultimate audience participation film" (302), and Wood has gone so far as to assert that the behavior of the *Rocky Horror* audience has "arguably altered the norms of behavior of a whole generation of filmgoers" (157). The origins of these practices are difficult to pin down and, among *Rocky Horror* devotees, are the stuff of legend. Although Henkin contends that "No one knows for certain how talking to the screen developed" and suggests that the practice may have started in several different places independently (102), Hoberman and Rosenbaum trace the convention of talking back to the screen back to Labor Day weekend in 1976, when five months into the *Rocky Horror* run at the Waverly in Greenwich Village, New York, schoolteacher Louis Farese, Jr., "felt compelled to talk back to the movie," and his quips were picked up by other *Rocky Horror* aficionados (176).[7]

Hoberman and Rosenbaum also locate the phenomenon of audience members dressing up as film characters as originating at the Waverly in 1976. They write that, independent of Farese's retorts, masqueraders taking great pains to duplicate the appearances of the film's characters began to show up a few weeks after the talking-back phenomenon began. This practice lead to a special Halloween costume party showing of the film at which fans got out of their seats, mimicked the on-screen action, and lip-synched the lines (177). This form of audience participation developed into the *Rocky Horror* floor show. These initial violations of conventional viewing practices seem to have liberated *Rocky Horror* fans, stimulating them to dream up "ingenious stunts involving diverse props that they would unexpectedly spring on fellow cult members during the movie" (Hoberman 179). Hoberman and Rosenbaum write, "The lineage was almost biblical, the way that rice begat candles begat water pistols begat newspapers, cards, and hot dogs aplenty" (181).[8] What this suggests is that part of the initial cult phenomenon of the film was the unusual—if not unique—opportunity it allowed for creative expression on the part of the audience, as well as the sense of community that developed out of not just the shared viewing experiences of audience members but their participation in the development of what film theorists J. P. Telotte and Barry Keith Grant have discussed as "supertext"—the combination of a film's text and reception and the "industrial practices" surrounding the film.[9] Audience members had

the opportunity not just to absorb or even participate with the on-screen action but actually to originate new conventions of spectatorship.

Shivering with Antici . . . pation

Given *Rocky Horror*'s unique place in cinematic history, a volume such as this one is long overdue. Essays included here have been organized into three sections that attend to what have emerged as the three most important topics for consideration of *Rocky Horror*: the film's appropriation and manipulation of various generic conventions, the "cultic" nature of the film and the viewership practices of its fans, and the film's representations of gender and sexuality. The first section of *Reading Rocky Horror* on genre groups together essays that situate *Rocky Horror* within the broader contexts of musical, theatrical, and cinematic genres, thus highlighting the ways in which *Rocky Horror* was a product of its historical moment that developed out of and manipulated the conventions of established forms and traditions. Sue Matheson, in "'Drinking Those Moments When': The Use (and Abuse) of Late-Night Double Feature Science Fiction and Hollywood Icons in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*," carefully scrutinizes the ways in which *Rocky Horror* incorporates, appropriates, and cannibalizes elements of the cinematic science fiction tradition. *Rocky Horror*, in Matheson's assessment, is an invasion film indebted to 1950s science fiction. However, instead of expelling the alien threat at the end and reestablishing the social order, Matheson proposes that what *Rocky Horror* reveals is that "we are what we fear most."

Julian Cornell, in "*Rocky Horror* Glam Rock," rather than exploring *Rocky Horror*'s cinematic appropriations, attends to the film's musical indebtedness. Cornell situates the influence of glam rock on *Rocky Horror* within the broader context of the 1970s camp and pop aesthetics to which this musical style owes a significant debt, with the intention of demonstrating how the film is more than just a parody, a pastiche, or an instance of cult spectatorship—instead being a "polysemic text that reflexively addresses the issue of desire in mass culture."

In the same way that Matheson examines *Rocky Horror* in light of how it draws on and manipulates the cinematic science fiction tradition, and Cornell situates *Rocky Horror* within the context of 1970s glam rock and camp, Sarah Artt, in "Reflections on the Self-Reflexive Musical: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the Classic Hollywood Musical," explores the ways in which the film both borrows and self-consciously departs from the conventions of the standard Hollywood musical. In Artt's assessment, *Rocky Horror* uses a conventional format to tell an unconventional story and

thereby paved the way for more recent unconventional cinematic musicals, including *Chicago* and *Moulin Rouge*.

In section two, which focuses on the *Rocky* cult, the attention of contributors shifts from looking at the film in its historical context to focusing on what makes the *Rocky Horror* experience unique—the reactions of the film's audience. These observations are important not just for understanding *Rocky Horror* but for film studies more generally.[10] Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, in "Heavy, Black, and Pendulous: Unsuturing *Rocky Horror*," explores how *Rocky Horror* viewership practices are antithetical to conventional psychological film criticism predicated on spectatorial identification. For Weinstock, what *Rocky Horror* audience response demonstrates is a fetishization of interruption, rather than "suture." In the quest for mastery of the filmic text, *Rocky Horror* fans quite consciously break the diegetic flow, foregrounding both its rigidity and the failure of dialogue. Weinstock argues that evident in the playful, loving mockery of the film exhibited by fans is a more general but inevitably frustrated desire to *be* the movie. This failure to be the movie in turn stimulates a sadistic desire to master or control the film.

Heather C. Levy and Matthew A. Levy, in their "Mocking the Mirror: Film Spectatorship as Hyperreal Simulation," similarly assert that audience behavior during *Rocky Horror* calls into question psychoanalytic theories of viewership predicated on spectatorial "(mis)recognition." In place of this, Levy and Levy propose a new theory of viewership developed out of French postmodernist Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and description of the "postmodern hyperreal." The Levys conclude that what audience reaction to *Rocky Horror* demonstrates is the need for a psychosocial model that emphasizes the active nature of spectatorship—a model that they feel Baudrillard's theory of hyperreal simulation provides.

In "Wild and Untamed Thing: The Exotic, Erotic, and Neurotic *Rocky Horror* Performance Cult," Michael M. Chemers approaches the *Rocky Horror* cult by exploring the ways in which the film's eroticism generates audience response. Chemers here is attending to that most difficult of questions: Why *Rocky Horror*? What is it about *this* film that impels the audience to violate conventional viewing practices and provokes such allegiance? Chemers's answer is both simple and elegant: the "sincerity of its lust." However, in keeping with Kevin Bozelka's meditations in the sexuality section on the ease with which capitalism can absorb queer energies, this sincerity of erotic transgression is always on the verge of going out of existence, of being compromised by market forces. For Chemers, it is the "fragility" of the film's sincerity that galvanizes its adherents to rally around the film and preserve it for themselves.

Also preparing us for the analyses of *Rocky Horror*'s representations of queer sexuality introduced in the third section, Nicole Seymour in her contribution "'What We Are Watching' Does Not Present 'Us with a Struggle': *Rocky Horror*, Queer Viewers, and the Alternative Cinematic Spectacle," situates the *Rocky Horror* viewing event as a queer experience that allows for and encourages what she characterizes as "radical viewing." According to Seymour, viewing practices developed by *Rocky Horror* fans "suggest productive ways for queer and marginalized viewers to approach and read the average, mainstream film text" and "indicate that film-going need not always be a passive, rote experience, nor a solely analytical one devoid of personal enjoyment." Adopting an anthropological approach to fan response, Liz Locke, in her "'Don't Dream It, Be It': Cultural Performance and Communitas at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*," turns to the work of anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner on liminality, communitas, and "interperformance" to explain the unique group dynamic that characterizes the *Rocky Horror* audience reaction. What *Rocky Horror* allows, according to Locke, is for a collectively experienced "sense of liminality" during which conventional subject positions can be briefly shed, producing a sense of liberatory exuberance. Rounding out the viewership practices section, in "The Cult and Its Virgin Sacrifice: Rites of Defloration in and at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*," Kristina Watkins-Mormino situates the *Rocky* cult and its behavior within the broader social context of contemporary understandings of virginity. With interesting connections to Locke's analysis of liminality and *Rocky Horror* viewership, Watkins-Mormino makes the fascinating observation that perhaps the only widespread communal observance of the loss of virginity in America takes place at midnight screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at which first-time viewers—"virgins"—are identified and subjected to certain rituals of initiation. Using this observation as the basis for her analysis, she scrutinizes the social understandings and implications of virginity that the film and its audience construct.

The third section of *Reading Rocky Horror* introduces essays that attend to *Rocky Horror*'s sexual politics. Leading off this section, Ben Hixon emphasizes the subversive potential of *Rocky Horror* in his "In Search of the Authentic Queer Epiphany: Normativity and Representations of the Queer Disabled Body in *Rocky Horror*." Here Hixon explores the film in terms of the ways in which its representations of disabled bodies subverts both heteronormative expectations and conventional attitudes toward corporal difference. Hixon maintains that although the film does manifest a tendency toward solidifying social norms, this conservative inclination is unable to offset the radical potential offered by its subversion of conventional mores

and therefore offers a potentially liberating message and transformative experience for the viewer.

Taking as his starting point Judith Butler's meditations on gender performativity and Michel Foucault's analysis of the production of sexed bodies, Zachery Lamm complicates Hixon's analysis with "The Queer Pedagogy of Dr. Frank-N-Furter." In his contribution, Lamm considers the radical implications of *Rocky Horror*'s subversive approach to gender and sexual preference. Important for Lamm, *Rocky Horror* is in fact a film concerned with pedagogy—with teaching—and Curry's Dr. Frank-N-Furter occupies the privileged role in this respect as instructor offering courses in both queer science and queer sexuality. At the end of the movie, not only Brad and Janet but also the audience graduate from Frank's queer classroom and emerge with an understanding of alternative sexual possibilities.

Reading Rocky Horror contributors Thomas G. Endres and Kevin John Bozelka are both far less sanguine concerning the radical potential of *Rocky Horror*'s representations of gender expectations and sexual orientation. In "'Be Just and Fear Not': Warring Visions of Righteous Decadence and Pragmatic Justice in *Rocky Horror*," Endres introduces symbolic convergence theory as a methodological tool to analyze the competing progressive and conservative messages communicated by *Rocky Horror*. As Endres explains, symbolic convergence theory provides a coherent and useful theoretical model for thematic analysis—one that leads him to conclude that the film ultimately forecloses the radical possibilities for social reorganization it seems to offer and instead reifies the status quo. In "'Your Lifestyle's Too Extreme': *Rocky Horror*, *Shock Treatment*, and Late Capitalism," Bozelka counters the critical emphasis on the film's "Dionysian" excesses and its celebration of counterhegemonic sexual practices by asserting that the film offers a critique of the "polymorphously perverse sexual politics of the counterculture," a critique that Bozelka reads as articulating a historically situated brand of 1970s cynicism. In opposition to those who focus on *Rocky Horror*'s subversive potential, Bozelka asserts that what *Rocky Horror*—and its less successful sequel, *Shock Treatment*—dramatize is the ease with which capitalism can absorb and co-opt the radical potential of counterhegemonic identity formations.

Taken together, the essays collected here offer the long overdue concerted attention to and analysis of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* that the film, as one of the most important phenomena of twentieth-century cinema, deserves. Although they focus on what have emerged as the main issues in relation to the film, clearly other approaches are possible, and it is my hope that this volume will lay the groundwork for future such analyses. With that said, I would like, if I may, to take you on a strange journey . . .

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Notes

1. This assessment is echoed by Wood, who characterizes *Rocky Horror* as "a paradigmatic cult film" (156); Kilgore, who asserts that the film has "risen to a position of preeminence among America's 'cult films'" (151); Samuels, who writes that *Rocky Horror* is "the king of the midnight cult films" (126); and Kinkade and Katovich, who contend that "Perhaps among all 'cult films,' *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is the definitive exemplar" (198).
2. For example, in advertising a 2005 interview with Curry that aired on National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* program, the *Rocky Horror* song "Sweet Transvestite" was played and Curry was identified as "the star of *Rocky Horror* and other films."
3. A very thorough overview of *Rocky Horror*'s history is offered in Hoberman and Rosenbaum's excellent *Midnight Movies*. Helpful background is also provided in both Samuels and Henkin, and a rather muddled but at times entertaining discussion of the history of *Rocky Horror* is available in Michaels and Evans.
4. One of the most interesting features of the critical literature on *Rocky Horror* is the heights of rhetorical exuberance to which critics soar in attempting to characterize Curry's performance. For example, according to Michaels and Evans, Curry is a "*cross* between a megalomaniac boarding-school matron and a deranged circus ringmaster" (167); Prouty describes him as "half Auntie Mame, half Bela Lugosi, a hybrid Sophie Tucker and Mick Jagger, a cross between Greer Garson and Steve Reeves, and part David Bowie, part Joan Crawford, part Basil Rathbone" (qtd. in Minor 86); for Robbins and Myrick, he is "the spectacle of Dracula and Mae West" (5); for Kilgore, Frank is Pygmalion, Narcissus, and Percy Shelley "rolled into one" (156); Hoberman and Rosenbaum characterize Curry's Frank as an amalgam of Elvis Presley, Mick Jagger, and David Bowie (177–78).
5. In his history of *Rocky Horror*, Samuels considers reasons for the complete failure of the New York City stage production. In his estimation, the cabaret-style seating arrangement was primarily at fault because it prevented audience members from sharing the "make-believe world of RHS." In addition, the cabaret arrangement was at odds with the "flashy, expensive, . . . overstaged" musical parody (132). Lou Adler reflects succinctly that New York "thought it was too L.A." (Hoberman 12).

6. Hoberman and Rosenbaum report that the promotional budget for the film's opening at the Waverly was four hundred dollars—"somewhere between one five-thousandth and one fifty-thousandth the amount customarily spent on a New York opening" (13).
7. Hoberman and Rosenbaum provide the detail that Farese's first *bon mot* was in response to Janet's shielding herself to the rain with a newspaper on the way to the Frank-N-Furter castle: "Buy an umbrella, you cheap bitch!" (176) and state that "Whenever the repartee went over well, it would be repeated the following Friday or Saturday [and] become absorbed within the general text" (176).
8. Hoberman and Rosenbaum provide an excellent overview of the development of the *Rocky Horror* cult, as well as its regional variations (see especially 176–88).
9. See Grant, "Second Thoughts," and Telotte.
10. The bulk of the surprisingly minimal academic attention paid to *Rocky Horror* has focused on the "cultic" nature of the film and its audience, as film theorists and critics alike have sought to analyze audience reactions and to isolate just what it is in the film that elicits such fervent audience response. For analyses of *Rocky Horror* as cult film, see Austin, Corrigan, Day, Grant, Hoberman and Rosenbaum, Kawin, Kinkade, Minor, Siegel, and Wood.

Part I

Rocky Horror and Genre

1

"Drinking Those Moments When"

The Use (and Abuse) of Late-Night Double Feature Science Fiction and Hollywood Icons in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

Sue Matheson

As Phillip Strick in *Science Fiction Movies* notes, science fiction invasion films found at the late-night double feature in the 1950s and '60s showcased things noticeably absent in the everyday lives of suburban teenage boys. The formula of these movies is simple: As any teenage boy would have known, "the aliens (or you could call them foreigners) are after our women and control of the world, whichever comes first. It would be unpatriotic to imagine otherwise" (Strick 9). Not only emblematic of problems faced by Americans during World War II, these aliens also functioned as metaphors of the "social ills" that American servicemen faced on returning home: among the lumbering, tentacled monsters signifying the calamities of fascism and communism, one also finds manifestations of the American family man's concerns with gender hierarchy and social status resulting from women reluctant to leave the workplace, as well as the rock and roll youth culture. In part, these movies—among them *Red Planet Mars* (1952), *She Devil* (1957), *The Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958), *The Wild Women of*

Wongo (1959), *Teenage Monster* (1958), *Teenage Zombies* (1960), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *Gigantis the Fire Monster* (1959), *The Leech Woman* (1960), and *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957)—showcased the state of anxiety in which average Americans were functioning throughout this period.[1] Underlying the political fear mongering, xenophobia, and gynophobia found in such movies, one finds the recurring nightmare of natural forces running amok as a result of scientific tinkering. Since the detonation of the A-bomb, the old problem of scientific megalomania, strongly voiced in the nineteenth century by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, was understandably an overriding preoccupation for Americans in the 1950s. As Americans, and the rest of the world, grappled with the implications of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, movies like *Invasion of the Hell Creatures* (1957), in which "little green Martians with needle-like nails" inject alcohol into their victims, and *Invasion of the Star Creatures* (1962), during which the Earth is attacked by "strapping wenches armed with monster vegetables," offered their audiences reassurance that in the end, Middle American norms and forms—in particular, patriarchy and reason—could be restored to a world temporarily gone insane (Strick 10).

Accordingly, visitors from other planets in late night science fiction movies were diametrically opposed to the crewcut heroism of the Atomic Age: Exotic, flamboyant, and often leaking unpleasant bodily fluids, examples of these extraterrestrials include a fifty-foot woman squeezing her cheating husband to death and a poison-dripping, tentacle-lashing triffid chasing Janette Scott. In 1975, however, visitors from outer space even more outrageous than their predecessors appeared in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. These aliens challenged not only the prowess of the patriotic American male but also the puritanical social codes of Middle America: Richard O'Brien's Transylvanians wanted our men as well as our women.

An updated version of the midnight double feature, *Rocky Horror* parodies the science fiction genre established in the 1930s by movies like *Dr. X* (1932), *The Invisible Man* (1933), *King Kong* (1933), and *Flash Gordon* (1936). At the beginning of this movie, a pair of disembodied lips (known as Lips or the Usherette), floating in the vacuum of outer space, carefully prepares its viewers' expectations by reminding the audience that *Rocky Horror* follows directly in the footsteps of the following late night classics: *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *It Came From Outer Space* (1953), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *Tarantula* (1955), *The Day of the Triffids* (1963), *Curse of the Demon* (1957), and *When Worlds Collide* (1951). For members of the audience who are not familiar with this genre—at times an uneasy blend of Gothic sensibility and hard science—Lips outlines its standard elements. Designed for the teenage imagination, the message from outer space contained in such pictures runs accordingly: A mad scientist—a

Dr. X—will "build a creature," and there will be "androids fighting." The viewer should expect to "get hot" when the alien monster is finally killed, and "some terrible thrills" will happen throughout the movie. True to this rather rudimentary formula, *Rocky Horror*'s Dr. Frank-N-Furter does build a creature, and Brad and Janet, who become like androids after experiencing the medusa ray, engage in a series of lovers' spats. By the time Riff Raff kills Frank-N-Furter, the latter draped across Rocky, who is climbing an unmistakably phallic RKO radio tower, the audience should be "hot," having witnessed two seductions and an orgy. In addition, there certainly are some terrible thrills—among them, Eddie the ex–delivery boy's untimely and bloody demise as he is ice picked to death, Riff Raff's dripping candelabra torture of the hapless Rocky, and Eddie's return as a mutilated corpse beneath Frank-N-Furter's dinner table.

To date, *Rocky Horror* has elicited a number of thoughtful examinations regarding its treatment of gender—its excessiveness, its celebration of transgressive sexuality, its playful treatment of Freudian dynamics, and its Gothic preoccupations.[2] Little critical attention, however, has been given to this film as a science fiction movie parody. It is the purpose of this chapter to do so, but oddly enough, to begin such an inquiry, it is necessary first to consider the significance of the past rather than the future—that is, Richard Nixon's resignation speech, which marks the beginning of Brad and Janet's farewell to American norms and forms.

Nixon's speech, which actually aired on the evening of August 8, 1974, has two functions at the beginning of *Rocky Horror*. First, because the "normal" young couple's adventure takes place not in August but during a dark November evening, Nixon's resignation suggests to viewers that Brad and Janet are in a time warp. Second, and arguably more important, Tricky Dick's assertion while quitting that he has "never been a quitter" points the viewer toward the movie's unrelenting deconstruction of Americana via elements of the science fiction movie. The significance of this Cold War Republican president's resignation lies in Nixon's strong identification with conservative, middle-class Americans. Many moviegoers in 1975 would have been initiated into their culture by way of the conservative, often paranoid, and generally politically reactionary medium of 1950s matinees and drive-in double features—arguably, the late-night double feature drive-in was the place where many of Nixon's middle-class voters, who later supported their government's policies in Vietnam, found their parents' social and religious attitudes reinforced.

In *Rocky Horror*, one finds Brad and Janet, leftovers from the '50s, beginning their night out in a mid-1970s version of a Woody Wagon listening to Nixon resign. Embodiments of Middle America, Brad and Janet are modern versions of the American Gothics found on Denton's Episcopalian

Church's steps after Ralph and Betty's wedding: Hopelessly out of date, their clothing and lifestyle denote a highly conservative approach to life in the sexually liberated and politically progressive '70s. Modeled after the 1950s emotionless, heterosexual, hypermasculine hero found in late night science fiction, Brad Majors embodies clean-living and God-fearing American values. Unfortunately for Brad, what was attractive in the '50s is not seen as such in the '70s. In his rectangular, dark-framed, Coke-bottle lenses, Brad is a caricature—that familiar type popularized in early science fiction movies and television serials as the nerd.

The nerd, whose social awkwardness conceals his true nature, has been an important mainstay in science fiction since Superman shed his socially inept Clark Kent exterior and began leaping tall buildings in a single bound. At first, Brad appears to have the heroic potential of Superman's Clark Kent and Captain Marvel's Billy Batson. Similar to Clark Kent, he has the deep voice and the lines of a late night hero: "It's alright, Janet," or "I'm here. There's nothing to worry about." Like Kent, Brad hints that he too can reveal his true nature by "pulling out the aces . . . when the time is right." However, unlike Kent (and Batson), Brad is unable to act heroically when the opportunity arises. Fixed to the laboratory floor, for example, he cannot save Janet from the medusa ray. The worst he can do is call Frank-N-Furter a hot dog. An ordinary human being, he lacks the finely tuned sense that superheroes have that danger or an alien menace is afoot. Clearly, there is a great deal for a late night science fiction hero to be concerned about at the Frankenstein Place, not the least of which is the odd appearance of the Transylvanians, the cobweb-covered mummy in the front hall, and Eddie's scarred and dripping forehead. Brad, however, notices none of these things. Thus, when Magenta pulls off Brad's pants, it is not surprising that his underwear is not made of silver, like Flash Gordon's, but ordinary cotton.

If heroic underwear is an indicator of super-masculinity in late night movies, one need look no further than Rocky's golden bikini for it. (It is no coincidence that Rocky wears the superhero's traditional golden boots to match his gleaming shorts.) Throughout, Rocky, played by Peter Hinwood, a professional model and bodybuilder, acts as a foil, emphasizing Brad's nerdhood. Compared with Hinwood, Bostwick appears to be the epitome of the ninety-eight-pound weakling—the bookworm who gets sand kicked in his face by a bully in the Charles Atlas ads found on the back of Marvel comic books in the 1950s and 1960s. In America, as elsewhere, it seems that muscles are an important measure of one's manliness and masculinity. Even Janet, who loyally tells Frank-N-Furter that she dates Brad because she doesn't like a man with "too many muscles," later confesses that she too is "a muscle fan."

As with all nerds, Brad is not only deficient in the area of deltoids but also lacks even the minimum amount of social delicacy that one would expect of a romantic late night lead. For example, when Janet urges him to leave the castle after "The Time Warp," he rudely grits his teeth and tells her "to get a grip on herself" because "it's just a party." The Transylvanians are "probably foreigners with ways different than our own," he reassures her patronizingly, and wanting to appear well-educated and broad-minded, he points out that "they may do some more . . . folk dancing." At this point, even Janet recognizes that Brad, playing anthropologist, is alienating the aliens in his attempts to be friendly. When he asks the Transylvanians after they do "The Time Warp" if anyone knows how to do "The Madison," she rolls her eyes, takes his arm, and heads for the door, saying, "Brad, please, let's get out of here." When he resists her suggestion, she resorts to terms that he can understand: "This isn't the Junior Chamber of Commerce, Brad," she tells him.

Unlike the Transylvanians, Brad is the epitome of the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Tastelessly dressed in white socks, flood pants, and a plaid cummerbund and bowtie at Ralph and Betty's wedding, he is the picture of a middle-class teenager attempting to ape Old Money. However, should the viewer miss the jarring ideological overtones of Brad's conservative suit, resplendent with a white carnation, and his embarrassing attempts to "swing" at the Frankenstein Place, the noisy and enthusiastic shouts of "asshole!" at Brad's appearance on screen at any public showing of *Rocky Horror* would at once rectify any false impression. Transcripts of this movie's cult following's responses to Brad's appearance demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that they immediately recognize him as a reactionary representative of the conservative middle class—the butt of Sharman and O'Brien's jokes.

As Richard R. Day points out in "*Rocky Horror Picture Show*: A Speech Event In Three Acts," during this movie, meaning—especially irony—generally presents few problems for first-time viewers, because the verbal interjections by the audience anticipate the action on the screen, allowing the significance to become clear in short order. Moreover, should the viewer be confused by the audience's behavior, Brad's conduct quickly makes their interjections meaningful (217). Brad indeed proves through his chauvinism at Ralph and Betty's wedding to be as conservative as his attire: As the newly married couple leaves, he explains to Janet that Ralph and Betty's marriage will be a success because "Everyone knows that Betty's a wonderful little cook," and "Ralph himself will be in line for a promotion in a year or two." In the 1950s, Brad's rather Victorian analysis of the situation may have been deemed acceptable. In 1975 and later, however, his attitudes toward gender and marriage grow increasingly out of date.

Apparently having missed out on both the sexual revolution and women's liberation, he indeed is living in the past.

In short, Brad is the epitome of the Nice Boy Next Door. Respectful and sexually inhibited, he transmits that prepubescent sexual innocence found in episodes of *Leave It To Beaver* and *Mayberry RFD*. Poking fun at his reactionary opinions and "good" manners, the audience response mocks his character at every possible opportunity. For example, when a motorcyclist passes Brad's station wagon in the rain several scenes later, viewers shout, "Say something stupid, Brad (asshole)!" Dripping with bigotry, Brad's comment, "Yes, life's pretty cheap to *that* type," is greeted with shouts of "asshole!" and "yea that type!"[3]

The chorus' use of the word "asshole" simultaneously establishes and undercuts the notion of the science fiction late night hero's hypermasculinity and ironically foreshadows Brad's sexual experience with Frank-N-Furter later in the movie. A nerd, a bigot, and as the audience disapprovingly points out, an asshole, Brad is identified early in the movie as a burlesque character. Involved in a series of slapstick jokes, he literally falls at Janet's feet on the steps of the church when he proposes to her, finds himself caught with his pants down at the Frankenstein Place, and spends most of the movie parading about in his "charming underclothes." Only a fool would ask a party of gender-bending transsexuals if "any of you *guys* know how to *Madison*," or introduce his sexually repressed fiancé as Janet Vice to Frank-N-Furter. Arguably, one of the best examples of Brad's foolishness occurs during his marriage proposal to Janet. Parodying the lyrics of marriage proposals often found in Hollywood musicals, Brad's offer of matrimony, which marks the end of his freedom as a bachelor, begins in a graveyard and concludes in front of a coffin. His musical proposition is constructed as a series of clichés that have occurred and reoccurred in popular love songs *ad nauseam*: Brad's entirely predictable, interminable, and overused metaphors include "The river was deep but I swam it. The future is ours so let's plan it. The road is long but I ran it. There's a fire in my heart and you fan it." He ends his declaration of undying love in a medley with Janet that reduces his beloved to a handful of letters in a doo-wop duet reminiscent of songs sung by The Chords, The Platters, and The Shirelles: "J-A-N-E-T. I love you."

Similar to Brad, Janet too is a send up of the '50s suburban Puritan. Her bifurcated nature also reflects the cultural contradictions of her period. Embodying the sexual double standard for women during the 1950s, in the movie's opening scenes, Janet is dressed in a conservative white hat that covers her head in church and a modest mauve suit buttoned to her neck that shows off her legs above the knees. Later, as the Criminologist points

out, in her pink Peter Pan collar and white cardigan, she is, in the vernacular of the Eisenhower Era, just a "healthy, ordinary kid."

In Janet's case, the 1950s American terms "healthy" and "ordinary" translate into the nice girl next door, who supports the power of patriarchy and its values. It is not surprising, then, that she upholds the ideals of the patriarchal family system, perfected almost a century before in the Victorian home. In this system, marriage and the sex life it licensed provided men with a status of which polite society approved. Indeed, marriage was "deemed almost a necessity for the pursuit of a conventionally acceptable career, or occupation, or simply existence" (Calder 9). As a result, acquiring a homemaker, who preserved the standards and values of Victorian family life well into the twentieth century, was generally considered by men (and women) to be an indication of social and economic success. Thus, after Ralph and Betty leave for their honeymoon, Janet wistfully gushes to Brad, "I can't believe it. Just an hour ago she was just plain old Betty Munro. And now she is Mrs. Ralph Happshatt," before heaving a deep sigh of regret that she is still single. When Brad presents her with an engagement ring, therefore, Janet's first reaction is not to ponder her forthcoming spiritual transformation and elevation but to leave Brad lying with his face on the doorstep and run into the church to show off her prize, triumphantly shouting, "It's nicer than Betty Munro has." A suburban girl, she is interested solely in her social and material elevation, keeping up with the Joneses next door.

The product of the American marriage market, Janet's possessiveness of Brad is a matter of personal property. By proposing marriage, he becomes Janet's. With apologies to *Frankie and Johnny*, he is *her* man, and it is Janet's responsibility to make sure that he does her no wrong. After all, in a monogamous, heterosexual, Episcopalian marriage, not only does the man take the woman but the woman also takes the man. Thus, when Brad gallantly offers to walk to the Frankenstein place in the rain to find a phone, Janet insists on accompanying him, because "the owner of that phone might be a beautiful woman, and you might never come back again." Ironically, the sexual predator awaiting Janet at the Frankenstein Place reveals itself not to be another competing angel of the house but something Other.

Accompanying Brad proves to be Janet's undoing. As Jenni Calder points out in *The Victorian Home*, modern women, if they were to become the middle-class male's refuge from the pressures of the world outside the home, could only be good wives "if they were unsullied by the horrors that lay without" (10). At first, J-A-N-E-T appears to be perfect for her essential function as Brad's future wife, because she seems to be innocent and puritanical. That is, her morals, like her hymen, appear to be intact. It soon becomes apparent, however, that by venturing outside the walls of her own

domestic sphere into a competitive arena, the nice-girl-next-door becomes no longer so N-I-C-E after all. After her first sexual encounter, Janet discovers a voracious sexual appetite that she proceeds to satisfy. She tells Rocky she needs "action." She has "tasted blood," and she wants more. As the Criminologist points out in his dictionary, Janet's state of mind is not what one would expect of the pure, demure, passive virgin she was before intercourse. According to the dictates of polite American society, she has become "abnormal," possessed by that state of "agitation or disturbance of the mind," which is "an irrational and powerful master." As the Criminologist explains, enslaved by emotion, she is no longer the passive, forgiving lover found in popular American love ballads. Instead, her appetites have become aberrant. Wanting blood, she has become something alien, socially abhorrent, immoral, and un-American—a vampire.

Amittai F. Aviram points out in his excellent article "Postmodern Gay Dionysus: Dr. Frank N. Furter" that blood-sucking vampires have long been associated not only with extramarital seduction but almost subliminally with homosexuality in the European popular imagination (188). A horrifying expression of reproductive aberrance in the Gothic, the vampire, originally found in European folklore is always a sexually experienced predator operating outside generally accepted social and religious boundaries. In the Gothic, the sexually experienced villain's triumph, of course, is the inexperienced victim's social, moral, and spiritual ruin. Once "bitten," she becomes a fallen woman—a Lilith who joins her seducer in seeking and destroying others' sexual innocence.

Similar to Magenta and Columbia, who voyeuristically hiss and slaver like Dracula's brides in a late night feature while watching Janet seduce Rocky, Janet proves that she wants to be not only a competitor but also a predator and a hedonist—a "creature of the night." During this scene, her allusion to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* reminds the viewer about and reinforces the Gothic treatment of sexuality that begins at the Frankenstein Place with the appearance of Frank-N-Furter, wrapped from head to toe in the sort of vampire cape seen in late night horror movies. As a sexual predator, however, Janet is comical. In fact, she is so clumsy while seducing Rocky that Magenta and Columbia roll about together and howl with laughter while they view and parody her betrayal of Brad. In spite her transformation from victim to vamp, Janet is still very much a novice in pleasurable matters. As she tells Rocky, who is even more inexperienced than she, all she wants to know is "how to go" when she should be teaching him "how to come." Ironically, Rocky is the person most unsuited to become Janet's tutor at the Frankenstein Place, because he has never experienced intercourse with a member of the opposite sex. Therefore, it is she who must initiate him, not he who initiates her.

Similar to Janet's unlikely vampirization, almost every Gothic convention from the late night science fiction genre appears in *Rocky Horror* and is remorselessly lampooned: to name but a few, the serendipitous dark and stormy night on which the adventure takes place; the tree branches that clutch like hands at Janet as she walks on the castle grounds toward one light showing in the entire Gothic complex, when she could have taken the road; the "Enter At Your Risk" notice repeatedly illuminated by lightening bolts and tacked to a ridiculously high iron fence; the bolts of lightening striking within and without the castle; the outrageously large, Igor-like hump that mysteriously shifts about on Riff Raff's back and changes its size in each scene; the wolf howling on cue as Frank-N-Furter enters Janet's and Brad's boudoirs; and "the dogs," rather than the traditional hounds guarding the grounds, that Magenta releases (see Figure 1.1). These parodies, especially those associated with the movie's hero and heroine, offer, as Aviram notes, a critique of "such apparently reasonable institutions as home and family, dad and mom and apple pie" (185). Moreover, as generic and social conventions collapse on the screen, the result is complete carnival. All that is marginalized and excluded in American culture—the mad, the scandalous, the aleatory—takes over the center in what Robert Stam would identify as "a liberating explosion of otherness" (86).

As Stam points out in *Subversive Pleasures: Film, Literature, and the Carnivalesque*, carnival involves a constellation of interrelated tropes and ideas engaged in the overturning of social norms and forms. Among these



Figure 1.1

subversive tropes are the notion of bisexuality and the practice of transvestitism as a release from the burden of socially imposed sex roles that rigidly prescribe procreative norms of sexual activity (93). A prime example of the freedom that carnival produces occurs at the movie's end, when Janet, dressed in black fishnet stockings, high heels, and a Merry Widow corset, experiences her liberation. Freed from the procreative sexual norms borrowed from the Victorians by the 1950s, she sings, "I feel released . . . my mind has been expanded." Moving into the '70s, she finally gives herself "over to absolute pleasure" and "swim[s] the warm waters of sins of the flesh." Perhaps a comment on the plight of the Middle American male in the '70s, poor Brad, although similarly dressed, finds his transsexual freedom frightening: Instead of celebrating his bisexuality and "feeling sexy," he is a reluctant carnival-goer, whimpering, "It's beyond me; help me Mommy! I'll be good; you'll see. Take this dream away."

During the orgiastic carnival in the swimming pool that follows, the five celebrants' bisexual natures are emphasized (see Figure 1.2). With wet flattened hair and wearing similar costumes, Rocky, Frank-N-Furter, Columbia, Brad, and Janet are virtually indistinguishable from one another. As Aviram notes, the movie effectively removes gender differences and subverts the institution of heterosexual reproduction via heavy makeup, burlesque brassieres, corsets, and fishnet stockings with garters and high heels (190). More important, during the orgy, distinctions between Self and Other break down, as swimming men look like women and swimming women look like men. In the water, it seems sexual behavior cannot be



Figure 1.2

gender specific. As a result, heterosexual norms are overturned: There is no top or bottom in the water, no pairing, and no aggressive or passive partners. As Frank-N-Furter, the master of the carnival, promises, this exercise is about pure pleasure, not the act of procreation.

The swimming pool scene in *Rocky Horror*, however, is not only about promoting the pursuit of pleasure—be it homo- or heterosexual. At its campy core, *Rocky Horror*, similar to other works of science fiction, is seriously concerned with the problems created by man's desire to create life. In addition, as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, patriarchal ideology based on biology is also at stake in *Rocky Horror*'s blurring of gender and genre.

Oddly enough, science fiction, which is often considered a lowbrow form of entertainment by critics, is a perfect medium for such a serious discussion. From spectacularly bad B movies such as *Teenage Zombies* (1960) and *The Leech Woman* (1960), to such a classic work of literature as Shelley's *Frankenstein*, mad scientists suffer from what has come to be known as the Frankenstein complex and simply cannot resist the desire to appropriate the power to create life and hubristically play God, thereby inviting suitably tragic ends. *Rocky Horror* signals its central concern regarding the question of creation when Lips dissolves after the opening credits to become part of a cross mounted on a steeple. Indeed, given the tongue-in-cheek nature of this movie, one cannot help noting here that both Frank-N-Furter and Jehovah, who are not of this world, must have come from outer space. As *Rocky Horror* begins, it is tempting to think that that Sharman and O'Brien may have borrowed material from the gospel of Michael Valentine Smith concerning the nature of free love in Robert Heinlein's classic science fiction satire *Stranger in a Strange Land* for their movie, but it soon becomes evident that Frank-N-Furter is not a god—or even godlike—but merely suffering from a god complex. Before the orgy in the swimming pool begins, Frank-N-Furter leaps feet first into what appears to be a cloud. When the mists dissolve, he is found floating in a swimming pool on a life preserver from the *Titanic*. Although this life preserver foreshadows that he is inevitably and irrevocably doomed, the bottom of the pool, a sepia-toned mural of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, points to the cause of his downfall. Ironically, the master of carnival is floating in the blank space in which the creative current occurs between Adam and God at the moment Adam is given life. Paddling in circles in the area between Adam and God's forefingers, Frank-N-Furter delivers a Promethean message, which could not be more withering. The ideal he invokes is that of Hollywood's America by singing, "Don't dream it. Be it." Frank-N-Furter's creative current is not the electricity found in the lab, as in Frankenstein's case, but the flashing lightening bolts of the RKO Radio Picture's tower that serve as his backdrop. Mistaking the illusion of life (or

art) for life itself, Frank-N-Furter asks, "Whatever happened to Fay Wray?" and then becomes her, reenacting her performance in *King Kong* (1933), as Rocky, in an attempt to revitalize his master, climbs the RKO tower like Kong climbing the Empire State Building.

As a Romantic attempt to realize the American Dream promoted by Hollywood, Frank-N-Furter's social and sexual experiment is a failure. Indeed, he himself points out that being a creator is anything but a bed of roses. While turning "tiny fools" who should "quake with fear," into stone, he observes, "It's not easy having a good time. Even smiling makes my face ache." When Frank-N-Furter promises earlier that "in just seven days" he can make Rocky, his creation, a man, he is, of course, plagiarizing Genesis. What Frank-N-Furter has forgotten—or has arguably never known—while paddling above *The Creation* in the swimming pool is that man's place in the universe is not that of the creator, but of the creation.

Conventionally, then, it is entirely appropriate that Frank-N-Furter is finally punished for his intellectual and biological hubris. At first, Dr. Everett V. Scott seems, logically and generically, to be the agent of society's retribution. As Rolf Eichler suggests in "In the Romantic Tradition: *Frankenstein* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*," it is possible to view Scott as "a guardian of morality from the real, everyday world" (112). In late-night double features, wheelchair-bound scientists, with the paralyzed bottoms of their bodies draped in plaid car rugs, typically represent the social norms of order, reason, and patriarchy divorced from the distractions of the flesh.[4] A representative of these forces, Scott understands the criminal enormity of Frank-N-Furter's madness that leads him to tamper with the laws of nature. Scott warns Frank-N-Furter that he has finally gone too far when, Janet—feet fixed to the floor—really does appear to be endangered. He reminds Brad that Frank-N-Furter must be executed because of "what became of Eddie. Society must be protected." Even when the lower half of his body, dressed in fishnet stockings, garters, and high heels, appears to take on a life of its own, Scott realizes that "We've got to get out of this trap before this decadence saps our wills. I've got to be strong, and try to hang on, or else my mind may well snap, and my life will be lived . . . for the thrill!"

Here it seems that Sharman and O'Brien are calling for a Gothic reading of their film. If Scott, alive only from the waist up, embodies the principle of pure intellect in *Rocky Horror*, it should follow that Frank-N-Furter is his evil twin, in much the same manner that Eddie is "the wild and ugly source that was sacrificed in order to produce his double, the gentle, handsome Rocky" (Eichler 110). However, when one considers the possibility of a doppelgänger in this case, an interesting problem arises. By seducing his own child and engaging in what he terms "erotic nightmares beyond

any measure," Frank-N-Furter clearly represents the dark side of the self in all its sexuality and aggression. But what does Scott represent? Regarding Scott as the purveyor of logocentric thinking is problematic, as the good doctor is simply not very bright. No match for the wily Frank-N-Furter, Scott is himself a parody of the late night science fiction movie's epistemological hero, whose superior brain allows him to rationalize and defeat the threat of the irrational and the Unknown. Armed with a pair of binoculars and a magnifying glass, Scott's slow-witted and low-tech attempts to save his nephew merely serve to bore Frank-N-Furter and most of the dinner party. In fact, his lines are so clichéd that when greeting his competitor for the first time, like Stanley meeting Livingstone, he says, "Frank-N-Furter. *We meet at last*." His scientific credentials are based on the "fact" that he knows "a great deal about a lot of things." Even the device on which he and Brad have been working is a cliché: Like the transporter on *Star Trek*, it too is "capable of breaking down solid matter and then projecting it through space and who knows perhaps even time itself." Happily, Scott's performance is interrupted by the medusa ray. Notably, before being turned to stone, he is unable to come up with even one original thought—all he can do is parrot Brad's insult that Frank-N-Furter is a "hot dog."

Later, however, Scott begins to resemble his nemesis. When Frank-N-Furter bursts from the swimming pool as "a wild and an untamed thing," Scott, a "rival scientist," joins the chorus line, wheeling about and kicking his heels in the air from his wheelchair. Other carefully constructed parallels between Scott and Frank-N-Furter also serve to undermine Scott's trustworthy posture as the man of scientist. Similar to Frank-N-Furter, who incorporates elements of the maniacal eugenicist in science fiction B movies in the 1950s and 1960s inspired by Nazi science—Rocky is "the triumph of [his] will"—Scott also displays foreign intellectual tendencies, sporting an exaggerated German accent. He punctuates his discoveries in the Zen Room with loud "achs," which are later replaced by louder "unds." Like Frank-N-Furter, Scott too is interested in tinkering with the forces of nature. He has also been spending his time building gadgets—in particular, an "audio-vibratory-physio-molecular transport device."

Throughout *Rocky Horror*, Sharman and O'Brien's spoofs of late night movie elements are delightful and instructive, but their careful and calculating parodies of Hollywood icons supporting and strengthening their use (and abuse) of other Hollywood movie staples are what ultimately rescue this movie from becoming something that can be appreciated only by Trekkies and B movie fans. A number of Hollywood screen goddesses, arguably themselves parodies of human beings, make up Curry's presentation of Frank-N-Furter—in particular, the middle-aged Joan Crawford, whose androgynous appearance has prompted a good deal of attention

from reviewers, and Mae West, whose throaty intonations and seductive pauses when inviting men upstairs to her boudoir made her a star in movies like *Goin' To Town* (1935).

As Gaylyn Studlar notes in "Midnight S/Excess: Cult Configurations of 'Femininity' and the Perverse," the Otherness of Frank-N-Furter's transvestitism and bisexuality are normalized by his very masculine qualities that confirm his active, phallic power (8). Curry's sideburns and the five-o'clock shadow under his makeup do reassure the audience that Frank-N-Furter's masculine aggression is testosterone-based. Curry's sideburns, however, are also an important part of his character's burlesque of womanhood because they undercut the powerful appeal of the diva that rests upon her hyperfeminine attributes. Here it is important to note that, during the Cold War, hyperfemininity became a bifurcated affair for women: The diva was popularly conceived of not only as a charming, ladylike hostess in the living room but also as a whore in the bedroom. Unlike the Victorian wife, who was taught to endure her husband's activities in the bedroom, in 1963, the modern woman looked, walked, and talked like an angel but, as Elvis Presley pointed out, was actually a devil "in disguise." With this in mind, on the one hand, throughout *Rocky Horror*, playful flaws in Frank-N-Furter's wardrobe deconstruct the divinity of the 1950s diva of the hearth. In what is arguably the most charming parody of Joan Crawford on the planet, the mad scientist appears in what seems to be a '50s Coco Chanel cocktail dress. Frank-N-Furter's tasteful lab coat, worn back to front, is actually an exact copy of Dr. Frankenstein's in James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Frank-N-Furter's exaggerated cherry-sized pearls and his gloves further undermine the seriousness of his announcement to the unconventional conventionalists gathered in the spectators' gallery. Made of pink rubber, Frank-N-Furter's household cleaning gloves burlesque the modest, ladylike ideal transmitted by the cotton, linen, and lace fashion accessories donned by '50s women for formal public occasions, such as a tea. To emphasize the inappropriate nature of his gloves, Frank-N-Furter snaps them on like a homemaker protecting her hands from the dishwater in an Ivory soap or Palmolive commercial.

When not parodying Crawford's matronly appearance, Curry overuses elements of Mae West's character to poke fun at the less puritanical aspects of American womanhood. Arrested for obscenity in the 1920s, West was known as "The Baby Vamp" at age fourteen and was Hollywood's first sex clown. As flamboyant and shocking as West, whose earliest Broadway plays were "Sex" and "Drag," Frank-N-Furter lacks her forty-three-inch bust but wears her trademark six-inch platform heels. Performing on a gymnast's horse, shaped like a red, beribboned dildo, he parodies not only her sexual innuendo and double entendres but also her stage presence, salaciously

rolling his eyes and singing, "Honey, I can make you a man." Much more sexually explicit than West, Frank-N-Furter informs his Transylvanians that "a hot groin" makes him want "to take Charles Atlas by the ha-ha-hand." To ensure that no one in the audience can mistake the source of his parody, Curry even borrows from what are arguably West's most recognized lines from *Goin' To Town*: "Come up and see me some time." Pausing for effect like West, he invites Brad and Janet to "come up . . . to the lab and see . . . what's on . . . the slab."

Sharman and O'Brien's delightfully irreverent treatment of late night movie staples and Currie's send up of the Hollywood star system suggest that the Other in *Rocky Horror* should ultimately be recognized as that Cold War phenomenon, the enemy within. In the final analysis, Frank-N-Furter and his Transylvanians are precisely what the puritanical social norms and forms of America during the Cold War were designed to suppress. It seems that every character in *Rocky Horror* subverts the sexless 1950s suburban dream of a white picket fence and twin beds in the master bedroom. Wearing her Mouseketeer hat, even Columbia is a member of the Disney inner circle. In *Rocky Horror*, similar to those alien Others of the 1950s invasion films, characters with antisocial tendencies are suffering from a malaise generated by the United States itself.

As Lips says at the beginning of *Rocky Horror*, the 1950s late-night double features tell "us where we stand." Typically, human beings in these films, whatever their vices and follies throughout, fare well in the end. Late-night double features, whether they may be classified as As or Bs, conclude with order being restored (in America, on Earth, and throughout the galaxy). The alien Other is killed, returns—or is returned to—outer space, and the Earthlings, the hero, the heroine, and what is left of the supporting cast, gratefully resume their humdrum lives in the suburbs as the dominant species on Earth, a little older and much wiser. Toward the conclusion of *Rocky Horror*, however, human beings prove themselves to be no wiser than the aliens. It is disturbing that they are like the aliens and have nowhere else to go. In yet another carnivalesque overturning of genre, the insanity, aberrance, sex, and vulgarity of the late-night double feature is not flushed into outer space. It remains on Earth. Having fallen into a garden, rather than from it, Brad, Janet, and Scott stay dressed in their corsets—unable to get to their feet and writhing about like worms on the ground. As the Criminologist points out, human beings have been revealed to be that lowliest of Others, mere insects, and as he spins his illuminated globe before turning out the lights, it seems inevitable that the carnival will continue. Following in the tradition of *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, *Rocky Horror* reveals that we are also that which we most fear, Otherness, which we project on those whom we do not know.

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Notes

1. Bill Warren points out in volumes 1 and 2 of *Keep Watching The Skies!* that science fiction movies that played as late-night double features were preoccupied to a great extent with America's domestic problems that surfaced during the Cold War. These domestic problems, among them the communist threat, women in the workplace, and motorcycle-riding teenagers who listened to rock and roll, manifest themselves as the Other or as aliens from outer space. For example, *Red Planet Mars* (1952), a hysterically anticommunist religious science fiction picture, showcases a scientist and his family who are "Just Folks" and save the world from the "Red" Martians (vol. 1, 90). Similar to the forces of communism, women in science fiction movies often became part of the forces threatening the gender norms and social forms of Middle America. The original *She Devil* (1957), for example, features an aggressive Jekyll-and-Hyde woman,

who—having been injected with fruit fly serum—will stop at nothing to get what she wants. In *The Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958), a radiated wife exacts revenge on her philandering husband and ends "the saga of Handsome Harry Archer, the most inept fortune hunter since Daffy Duck" (vol. 2, 10). *The Wild Women of Wongo* (1959) features a number of dissatisfied, beautiful, and savage wives who trade their ugly husbands in for more attractive models. Rebellious youth threatening the status quo is a major concern in *Teenage Monster* (1958), a science fiction Western in which a meteor strikes down a miner and his son in the Old West: The son recovers to become a teenager only a mother could love—"hairy, ugly and stupid, occasionally killing sheep and cattle" (vol. 2, 196). According to Warren, the ads for *Teenage Zombies* (1960) promised "Young Pawns Thrust Into Pulsating Cages of Horror in a Sadistic Experiment" (vol. 2, 446). In *Teenage Zombies*, youth is not entirely to blame for the threat posed to society: The mad scientist, Dr. Myra, who "resembles Vampira after a muscle-building course," is "working for an Unnamed Foreign Power which will transform people into obedient zombielike slaves" (vol. 2, 445). Likewise, *Forbidden Planet* (1956) also investigates the problems that the Frankenstein complex can cause for the average American—among them, the misuse of science and technology and incest. Scientific meddling is again an issue as the forces of nature, a tyrannosaur, and an anklyosaur revived by a Japanese-U.S. geological/paleontological team threaten life and limb in *Gigantis the Fire Monster* (vol. 2, 1959). In *The Leech Woman* (vol. 2, 1960), an interesting variant on the vampire theme, an unscrupulous endocrinologist who specializes in the rejuvenation of elderly women unleashes on an unsuspecting America a patient who drinks pineal fluid. *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957) merely features the perils of two huge radiated land crabs.

2. For example, see Gaylyn Studlar's illuminating examination of excess and transgressive sexuality in *Rocky Horror* in "Midnight S/Excess: Cult Configurations of 'Femininity' and the Perverse"; Amittai F. Aviram's provocative reading of the movie as a "pastiche of Great Books and other portions of Western culture" and a gay response to Euripides' *The Bacchae* in "Postmodern Gay Dionysus: Dr. Frank N. Furter"; John Kilgore's thorough investigation of sexual subtexts in the movie in "Sexuality and Identity in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*"; Betty Robbins and Roger Myrick's discussion of gender ambiguity, the institution of marriage, the political uses of drag, and sadistic masculinity in *Rocky Horror* in "*The Function of the Fetish in* The Rocky Horror Picture Show *and* Priscilla, Queen of the Desert"; Raymond Ruble's discussion of O'Brien's playful incorporation of Freud's psychoanalytic theory in "Dr. Freud Meets Dr. Frank N. Furter"; Rolf Eichler's excellent examination of Gothic elements, especially the treatment of the doppelgänger, or the double, in *Rocky Horror* in "In the Romantic Tradition*: Frankenstein* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*"; and Richard R. Day's useful and illuminating discussion of audience participation during a screening of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in "*Rocky Horror Picture Show*: A Speech Event In Three Acts."

3. For a popular set of audience responses, see the complete script of *Rocky Horror*, available from the Dartmouth College Computing Center at http://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/image/rocky-horror.html.
4. The wheelchair-bound scientist appears in *Dr. X* (1932), a movie that Lips mentions at the beginning of *Rocky Horror* in "Science Fiction/Double Feature." Dr. Scott closely resembles the wheelchair-bound Boris Karloff who sports what appears to be the same plaid car rug draped over his lap in *Monster of Terror* (1965). Perhaps the most recent memorable example of a wheelchair-bound scientist (with a German accent) in science fiction film is Dr. Strangelove in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Stopped Worrying And Learned To Love The Bomb* (1964).

2

Rocky Horror Glam Rock

Julian Cornell

Hot Patootie
Bless my soul
I really love that Rock and Roll

—"*Hot Patootie Bless My Soul*"

The many and varied interpretations of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have provided keen insights, but few seem to have considered how the film specifically uses glam rock, a particular genre of rock and roll, which enjoyed a brief, though significant, commercially successful, and influential vogue in the early 1970s. Described by director and screenwriter Todd Haynes as "nothing short of a Camp attack on rock and roll," glam represented a "queering" of the masculine hegemony of popular music (Hoskyns x). Called glitter in the United States because of the propensity of the glam rockers to wear face paint and put sparkles in their hair and on their clothes, the musical genre was primarily a British phenomenon. As the term itself indicates, glam—short for glamour—placed star image and fashion on equal footing with the music itself. Glam emerged as a mass cultural form during a time when the American and British rock and Pop charts were ruled by '60s holdovers (the Who, the Rolling Stones, the Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan, the former members of the Beatles), introspective singer-songwriters (James Taylor; Joni Mitchell; Crosby, Stills, Nash, and occasionally Young; America; Cat Stevens; John Denver; the Carpenters), boogie-based southern rock (the Allman Brothers, the Marshall Tucker Band), portentous art school progressive rock (King Crimson; Jethro Tull;

Yes; Emerson, Lake, and Palmer; Pink Floyd; Genesis) and hard-rocking progenitors of heavy metal (Deep Purple, Grand Funk Railroad, Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith, Black Sabbath).[1] Although glam rockers shared the sonic landscape with artists of all kinds in the United States, they dominated the UK charts for the brief period from 1971 to 1975 until being superceded by punk and disco.

Despite its chart-topping popularity with music fans, glam rock proved troubling and controversial in many respects, especially in the rock press. Much of the denigration of glam came from the genre's winking, reflexive awareness of popular music as being an inauthentic image driven commodity. Because "authenticity" had long been—and continues to be—a central concern in rock music criticism, glam's acknowledgement of the constructed nature of the rock star persona represented a quandary. Where the confessional sincerity of the singer-songwriter, virtuosity of the progressive-rock instrumentalist, or blues-based musicianship of the southern rocker implied little separation between the performance and the authentic human being behind it, glam continually referenced the artificial, showbiz nature of rock and roll. In doing so, glam suggested not only that there might be a disparity between performer and performance but also that the musician was first and foremost a performer heavily invested in projecting a rock star persona. Glam demonstrated that rock and roll was an economic and cultural phenomenon and an industry, as opposed to an organic entity that was a natural expression of rebellious youth. Unlike other genres of pop music, glam celebrated the artificiality of rock music rather than attempting to deny it or cover it up. Glam not only contested the idea of authenticity but was also anticraft, antivirtuoso, and image based. The embrace of ideas seemingly antithetical to previous mainstream expressions of rock and roll may have reinvigorated popular music, but it might also account for the genre's relatively brief stint in the public consciousness.

At the same time, glam marked a return to structural and lyrical simplicity in reaction to the complexity, length, and compositional indulgence of art rock and hippie music. In place of concept albums and overblown rock operas, glam harkened back to the tighter, shorter song structure of the 1950s and early 1960s, emphasizing driving rhythms and anthemic, catchy choruses in lieu of extended jams, guitar workouts, and displays of technical virtuosity.[2] The nostalgia indicated by a return to a "classical" rock and roll song structure was inflected with self-consciousness rather than merely providing updates, rewrites, or cover versions of earlier forms of pop music. Glam songs were quite often *about* rock and roll classicism and songwriting, rather just being a straightforward repetition of previous songs and styles. Because reflexivity and irony were normally lacking

in the music of the 1960s, glam's reinvigoration of the golden oldies presented a marked contrast to its predecessors in the pop world. More significantly, perhaps, glam's engagement with visual indulgence and decadence reveled in the very aspects of the entertainment industry that the hippies, folkies, and art-rockers had seemed to deny. Performers like Davie Bowie, Bryan Ferry, and Freddie Mercury presented themselves as showmen—not merely musicians—consciously embracing their role as entertainers as part of their stage personas. The reflexivity and ironic nostalgia of the music was absorbed into the rock star icon in glam performance.

The espousal of excess, showmanship, and ironic nostalgia embraced by glam rock made it, in many ways, the logical choice for the musical numbers of *Rocky Horror*. In contrast to the pensive sincerity of early 1970s singer-songwriters and former hippies or the lyrical obtuseness of art rock, glam dealt in transgression and was profoundly reflexive. For example, glam's biggest stateside hit was Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side," a knowing tribute to Andy Warhol's Factory scene, which contains references to oral sex, cross-dressing, prostitution, and drug use. Iggy and the Stooges' "I Wanna Be Your Dog" is an ode to masochism, and Alice Cooper's songs often trafficked in sadism and images of wanton mayhem, as in the apocalyptic destruction of the hit single "School's Out." As in glam, the lyrical content of the musical numbers in *Rocky Horror* is nothing if not transgressive.

Decoding glam lyrics often requires familiarity with the history of pop music and culture. For example, in Mott the Hoople's "Honoloochie Boogie"—a song celebrating the discovery of rock music by a new fan—Ian Hunter sings "Wanna tell Chuck Berry my news," which refers not just to '50s rock pioneer Berry but to his song "Roll Over Beethoven," which is also about being introduced to rock music.[3] In *Rocky Horror*, to look ahead a bit to the following discussion, an analogous form of intertextuality is expressed through movie references (as opposed to musical ones), such as the long list of science fiction films and stars in the opening number "Science Fiction/Double Feature," but musical references exist as well. For instance, in the floor stomping number "What Ever Happened to Saturday Night? (Hot Patootie)," Meatloaf's Eddie notes that "a saxophone was blowing on a rock and roll show" and "Buddy Holly was playing his very last song" as the adolescent male in the song makes his move on his date in the backseat of his car. Glam's retrieval of the musical stylistics of the 1950s fits nicely with the film's intertextual celebration of that decade's science fiction and horror B movies and the iconographic drive-in theater, site of sexual activity for many teens.

Although it was the British glam artists who experienced the greatest commercial success, the genre had its roots in New York City's underground

theater, the Warhol Factory scene, and American Pop art aesthetics.[4] Of particular influence were Warhol's notions of stardom and the constructed nature of fame. Warhol's "superstars" challenged the notion of how "stardom was attained by showing how easily it could be manufactured" and demonstrated how unstable the notion of celebrity was—themes also expressed in Warhol's Pop art paintings (Buckley 107). For artists such as Warhol, according to Andrew Ross in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, Pop was a discursive practice whose commitment to the disposable, mass-produced artifact was a "direct affront to those who governed the boundaries of official taste" (149). Warhol's paintings of Coke bottles, Campbell's soup cans, star portraits, and car crashes are prominent examples of this tendency. In a sense, Pop symbolized the promise of liberal pluralism, as well as of democratic access to cultural production and reception—something that rock music, with its commitment to authenticity also suggested. Critically, Pop art acknowledged and celebrated the obsolescence of the mass-produced artifact and culture. In the British context, the specific milieu from which both glam and *Rocky Horror* emerged, Pop represented "American-ness" as an alternative to British cultural traditions. Pop embodied America in such things as science fiction, cars, comic strips, Detroit, rock and roll, Hollywood genre films, and advertisements—the very stuff that built both *Rocky Horror* and glam (Ross 148–49).

In addition to embracing elements of the Pop aesthetic, glam was influenced by camp and its treatment of star image. Camp's appropriation of classical Hollywood can be seen as a perversion of nostalgia itself—one that can be directed against the original representation, such as a movie star image, and thus facilitates oppositional readings of gender stereotypes. As Ross contends, camp signified differently to different classes, genders, and sexualities, and interpretation of camp performances varied widely. Before Stonewall, camp was a survival strategy, though not an oppositional one, in some homosexual communities. By using Hollywood star iconography in camp, disenfranchised gay subjects found "a way of imaginatively communicating its common conquest of everyday oppression" (157). Images of Hollywood straightness were "appropriated and used to express a different relation to the experience of alienation and exclusion in a world socially polarized by fixed sexual labels" to suggest an "imaginary control over circumstances" (157–58). This suggests the possibility of understanding *Rocky Horror* and glam rock in a similar manner as forms of camp performance. Glam's retrieval of 1950s rock and roll iconography and musical styles, wedded with an emphasis on gender fluidity, can be seen as an appropriation of camp's strategy of reinterpreting forgotten or obsolete cinematic iconography to challenge popular culture's rigid representational strategies. It is, therefore, possible to see *Rocky Horror*'s shifting

signifiers of gender as coterminous with the glam rock project, perhaps accounting for the music's appropriateness for the film itself.

As a text, glam can be read as being principally about stardom and identity—two of the main preoccupations of camp. Appearing at the very end of this fertile period in rock and roll, *Rocky Horror* represents, in a certain sense, a culmination of glam rock's recurring thematic preoccupations with stardom, identity, gender fluidity, and desire. However, the glam star was not the macho, virile virtuoso of the blues or art rock scene. Instead, glam artists consciously blurred the line between straight and gay, male and female. David Bowie, for example, actively courted the gay press. Although it is easy to dismiss Bowie's pronouncements of bisexuality and homosexuality as cynical publicity stunts, they did, in fact, dovetail with the rocker's larger project of constructing the self.[5] Indeed, much of glam is about the multiplicity of identity, a central theme of much of Mott the Hoople, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and Roxy Music's *oeuvres*.[6]

In terms of glam's noted androgyny, a flattening out of the differences between male and female was enacted, but without losing the masculine power over the image and the self. It is possible to view glam's male rock stars in terms similar to the ones Richard Dyer uses to analyze the androgynous persona of Judy Garland. As Dyer observes, "to be glamorous is to be asymptotic to the feminine, to feminize the masculine self, to arrive at a de-sexed space but without relinquishing male privilege and aggression" (Dyer 167). The idea is to become a gender "in-between," existing in a space that allows for a more complex conception of gender than a male/female binary permits. At the same time, this is not quite as rebellious as it seems. Although many drag performances problematize the boundary between the female image and male privilege, glam performs androgyny and bisexuality in a manner that still retains masculinity at its core.

Glam's obsession with the plasticity of sexuality and its expression in stage personas results in an intense preoccupation with stardom—a construction that informs *Rocky Horror*. In *Rocky Horror*, androgyny and stardom are both displayed through the film's most transgressive character, Dr. Frank-N-Furter, but in a complex manner. Frank-N-Furter is introduced in the number "Sweet Transvestite" in visual fragments. He descends into the frame by means of an elevator and a close-up on his sequined, star patterned shoes—a shot that is repeated, and one in which Frank taps in time to the music. After Janet shrieks in horror, the film cuts to a long shot and a quick track-in to a close-up of the face of Frank. Contrary to critics Betty Robbins and Roger Myrick, I do not think that this is a simple recapitulation of the introduction of the female star common to many Hollywood narratives, which restates the objectification of women. Instead, cinephiles instantly will realize that it is a quotation or parody of that type

of entrance; it requires familiarity with the conventions of female representation in classical cinema and has little meaning outside a particular, cinematic construction of "woman." Frank cautions Brad and Janet,

> Don't get strung out by the way I look
> Don't judge a book by its cover
> I'm not much of a man
> By the light of the day
> But at night I'm one hell of a lover
> I'm just a sweet transvestite from transsexual Transylvania.

The critical moment occurs when Frank discards his cloak, revealing his gender-bending attire. His black leather corset complements his excessively made-up face, torn fishnet stockings, garter belt, sequined shoes, and perfectly coiffed hair.

As Robbins and Myrick note, Frank's appearance is clearly meant to disrupt conventional notions of gender, as it is an amalgam of masculine and feminine. His dress and manner eroticize his gender fluidity and provide the source of his power, which Robbins and Myrick term sadomasochistic. Despite the shifting signifiers of gender, Robbins and Myrick contend that masculine power and authority constantly implicate him, thus undermining the oppositional potential of his drag. Perhaps this might be the case if Frank is read as a conventional glam idol, rather than the complex one he portrays. For example, the authors conveniently ignore Frank's crotch bulge, which complicates his drag. As Chris Straayer observes, Frank is not just a man giving a drag performance, wearing the signifier of "woman," but is "bi-sexed" (81). Frank is powerful because he is able to contain multiple sexual identities on a single, eroticized body. As the song indicates, the signifiers of gender continually revise and reconfigure one another. If one is a transvestite from a transsexual planet in a Transylvanian galaxy, then one can be presumed to be constantly crossing back and forth between gender positions and boundaries. This type of continually shifting gender association is a direct corollary to the star personas of such noted glam figures as Freddie Mercury, David Bowie, and Roxy Music's Bryan Ferry and Brian Eno.[7] It is perhaps conceivable that the good doctor's character is a camp performance of a glam rock idol. Frank's persona can be understood as an allusion to the iconography of the male glam idol, which was dependent on a similar deployment of signifiers of excessive gender identity but with an additional layer of excess and self-consciousness that underscores glam's unwillingness to disengage completely from male privilege. Frank's glam performance, in contrast, camps both masculinity and femininity; moreover, his act denaturalizes the figure of the scientist—a paragon of

masculine knowledge and power familiar to fans of horror and science fiction film. This denaturalization can be seen as analogous to the manner in which the glam performer denaturalizes the figure of the rock star.

Finally, the glam rock music allows for the articulation of Frank, not just as character in a narrative but also as a comment on the star persona. His dramatic arrival could also be seen as similar to that of a rock star making a grand entrance in the tradition of Bowie, Mercury, Alice Cooper, or the members of Kiss. To underscore this point, Frank ascends the podium (stage) to reveal his provocative attire. Frank is constructed as "star" by the film (both a Hollywood movie star and a musical rock star) but also as the focus of a non–gender specific "desire" on the part of the audience. Frank explodes the androgyny common to glam, replacing it with the previously noted shifting signifiers of gender. If glam desexes the star by flattening gender through androgyny, Frank resexualizes stardom and connects it to desire when he sings,

> I could show you my favorite obsession
> I've been making a man
> With blond hair and a tan
> And he's good for relieving my tension.

Thus, Frank signifies a desiring male body clothed in the feminine—asserting the power of both genders—whose desire is expressed not just for another man but for a man of his own creation, his own object of obsession. Here, the star is expressed in terms not just of glam's construction of the self but also of the ability to project that self outward, to construct the very object of one's desire. If, like camp, glam fetishizes stardom, then Frank takes it one step farther and models a stardom of the fetish.

In one sense, the main structuring narrative device in the film is desire itself. This is expressed in the opening song "Science Fiction/Double Feature" and becomes a framing device when the song returns in reprise at the conclusion. This number, with its dizzying array of cinematic allusions, foregrounds the act of desire *for* cinema and the space of the cinema as a place where sexual desire is enacted. The entire cinematic or cult film experience operates in the realm of desire; it need not be consigned to be a function of the narrative or its effects. The lyrics are a list of classic and B-movie stars and moments, and the song ends,

> I wanna go
> To the late night, double feature, picture show
> By RKO
> To the late night, double feature, picture show

In the back row
To the late night, double feature, picture show!

Thus, desire is framed in terms of cult knowledge (the compendium of obscure genre film references), the desire to experience the film in the plentitude of the theater (late night, double feature), and sexual possibility (in the back row, where adolescent sexual initiation often takes place). The song is camp in Andrew Ross' sense of retrieving history's detritus and re-energizing it; it engages glam at the musical level and cult cinephilia through the references to science fiction and horror films. In other words, the song is polysemic, engaging multiple levels of desire in multiple locations. In case that is not enough, we see only full, painted lips continually linking cinema and glam to desire in indeterminate space and time, where desire is expressed in an excessive way, detached from a desiring body. The song returns at the end to sum up the film and to posit the continuance of cinematic desire:

Science fiction double feature
Frank has built and lost his creature
Darkness has conquered Brad and Janet
The servants gone to
A distant planet
Wo, oh, oh, oh
At the late night, double feature
Picture show
I want to go
To the late night, double feature picture show.

The implication is that the movie has satisfied the very desire framed by the song and that the experience can, and even must, be repeated endlessly—in a sense, equating sexual activity and spectatorship.

That desire is fluid and is expressed in a number of the songs, but none so forcefully as in Janet's solo "Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch Me." Significantly, the song allows for the expression of female sexual desire—in this case for the idealized male body Rocky. She sings,

I'd only ever been kissed before
I thought there's no use getting
Into heavy petting
It leads into trouble and seat wetting
Now all I want to know
Is how to go
I've tasted blood and I want more

and

Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch-a Me
I want to be dirty
Thrill me, chill me, fulfill me
Creature of the Night.

As the song reaches its conclusion, Magenta and Columbia, inspired by the Rocky and Janet coupling, fool around with each other. For the coda, each of the major characters is intercut with Janet writhing in ecstasy, as if they are all pleasuring her. The camera setup and the editing extend her desire and orient the spectator in her spatial position; thus, while she and Rocky are having sex, the implication is that anyone could take her or Rocky's place, establishing both the fluidity and equivalence of desire. The point of view expressed in the shot and editing addresses the audience in terms of that same equivalence—in other words, the film literalizes multiple sexualized viewing positions. It should also be stated that Rocky, the constructed expression of the powerful bisexed Frank's desire, is conquered and possessed by Janet on one level and by the spectator on another. Rocky, by his very name, refers intertextually to the film itself (as his name comes from the movie's title) and to rock and roll (from which his sobriquet is ultimately derived). Finally, the line that is repeated by each character as they pleasure Janet and the audience is "Creature of the Night," which refers to deviance; to existence in a shadowy, nocturnal world; to horror films; and to cinema patrons, who, similar to club and concert goers, can be construed as creatures of the night. (In the play, Rocky counterpoints her song with "Bless my soul / I really love that rock and roll" from the previous number "What Ever Happened to Saturday Night?" linking desire with glam as well as cinema.)

One portion of the film that makes little sense outside of a glam context concerns the brief appearance of Eddie. Frank's number "I Can Make You a Man" is interrupted by the entrance of Eddie to great acclaim from the onlookers. Meatloaf's only number presents a vision of skewed heteronormativity, depicted as excessive masculinity. He enters on a Harley, clad in leather and blue jeans, with a phallic saxophone in tow, love and hate tattooed across the knuckles of his hands, and sings a "conventional" glam number, "What Ever Happened to Saturday Night?" about adolescent heterosexual love. This symbol of conventional masculinity also happens to have a big red scar on his forehead, indicating that half his brain has been removed. Although some commentators have noted that Meatloaf's hairstyle and leather jacket mark him as Elvis, a better comparison would be Gary Glitter, an extremely popular glam idol who is best known for the UK

hit "Rock and Roll Part Two."[8] Glitter glammed up Elvis, so his persona and music referred back to that previous icon, though with a liberal coating of glam androgyny, parody, and irony. Meatloaf's song refers further to such glam hits as Bowie's "Drive In Saturday" and Mott's "Golden Age of Rock and Roll" and "Saturday Gigs," all British chart successes. All these songs, similar to Meatloaf's, highlight the connection of music and sexuality, but in a fashion that betrays an awareness of ironic nostalgia.

"What Ever Happened to Saturday Night?" does not just ask about that day of the week but also about masculine privilege and an adolescent conception of sexuality. Frank responds by murdering Eddie and labeling it a "mercy killing." The first line that Frank utters after dispatching Eddie is "one from the vaults," a disk jockey expression for an old record. The doctor then reprises "Charles Atlas," thus circumscribing Eddie's disruptive, conventional, brainless masculinity and suggesting the viability of constructing one's own fetish object rather than recapitulating traditional ones. The segment ends with the playing of the wedding march and the marriage of Rocky and Frank as the scientist jumps into his creation's arms in front of a "matrimonial" bed. Here the film privileges Frank's desire, depicts Eddie's conventional man as deviant and disruptive, and asserts that masculinity is a problem if it has become ossified, as represented by Eddie. The answer that the film poses to the song's question is perhaps that heteronormative nostalgia for adolescent groping is outmoded and unfulfilling. All male desires in the film are, in fact, problematic. Where Eddie is anachronistic and brain-dead, Brad is vacuous and normative, Riff Raff is incestuous and ultimately repressive, Rocky is pure libidinal energy, and Dr. Scott arguably is impotent. The sexual indeterminacy of Frank is more appealing than these other configurations of masculinity, which allows Frank-N-Furter to appropriate and overtake them with his free-floating desire. In a similar vein, the glam rock idol represented a more appealing and more fluid vision of the male pop star than previous incarnations.

The relation of this type of fluid desire to camp, cult, and glam is explored in the film's lengthy closing sequence,

> Rose Tint My World,
> Floor Show,
> Fan Fare,
> Don't Dream It Be It,
> Wild and Untamed Thing,
> I'm Going Home.[9]

In this rousing closer, Frank dresses up Columbia, Janet, Brad, and Rocky in his preferred clothing, equips them with feather boas, makes their faces

up in close approximation to his, and puts them onstage. The action takes place in an empty theater, with rows of deck chairs constituting the audience. Each of the four players takes a verse of "Rose Tint My World," in which they individually express their differing identities and sexualities. For Columbia, named after both a film studio and record company, it is fandom and love; for Rocky, it is unadulterated lust; for Brad it is Oedipal confusion; for Janet it is sexual empowerment and liberation. All of their identities are figured in relation to Frank-N-Furter: Columbia is a fan of his, he has created Rocky, and he has deflowered Janet and Brad. In other words, the signifier of the slippage/fluidity of desire—Frank, the glam rock idol—defines the four characters. Rose tinting suggests an escape into this desire. The four characters perform an approximation of Frank and of his star qualities, and their performance configures desire as a refusal of psychological depth and unconscious processes; it is a conception of stardom consonant with the glam rock idol. In addition, the group's song is a literal warm up and opening act for the main event, the star of the film, Dr. Frank-N-Furter.

When they finish their song, the film cuts to a long shot of the empty theater with the principals onstage. Trumpets herald Frank's imminent arrival. The curtain pulls back to reveal not just the star but Frank standing in front of an exact replica of the RKO studios logo, with the looming radio tower behind the doctor. RKO, of course, was best known for Astaire-Rogers musicals, so it is possible to see the closing sequence as a camp performance of glam, musicals, and also horror films, given the reference to *King Kong*. In "Don't Dream It," Frank sings,

> What ever happened to Fay Wray
> That delicate, satin-draped frame
> As it clung to her thigh
> I started to cry
> For I wanted to be dressed just the same.

He continues, "Give yourself over to absolute pleasure" and "Don't dream it—Be it," a line taken up by the chorus as they frolic in a pool in a parody of Esther Williams' nautical spectacles.[10] "Don't Dream It" refers back to the "Science Fiction/Double Feature" framing device, contextualizing Frank's desire to be Wray—not merely to assume her gender but also to perform her function in the supertext of genre film. When he sings, "give yourself over to absolute pleasure," he connects sexuality and cinema spectatorship. The pleasure to which he refers is the satisfaction of desire by cinematic or sexual means. If we configure his wish as expression of lack, then the film's dénouement, in which a lifeless Frank is carried by Rocky

up the phallic tower, itself an overdetermined reference to excessive masculinity expressed as a parodic recapitulation of Kong's tragic finale, is an ironic, self-aware, reflexively artificial fulfillment of desire. Thus, the text is engaged in avowing the power of cinema to compensate for lack, to satiate desire. The film works to give Frank what he wants: He can be both Fay Wray and King Kong.

Some critics—Barry Keith Grant, Gaylyan Studlar, and Robbins and Myrick included—have interpreted the narrative's resolution to indicate the restoration of normative and recuperation of the deviant spectacle by patriarchy. If one considers the destruction of the monster at the end of the horror film to restore normativity, then perhaps Frank's death does reassert conventionality. The musical genre, for its part, is concerned with the construction of community and the consolidation of heteronormativity. The singing and dancing in the musical genre film is a metaphoric, paradigmatic circumscription of heterosexuality and gender roles; the narrative trajectory is toward the reconsolidation of the heterosexual couple who have been kept apart in the body of the text. In *Rocky Horror*, this is not the case. Heteronormativity is exploded by the film, and the escape of the romantic couple and their authority figure friend and government operative, Scott, at the end suggests that normative heterosexuality cannot be restored. The penultimate image of the film has them writhing on the ground still wearing their Frank-style clothing—hardly an image of normativity restored. Furthermore, the agents of "restoration" are brother and sister, Riff Raff and Magenta. No normal couple, they are instead presented as incestuous. The film also implies that Frank has slept with both of them. Their attire in the scene where Riff Raff asserts his control over Frank and then murders him and Rocky is a combination of drag and space suit—a camp performance of science fiction authority. Riff Raff's stated reason for killing Frank has nothing to do with restoring order; he does it because he thinks Frank does not like him. The entire castle is then beamed back to the planet of Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania, undoubtedly a transgressive place. Frank's death is, finally, framed by "Science Fiction/Double Feature," indicating the fulfillment of cinematic desire, not necessarily patriarchal restoration.

The excessiveness of the closing sequence, and even the film as a whole, prevents the reaffirmation of heteronormativity; instead, perhaps, once exploded it can never be restored. Where the glam rock idol never relinquished his masculine privilege, here the film's playing with popular culture suggests that heteronormativity, not heterosexuality, is the repressed and repressive thing that returns. Certainly, it can be argued that by "queering" genre film, musicals, and glam, *Rocky Horror* either effaces gayness or relegates it to one form of deviance among many, but as the film

performs the same operation on heterosexuality, it asserts the viability of the marginalized over the dominant. Heterosexuality is just one possibility for sexual identification. Sexuality, as such, comprises traces of all potentialities. By camping so many genre film elements at the same time, *Rocky Horror* does not just parody the musical, the horror film, the science fiction spectacle, or the glam rock performance; it reveals an absence of normative reception that was always implicit in the way the genre film mobilized desire and exposes the cinema's economy of desire by literalizing it. The film acknowledges, through the final sequence and the framing device, that Frank is a fantasy himself—a creation of the cinema, one derived from camp and glam, and an expression of the fluidity of desire that film is empowered to mobilize. The link between star and film—both commodities and circulated texts—creates a space for the articulation of desire coded in terms of a particular, shared knowledge. It is the cinema and knowledge of film, film history, and genre codes, of stars and stardom, and of rock and roll and glam that is the locus of power.

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Notes

1. A family tree of glam rock acts would include such UK artists as Marc Bolan and T. Rex, David Bowie, Roxy Music, Mott the Hoople, Slade, Gary Glitter, Sweet, David Essex, Queen, the Sensational Alex Harvey Band, Steve Harley and Cockney Rebel, as well as acts that incorporated some glam aspects into their stage personae and music such as 10cc, Elton John, Alvin Stardust, the Bay City Rollers, and Showaddywaddy. In the United States, the best known domestic acts were Iggy Pop and the Stooges, Lou Reed, the New York Dolls, Sparks, Alice Cooper, Kiss, and for a brief period, Todd Rundgren.
2. There were notable exceptions to the rejection of experimentation, such as the explorations of song craft and structure by Roxy Music or the vocal pyrotechnics of Queen, but in general, glam dispensed with the musical immoderation of progressive and art rock or the emotional intimacy of the singer-songwriters.
3. In the song, Hunter's recent convert to glam rock exclaims "Now my hair gets longer / as the beat gets stronger / Wanna tell Chuck Berry my news / I get my kicks from guitar licks / and I've sold my steel-toed shoes." In Berry's original, he sings "You know my temperature's risin' / And the jukebox blowin' a fuse / My heart's beatin' rhythm / And my soul keeps singin' the blues / Roll over Beethoven / And tell Tchaikovsky the news."
4. Connected to Warhol's Factory scene were underground theater groups that involved many of the same people. Prominent at the time were Charles Ludlum's Ridiculous Theater Company and John Vaccaro's Playhouse of the Ridiculous Theater, both of which used camp performance and drag in many productions. Much of the costumes, makeup, and transgender images of glam, as well as the deployment of androgyny, drag, and bi- and homosexual themes, was developed in the New York theater underground. In terms of music, David Johansen, founder of the New York Dolls, was also a member of the Ridiculous Theater, and Lou Reed was the main force behind the Velvet Underground—the legendary house band for the Factory. In addition, the

music club Max's Kansas City served as a hangout for both Factory and theater personnel (Hoskyns 24–27). Tony DeFries, prominent partner in arts management firm Main Man Productions, was pivotal in both the production of *Pork* and the career of David Bowie. Apparently, it was at DeFries' suggestion that Bowie familiarize himself with the New York theater scene and with the Factory (Paytress 58–59). Bowie's well-known fascination with Warhol manifested itself in a song on his 1971 album *Hunky Dory*, named after the Pop artist. Bowie would later portray Warhol in Julian Schnabel's 1996 film *Basquiat*.

5. As early as 1969, Bowie was interviewed in *Jeremy* (which, according to Richard Dyer, was geared to a bisexual audience) and in *Gay News* (a key British gay liberation journal) in July 1972. In the latter article, Peter Holmes stated, "David Bowie is probably the best musician in Britain now. One day he'll become as popular as he deserves to be. And that'll give gay rock a potent spokesman." He also appeared in drag on the cover of his 1970 album *The Man Who Sold the World*, spawning a series of articles about his propensity for wearing frocks (Paytress 53). In a famous January 1972 interview in *Melody Maker*, Bowie announced, "I'm gay and always have been." Taken together, these controlled images of Bowie helped create the myth of Queer David (Gill 107).
6. For instance, in "All the Way From Memphis," Hunter claims, "you look like a star but you're still on the dole" and "you look like a star but you're really out on parole." Mott also dedicated two albums, *Brain Capers* and *Mad Shadows*, both commercial failures, to the exploration of the multiple sides of Hunter's would-be rock star persona.
7. Roxy Music in particular is a musical touchstone for many of Richard O'Brien's compositions. Bryan Ferry's mixing of older rock and roll styles with Broadway show tunes can be seen in "Dammit Janet" and "Over At The Frankenstein Place." Perhaps more strikingly, "The Time Warp" is lyrically and compositionally quite similar to Roxy Music's early hit "Do the Strand."
8. Glitter's hit was common at American sporting events until recently. Glitter, whose real name is Paul Francis Gadd, made headlines when he was imprisoned in Vietnam on charges of sexual misconduct with a minor.
9. A common criticism leveled at the film is that it is incoherent. Stuart Samuels in *Midnight Movies* claims that the film falls apart in the last half hour. In the context of genre musicals, it should be noted, the ending makes perfect sense: How else would you attempt to resolve tensions in a narrative except by putting on a show? In addition, Frank's naming of the performance the Floor Show refers, perhaps, to David Bowie's 1973 television special *The 1984 Floor Show*.
10. It is virtually impossible to account for all of the intertextual references in the final sequence, let alone the entire film. Many have tried, as a visit to the official fan club Web site attests. A comprehensive list of all the cinematic allusions exists at http://www.rockyhorror.org/faq/.

3

Reflections on the Self-reflexive Musical

The Rocky Horror Picture Show and the Classic Hollywood Musical

Sarah Artt

> Whenever an art form is highly conventional, the opportunity for subtle irony or distanciation presents itself all the more readily.
>
> —*Jean-Loup Bourget, "Social Implications in the Hollywood Genres"*

Most critical and popular work on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* acknowledges that the film demonstrates a variety of cultural references that open it up to many possible aesthetic and theoretical interpretations. In interviews conducted for the music video channel VH1 and now included in the special features of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the *Rocky Horror* DVD, writer Richard O'Brien has confirmed this view, citing influences as diverse as old lingerie ads and Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944). Much has already been said about *Rocky Horror*'s status as a cult film and its use of sexuality, but as yet no one has offered an in-depth analysis of *Rocky Horror* as a musical. The music and songs that make up much of *Rocky Horror*'s narrative have long been treated as an aspect of the film that feeds into other theoretical readings of *Rocky Horror* as an example of camp, cult, or queer cinema (or indeed, all of the above). Without wishing to diminish the richness of those other readings, I would

like to propose that an examination of *Rocky Horror* as a musical is long overdue. *Rocky Horror*, with its theatrical origins and its annual presence as a Halloween screening for the better part of three decades, deserves to be included in a genre that ranges from classics like *42nd Street* (1933), *Top Hat* (1935), and *Easter Parade* (1948) to the surreal heights of *Cabaret* (1972), *Hairspray* (1988), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000).

The musical has had a checkered academic history and did not really gain acceptance as a genre worthy of study until the 1970s, in part because of the recuperation and rediscovery of Vincente Minnelli (*The Band Wagon* [1953], *Gigi* [1958], *An American in Paris* [1951]) as an auteur of the musical genre, as well as feminist film theorists' academic championing of "women's genres," which often included the musical alongside melodrama and costume drama. The musical was initially reclaimed as a genre that appealed to a female audience by celebrating fantasy and pleasure, but it could also be interpreted as subversive. Molly Haskell claims the woman's film, which can include the musical among other previously denigrated genres, "ranged from films that adhered safely to the formulae of escapist fantasy, films that were subversive only 'between the lines' and in retrospect, and the rare few that used the conventions to undermine them" (21).

The classic Hollywood musical I have chosen to refer to in this chapter, *Summer Stock* (1950), falls into Haskell's "between the lines" category but maintains a traditional romantic ending. Jane Feuer in her book *The Hollywood Musical* comments that "*Summer Stock*, a fascinating and undervalued 1950 MGM musical . . . is unique among musicals of its period in achieving a fifty/fifty blend of folk and backstage themes" (20). Although *Summer Stock* (in the United Kingdom the film was released with the title *If You Feel Like Singing*) is a lesser known example of a classic musical, it stars Judy Garland and Gene Kelly and contains Garland's first performance of her now well-known "Get Happy" number, which later came to be as closely associated with Garland's star persona as "Over the Rainbow" from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Although Feuer references *Summer Stock* throughout *The Hollywood Musical*, the film remains underseen and understudied. By using it as a comparison for my analysis of *Rocky Horror*, I hope that these two films may illuminate each other, shedding critical light on neglected aspects of both texts.

Jean-Loup Bourget states, "the musical, like a court jester, is allowed a saturnalian freedom because it is not a 'serious' genre" (472), and it is this freedom associated with musicals that allows *Rocky Horror* to be interpreted and enjoyed on so many different levels. It is, among other things, a cult film, a sex film, a horror film, a film about social misfits, and a film that articulates popular social movements of the 1970s. The blending of all these ideas is possible under the all-encompassing rubric of the musical, where

nothing has to be particularly realistic, or even make sense. (If you've ever seen the Busby Berkeley number with Carmen Miranda singing "The Lady with the Tutti-Frutti Hat" with its giant banana set pieces in *The Gang's All Here* [1943], you'll know that the Hollywood musical entered the realm of the ridiculous long before *Rocky Horror*.) In terms of theories of the musical, I have chosen to make substantial use of Feuer's writing because I feel that her ideas provide the most comprehensive scope for a study of how *Rocky Horror* demonstrates many of the characteristics of the classic Hollywood musical and then takes them even further—into the realm of the subversive. Feuer also remains one of the few academics to undertake a sustained critique of the Hollywood film musical in book form.

In her landmark 1977 essay, *The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment*, Feuer claims that, within the classic Hollywood musical, "entertainment is shown as having greater value than it does" (487). What Feuer means here is that entertainment, in the form of the songs and dances, or the "show within the film," takes precedence over everything else. In the world of the classic Hollywood musical, singing and dancing become more important than the mundane realities of everyday life. This holds particularly true for what Feuer dubs the "backstage musical," in which the putting on of the show is the most important thing. In the backstage musical, songs and dances usually occur in the context of a rehearsal and serve to further backstage romance. *Summer Stock*, the 1950 musical starring Gene Kelly and Judy Garland, is a classic example of the backstage musical. The plot consists of a wayward troupe of performers headed by director Joe Ross (Kelly) attempting to convince skeptical farmer Jane Falbury (Garland) of the importance of putting on their show in her barn. When Jane eventually joins in the performers' fun, it is happily at the expense of running her farm and ruining her engagement with an upstanding local shopkeeper. In *Summer Stock*, entertainment in the form of the show, *Fall In Love*, conquers Jane and the rural community's suspicions about "show people," privileges the production of entertainment, and trivializes things that would, in reality, be serious responsibilities.

Rocky Horror, rather like Mervyn LeRoy's classic musical *Golddiggers* of 1933 and its comical take on surviving the Depression, takes this idea of privileging fantasy over reality to its extreme. Entertainment in the form of sexual pleasure is upheld as the ultimate goal in the fictional world of *Rocky Horror*—even Dr. Frank-N-Furter's scientific achievement in creating Rocky is a triumph of entertainment, as Rocky's primary function is to serve as a sexual plaything. The climax of *Rocky Horror*'s equation of entertainment and pleasure is, of course, the pool orgy, during which Frank sings, "Give yourself over to absolute pleasure." However, even though it is implied that Frank, Magenta, and Riff Raff hail from a planet where

hedonism is encouraged ("sweet Transsexual, land of night"), Frank has managed to give his desire for entertainment too much importance: "your lifestyle's too extreme" Riff Raff sings to him. Feuer comments, "perhaps the last step along the road away from the vision of the classical period is *All that Jazz* (1980) which terminates in the death of the artist and the negation of show business" (*Hollywood* 85). I would argue that *Rocky Horror*'s conclusion also represents a break with the vision of the classic musical. *All that Jazz* ends with the death of its protagonist, the hard-living choreographer Joe Gideon. Joe suffers complications after a heart attack brought on by his drug use and frenetic lifestyle, but his final moments are a montage of ironic performance to the song "Bye Bye Life" and a series of dreamlike appearances by his family and former lovers. *Rocky Horror* concludes with Frank's death, the spaceship's return to Transsexual, and the disheveled figures of Brad, Janet, and Dr. Scott amid the rubble. Both *Rocky Horror* and *All that Jazz* show a definitive curtailment of entertainment and pleasure with their conclusions that differs dramatically from the upbeat send-off typically employed by the classic Hollywood musical, as exemplified by *Summer Stock*, which ends with the engagements of Jane and her sister Abigail, followed by a reprise of the song "Howdy Neighbour," celebrating community spirit. Indeed, most classic Hollywood musicals conform to the expectations of the romantic comedy in terms of their conclusions: *Easter Parade* (1948), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *Funny Face* (1957), *Silk Stockings* (1957), and even *Les Girls* (1957), which uses the unusual narrative technique (unusual for the musical, anyway) of a court case over a tell-all book about a former musical act, all conclude with the romantic union of one or more couples.

When entertainment is relegated to a less prominent position in the musical, it is usually the result of an unsuccessful performance. As Feuer remarks, "Only unsuccessful performances are demystified. The musical desires an ultimate valorization of entertainment; to destroy the aura, reduce the illusion, would be to destroy the myth of entertainment as well" (488). *Singin' in the Rain* famously engages in a simultaneous demystification and valorization of entertainment in the form of "natural" talent in the sequence toward the end of the film when Lina Lamonte's (Jean Hagen) singing talent is exposed as fraudulent when the curtain of the theater in which she is performing drops away to reveal the "real" singer, Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds). This is the case with Frank's final song in the floor show sequence "I'm Going Home." Up until now, Frank's costuming has been as seamless as that of any '40s starlet: His costume changes happen off screen, and his makeup has been flawless. However, just before the floor show, we see Frank with messy hair, in his dressing gown, with cold cream on his face. The seamless image of Frank as an emblem of

sexual entertainment is compromised, and when Riff Raff enters in his gold lamé uniform declaring his status as the new commander, Frank is finally exposed: His costume is wet and unraveling, his makeup is sloughing off, and he sings, with no apparent irony, "I'm Going Home" in torch song style. It is fitting that *Rocky Horror*, coming decades after the golden age of the Hollywood musical, takes the myth of entertainment to its fullest extent and then exposes it precisely as a myth.

Both *Summer Stock* and *Rocky Horror* can be considered "self-reflexive" musicals in that each thematizes the putting on of a show—they are both to varying extents musicals about mounting musicals. According to Feuer's model, the self-reflexive musical displays three main myths: spontaneity, integration, and audience. Feuer defines spontaneity both as "musical performance['s] . . . spontaneous emergence out of a joyous and responsive attitude towards life" and "spontaneous talent" (488). Within the genre of the classic Hollywood musical, there are countless examples of this first definition of the myth of spontaneity; virtually every musical employs the conceit that singing and dancing are natural, everyday ways of expressing emotion and, therefore, do not need to be integrated into the narrative as part of a show, as is often the case with the backstage musical. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) deploys the myth of spontaneity throughout its narrative, particularly in two solo numbers by Jane Russell as Dorothy Shaw: when she performs "Ain't there Anyone here for Love" surrounded by the Olympic swim team on the deck of the cruise ship, and when she gives her own performance of "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" in the Paris courtroom. As viewers, we accept this myth as an aspect of the genre, just as we accept that in a conventional horror film, though it is always unwise for characters to enter dark basements alone, they do it anyway. It is also this spontaneous bursting into song that detractors of the musical cite as seeming particularly ridiculous to their sensibilities—they cannot accept the myth of spontaneity.

Summer Stock actually opens with just such a spontaneous moment: Jane sings a song about how pleasant it is to sing to yourself for no reason as she gets ready for her day. This is our first indication of Jane's spontaneous talent, and the lyrics are telling: "if you feel like singing, sing" is the refrain, showing the audience that any emotion or occasion can be expressed by a song within the narrative world of this film. A more contemporary example of a film that counts on the myth of spontaneity is Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). In *Dancer*, the musical performances do not occur in the context of a show, or even on stages; instead, they occur in real, but also highly unusual, places: a railway car, a factory floor, and most incongruously, an execution chamber. It is the myth of spontaneity

that accounts for how actors in a musical burst into song and dance to signal their highly complex emotions, as if we all did this everyday.

Rocky Horror also uses singing and dancing as the preferred modes of emotional expression for both mainstream and underground society. Brad and Janet perform their duet "Dammit Janet" as they become engaged, signaling that rapturous joy can only be expressed through song in the filmic world of *Rocky Horror*. Of course, because *Rocky Horror* is a parody, Brad and Janet's wholesome style of singing would not be out of place in a classic musical—musically, it stacks up well against Joe and Jane's courtship song, "You Wonderful You," in *Summer Stock*. However, the humorous lyrics of "Dammit Janet" (e.g., "there's three ways that love can grow / that's good, bad or mediocre") and the monotone repetition of their names by the church staff send up the staid suburbanite façade of Brad and Janet. Singing and dancing are also the way in which we are famously introduced to the world of Dr. Frank-N-Furter through the musical numbers "Time Warp" and "Sweet Transvestite." These two numbers signal that the audience, along with Brad and Janet, have now entered a world where conventions are ridiculed and hedonism reigns. Frank sings,

> I'm not much of a man
> By the light of day
> But by night I'm one hell of a lover
> I'm just a sweet transvestite.

These lyrics, in tandem with the synchronized dancing and strangely erotic costumes, all contribute to *Rocky Horror*'s own myth of spontaneity.

Feuer also defines the myth of spontaneity as the expression of spontaneous talent and cites the performances of the three stars of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), who not only make singing and dancing seem like "an involuntary response, like breathing" (489) but also "[make] use of props at hand" (489). Kelly is the real master of making this technique look natural, epitomized by the dance he appears to improvise in *Summer Stock* with the sound of a squeaky floorboard and a sheet of newspaper. Feuer also cites this performance as an example of spontaneity in *The Hollywood Musical*: "Of all Kelly's environmental conceptions, the one which gives the greatest impression of spontaneity springs from a stage's squeaky floorboard and an old newspaper" (6). The squeak of the floorboard in combination with tap dancing becomes a whole routine as a crumpled and ripped newspaper is added to the melody and the dance. The scene culminates with Kelly noticing a story of interest in the newspaper and gradually stopping dancing, wanders off reading the paper. Kelly's dance here is a perfect example of the myth of spontaneity, "us[ing] the proscenium stage not as an arena

for the dance but rather as material for the dance" (6). Kelly goes to great lengths to make a carefully rehearsed number seem effortless and part of everyday life through the use of ordinary objects as props. Kelly's work in *Summer Stock* contrasts dramatically with his performance in the fanciful, self-consciously elaborate Toulouse Lautrec–inspired sequence that ends *An American in Paris*, which was released only a year after *Summer Stock*.

It is hard to apply the myth of spontaneity to *Rocky Horror* because so much of the film relies on the unnaturalness of Frank's castle and the elaborate symbolism of its sets. Ordinary, everyday objects do not really exist in *Rocky Horror* as they do in the classic Hollywood musical. However, I argue that part of the film's enduring appeal for its hardcore fans is undeniably connected to the film's costumes, particularly the way underwear and high heels are given an iconic sexual status. Clothing that is typically hidden and characteristically feminine, including bikini underwear, corsets, garter belts, fishnet stockings, and high heels, is transformed by Frank into clothing that indicates an aggressive sexual attitude for any gender. Suddenly, these clothes are allowed to be on the outside—in fact, all the major characters are mostly underdressed throughout the film—which, in the filmic world of *Rocky Horror*, is made to appear normal and natural. Two examples of similar performances in classic Hollywood musicals come immediately to mind, where the revelation of undergarments and elements of burlesque enter into the classic musical. The first is Mame Carson's (Jane Russell) striptease performance "Lookin' for Trouble" in *The French Line* (1954). The second is Peggy Dayton's (Janice Paige) salacious number "Satin and Silk" in *Silk Stockings*, in which she performs in an elegant but brief negligee for the composer Boroff in the private showroom of an expensive dress shop. Brad and Janet are spontaneously undressed before their trip to Frank's lab under the premise of removing their wet clothes, but the real reason seems to be so that they can be more easily integrated into Frank's world. Given the assumed conservativeness of Brad and Janet, they are remarkably calm when their outer clothes are removed, signaling the normality of being underdressed in Frank's world. In *Rocky Horror*, the myth of spontaneity is perhaps best expressed as the myth of spontaneous and natural seminudity, whereas in the classic Hollywood musical, these sartorial displays are relegated to the proscribed areas of the performance space or the boudoir.

The myth of integration, according to Feuer, is evident when "successful performances are intimately bound up with success in love, with the integration of the individual into a community or a group, and even with the merger of high art with popular art" ("Self-Reflexive" 491). In *Summer Stock*, Jane's integration into the community of performers comes when a square dance is held in her barn. The performers—"the kids," as they are

often called—are banished to the upper reaches of the barn, where they observe and gently mock the stiff and staid dancing of the farming community. Joe ends up dancing with Jane to distract her from two boys who are about to reveal that one of the performers has accidentally destroyed her new tractor. At the sight of Joe dancing, the kids leap down from the hayloft and take over the band: One of them takes over the drums and enlists the help of a sympathetic saxophonist. The square dancing music and dance moves evolve seamlessly into swing style as the performers jive and jitterbug. Jane tries to maintain the original stately pace but soon shrugs and gives herself over to Joe's more energetic style. As Joe sets up a series of steps, Jane effortlessly follows him, demonstrating the spontaneity of her talent and beginning her transition from the farming to the performing community. After she and Joe finish dancing, the kids crowd around to congratulate them.

This demonstration of Jane's "natural" talent proves crucial when the two stars of *Fall in Love*, Jane's sister Abigail and "the name" Harrison Keyes, abandon the show for more lucrative opportunities in New York. Although Joe quickly decides he can do the male lead himself, Jane has to be persuaded to take the female lead. By the time her stuffy fiancé Orville vents his disapproval at her performing in the show, Jane is already committed to its success and to her growing attraction to Joe. When rumor has it that Orville has convinced the other townspeople to boycott the show, Jane storms into a meeting of the town council and proclaims she is "fighting tooth and nail for this show," which must go on because "it means too much to Joe." On opening night, Jane's stage fright is soothed by Joe's promise of a romantic courtship after the show's success, and Jane goes on to give a flawless performance. In contrast to the success of Jane's performance and its link to the increasing success of the romance between her and Joe, Abigail's performance during rehearsal before her abandonment of the show begins to suffer the more she opposes Joe's direction and the more they quarrel. Once it is clear that Abigail sees herself, despite her inexperience as a performer (this is her first real acting, dancing, and singing experience), as being on a higher level than the rest of the cast, she becomes segregated from the performing community, which culminates in her escape with Harrison. As one leading lady becomes segregated, the new one is in the process of embracing the performing community, ensuring a seamless musical performance and upholding the myth of integration.

The myth of integration in *Summer Stock* also represents the mythical integration of two disparate communities—the rural and the urban, or as Feuer characterizes it, the relationship between mass art and folk art (*Hollywood* 20). The show people come from New York and make their living by entertaining others. The rural community of Windgate Falls traces its

ancestors back to the earliest European settlements, and its members make their living by farming. The initial merger of these two communities is expressed by Joe and the kids in the musical number "Dig for your Dinner," performed in the Falbury Farm kitchen and filled with lyrics that can only be described as "Protestant work ethic goes Hollywood":

> You gotta dig dig dig
> Dig for a dollar
> T'aint as simple as you think
> You can't purloin a sirloin or the butcher'll put you in the clink
> You just can't be a lazy bird
> You gotta get off of your twig
> So you can afford
> Your room and your board
> And it's nice to have the price of a cig
> Hey you gotta pay the fiddler manif you wanna do a jig
> You gotta be as busy as a bee
> To be a Mr. B-I-G
> And if you want some dig dig dignity
> You gotta dig dig dig dig dig for your dinner
> dig, etc.

This number reinforces a shared work ethic, and it is this aspect that eventually unites both communities.

Rocky Horror also demonstrates the myth of integration through the merger of disparate aspects of society. Brad and Janet represent the conservative middle class: Their modest clothes, plans to marry after college, and shared virginity all signify this. These two are thrown into the madcap world of Frank's laboratory: bisexual aliens, scientific experimentation, and spontaneous undressing. After some initial resistance, Brad and Janet are completely absorbed into this hedonistic community—especially once Frank seduces them both. After their separate deflorations, they both go on to mimic Frank's image in the floor show sequence while ruminating on their respective sexual awakenings: "My mind has been expanded" sings Janet, for example.

Although Brad does not demonstrate a successful integration in the film despite his sexual encounter with Frank (even his portion of the floor show is awkward and helpless), Janet is another story. After her encounter with Frank, she appears to be suffering some remorse: "Oh Brad my darling, how could I have done this to you?" she cries as she returns to the laboratory. She finds the lab empty but observes Brad on one of the TV monitors having a postcoital cigarette as Frank reclines on his bed. This revelation causes Janet to weep even more until she hears whimpering and discovers

the wounded Rocky hiding in his tank. Janet begins to dress his wounds until Rocky touches her hand and the Narrator intervenes with the following voiceover: "Emotion: agitation or disturbance of mind; vehement or excited mental state. It is also a powerful and irrational master. And from what Magenta and Columbia eagerly viewed on their television monitor, there seemed little doubt that Janet was indeed its slave." What follows is Janet's first successful performance, "Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch Me." Having realized that Brad too has slipped, and on the strength of her sexual success with Frank, Janet is now free to choose Rocky as a sexual partner, which coincides with her solo performance of this song:

> Touch-a, touch-a, touch-a, touch me
> I wanna be dirty
> thrill me, chill me, fulfill me
> creature of the night.

Just as successful performances in the classic Hollywood musical are linked with romantic success, *Rocky Horror* uses the same trope in relation to sexual success.

To seal the myth of integration, the classic Hollywood musical usually ends with a public consummation of romance. Feuer's example is *Singin' in the Rain*'s final "shot of the lovers embracing in front of a billboard." This shot, asserts Feuer, "emphasizes the unity-giving function of the musical for both the couples and the audiences *in* the film and for the audience *of* the film" ("Self-Reflexive" 491). Other musicals that culminate with the public validation of romance include *An American in Paris* (1951), *Easter Parade* (1948), and *Summer Stock*, the latter in which Jane and Joe finally kiss in public before performing a reprise of the number "Howdy Neighbour" (performed by Jane alone at the beginning of the film), which celebrates the virtues of farming and rural life.

However, the myth of integration, similar to the myth of spontaneity, is not maintained in *Rocky Horror*. At the end of the film, Brad and Janet are cast out of the castle/spaceship, and as they crawl on the ground in their disheveled corsets, they sing the melancholy "Super Heroes" number:

> I've done a lot
> God knows I've tried
> To find the truth
> I've even lied
> But all I know
> Is down inside
> I'm bleeding.

The dark tone of the final song dispels the myth of integration. Rather than ending on a note of communal high spirits and heady romance in the manner of the classic musical, *Rocky Horror* shows us that Brad and Janet are no longer enveloped in Frank's paradise of sexual freedom, and as the lyrics of "Super Heroes" imply, they will now have to deal with the deeper ramifications of their experiences.

Feuer maintains that the myth of integration can also be symbolized through the merger of high and popular art ("Self-Reflexive" 491 and *Hollywood* 20); I argue that both *Summer Stock* and *Rocky Horror* demonstrate this. In the case of *Summer Stock*, the merger of high and popular art is symbolized by the penultimate number in *Fall in Love* (the show within the film). The number is "Get Happy," a song Garland went on to perform throughout her career. Unlike the rest of the fairly conventional musical numbers, "Get Happy" stands out for a number of reasons: First, it is essentially a gospel song about death ("Sing Hallelujah / c'mon get happy / get ready for the judgment day"), which sets it apart lyrically and musically from the rest of the show and its conventional romantic or comic numbers. In addition, this song is performed solo by Garland in a striking ensemble of fedora, tuxedo jacket, fishnet tights, and high heels, surrounded by anonymous male dancers in black suits against a stark red backdrop. Most of the other numbers in *Fall in Love* are ensemble ones with several cast members singing and dancing. Garland does little dancing here, but the men around her dance in a way that appears almost modern and sculptural as they form walls of movement with their bodies around Garland. The style of this number contrasts sharply with the otherwise conventional performances that punctuate the film, and "Get Happy" seems to be a number in which an effort is being made to do something different with the musical within the context of the conventional Hollywood musical—perhaps to merge the spheres of popular and high art through the daring costuming of the normally wholesome Garland in something reminiscent of Marlene Dietrich, through the minimalist set, and through the modernist influenced dancing. Feuer points out that "Get Happy" was in fact Garland's last appearance in an MGM musical. The song marked both the end of Garland's wholesome image and her contract with MGM. The stark visual imagery and sexualized costuming of Garland in the "Get Happy" number hint at the "new singing style with its histrionic excess and awkward gestures" (*Hollywood* 119) and the tragic image she would assume in her next film, *A Star is Born* (1954).

The myth of integration can also be extended to the way *Rocky Horror*, similar to many classic musicals, attempts to fuse high and low artistic influences in both its music and its mise-en-scène. Analogous to Dick Hebdige's theories of subcultural style, *Rocky Horror* can be said to engage in

"semiotic warfare" by incorporating into its camp aesthetic both images of classical Western art and its Oakley Court setting for numbers like "Time Warp." (The film was shot partly at Oakley Court, a former stately home that had long served as the set for the Hammer Horror films and is now a hotel.) Oakley's Court's history as a private home for the upper class, a set for popular films, and a middle-class hotel, reflects this intersection of high and low cultures. Frank's lab has replicas of Michelangelo's *David*, and Frank and Rocky's honeymoon suite contains a stained-glass depiction of Atlas holding the world. The image of the mythical Atlas is of course tied into the camp references to 1950s bodybuilder Charles Atlas when Frank sings "The Charles Atlas Song" to Rocky. Another Italian renaissance image appears in the floor show sequence: Michelangelo's fresco of God and Adam decorates the bottom of the pool. These are just a few examples of how *Rocky Horror* mixes its high and low cultural influences. In these various ways, *Rocky Horror* presents itself as a site that displays the myth of integration in terms of narrative, music, and visual imagery.

The final element that Feuer identifies as defining the self-reflexive musical is the myth of audience, which also relates to the idea of the successful performance: "successful performances will be those in which the performer is sensitive to the needs of the audience and which give the audience a sense of participation in the performance" ("Self-Reflexive" 493). This idea of the sensitive performer reacting to a responsive audience is also related to the idea of the star as articulated by John Ellis: "the star is at once ordinary and extraordinary, available for desire and unattainable" (614). This is certainly the case with the stars of *Summer Stock*, Judy Garland and Gene Kelly. *Summer Stock* plays off this contrast of ordinary and extraordinary by making Garland's character someone exceptionally ordinary—the owner of a rural farm—but with an extraordinary talent for singing and dancing that is discovered by accident. Kelly's character is made ordinary by his poverty—the fact that he has risked all his money and even sold his car to put on *Fall in Love*. Ellis remarks that "the star is present in the same social universe as the potential film viewer" (617), and this connection to the ordinary is evident in the theme of financial constraint that pervades *Summer Stock*, as well as the type of characters played by Kelly and Garland. The rest of the performers in *Fall in Love* are also ordinary. They are portrayed as amateurs, just "kids" as Joe calls them, with little experience of being in a large or successful show. Their inexperience is also the reason they are happy to put up with the unusual conditions: sleeping in the hayloft and doing farm chores in addition to rehearsing the show. At the same time, as with Ellis's star theory, the kids are elevated by the seamless perfection of their performances in the final sequences of the film. They too become simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary.

Although a classic Hollywood musical such as *Summer Stock* relies partly on the mythology of the extraordinary Hollywood star in contrast with the ordinary character to create that sense of connection with the audience, *Rocky Horror* also fulfills the myth of the audience despite the relative obscurity of most of its actors, few of which could be deemed stars at the time. Possibly, it is this combination of relatively unknown actors joyfully singing and dancing to catchy tunes about hedonism that is at the core of *Rocky Horror*'s appeal. The ordinary appearance of Brad and Janet contrasts sharply with their hedonistic experiences and desires, but we are also presented with a world in *Rocky Horror* in which "giving yourself over to absolute pleasure" is totally permissible.

Feuer's theory of the myth of the audience was originally formulated in relation to the musical's diegetic audience (i.e., the audiences we see witnessing performances within the musical's narrative), but I believe that in the case of *Rocky Horror*, it can also be applied to this film's extraordinary, participatory fan audience. Therefore, it is not only the diegetic and extradiegetic audiences' rapport with the film's performers that fulfills the myth of audience in *Rocky Horror* but also the direct address of this extradiegetic audience of cinema spectators through the Narrator and various characters' takes to the camera. The first instance in which the audience is really acknowledged by a character other than the Narrator occurs during "Sweet Transvestite," when Frank pauses midperformance for a drink of water, which he then tosses into the camera. This has since given birth to the audience response line "Hey Frank can I have some water?" or "Throw it!" The audience is also implicated in Janet's performance of "Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch Me" during the final refrain of the lyric "creature of the night." In this sequence, we hear Janet sing the lyric "creature of the night," which is then repeated by different characters. What is interesting about this sequence is that the shot is from Janet's perspective underneath Rocky as they make love, and she appears to be imagining other characters in Rocky's position: Brad, Frank, Magenta, Riff Raff, Columbia, and finally Rocky. Because this is one of the few shots in which where the audience shares the perspective of a particular character, we are invited to share in Janet's performance rather than remain merely spectators. These two specific instances in which the extradiegetic cinema audience is invited to respond to or share in a character's on-screen performance perfectly captures Ellis's theory of the star as both ordinary and extraordinary. The lesser-known actors of *Rocky Horror* are appealing to the audience because there is not a mythology of fame surrounding them, and yet by creating performances that are so "sensitive to the needs of the audience" that both the internal and external audiences want to respond *en masse* with actions and words, the film renders these performances extraordinary and fulfills

the traditional function of the star. Feuer also acknowledges this theory when she states that "star iconography can be a means of manipulating audience response" ("Self-Reflexive" 495).

Feuer stresses that the classic Hollywood film musical lacks the "fluidity and immediacy" of a theater show: "the out-of-town try-out, the interpolation of new material after each performance, the instantaneous modulation of performer-to-audience response—none of these common theatrical practices is possible for film" (493). What Feuer stresses here is that a musical theater show has a capacity for change with each performance, whereas a filmed performance is the same each time it is viewed. *Summer Stock*, similar to many backstage musicals, attempts to incorporate something of this immediacy of the musical by including scenes of rehearsal and choreography. In these scenes, the cinema audience is given the illusion of change, of seeing a musical number as it is being created, even though we realize that these scenes are entirely scripted and not spontaneous at all. *Summer Stock* shows us a montage of an exhausted Jane making entrances and struggling to learn new steps during the intense rehearsal period before *Fall in Love* opens, which gives the audience the illusion that it is seeing a work in progress.

Rocky Horror is quite possibly the only exception to the lack of immediacy characteristic of the Hollywood film musical, in that it is a film in which a live element (the audience and the shadow cast) is present, giving it the fluidity and change attributed to live theater. This may partly be because the story began life as musical theater. The unpredictable combination of the film, the shadow cast, and what must be the rowdiest cinema audience anywhere—in costume, sometimes drunk, and armed with everything from spare tires to raw meat—stands alone and changes every time. *Rocky Horror* thus is unique when it comes to the theory of the myth of audience, mainly because it is the extradiegetic audience that makes the experience of viewing the film so unusual. This is a film in which audience members feel such an overwhelming "sense of participation in the performance" that they physically participate in their own version of the performance. All films are different with an audience, but there is no *Rocky Horror* experience without a live cinema audience that participates.

Feuer comments that, "The backstage musical . . . manages to incorporate the immediate performer-audience relationship into films, thus gaining all the advantages of both media. Musical numbers can be shot from the point of view of a front-row theatrical spectator and then move into filmic space—combining the immediate contact of the theater with the mobility of perspective of the camera" ("Self-Reflexive" 493). Structurally, *Rocky Horror* shares the traits of a backstage musical such as *Summer Stock*. Examples of this technique can be found throughout films

similar to *Golddiggers* of 1933, in which each musical number begins with a shot of the proscenium arch stage, from the perspective of a theatergoer, before rapidly moving into film space, with close-ups, cut-away shots, and of course the Berkley top shot—Busby Berkley's overhead shot, which he invented to showcase his famous synchronous, geometric dance routines. Examples of this technique can be found in the final part of *Summer Stock*, when the show *Fall in Love* has its debut. The first shot of the opening number "All for You" takes in the stage from the perspective of a seated theatergoer and then moves around throughout the following numbers to give a privileged, filmic perspective on the performances. The film's final frame is also in keeping with the theater: a long shot of the entire cast of *Fall in Love* on stage singing "Howdy Neighbour."

In *Rocky Horror*, alongside unconventional techniques such as Frank's takes to the camera, with which the film seems to be actively acknowledging the extradiegetic cinema audience, there are also sequences that give the cinema spectator the best seat in the house for the musical performances in the style of the classic Hollywood musical. Throughout most of *Rocky Horror*, the spectator has this mobile, filmic perspective Feuer describes. The floor show sequence, with its overtly theatrical costumes, underwater swimming pool sequence reminiscent of a pornographic Esther Williams feature, and RKO Pictures logo backdrop, opens by showing us a proscenium arch stage and then moves, as Feuer describes, into filmic space.

Before this movement, the audience is treated to a backstage shot of Frank preparing the "medusaed" Columbia, Rocky, Brad, and Janet for their performance. Then there is a long shot taking in the entire proscenium arch stage and the four characters, followed by a close-up on Columbia as she begins to sing the first verse of "Rose Tint My World." Next is a low-angle shot that takes in the whole figure of Columbia but also the bottom edge of the stage, giving the perspective of a seated theatergoer. The entire floor show sequence alternates between techniques employed by the classic Hollywood musical to imply the perspective of a diegetic or traditional theatrical audience and filmic techniques—such as the rear shot of Brad performing—that also reveal the empty seats in the theater. The fact is, during this performance there is no diegetic audience. Just before Frank's entrance, there is a long shot, as if from the back of the theater, and then a second curtain rises and a spotlight picks out a perfectly made-up Frank in front of the RKO Pictures backdrop. As Frank moves downstage, a plank lowers as he sings:

> Give yourself over to absolute pleasure
> Swim in the warm waters of sins of the flesh
> Erotic nightmares beyond any measure

> And sensual daydreams to treasure forever
> Can't you just see it,

at which point he jumps into the mist. The mist parts to reveal Frank floating in an *S. S. Titanic* inner tube in the pool. Once the pool sequence begins, filmic perspective takes over, even moving underwater. A theatrical perspective resumes when Frank and the others emerge after their orgy-like interlude to sing, "we're wild and untamed things." As all six (Dr. Scott has also succumbed by this point, wheeling around in his chair and waving fishnet clad legs in the air) characters take the stage once more, the camera draws back to a long shot, revealing the lit archway of the stage and the empty seats until Riff Raff and Magenta burst in with "Frank-N-Furter it's all over."

One intriguing thing about the floor show sequence and the myth of audience is that, unlike most of the other musical numbers in *Rocky Horror*, there is no diegetic audience. "Dammit Janet" has the church staff to observe, and "The Time Warp," "Sweet Transvestite," "Sword of Damocles," "Whatever Happened to Saturday Night," and "The Charles Atlas Song" all have an audience of the "unconventional conventioners." "Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch Me" has Magenta and Columbia watching via a television monitor, and "Eddie's Teddy" is performed at the dinner table. Unlike these songs, the floor show song "Rose Tint My World" has no audience apart from the extradiegetic spectators in a cinema or a living room, and it is this song sequence that adheres most closely to Feuer's theory of the structure of the classic Hollywood musical, beginning with a shot of Frank, Janet, Brad, and Rocky on a proscenium arch stage and then moving gradually into filmic space when the characters enter the pool, while alternating between theatrical and filmic perspectives throughout. When Frank sings "I'm Going Home," he has to imagine an adoring diegetic audience of ghostly figures from a bygone era applauding and cheering him. Magenta shatters Frank's myth of his own audience when she comments acidly "how sentimental." The myth of audience in *Rocky Horror* is displayed through the camera techniques it shares with the classic Hollywood musical and its use of a diegetic audience. The experience of the cinema audience that accompanies screenings of *Rocky Horror*, and the audience rapport established by the stars' successful performances, constitute a unique extension of Feuer's theory of the myth of the audience.

With the myth of spontaneity, we are treated not only to the spontaneous musical performances of characters such as Frank-N-Furter, Eddie, and Columbia but also to spontaneous hedonism as well. The myth of integration is represented by Brad and Janet's absorption into Frank's world, but the film then acknowledges that this fantasy cannot be sustained and ejects

them back into reality. The myth of audience is expressed through camera shots that imply the perspective of a theatrical audience, through the presence of diegetic audiences like the conventioners, and through the cinema audience that participates in the *Rocky Horror* experience. As I claimed at the beginning of this chapter, *Rocky Horror* fulfills the qualities that Feuer attributes to the classic Hollywood musical and takes them farther—into the realm of the subversive. When we look at a classic musical such as *Summer Stock*, its rare moments of unconventionality stand out against its otherwise conventional story, just as the "Get Happy" number stands apart from the rest of *Fall in Love*.

In her conclusion to "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," Feuer states, "self-reflexive musicals are conservative texts in every sense" (497). *Summer Stock* is no exception to this rule: Both Jane and Abigail are paired off at the end, the show is a success, and the two disparate communities resolve their differences. However, it is difficult to make the same assertion for *Rocky Horror*, and I would in fact argue that *Rocky Horror* is one of the first musicals to conform to the overall style of the genre while striving to tell a less conventional story. In *The Hollywood Musical*, Feuer mentions Bob Fosse's 1980 musical *All that Jazz* as one of the only examples of a musical that ends in tragedy. Fosse's 1972 version of *Cabaret* also has a less than upbeat ending, and *Rocky Horror*, released in 1975, slots comfortably in between these two examples. *Cabaret* is unusual as a musical in that it draws its inspiration from a dark historical period—decadent Weimar Berlin just before the Nazis came to power—which gives its performances a certain doomed, voluptuous quality. *Rocky Horror*, although largely camp, dips into both the realms of horror with Eddie's murder and the price of excess with its penultimate song, "Super Heroes." *All that Jazz* presents us with largely ironic, frequently surreal performances dwelling on the nature of paternity, drug addiction, and death. These three films, made over a period of eight years, can be seen to form a trend that shows an attempt to continue to make the film musical culturally relevant by attempting to explore the darker, more adult themes that characterized American cinema in the 1970s more generally.

Curiously, Feuer does not include *Rocky Horror* in the revised second edition of her book *The Hollywood Musical*, which appeared in 1993. The absence of *Rocky Horror* in Feuer's otherwise highly comprehensive analysis seems odd, particularly when discussing films such as *Hairspray* (1988), which share a similarly irreverent approach to song topics and mise-en-scène, and is reflective of the generally critical dismissal of *Rocky Horror* by academics and theoreticians. *Rocky Horror* demonstrates many of the classic traits of a Hollywood musical. However, alongside the later musicals of Bob Fosse, it also represents an important attempt to revitalize the

musical as a contemporary film genre by tackling nontraditional subjects and allowing the possibility of a downbeat ending, paving the way for both the darkly experimental *Dancer in the Dark* and the spectacular pastiche of *Moulin Rouge!* (2001).

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Part II

Rocky Horror and Cinema Spectatorship

4

Heavy, Black, and Pendulous

Unsuturing *Rocky Horror*

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock

> The bulk of *Rocky Horror* participation is verbal. There is an almost constant dialogue between the audience and the film, similar to that between priest and congregation.
>
> —*Mark Siegel, The Rocky Horror Picture Show: More Than a Lip Service*

AUDIENCE: Is it true you masturbate?
NARRATOR: It's true, there were dark storm clouds . . .
AUDIENCE: Describe your balls!
NARRATOR: . . . heavy—black and pendulous, toward which they were driving.
AUDIENCE: Is it also true you're constipated?
NARRATOR: It's true also, that the spare tire they were carrying was badly in need of some air.

Discussions of cult films in general, and of *Rocky Horror* in particular, frequently emphasize, as Mark Siegel does in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, the religious character of audience response. Along these lines, Richard Day asserts that cult movies are events similar to religious rites (215), Hoberman and Rosenbaum compare midnight movies to midnight mass (16), and Kinkade and Katovich claim that cult films "represent one of the many secular replacements for religious symbols in the postmodern age of electronic imagery" (191). Speaking of *Rocky*

Horror in particular, Bruce McDonald describes the film as a "different church" (219), Rosenbaum refers to audience response as "a mutant form of organized religion" (qtd. in Siegel 306), and Jonathan Adams, the originator of the characters of the Narrator and Dr. Scott in the theatrical version and the actor who plays Scott in the movie, commented in a 1998 interview concerning *Rocky Horror* aficionado Sal Piro, and *Rocky Horror* "cultists" in general, that they are "Obsessed a bit. It's like a holy church, and the script is the holy text" (Michaels and Evans 164).

Although there most certainly is a ritualistic quality to *Rocky Horror* spectator practices—and I do agree with Day, Grant, Kawin, Minor, and others who assert that cult movie viewership practices construct communities of admirers that connect people in intimate ways and provide "renewable source[s] of delight" (Minor 16)—this comparison between audience response to *Rocky Horror*, in which the audience talks back to the film, and religious rites seems problematic in at least three respects. First, although the bulk of the discussion of the *Rocky Horror* cult has focused, as Siegel previously does, on the audience's verbal responses to cinematic text, this emphasis overlooks the audience's use of props, the important role of the shadow cast during which live actors mime the onscreen action, and the dancing that the audience does during "Time Warp." With these features in mind, the claim that "the bulk of *Rocky Horror* participation is verbal" is questionable at best. Second, as opposed to Siegel's contention, no "dialogue" is in fact created between audience and film. "Dialogue" implies an interchange or discussion of ideas—that is, a conversation between (at least) two participants who respond to one another. *Rocky Horror* fans are not having a conversation with the film because the film does not respond to or specifically address audience comments—indeed, as I discuss later, what audience comments shouted at the screen reveal is precisely the failure of dialogue and the inability of the film to change or respond. Rather, what *Rocky Horror* fans do is to construct out of what I will refer to as the film's primary script a secondary script, which is then overlaid on the primary script for the benefit of other audience members. Third, as my juxtaposition of epigraphs here is intended to illustrate, the secondary script that *Rocky Horror* fans construct for one another is one that primarily *debases* the primary script. The vast majority of the witticisms hurled at the screen are humorous quips poking fun at the characters and their actions and highlighting production gaffs.[1] The comments produced by audience members hardly are the sorts of things one would say to a priest or about a holy text—at least not out loud. Paradoxically, although *Rocky Horror* fans may venerate the *Rocky Horror* script, the script itself is hardly sacrosanct. Indeed, it is travestied at every turn.

Rather than solely demonstrating reverence, I argue here that what *Rocky Horror* audience response, through both its love and its iconoclasm, makes evident is the attempt to realize two unspoken desires inherent in cinematic spectatorship in general—the desire, as Robin Wood puts it, to "be" the film—to be a part of the film, to enter into the filmic world—and the desire to control the film—to seize control of discourse and to speak, rather than to be spoken. The two forms of audience response—to which I will refer as empathetic and ironic—exhibited by the *Rocky Horror* audience demonstrate the simultaneous and contradictory pull of both of these desires during the viewing experience of the conventional plot-driven Hollywood film, as well as the impossibility of their realization. No matter how perfectly one mimics the screen action or attempts to reproduce in the theater the environment represented in the film, one will never be part of the film. Finally, despite the most inflammatory rhetoric, the film will never yield or change. What *Rocky Horror* audiences perform then, week after week, is precisely the failure not only of their desires but also of cinematic desire in general.

Empathetic Behavior

Audience responses to *Rocky Horror* during the film can be categorized in terms of their temporal relationship to the onscreen action and then divided into three categories that I refer to as predictive, reactive, and simultaneous. Predicative actions are audience actions—in the case of *Rocky Horror*, almost entirely verbal—that reveal foreknowledge of what is to come. My second epigraph provided earlier is one example of predictive action because the audience, having memorized part or all of the *Rocky Horror* script, can insert its own lines between the lines of onscreen dialogue in such a way that the intended meaning of subsequent lines of the filmic script is altered or subverted. For this secondary script produced by the audience to be coherent and produce humor, lines generated by the audience must appear to be answered by the film. The origination of such lines thus demands an awareness of what is to come and fosters the illusion of control.[2] Another example of a predictive action occurs during the song "Sweet Transvestite," when, following Frank-N-Furter's statement that he'll remove "the cause," the audience shouts "What about the symptom?" Frank then concludes the song by shouting "but not the symptom!" seemingly answering the audience's query.

Reactive responses are comments that respond to and evaluate onscreen action. Similar to predictive actions, reactive responses are verbal interjections generated by cues in the primary text. However, their humor is derived from their relationship to a preceding line or action in the primary text,

rather than an ensuing one. For example, when interrupted while fellating Brad by a summons from Riff Raff, Frank-N-Furter responds, "Coming!" to which the audience adds, "So is Brad!" Another example of a reactive response occurs when Magenta greets Brad and Janet by sliding down the banister while shouting, "You're lucky, he's lucky, I'm lucky." The audience (refined as always) here adds, "The banister's lucky!"

Predictive and reactive responses "twist" the meaning of the on-screen dialogue, thereby introducing ironic distance that interrupts identification and has the effect, as I develop later, of "unsuturing" the film. However, a third class of actions performed by the audience can be identified that works in the opposite way. Simultaneous events are comments, movements, or actions that the audience performs in conjunction with the film. Simultaneous actions include the use of props, the *Rocky Horror* shadow cast, and the dancing and singing along with the movie that occurs at certain moments. Such actions can be referred to as empathetic. Rather than manifesting a desire to control the film, simultaneous empathetic actions demonstrate the opposing pull—the desire to "be" the film, to dissolve the boundaries between the cinematic world portrayed and the real world inhabited by the viewers and "submit" to the film.

Wood most clearly correlates audience response with what I call simultaneous empathetic acts, and significantly, as opposed to Siegel, he foregrounds the audience's nonverbal actions. He writes,

> The characteristics of the [*Rocky Horror*] audience's performance are generally well known. They typically throw rice at the wedding scene and toast at the banquet. They fire water pistols during the storm scene and ignite lights in the darkness. They dance the "Time Warp" . . . and they touch the screen during Janet's solo, "Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me." In short, even beyond specific performances, the audience asserts its physical presence and surrenders its anonymity, as if in obedience to the refrain in Frank-N-Furter's lyric, "Don't dream it. Be it." . . . To be "it," apparently is to be the film—or at least to be one with the film. (160)

I agree with Wood that it is through these simultaneous empathetic acts that the audience most clearly expresses its desire to be a part of the film, to enter into the filmic text to the fullest extent possible, yet it must be acknowledged that the use of props, although clearly exhilarating for audience members, inevitably can only foreground the audience's failure to achieve its desire by interrupting the viewer's absorption into the text. When one is struck by rice or returns to a wet seat, or perhaps most strikingly, when a role of toilet paper hits the screen, causing the projected image to ripple, imaginary identification with the filmic text is disrupted

by reminding the viewer of the material conditions of spectatorship. The outward gesture of identification boomerangs around and returns to knock the viewer out of a state of absorption.[3]

The desire to be the film—as well as the inevitable failure of its realization—is perhaps most clearly evident during the *Rocky Horror* floor show. During the floor show, costumed actors (the shadow cast) against the backdrop of the movie screen alternate between performing simultaneous actions—doubling the actions that are taking place on the screen—and performing reactive gestures, such as groping Janet's breast during her "Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch Me" song. For the *Rocky Horror* "virgin," the moments during the floor show when the cast synchronizes its motions with those on screen—when the floor show actors "become" the movie—may be the most surreal or uncanny elements of the experience. Importantly, for audience members, the floor show is something to watch: an alternative, competing visual text, not something in which one participates, but perhaps something toward which audience members aspire.[4] In addition, the uncanny duplication of the screen action, although clearly an act of simultaneous empathetic identification for cast members, functions ultimately to alienate spectators from the experience of the movie itself. The ability of actors to synchronize their movements to the screen reveals the fixed, mechanical nature of the filmic substrate. The movements can only be mimed so precisely because the movie never changes, because what film theorist Jean-Pierre Oudart has called "the absent-one" has structured the text in advance. Rather than the illusion of a story in process being revealed as it occurs, the floor show reveals the plot to be one always already told, barring the subject forever from "being" or entering into the film.

What the audience's simultaneous empathetic actions materialize is the usually inchoate and unarticulated desire on the part of the audience of the classic plot-driven film to be absorbed into the film, to be a part of the experience to such an extent that boundaries between the narrative world and the real-life world of the audience dissolve. However, dance movements and the use of props "rematerialize" the viewing experience, ground the viewer in the bodily experience of spectatorship, and thereby disrupt psychic identification. In addition, the uncanny spectacle of the floor show further alienates the viewer by not only distracting the viewer from the filmic text but also revealing that text to be closed and unalterable.

Ironic Behavior

Previous analyses of *Rocky Horror* have suffered as a result of the failure to distinguish among different forms of audience response at the film. For

the most part, critical attention to *Rocky Horror* has conflated all forms for audience response with mechanisms of identification that I have referred to as empathetic actions. For Kinkade and Katovich, for example, a primary characteristic of the cult film in general (of which for them *Rocky Horror* is the preeminent example) is that it allows for "narcissistic and empathic identification with subversive characters" (194). Telotte speaks of the audience investment in the cult film as a form of "love" that embraces a "comfortable difference" (5). As noted earlier, Wood associates the *Rocky Horror* audience's "performance" almost entirely with the desire to be the film, to dissolve boundaries between the world of the film and the world of the theater. This conflation, as I have suggested, leads to problematic assertions that *Rocky Horror* audiences treat the film reverentially or consider the script inviolate or sacred. However, what must be taken into consideration is the fact that the majority of the behavior exhibited by fans during *Rocky Horror* is not empathetic, but ironic; that is, rather than an effort to enter into the film or to be the film, the majority of interjections by audience members interrupt the narrative in ways that prevent absorption or identification. Signifiers are wrenched out of their embedded contexts and forced to signify differently—to say something (usually something crude) apart from their intended meanings. Furthermore, the comments are not neutral in tone but persistently debase the film and its characters. Although, to borrow from Telotte, this may be love, it is a sadistic form of love that continually insults and degrades the object of its affection. What I argue later is that ironic predictive and reactive interjections shouted by audience members demonstrate a desire running contrary to the empathetic desire to be the film—that is, they manifest the desire to control the film, to master it. In the process, they "unsuture" the film by preventing psychic identification and foregrounding the gaps in cinematic discourse. However, as with the desire to be the film, the desire to control the film also is inherently impossible, and the realization of this impossibility underlies both the audience's sadistic denigration of the film and the "repetition compulsion" manifested by *Rocky Horror* fans through obsessive viewing. Impotence to effect change or to establish a true dialogue with the film instantiates itself in insults and slurs and generates repetitive viewing in an attempt to master the experience. What I wish to emphasize here is that, as with the desire to be the film, this desire to control the film is not by any means something unique to *Rocky Horror* viewers. Rather, what *Rocky Horror* spectators exhibit in hyperbolic form is a general desire inherent in the cinematic experience (and in discourse in general): the desire to control discourse, to speak rather than to be spoken. To develop this idea, a brief summation of the notion of "suture" developed by film theorists adopting a psychoanalytic approach to viewership is necessary.

The influential model of cinematic spectatorship derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis emphasizes the way in which subjectivity is conferred on viewers—the manner in which viewers are "spoken" by classical cinema—through a process called suture. This process is exemplified for theorists such as Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan by the shot/reverse shot sequence. The shot/reverse shot dyad is a pairing of shots in which the second shot shows the field from which the first shot is presumed to have been taken.[5] As a result of this, "the gaze which directs our look seems to belong to a fictional character rather than to the camera" (Silverman 202). This sequence of shots in which the role of the camera in structuring what the viewer sees is obscured has been discussed in terms of both its affective and ideological ramifications. On the level of affect, according to Kaja Silverman, the viewer of the first shot initially experiences it as "an imaginary plenitude, unbounded by any gaze, and unmarked by difference" (203). The first shot is experienced as a "site of *jouissance* akin to that of the [Lacanian] mirror stage prior to the child's discovery of its separation from the ideal image which it has discovered in the reflecting glass" (Silverman 203). However, this pleasure is almost immediately interrupted when the viewing subject perceives its limitations and "discovers that he is only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the glance of another spectator, who is ghostly or absent" (Dayan 188). This absent controlling force, what Dayan, following Oudard, refers to as "the absent-one," and which Silverman calls "the speaking subject," "has everything which the viewing subject, suddenly cognizant of the limitations on its vision, understands itself to be lacking" (Silverman 204). This sense of lack, in turn, elicits a desire to see more.

The second shot of the shot/reverse shot dyad responds to this desire for more. By presenting a character who is assumed to be the owner of the glance corresponding to the first shot, the second shot, according to Dayan, closes or "sutures" over the "hole opened in the spectator's imaginary relationship with the filmic field by his perception of the absent-one" (189). A gaze within the film is presented that serves to conceal the controlling gaze outside the fiction (Silverman 204), a process of specular identification is elicited in which the viewing subject allows a fictional character to define what it sees, and "by means of suture, the film-discourse presents itself as a product without a producer, a discourse without an origin" (Dayan 191). What is concealed by this process of suture is the control an unrepresented outside force—the camera, the director, all the forces producing the film—has over the viewer's experience. The viewer therefore is being manipulated psychologically during the experience of the film in ways of which he or she remains unaware on a conscious level.

The ideological implications of suture revolve around the concealment of the forces that control and produce the filmic discourse. According to Silverman, what suture does is to encourage viewers to establish a relationship not with the apparatuses that produce the film but with their fictional representation (216). Drawing on Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, Silverman explains that "The system of suture functions not only constantly to re-interpellate the viewing subject into the same discursive positions, thereby giving that subject the illusion of a stable and continuous identity, but to re-articulate the existing symbolic order in ideologically orthodox ways" (221).[6] Suture ultimately

> can be understood as the process whereby the inadequacy of the subject's position is exposed in order to facilitate (i.e. create the desire for) new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack. Since the promised compensation involves an ever greater subordination to already existing scenarios, the viewing subject's position is an extremely passive one, a fact which is carefully concealed through cinematic slight-of-hand. This sleight-of-hand involves attributing to a character within the fiction qualities which in fact belong to the machinery of enunciation: the ability to generate narrative, the omnipotent and coercive gaze, the castrating authority of the law. (231–32)

In effect, the viewing subject is "spoken" or constructed by the syntax or "code" of the film, but this code, which in Dayan's assessment "*produces* an imaginary, ideological effect," is hidden by the narrative. "Unable to see the workings of the code, the spectator is at its mercy. His imaginary is sealed into the film; the spectator thus absorbs the ideological effect without being aware of it" (188).

One last aspect of suture that it is necessary to highlight before turning back to *Rocky Horror* is the retroactive temporality of the constitution of meaning in film (or in any form of narrative communication). As with spoken language, the process of perceiving meaning in film is both retroactive and anticipatory, as each new shot modifies the meaning of the previous one and is dependent for its own meaning on the next. The result of this, according to Dayan, is that the "spectator is torn to pieces." He continues, "On the one hand, a retroactive process organizes the *signified*. On the other hand, an anticipatory process organizes the *signifier*. Falling under control of the cinematographic system, the spectator loses access to the present. When the absent-one points toward it, the signification belongs to the future. When the suture realizes it, the signification belongs to the past" (190).

The essential points of this discussion of suture for purposes of analyzing *Rocky Horror* fan response are the ideological interpellation and "speaking" of the viewer enacted by suture and the retroactive constitution of meaning inherent in cinematic syntax. What *Rocky Horror* fans do through predictive and reactive actions that establish ironic distance is to resist the "hail" of the film, so to speak—that is, to interrupt the process of suture and refuse to be spoken or interpellated by the film. *Rocky Horror* fans refuse to sit quietly and let themselves be manipulated by the obscured yet controlling mechanisms of the film's production. Rather, they attempt to control discourse through an act of verbal piracy that hijacks the film's intended meaning. To express this using the Lacanian, what *Rocky Horror* spectator behavior manifests is the desire to possess the "phallus."[7] It is through predictive actions that *Rocky Horror* fans demonstrate most clearly the desire to take control of the film, to wrench its significations out of their intended grooves and to redeploy them in new ways that they direct. Predictive verbal comments interrupt the retroactive constitution of meaning within the film by forcing actions and spoken lines within the film to signify in a dual capacity. The film is seemingly compelled to respond to the audience, whose omniscience allows it to "corner" the film and subvert the intended meaning by overlaying a secondary script that alters the meaning of the cinematic dialogue. The attempt to take control of the cinematic experience manifests itself even before the film begins, when excited audience members chant "Lips, Lips, Lips," and then, obedient to their wishes, the film begins and Patricia Quinn's now-famous brightly painted lips fill the screen.

The way in which the audience's secondary script subverts intended meaning is clearly evident in the following example of predictive audience participation, which occurs early in the film, when Brad and Janet first arrive at Frank-N-Furter's castle:

Brad: Hi! My name is Brad Majors, and this is my fiancée, Janet Weiss. I wonder if you could help us. You see, our car broke down a few miles up the road. Do you have a phone we might use?
Audience: Look between Janet's legs!
Riff Raff: You're wet.
Audience: Hey Janet, are you a slut?
Janet: Yes . . .
Audience: What's the weather?
Janet: . . . it's raining.
Audience: No shit! Are you an asshole, Brad?
Brad: Yes.

AUDIENCE: Are you on drugs, Riff?
RIFF RAFF: Yes. I think perhaps you better both . . .
AUDIENCE: Get lost?
RIFF RAFF: . . . come inside.

The insertion of audience commentary into the literal gaps of the cinematic dialogue here effectively "unsutures" the scene by preventing imaginary identification and bifurcating the meaning of each line such that, although each character is clearly responding to the preceding comment within the cinematic dialogue, he or she is also "forced" to answer the audience's question at the same time. The attempt to redirect meaning and to assume control of discourse reveals the desire to "master" the film, to speak rather than to be spoken. Predictive ironic actions demonstrate a desire inherent in cinematic viewing—the desire to control discourse, to master "the absent-one." However, this desire, similar to the desire to be the film, is destined to be thwarted, and its impossibility leads to the fetishization of interruption, repetitive viewing, and the sadistic debasement of the film through both predictive and reactive verbal interjections.

The sense of control felt by *Rocky Horror* audience members who effectively deploy predictive interjections is inevitably undermined by the inescapable awareness of their failure to direct the on-screen action or to prompt a response. No authentic dialogue is established with the screen, the film's characters remain forever oblivious to the presence of the audience, and spectators cannot force the film to deviate from its primary script. Indeed, for all their originality and occasional cleverness, audience exclamations remain bound to and directed by the primary script of the film. The apparent control manifested by predictive interjections is, at last, only illusory, and the senses of fullness and power felt by the spectator who presumes to redirect the significations of the film's dialogue ultimately is belied by an underlying sense of impotence.

One strategy by which *Rocky Horror* aficionados attempt to maintain the illusion of mastery and to ward off the distressing realization of disempowerment is the fetishization of interruption itself. What *Rocky Horror* fans do, again and again, is to interrupt the film in ways that reinforce their sense of mastery of the plot and dialogue. *Rocky* fans revel in their ability to predict what the characters will say and do and to subvert intended meaning through predictive interjections. Ironically, each "cut" enacted by the audience bolsters its own sense of plenitude: Each time the audience successfully redirects cinematic signification—turns the film back on itself—what is produced is humor and a sort of free-floating euphoria. The film appears powerless to resist the audience—it is subject to the audience's commands, and not the other way round.

The desire to maintain the illusion of mastery over the film—over discourse—is also manifested in the "repetition compulsion" many *Rocky Horror* fans demonstrate by viewing the film obsessively.[8] This is not to discount the powerful motivating factor that participation in a communal event provides. As commentators on *Rocky Horror* and cult films more generally have argued, what cult films construct are communities of viewers that reap psychic benefits from the shared experience of group identification—indeed, Mary Eden Minor's entire doctoral dissertation on *Rocky Horror* is premised on the idea that what *Rocky Horror* affords for those who regularly participate in its "cult" is a comforting sense of community and belongingness.[9] However, what I am suggesting here is that part of what is so rewarding about participating in the *Rocky Horror* event is the euphoria attendant on the empowering (but illusory) sense that one is in control of the film—that one speaks, rather than is spoken. Repetitive viewing develops out of and helps to repress the anxiety that one is not in control; each time the spectator views the film, he or she can imagine that he or she is one step closer to the impossible goal of "getting it perfect"—of directing the film, rather than being directed by it, of bending discourse to his or her will. *Rocky Horror* fans go again and again not just to experience the comfort of community but also to attempt to realize the impossible *jouissance* of plenitude.

However, as with the desire to be the film, the desire to master the film ultimately is unrealizable. Underlying the illusion of control is the awareness that, however provocative or prescient the audience interjection, the film will not yield or change. Its responses are mechanical and prescripted, and all attempts by audience members to "break into" the film and alter it fundamentally are in vain. It is a closed text, finished and sealed. Not only can it not be controlled, but it "refuses" to recognize the audience, and it is this knowledge that the audience's sense of empowerment is purely illusory that fosters aggression and turns love to hatred. Lurking beneath the fetishization of interruption and the spectatorial repetition compulsion is the repressed awareness of lack.

As I previously note, the vast majority of audience interjections—especially reactive ones—during *Rocky Horror* are comments that poke fun at or belittle the characters and debase the film. Every time Brad's name is mentioned, the audience shouts "Asshole!" Every time Janet's name is mentioned, the audience shouts "Slut!" The Narrator, Riff Raff, Magenta, Columbia, and even Dr. Frank-N-Further himself all are subject to the audience's playful yet disparaging remarks, as are the song lyrics and the scenery. Consider the audience's interjections into the following exchange between Brad and Janet just before their arrival at Dr. Frank-N-Furter's castle:

AUDIENCE: What's white and sells hamburgers?
BRAD: Didn't we pass a castle back down the road a few miles? Maybe they have a telephone we could use.
AUDIENCE: Castles don't have phones, asshole!
JANET: I'm going with you.
BRAD: Oh, no, darling, there's no sense in both of us getting wet.
AUDIENCE: Janet's already wet!
JANET: I'm coming with you.
AUDIENCE: That would be a first!
JANET: Besides, darling, the owner of the phone might be a beautiful woman . . .
AUDIENCE: He is!
JANET: . . . and you might never come back again.
AUDIENCE: You should be so lucky!

The audience here, through its interruptions of the dialogue, foregrounds the couple's naïveté and mocks their sexual innocence. At the same time, the comments foreshadow Brad and Janet's encounter with the cross-dressing Frank-N-Furter and their subsequent sexual awakenings, thereby revealing the audience's awareness of the plot's development and its resignation to the inevitability of this progression. Foreknowledge turns to frustration, as the audience knows what will happen but is powerless to prevent it. The audience taunts the movie, attempting to goad it into a response. However, the limited empowerment developed through predictive interruptions transforms into aggressivity as this empowerment is revealed to be illusory, and this frustration is expressed through insults and debasing invective hurled at the screen. In its reactive commentary, the audience finally assumes the only authentic position it can occupy: that of critic. Despite its pretensions of grandeur, as it cannot fundamentally alter the on-screen action, it must resign itself to assessing what has transpired after the fact. The sadistic denigration of the film and its characters reflects the audience's failure both to be the film and to master the film. Its inability to realize either desire manifests itself in irreverent commentary that belies the audience's affective attachment to the film by fostering the impression that the movie is worth nothing.

To return to the beginning of this chapter, rather than a reverential experience of worship, what the *Rocky Horror* fan response demonstrates is a desire to displace God and to assume his position. However, despite a refusal on the part of *Rocky* fans to worship as anticipated or directed, what fans discover is that God—the Absent-One—cannot be unseated or even challenged. The audience joins together to abuse the priest but only succeeds in revealing its frustration over the fact that God does not hear or care.

My argument here has been that *Rocky Horror* audience behavior, rather than being anomalous, in fact embodies in hyperbolic form two fundamental desires inherent in the cinematic experience of conventional narrative film: the desire to be the film and the desire to control the film. The impossibility of realizing either of these desires ultimately manifests itself in interruption, debasement, and repetitive viewing of the film. The question remains, however, that if, as I claim, these are general desires inherent in cinematic spectatorship, what is it then about *Rocky Horror* in particular that elicits such vigorous viewer response? Although I don't have space to address this question fully here, I would like to suggest briefly that *Rocky Horror* fan behavior is a combination of the film's own comedic irreverence combined with historical contingency—that is, although I believe the film's own subversive iconoclasm, it's "nothing's sacred" attitude predisposes the audience to disregard conventional viewing practices, I suspect that, at bottom, entrenched forms of spectator behavior at *Rocky Horror* are primarily the product of chance. This is to say, although intrinsic qualities of the film do open up unusual spaces for audience engagement, many other films do as well and, given the proper conditions, could have catalyzed similar audience response.

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Notes

1. For example, one of the most inescapable forms of verbal audience participation throughout the film is the shouting of "asshole!" each time the character Brad's name is spoken and "slut!" each time the character Janet's name is mentioned.
2. Importantly, what I call predictive behavior differs from what I call anticipatory behavior. Predictive behavior derives from confident knowledge of what will come next based on familiarity with the filmic text. Anticipatory behavior expects something to happen on the basis of various cinematic cues but remains defined by uncertainty. An example of the latter would be the horror movie viewer who anticipates an attack and covers his eyes on the basis of familiarity with the genre and cues generated by the movie, such as soundtrack changes and camera shots from the monster/killer's perspective, and so on.
3. There is a striking parallel here with Timothy Corrigan's assertion that what characterizes cult films in general is "the debris and excess that defines characters and environments" (28). What the audience is left with at the end of any showing of *Rocky Horror* is literal debris in the form of a theater strewn with rice, newspapers, hotdogs, and so on. The audience here produces and leaves behind its own debris, which not only explains why many theaters are reluctant to show *Rocky Horror* but foregrounds the material conditions of spectatorship.
4. Unlike what I have referred to as the primary and secondary *Rocky Horror* scripts, it is difficult with the floor show shadow cast to establish a primary and secondary text. When the two are synched, one goes back and forth between them, and it is difficult to say which is primary and which is secondary. During moments when the floor show innovates—for example, when I saw

floor show cast members pile on top of one another to "fuck" the Narrator's chin cleft—the floor show clearly becomes the main attraction.

5. As summarized by Kaja Silverman, the first shot shows a space that may or may not contain a human figure. The second shot "locates a spectator in the other 180° of the same circular field, thereby implying that the preceding shot was seen through the eyes of a figure in the cinematic narrative" (202).
6. Interpellation, according to Silverman, "designates the conjunction of imaginary and symbolic transactions which results in the subject's insertion into an already existing discourse" (219).
7. Distinct from a physical organ, Lacan's notion of the phallus signifies "all of those values which are opposed to lack" (Silverman 182–83). According to Jonathan Scott Lee, "The phallus then serves to signify . . . that fullness of being, that complete identity, the lack of which is the fact of our ineluctable want-of-being" (67). For Lacan, to have the phallus is impossible. Human beings are born into culture and language that precedes and situates them—they are spoken. To have the phallus would mean to control discourse rather than to be controlled by it.
8. At the top of the list here is *Rocky Horror* "superfan" Sal Piro, who, in 1995, claimed to have seen the film over 1,500 times (Adler in Piro, "Foreword").
9. In addition to Minor, for attention to the cult film's development of community, see Day, Grant ("Science Fiction"), Hoberman and Rosenbaum, Kawin, Kinkade and Katovich, McDonald, Siegel, Telotte, and Wood. It should also be pointed out here that another way in which spectators attempt to assert their authority and to "control discourse" is through the development of what Robert Samuels terms a "rigid social order that disciplines anyone who does not replicate the group actions in the proper manner." Although I do not have space to pursue this idea in this chapter, what is suggested by this is that although the group actions enact an ironic distancing from the film, *Rocky Horror* fans hail and interpellate others into their own nonironic apparatus.

5

Mocking the Mirror

Film Spectatorship as Hypperreal Simulation

Heather C. Levy and Matthew A. Levy

Movie houses blacken out the light and quiet audiences to direct and intensify the individual's experience of the film. Psychoanalytic approaches to film theory tend to reinforce this taming of the audience by describing the audience primarily as individual spectators and ignoring their social performance—performance that is more blatant at cult films but is also important in traditional film venues. The spectators at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* challenge the norm by misbehaving: They actively participate with the film in a physical way, transforming the show by adding elements of improvisatory live theater. Incorporating their bodies and voices into the viewing experience, the spectators defy the boundaries and limitations placed on them by a darkened theater designed for viewing pleasure only.[1]

The dominant psychoanalytic model of film fails to account for the excesses of these audiences because it begins with the concept of a developing individual psychological subject rather than with the concept of a complex social situation. As we explain, *Rocky Horror* performances and rituals cannot be explained as "mirror-stage identification," a central concept of Lacanian film theory. Nor do *Rocky Horror* fans move (in Freudian fashion) from voyeurism (sexual enjoyment of seeing) to exhibitionism (sexual enjoyment of being seen) because of some kind of rule

of cognitive development of the perversion of individuals. When *Rocky Horror* audiences refuse to obey the etiquette of passivity before the screen, they reveal the false opposition that structures much spectator theory. Against this opposition between the active screen object and the passive spectator subject, the *Rocky Horror* audience "asserts its physical presence and surrenders its anonymity, as if in obedience to the refrain in Frank-N-Furter's lyric, 'Don't dream it. Be it'" (Wood 160). *Rocky Horror* players perform seeing and being-seen as one and the same social gesture: They are (at) a party. So, although the question "How do individuals come into being?" is an interesting and fruitful one, in the context of film theory it has been counterproductive, making it more difficult to see the many different forms spectatorship can take and how spectators perform in context.

There Are Some People Who Say that Life Is an Illusion[2]

If this extraterrestrial sex farce were ever amenable to traditional psychoanalytic interpretations of spectatorship, the addition of a floor show with constantly evolving audience scripts would render those models obsolete. Although some attending *Rocky Horror* choose to sit and try to enjoy the film in the traditional way (sitting at the back of the theater, not participating), if a floor show is going, the emphasis remains on displays of voyeurism (pleasure in seeing) and exhibitionism (pleasure in being seen). Because, as in theater, living actors perform a floor show, the audience itself is gazed on by the performers. The gazes of the spectators turn from the screen to the spectator-subject-turned-object. Most *Rocky Horror* spectators enter the theater expecting to be looked at and listened to and often hoping to be incorporated into the floor show. They bring the appropriate props for certain scenes to function at once as extended technical crew and extras. They shoot water guns during rain scenes while holding newspapers overhead and throw rice during a wedding. When the floor show and props release the audience from the singular hold of the screen, gazes multiply in a feeding frenzy of visual desire.

Audience participation at *Rocky Horror* screenings reveals a falsifying opposition between viewer and viewed that continues to vex psychoanalytic models of film spectatorship. Even sophisticated Lacanian approaches to film commonly maintain a foundational passive-subject-spectator versus active-object-screen opposition. This problem has been dealt with by Lacanians themselves as a problem of misinterpretation and misapplication of Lacan's theoretical works. Spectator theory must be adjusted, they say, "Making it even more Lacanian."[3]

As fruitful and compelling as Lacanian film theory may be, viewing it as "The Theory"[4] has only limited attempts to understand film spectatorship. We can move beyond the opposition that Lacanian theory has questioned but not escaped by turning to French postmodernist Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and description of the postmodern hyperreal. Baudrillard's theory of simulation explores the psychological and sociological effects of technological progress that have made it possible to represent, replicate, and redesign so much of nature. He writes, "The very definition of the real has become: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction. . . . The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: that is the hyperreal . . . which is entirely in simulation"—a copy of an original that never was (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 146).

Our capacity to copy, reshape, and redesign human experience sometimes provides a sense of control. At the same time, the feeling that that everything is manipulated and processed—from the places we live to the foods we eat to our culture and politics—can produce a nostalgia for the real thing. (Ever wonder why Coke decided to market itself as "the real thing"?) Ironically, we begin to use our great powers of fabrication to produce a feeling of authenticity—a process that works in part by producing a picture of the "normal way things used to be" that really never was. This nostalgia can be dangerous when it justifies enforcing conformity to codes of normality and punishing or even bashing those who are perceived to be different. The preoccupation of spectator theory with the relationship between individual viewing subjects and the screen-as-viewed-object prevents film theorists from observing how the filmic experience functions within our culture of simulation, sometimes in a vain attempt to create an authentic state through simulation and sometimes accepting, foregrounding, and experimenting with our simulated state. *Rocky Horror* spectators see that their world is fake and decide to have fun with it rather than to despair or to act desperately to make things authentic again (as if that were possible). The content of the *Rocky Horror* play—aliens and gender bending—goes together perfectly with this attitude toward simulation. *Rocky Horror* enactors accept that life is illusion and use that fact as a way to create a radically inclusive social space. This argument will be clearer after a review and discussion of Lacanian spectatorship theory that we hope will show the need to account for the active and collaborative nature of spectatorship—a problem overcome by Baudrillard's discussion of hyperreal simulation.

"Double Feature": The Dualistic Nature of Psychoanalytic Models of Spectatorship

The concept of spectatorship permeates the study of film, but the specific ways in which a film's audience finds meaning has particular relevance to the psychoanalytic branch of film theory. In the description provided by theories of spectatorship, "traditional" filmic spectators passively direct their gaze only at the action on the screen. According to the widely accepted model outlined by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," this cinematic ritual serves to objectify women, who are represented either as "the lack" or as a fetish object on screen. Essentially, this means that women are depicted in degrading or highly sexualized ways to satisfy a psychological purpose for men (primarily). Mulvey describes three types of gazes: the camera's gaze as it records an event, the spectator's gaze as the film is shown, and the gazes characters exchange on screen. Mulvey's second gaze—the gaze of the spectator—relies on the more Freudian aspects of the Lacanian model of the cinema (Mulvey 16–17). Of central importance is Lacan's idea of the mirror stage, in which a prelinguistic child held up to a mirror by his mother (or some sort of baby chair) recognizes the reflection as his own (Lacan describes the child as male in his explanation of the mirror phase). Importantly, this recognition is a misrecognition: The child sees himself as a separate self but does not recognize the fact that he remains utterly dependent on the mother or the device that supports him in front of the mirror. In the dominant version of Lacanian film theory, the spectator's relationship to the screen is analogous to the baby's relationship to the mirror. The viewer identifies with the image on the cinematic screen, ignoring the technology that makes the fantasy possible. Mulvey holds, with Lacan, that this fantasized relationship between the fixed passive spectator (subject) and the reflected image (object) produces the illusion of fulfilled desire, bringing us back for more.

Mulvey's spectators can enjoy either direct "scopophilic" contact with the desired object or fascination with the image of his or her own likeness, which results in a feeling of control over the object. According to the cause-and-effect reasoning that Mulvey adapts from Freud and Lacan, scopophilia precedes exhibitionism. First I see, then I want to be seen. The subject begins by seeking pleasure from an extraneous object and enjoys seeing it. Then the pleasure is turned inward, causing the scopophiliac to want to be seen also. At this point, another subject is required to play the role of scopophiliac.

At first glance, this model seems especially helpful for a reading of *Rocky Horror* in which the spectator/subject's desire is not fulfilled by simply watching the film but only satisfied when he or she becomes an exhibitionist-object.

These ideas of cause and effect and subject and object are appealingly simple. First, according to this model, we have our Self. Then, when we want to show it off, we need another person to admire it. This explanation, however, requires that we accept that a Self can precede the existence of others. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger suggests that looking at others is crucial to the very formation of identity: "Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world" (Berger 9). Thus, the psychological formation of selfhood (like that of the body) does not precede but follows and depends on those who precede the self and support its existence—not merely its genetic parents but also the social body that provides its "ways of seeing" as well as its way of being. Mulvey's theory does not account for the shape this interdependence takes in the context of the cinema, and it ignores the social crosshatchings of desire that fill a room and make social life possible.

The *Rocky Horror* spectacle challenges Mulvey's model of spectatorship because its spectators are not passive and the screen does not monopolize the audience's gaze. Although Mulvey's spectators repress "their exhibitionism" and project this "repressed desire onto the performer," the live cast and crew of *Rocky Horror* compete with the screen for attention, actively enhancing their objectification and blurring the status of subject and object (Mulvey 17).

Paul Willemen adds a fourth gaze to Mulvey's list to account for the gaze that sees the other viewers in the darkened theater (216). This imagined look (of others watching us watch) is signified by the reflection of light bounced off the screen onto the audience, making us visible in the otherwise dark theater: "As the viewer has to confront his/her sadistic voyeurism, the presence of the imagined look in the field of the other makes itself increasingly felt, producing a sense of shame at being caught in the act of voyeurism. By this time, the viewing subject has become the exhibitionist. The scopic drive has turned back on the subject and the active aim had become a passive one, delegating the role of actively viewing sadist, in a displacing gesture, onto the camera" (Willemen 216). Willemen's fourth look recognizes the presence of other spectators and thereby turns the voyeuristic spectator-subject into a nervous exhibitionist object—but still in the setting of a traditional theater constrained by Lacanian splits. Where Mulvey focuses on the bliss of seeing one's distorted reflection, the fourth gaze recognizes the pleasure in providing one's self as an object that can serve as the mirror for the distorted reflection of another. If this description is making you feel like you are at the county fair in a hall of mirrors, that is only fitting. As complicated as this "I see you seeing me see it" situation gets, however, this mirror metaphor continues to require that some

element in the subject-object relation be passive in a given encounter—no one has agency. The mirror metaphor creates a closed model of the cinema that prohibits the possibility of some middle state that would escape the psychoanalytic economy of sadistic and masochistic gazes.

Christian Metz addresses a problem with Mulvey's model that the addition of a fourth gaze does not: Mulvey's use of the mirror stage. How can the mirror stage be used to explain the adult experience of subject-spectators who experienced the mirror stage long ago, as children? Furthermore, "there is one thing, and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body" (Metz 45). That is wholly unlike a mirror, in which we view our selves. Although Metz rejects the characterization of cinematic spectatorship as an instance of the mirror phase—an important distinction within the context of Lacanian film theory—his use of the concept of "identification" preserves the force of Mulvey's gesture, which defines the viewer as a passive spectator-subject. Metz downplays the importance of the viewer's identification with the characters onscreen (crucial for Mulvey) in favor of self-identification as "a pure act of perception" and a concomitant identification with the eye of the camera (Lapsley and Westlake 83). In other words, the main pleasure is not seeing a reflection of our self but seeing the other and feeling powerful over that other as a result. As previously explained, in the mirror stage, the child recognizes himself as a distinct and complete being in the mirror in a moment of bliss in which he does not recognize his state of dependence on others and artifacts. Likewise, Metz's spectator identifies himself or herself as a completely adequate viewer—a feeling of confidence that leaves the spectator more susceptible to the power of the cinematic apparatus to limit the field of vision and to manipulate the spectator through the representation of absent objects. Thus, although Metz says that the mirror stage does not really apply to spectatorship, his description is substantially the same in that he maintains the subject-object split. He maintains this subject-object split as part of a larger political understanding, shared with Mulvey, that envisions a subject that is simultaneously autonomous (in the sense of being individually motivated by an interior economy of desire) and passive (the subject is susceptible to the tricks of the cinema—or, in the jargon of the Theory, the subject's desire is motivated by a lack that is temporarily sutured by the fantasy projected on the screen).

In all fairness, Metz does attempt to account for the characteristics that distinguish the cinema from other environments; for instance, he points out how the cinema differs from live theater: "The film is not exhibitionist. I watch it but it doesn't watch me watching it. . . . The visible is entirely confined to the screen" (Metz 95–96). Of course, in *Rocky Horror*, the presence of audience members mimicking the actions and lines of the characters in the

film while spectators handle props complicates Metz's argument not only by injecting the live theater into the cinematic event but also by erasing the borders between spectator, performer, and show. Further challenging Metz's theory, *Shock Treatment*, the sequel to *Rocky Horror*, contains satiric depictions of audiences that could be taken as barbs at *Rocky Horror*'s own obsessive audiences. This would suggest that although Metz is right that the screen itself has no eyes, the cinema-at-large does see and react to its audiences. After all, producers decide which movies to make and distribute in large part based on assumptions about which movies will make money. Films are audience tested and changed based on audience reactions.

There's a Light (Over at the Frankenstein Place)

There is no universal theory accepted for film or spectatorship; however, psychoanalytic models dominate film theory to an extent that, in a way, theorists have created their own "monster." The psychoanalytic view of the subject can be explained by the development of psychoanalysis within the context of one-on-one clinical relations between analyst and patient in which the transference between the two interlocutors is of primary importance. On the one hand, the patient is the subject and the analyst is the object of the patient's gaze and, in a certain sense, his or her mirror. On the other hand, the analyst is also a subject for whom the patient/object serves as a kind of mirror, as the analyst projects ideas about psychology onto the patient. In the more complicated social setting of *Rocky Horror*, at any time the audience (as one or many), the cast of the floor show, the screen, or the camera could be identified as subject or object, depending on whose gaze is directed where. Furthermore, these assignments of subject-hood and object-hood tell you little about what actions are taking place. In the decades of Lacanian psychoanalytic rereadings and reinterpretations, there have been occasional attempts to attribute some power to the spectator/subject; however, Lacanian discourse never escapes the subject-object binary but only complicates it by equating the subject to the object or by using symmetries to multiply dualities (as we previously saw in the list of possible viewer-viewed pairings in the complicated social situation of *Rocky Horror*).

The binary model that Freud developed while dealing with individual patients does not translate well into the cinema, and the ramifications of subject-object splits in general extend well beyond a failure to understand cinema. Binary thinking creates a concept of the viewing subject that ignores the fact that we all see differently based on our situations and experience. It hides the fact that we all have bodies and emotions that affect how

we observe the world. It creates a concept of the thinking mind as a disembodied eye, floating somewhere in space, from which it can observe objects in a completely objective, disinterested way. As Slavoj Žižek writes, "It is this very desubstantialization which opens up the empty space (the 'blank surface') onto which fantasies are projected, where monsters emerge" (Žižek 136). Unsurprisingly, this powerful Enlightenment eye (which Freud was not the first or last to imagine he was using) has historically been associated with those in power, and as such, it becomes a justification for all kinds of abuse. For instance, men have been considered the thinking *subjects* and thought to be capable of science and rational thought, whereas women, the emotional *objects*, have been associated with nature. This same sort of objectification has been applied to minority groups by majority groups and to indigenous groups by colonial powers. This subjectification and objectification would seem too simplistic for people to believe, except for the fact that history shows it happening over and over again. Remedying this error in Western thinking (and, ostensibly, its ethical consequences) is supposed to be one of the major motives of Lacanian theory; however, as we have seen, even as Lacanians criticize the subject/object split, they continue to employ it. To the extent to which this binary opposition helps in naming an oppressive relationship, its use is just; however, we contend that thinking in those terms has become habitual in film theory to an extent that it blinds theorists to what happens in the living spaces around them.

Lacanian analysis performs a postmortem on the apparatus of the cinema, breaking down its parts and situating the spectator's gaze as a feature of a cinematic system; however, according to Todd McGowan in "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," "the primary problem with 'the Theory' is that Lacanian concepts have been applied to the cinema without regard for the specifics of the cinematic experience itself" (27). McGowan suggests that Lacanian film theory exposes itself to easy criticism because the theorists have been "too modest" and do not explore the true intricacies of Lacan; however, arguably, Lacanian theorists such as Žižek explore the intricacies of Lacanian film theory in a not so modest way (27). McGowan suggests that many have ignored the particulars of the cinematic encounter (44), and he also suggests that those critical of Lacanian film theory mainly find fault with the lack of empirical data to back up the Theory as applied to the cinema: "In short, traditional Lacanian film theory goes too far in its claims and extrapolates too much from its theoretical presuppositions. . . . It is my contention, however, that traditional Lacanian film theory became a target for these attacks not because of the grandeur of its claims but because of its modesty. The proper response, therefore, is to expand Lacanian analysis of the cinema" (McGowan 28–29).

Toward this purpose, McGowan describes the appeal of giving oneself over to cinematic fantasy: "One reduces the object to the level of an ordinary object, eliminating its Real, traumatic dimension. Fantasy is thus a way of avoiding the Real of the gaze" (36). This "Real of the gaze" refers to the trauma of the other looking back. If you stare at another person and he or she looks back at you, you may feel compelled to look away in embarrassment. You can stare at a screen with impunity, giving you a feeling of power. McGowan is correct that the spectator's gaze needs further and deeper evaluation, and his use of face-to-face encounters makes more sense than the mirror stage for describing the psychology of adults; however, our reevaluation of spectatorship need not remain reverently entrenched in Lacanian film theory. As we see again and again in psychoanalytic approaches, McGowan's description of the spectator's traumatic face-to-screen meeting with the Real once again reasserts the subject–object split.

Those who believe that the Theory provides an adequate description of film psychology and culture err by discounting Baudrillard's theories of simulacra, simulation, and the hyperreal, which allow us to ask the question, "What if there is no 'Real' at *Rocky Horror*?" As we now explain, the spectators' experience can be better understood using Baudrillard's vocabulary of hyperreal simulation because it helps us to recognize the spectators' own acts of creation that contribute to the cinematic experience as well as the entire technology and culture of simulation supporting that experience.

It's So Dreamy, Oh Fantasy Free Me![5]

Lacanians and Marxists have attacked Baudrillard's arguments regarding hyperreal simulation as dystopic, nihilistic, and excessive.[6] Nevertheless, modern critical theory and psychoanalysis cannot accurately describe the postmodern spectator's experience without accounting for how developments in technology and the resulting culture of simulation have transformed our lives. Whereas Baudrillard's hyperbolic style can rightfully be criticized for leaving much of the difficult empirical work to others, it is too much to claim that his theory "rests on some shaky theoretical premises, especially concerning the role of the media" (Kellner). Baudrillard's descriptions, although admittedly delivered in a prophetic style that sometimes conceals their influences, provide a constructive approach to the problem of understanding media.[7]

The postmodern cinematic experience, defined by hyperreality—a symptom of postmodern culture and the condition left after the implosion

of images and reality—is more real than real. This Baudrillardian wordplay refers to the elimination of the boundary between the actual and the virtual that sustains the very notion of the real. We can only speak of something being "real" in a meaningful way as long as we can reasonably believe it is distinct from simulation: The real supposedly comes before and is only copied by art; however, we know that our participation in simulation actually produces "real effects." Technology, including the cinema and other media, transforms the earth (and its inhabitants) in an imaginative process; as a result, the real can no longer be said to be truly distinct from the fake. For example, the stock market has become a virtual space in which investors buy and sell symbols that represent pieces of companies almost entirely using communication technologies. What happens in this "nowhere" space transforms our actual physical landscape as economic projects are funded and defunded and buildings go up and shut their doors. One could sensibly ask where individuals live their lives—in those "real" buildings? Or in the virtual mental spaces where we do most of our thinking? What happens on screen—the make believe—has real consequence to us.

Exploring the spectator-as-hyperreal[8] means viewing the space of spectatorship as a space in which people "imitate and instantiate hyperreal simulation models" (Kellner). Anne Friedberg explains Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality as a "representation of the thing replacing the thing—and extends it into a mise-en-abîme of the 'hyperreal,' where signs only refer to signs. Hyperreality is not just an inverted relation of sign and signifier, but one of receding reference, a deterrence operation in the signifying chain" (Friedberg 178). *Rocky Horror* exemplifies this space of signifiers where there is an "escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production" (Baudrillard 7). Baudrillard here explains that the demands for authenticity and reality that we find everywhere—for instance, in the safely reproduced "American" scenes of Disneyland—only show we already know existence is "tainted" by simulation. Part of the attraction of an intense simulation is that it can "deter" us from seeing how fully simulation has affected our world. Simulation allows us to believe we can leave it and return to a life of normality; however, normality is structured by simulation. You can turn off your computer, but try turning off the Internet. We demand the real specifically because we suspect that these demands cannot be met. Out of this psychological motive, we fake the authentic.

Let There Be Lips[9]

We don't have to read all cultural performances in such negative terms. The do-it-yourself aspect of *Rocky Horror* and other cult film experiences encourages us to understand participation not as denial or false consciousness of the simulated nature of contemporary reality but as a means of coping with simulation by engaging with it creatively: "Specifically, the postmodern urge to create facsimiles of the self or images perceived as emphatically tied to the self inspires a consciousness of images sensed as unreal, but treated as 'real in their consequences.' Thus, attention to cult movies draws attention to the arcane dress codes associated with the event. People often dress as carefully and elaborately for cult films as for a job interview, perhaps even more so. In both contexts, a proper impression entails attention to an imaginary self" (Katovich and Kinkade 195–96). Cult filmgoers like *Rocky Horror* fans provide an admirable exception to the rule of simulated nostalgia. They do not fake the authentic; they celebrate the monstrous and the fantastic. When psychoanalytic theorists rush in to describe the self-consciously kinky *Rocky Horror* behavior as fetishistic and pathological, they completely miss the point. For example, Henkin quotes a *Rocky Horror* fan who speaks of identification, but engages, rather, in hyperreal simulation: "If you're an enthusiast, you can relate to the characters. I feel quite comfortable relating to Frank on a one-to-one basis. The movie is a takeoff on all the monster and rock 'n' roll and science fiction films. Every type of fantasy personality is in the movie. So it appeals to a wide range of people. Then there's the sheer fun of dressing up and going to the theater" (119). It is hard to conceive of this fan's relationship to *Rocky Horror* as one of simply unconscious identification, either in Metz's sense of self-identification as all-knowing spectator or in the sense of outwardly projected self-wholeness. Instead, the fan dresses up and performs along with the movie, entering a relation of parody with parody. The expanded *Rocky Horror* cast does not pass between states of subject- and object-hood but unsettles those terms altogether to don their getups and thereby become part of the hyperreal simulation. As Kyle Tyson writes, *Rocky Horror* has become a "Bakhtinian carnival—demonstrating that the meaning of texts produced for mass consumption can be appropriated and subverted" (qtd. in Faigley 223). *Rocky Horror* fans again exceed the explanatory capacity of the Theory when they take control of the language of the film by shouting (often in unison) added lines to the film. These acts of agency were even remarked upon in a 1978 *National Review* article: "These night folk surely do want some credit, input, and billing, and to acquire it they've taken one of the most creative steps live theater has seen in years. Audience response to the movie is widespread and often spontaneous. Although certain elements of

the audience script remain identical from one location to another, other elements are unique to specific regions, theaters, and even performances. No one knows for certain how talking to the screen developed" (Henkin 12). *Rocky Horror* fans attend the show not just to join the spectacle but also to inject their own punch lines into the show. Their repetitions of the scripts shape the audience as a sort of congregation that continually revises its service by injecting new lines: "Cult filmgoers' paradoxical perspective holds 'nothing is sacred' on the one hand, and 'our film is sacred' on the other" (Katovich and Kinkade 192). Its evolving script relies on the social context of the viewing experience—the theater with its local flavor and the larger social backdrop of current events—and frequently contains political and cultural criticism. Understanding film as a paradigm of hyperreal simulation helps explain the public's desire to view a film multiple times (at the theater, at home, or in another space) or to encounter the same themes, storylines, and myths again and again. In the case of *Rocky Horror*, the repetition gives fans a chance to make their own additions to the Frankenstein myth that has been appropriated through hundreds of films, commercials, and other media.

The hyperreal simulation cannot be missed when one attends a midnight "mass." First, the carefully rehearsed floor show simulates every move, facial expression, and emotion of *Rocky Horror*'s characters. Dressed exactly like the cast member's character, the floor show performer *becomes* the character. Discussing his role as Frank-N-Furter, a cast member told us, "When I am performing, I am not me. I *am* Dr. Frank-N-Furter. When he dies at the end of the film, I am myself again." Tim Curry, in an interview in *Oui* magazine in 1978, says that Frank was an entirely separate, simulated being: "In the film I ended up looking like a rather crazed Bianca Jagger." Speaking of his character as though he is a real individual, Curry says, "Frank loved it; he thought he was finally a movie star" (qtd. in Whittaker 137). Members of the audience who dress in costume do so as an escape from the normalcy and the banality of everyday life, which is not real enough. They, too, simulate the characters they play, seeking acceptance, approval, and praise from the cast members and the film itself in a sort of reverence to the institution. Finally, even uninitiated spectators usually begin simulating as well by jumping up to learn and perform "The Time Warp" along with the Transylvanians on screen (Twitchell 74). Quickly, one learns to shout "Bitch!" or "Slut!" upon hearing Janet's name and "Asshole!" when hearing Brad's. Regulars sell or lend props to virgins so that all can actively and more fully simulate the film.

Although *Rocky Horror* remains a unique and enduring example of how audiences have transformed the cinema, we believe that *Rocky Horror* brings to light what the Theory ignores in typical spectatorship as well—aspects

that perhaps could never be expressed under the rubric of spectatorship, which tends to emphasize a dualistic paradigm of subjectivity. Unlike at *Rocky Horror*, spectators do not plan the eruptions of applause and cheering for Sylvester Stallone in the Rocky films (that other *Rocky*), nor do they expect to sob uncontrollably during *The Bridges of Madison County* and *Casablanca*, but nevertheless they do—repeatedly. Spectators desire their involvement, their hyperreal simulation, even when it causes them anxiety and sadness, again and again. Even after multiple viewings of the same horror film, someone will tell a character, "Don't open that door!" Has that participant really forgotten they are not watching a "real" event? Has he or she really forgotten she is at the movies? Or, does the spectator engage in simulation like a fan of *Rocky Horror*? Does it matter? Internal and (sometimes) external dialogues, common at *Rocky Horror*, exist for every spectator during both marginalized and mainstream film. Just because a spectator chooses to follow a theater's rules regarding silence does not mean he or she escapes the involvement of simulation. Even though we know *Apollo 13* returned to Earth, we sit on the edge of our seat during the Tom Hanks film, hoping that "we" return home safely. A man viewing *Titanic* exclaims urgently, "Slow down! You are going to kill everyone!" In these moments, we literally forget ourselves, and our status changes from that of spectator to that of hyperreal simulation, "merging with the film" (Katovich and Kinkade 196):

> This insatiable hunger for shows and the increasing reliance on mediated rather than real experience marks off what Baudrillard terms an "ecstasy of communication" that defines postmodern life and culture. And this ecstasy is "obscene," he maintains, "because today there is a pornography of information and communication, a pornography of circuits and networks, . . . of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more visible than visible." This is the age of simulations and the simulacra, of mediated representations and reproductions, images and signs that have taken up the place of objects and commodities in the fabric of social, everyday life. (Kokonis)

The engaged spectator at *Titanic*, similar to engaged spectators of any film or film-like medium, believes the inevitable to be preventable. Although if one pretends to watch from the outside, this spectator may seem ridiculous, the psychological commitment to simulation of the shouting filmgoer only reflects the degree to which signs constitute our environment. In a culture of simulation, more is at stake in "suspended disbelief" than merely the ability to take a fictional ride. The spectator's choice to enter the theater and play along can equally represent the desire, on the one hand, to enter a fictional space to pretend that the rest of life is authentic, or on

the other hand, to allow one's simulated identifications to go down with the fictional ship.

Film simulation does not contain itself within the movie house. Many films allow corporations to capitalize on the spectators' desire for hyperreal simulation. *Evita*, for example, launched a line of cosmetics allowing women to *become* Madonna's Evita before leaving home, and lightsaber toys became available at stores very early in the life of the *Star Wars*' franchise. This is not simply Halloween but the human-become-simulacra—the spectator simulating an imaginary original. Film can still be escapist, but does the audience seek to escape reality, or the reality that there is now only simulation? Or, does the audience use film as a means to embrace the simulated nature of postmodern life, as those things that we choose to simulate together we might also choose to simulate differently? Every subculture testifies to the possibility of bringing into being a different way of being, whether by holding fast to an earlier technological state like the Amish or by attempting to bring filmic technology to life, as with the Trekkies.

Conclusion: Removing the Cause But Not the Symptom[10]

Baudrillard's explanations allow us to recognize the audience's role in the enactment of *Rocky Horror* as a proactive, creative—even ethical—means of coping in a simulated society. In the film and in the ritual of the film, the dualistic nature of gender, power structures, master/slave relationships, and distinctions between virgin and whore are literally blown up. *Rocky Horror* spectators mark this implosion during the last moments of the film with relative quiet as their simulated "Christ"/Frank and "Adam"/Rocky lie dead, and the "Church"/Castle no longer exists. The apocalyptic finale mocks the nostalgic panic accompanying the breakdown of the binaries that prop up not just oppressive structures but also the Theory that ostensibly means to question them: "And crawling on the planet's face, some insects called the human race. . . . Lost in time and lost in space and meaning," *Rocky Horror*'s conclusion evokes Baudrillard's concept of implosion in which the dualities that have provided the traditional source of meaning collapse. For the fans who have found in *Rocky Horror* a socially inclusive space, however, one wonders whether this orgy of simulation that collapses inward does not contain some utopian hope for a larger collapse. After all, *Rocky Horror* and film in general have a greater meaning than merely as a commodity circulated within a larger capitalist system. As we learn from Baudrillard, the capitalist system itself can be fruitfully understood as the enactment in everyday life of filmic (hyperreal simulated) reality. The simulation within the movie house and the simulation of the greater economy

may be of different orders, in that people place greater stake in the value of virtual Enron than they do in the meaning of a movie. However, signification is a slippery business: Meanings fall away, and with them value.

Though *Rocky Horror* is shown in "classic" movie houses where "shhh!" has been the law and focus has resided on the screen, it is performed through creative imitation and deviance with the screen as a psychological-theatrical setting. *Rocky Horror* is not best described as a cooperative effort of subjects who become objects as they watch it and each other. It is not something *seen* so much as a *scene*—a playground of interacting desires. This *Rocky Horror* play has serious consequences for film theory. It tells us that Lacanian film theory provides a sorely incomplete description of what is really going on at the movies, and it shows us this by magnifying the spectators' active and collaborative role in simulating film and other media. Although unique in its specific character, *Rocky Horror* is not an exception to the rule of spectatorship. *RHPS* and other cult films should be seen as exaggerations that showcase the roles played by the postmodern spectator. Thus, although we agree that "*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* does a superb job of unveiling the hidden dynamics of the committee of the unconscious mind" (Ruble 163), in recognizing this inner committee—the multiple forces that act within each of us—we should not forget the "outer committee"—the social scene that people are born to encounter and often go out to find in the evenings, such as at *Rocky Horror*.

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Notes

1. In David J. Skal's *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*, he points out that audience participation, specifically in the horror genre, is not a new phenomenon, as "surrealists were fond of disrupting films like *Nosferatu* with shouted litanies of the kind that decades later would attend *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*" (54).
2. See script, section 80 (Burgyan).

3. Todd McGowan holds that psychoanalytic film theory primarily analyzes the spectator's master gaze, which he claims to be a misreading of Lacanian theory. McGowan, who is primarily concerned with the spectator's gaze, claims the gaze is an occurrence of the *objet petit a*—the moment where the "object looks back . . . a traumatic encounter with the Real, with the utter failure of the spectator's seemingly safe distance and assumed mastery" (McGowan 29).
4. McGowan points out that "David Bordwell and Noël Carroll simply label Lacanian film theory 'the Theory'" (27).
5. During the performance of the "Time Warp," Magenta exclaims, "It's so dreamy, oh fantasy free me / So you can't see me, no, not at all / In another dimension, with voyeuristic intention / Well secluded, I see all." Richard O'Brien's lyrics here suggest Magenta's turn to the fantasy as discussed in this essay.
6. This is in reference to an online review of Julia Witwer's *Reading Baudrillard: The Vital Illusion* by David Banash.
7. Frankfurt School author Walter Benjamin's 1936 "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" offers a Marxist precursor to Baudrillard's idea of simulation. Benjamin states, "In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. . . . Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. . . . Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. . . . The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity." Richard P. Richter addresses the Frankfurt School's influence on postmodernity as well: "Baudrillard . . . may be seen at the task that the Frankfurt School set for itself years before: to analyze social reality so closely that the analysis will burst it from within and reveal a new and better arrangement. Baudrillard belongs in the first rank of critical theorists because of the intention that his tone unmistakably identifies" (Richter).
8. Anne Friedberg explains Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality as a "representation of the thing replacing the thing—and extends it into a mise-en-abîme of the 'hyperreal,' where signs only refer to signs. Hyperreality is not just an inverted relation of sign and signifier, but one of receding reference, a deterrence operation in the signifying chain" (178).
9. Before the film begins, *Rocky Horror* spectators chant, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, God said: 'Let there be lips,' and there were. And they were good." This audience comment merges the beginning words of *Star Wars* with language from *Genesis*, seriously and comically placing their ritual on the same level as a blockbuster film and a religious text.
10. Dr. Frank-N-Furter addresses the suburban virgins, Brad and Janet, in the song "Sweet Transvestite." He suggests the cause for their arrival at the "Frankenstein Place," a blown tire, doesn't matter. Their symptoms (the need for the implosion of gender dualities, the need for sexual liberation, and the need for escape from a restrictive suburban structure contained neatly within a white picket fence) would have freed them from their naïve view of the world eventually regardless.

6

Wild and Untamed Thing

The Exotic, Erotic, and Neurotic *Rocky Horror* Performance Cult

Michael M. Chemers

Is not the most erotic portion of the body where the garment gapes?

—*Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text*

Whatever happened to Fay Wray?
That delicate, satin-draped frame?

—*Frank-N-Furter, "Don't Dream It"*

Barthes' question, simply asked and simply answered, provides a fertile field of inquiry for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* performance cult; Frank's query, in contrast, is startlingly complex. The cult is a phenomenon, apparently unique in American history, which by definition exists at a perceived "edge" of our culture, on that slender dividing line between the forces that regulate our cultural consumption and those that seek its destruction, like the edge of a garment as it falls away from naked flesh. The cult is the flaw, the crack where the façades of pop counterculture and bourgeois conservatism meet and sometimes painfully mingle, a gap

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through which flows a narrative of liberation, both sexual and social—fresh enough to keep its devotees weird decades after our initiations into its sacred mysteries—and like all sacred mysteries, the clearer it becomes, the more tenuous and precarious is its existence. Born outside the light and familiar warmth of popularity and success, the cult gestated and grew in the twilight zone—as do all states of bliss, ever on the edge of collapse. Ironically, it may prove that those forces that seek most strongly to preserve the cult will contribute most mightily to its dissolution, as they endow the new rituals established by the cult—subversive and therapeutic surrogates for the conformity rituals they assaulted—with the very authority they originally struggled so desperately to subvert.

What Charming Underclothes You Both Have

> Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so. The pleasure of the text is like that untenable, impossible, purely *novelistic* instant so relished by Sade's libertine when he manages to be hanged and then to cut the rope at the very moment of his orgasm, his bliss.
>
> —*Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text*

Barthes locates the origin of erotic desire neither in total nudity nor total coverage but in the intermittent state, the flash of flesh at the edge of a low collar, or the sweet sensual gap of a bare midriff between shirt and pants. This, too, is *Rocky Horror*'s eroticism: the rhythmic revelation of fishnet stockings, the allure of supple flesh rippling along the harshly rigid upper rim of a merry widow. It is, very specifically, an eroticism drawing from the performative tension between the known and unknown, the explored naked flesh and the forbidden skin concealed by the clothing. *Rocky Horror*'s creator Richard O'Brien, actor, playwright, cross-dresser, in a recent interview, linked the supremacy of bourgeois morality to the decline of the sensuality of royal court dress and the rise of the repressive dark suit of the Victorians ("Cast Interview: Richard O'Brien"). This sense of clothing as therapy was present long before the film was made, during the tumultuous period of the show's onstage existence. Patricia Quinn reported that Tim Curry was unable to "find" the character of Frank until he stepped into his platform shoes; "The high heels did it for Tim," she reported ("Cast Interview: Patricia Quinn"). Meat Loaf walked out of rehearsals at the Los Angeles Roxy when he learned he had to appear in fishnets; cajoled back into the cast, he ultimately experienced a faith healing concurrent with his character's, Dr. Scott's, when the crowd erupted in celebratory laughter as

he revealed the leggings beneath his conservative lap quilt ("Cast Interview: Meat Loaf Aday"). The eroticism of *Rocky Horror* has a great deal to do with the clothing of the characters: Preppy protagonists Brad and Janet are stripped of their bourgeois pretensions as they are stripped of their middle-class clothing and, naked, are reclothed in the liberated transsexual getup of the floor show; Riff Raff sheds his stooped posture and hunchback even as he trades his servant's rags for a futuristic transvestite military uniform, in which he appears rail-straight during his personal minirevolution (see Figure 6.1). However Frank-N-Furter's goals in the film are not merely to satisfy his superhuman lust but to rebuild Brad and Janet, as he did Rocky, in his own image—an ambiguous body, even a freakish one, one in which the breaking down of sexually repressive boundaries could begin.

Whether O'Brien had internalized the lessons of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is not expressly clear, but his dress-up-play-*qua*-social-therapy program worked. Of the play's London staging, O'Brien reported that "Our first reviews revealed to us that we'd done something exceptionally right. Somehow or other, perhaps by chance or accident, we'd done something very clever of which we were never aware. It was a very interesting sociological kind of footnote; it was that a man wearing fishnet stockings and high heels was turning on the *women* in the audience" ("Cast Interview: Richard O'Brien").

Accident it may have been, but in the late '70s, as the United Kingdom and the United States witnessed the triumphs of proto-neo-conservatism in the persons of Maggie and Ronnie, it was a happy, happy accident for



Figure 6.1

those of us aching for some kind of alternate mode of being. The erotic transgression that began in Frank's sweet transvestite, transsexual body and spread like a luxuriating disease to Brad's and Janet's classically rigid bodies would not stop until it had blurred boundaries that would extend to the very tradition of audience spectatorship.

Of course, in the final analysis, it is that performance cult that snatches *Rocky Horror* from B-movie oblivion. Robert E. Wood notes in his 1991 article "Don't Dream It" that the exuberant rise of the performance cult succeeded where the general tradition of neo-avant-garde theater spectacles of the 1970s had failed in their attempts to trigger an emotional and spiritual liberation of the theater audience (156–66).[1]

Sponsored by the sacerdotal class of intellectuals and artists who set themselves up as the prophets of a modern cultural revolution only they themselves could understand, the neo-avant-garde had a tendency to descend into a sort of perverse sadism that appeared desperately to need to humiliate and confound its audience: The turn-of-the-century goal of the avant-garde to *épater le bourgeois* in a Dionysian ecstasy of dissolving boundaries manifested itself only too often as a sort of quasi-aesthetic *schaudenfreude*.

Wood's point is well taken, but he fails to observe concerning the phenomenon that the success of the *Rocky Horror* cult, as compared with the theatrical avant-garde, was, fundamentally, its love. Whereas the neo-avant-garde described the desire to assault and shock its audience, the *Rocky Horror* cult seemed to want only to embrace it. The cult became the sexual fetish that desired the fetishist, the *fumisme* that turns its laughter on its own *fumistes*. Because of this self-consciousness, the cult, unlike most events developed by the avant-garde theater, offers surrogate rituals to replace those it undermined, creating a new sense of *communitas* that exists not within the mainstream aesthetic, and not within the radical deconstruction that seeks to destroy that aesthetic, but balanced precariously as a dream on the sensual, erotic, liminal, theatrical space that adumbrates both conformity and its opposite—an ecstatic gestalt of the total utterance. That is the erotic appeal of *Rocky Horror* and her wild cult, the delicious combination of sexual repression and its subversion, the permissible and the forbidden, the revealed flesh and the concealed.

This kind of ambiguous erotic aesthetic lends itself well to ecstatic cult behavior because it emphasizes the ambiguity of the human body itself. Mikhail Bakhtin observes in *Rabelais and His World* that such ambiguity is the font, refuge, and excuse for total freedom of thought and action in a personal as well as social sphere. The most liberatory aspect of the body is its very grotesqueness; the body is unclassifiable, not least because it is always in the process of *transforming* into something else. The hierarchy of normal society cannot contain or explain this wonder, and so that hierarchy

is revealed to be an imperfect construct of limited utility: "Such concepts as becoming, the existence of many seeds and of many possibilities, the freedom of choice, leads man towards the horizontal line of time and of historic becoming. Let us stress that the body of man reunites in itself all the elements and kingdoms of nature, both the plants and animals. Man, properly speaking, is not something completed and finished, but open, uncompleted" (Bakhtin 364). This is the body element in its most utopian aspect; undeniably erotic, an ecstatic union of separate selves into a single grotesque but communal entity of multiple bodies orgiastically manifested in Frank's swimming pool: a single body, wearing a single costume, housing multiple merged people, arms, legs, mouths, breasts, genitalia.

Elsewhere, Riff Raff's hunchback becomes indicative of a pregnant belly, swollen with his own rebirth as dominator—a grotesque echo of the round perfection of Janet's hitherto-unmolested breasts. Rocky's monstrous, hypersexualized, hyperconditioned body possesses its own grotesqueness[2] in opposition to the irresistible fat rock and roll sensuality of Meat Loaf's Eddie, with whom he shares a single brain. Even the classically sexy Columbia and Magenta are rendered celebrationally grotesque during the climax of "Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch Me," when we, the audience, vicariously experience taking the submissive position as Janet, to be fucked missionary-style by all the film's characters. In addition, the Transylvanian conventionists, who appear as the lineup of a nineteenth-century ten-in-one freak show (a long-honored tradition of the performance of erotic boundaries and their subversions), include a person of short stature, a skeleton-dude, obese persons, and several persons who appear hermaphroditic. The conventionists are, we ultimately discover, their own avant-garde—the first wave of an invasion of Earth by a species of transvestite aliens from a distant galaxy, where "transsexual" is not a lifestyle choice but a galactic identity and tribal marker.

Frank-N-Furter, of course, has the most transgressive and ambiguous of all the film's bodies. Modeled in Richard O'Brien's words, on "a combination between Eisenstein's Ivan from *Ivan the Terrible Part One*, and the Wicked Queen from Snow White" ("Cast Interview: Richard O'Brien"), Frank is, as Amittai F. Aviram observes in his 1992 article, a sort of postmodern Dionysus, a transformational—indeed, in some ways, transcendent—figure that can switch genders and sexualities as it suits his whims and schemes.[3] Similar to Dionysus in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, Frank's body encompasses the sacred and profane, native and alien, animal and human, human and divine, divine and demonic, subject with object (of desire), the living with the dead, male and female, sub and dom, sadist and masochist; in all, a Bakhtinian bursting forth of Hell in a sensual, even sexual, cornucopia of abundance. Frank lives on Barthes's erotic edge, like Dionysus—at

once a thing and its opposite, yet never wholly either. It is this ambiguity that gives him his seductive power over Brad and Janet, mired in their static, hierarchical eroticisms. However, Brad and Janet's bodies are equally grotesque; through the unique practice of the cult in performance the abnormal is rendered commonplace and the idealized, bourgeois bodies of Brad and Janet become understood by the cult as diseased. They are outcast, and the cult is instructed to affix on them the labels of their diaspora from Frank's polymorphous polyamory: "Asshole!" and "Slut!" Denton is Hell, and Frank, the medical genius, has the only cure: rendering their hierarchical, seemingly finished and closed bodies into open, transcendent ones by penetrating them (literally and figuratively), creating orifices of pleasure where once only senseless, mechanical organs existed.

Admittedly, of the four participants in the floor show who have ostensibly been "liberated" by Frank's healing hypersexual energy, only Janet appears to be able to handle it; the others complain of the "trouble and pain" engendered by their lack of control (Columbia's loss of faith in Frank, Rocky's uncontrolled heterosexual libido, Brad's infantile longing for his lost bourgeois innocence condensed into his plaintive cry: "Help me, Mommy!"). Janet's refrain, in contrast, is an unqualified celebration:

> I feel released
> Bad times deceased
> My confidence has increased
> Reality is here.
> The game has been disbanded
> My mind has been expanded
> It's a gas that Frankie's landed
> His lust is so sincere!

One of my students suggested that Janet gains the most from Frank's program of sexual liberation precisely because she is, after all, a slut. In any case, her song of thanksgiving to Frank invokes the queening alien's temporary apotheosis as a transvestite RKO radio demigod, manifested in a song about Fay Wray's dress in *King Kong*. It is, as Janet observes, the sincerity of his lust—unbounded and, like the *logothete* de Sade's, encompassing repression and transgression in one omnivorous appetite—that she appreciates.

However, for Bakhtin, Barthes, and O'Brien alike, the ecstasy is temporary—its inevitable catastrophic implosion adding savor, all the more seductive for its very impermanence. Even Frank's new sexually open miniverse must fall prey to the new order sponsored by Riff Raff's jealousy, three-pronged antimatter dildo/pistol ("that's hard to come by," quips the cult), and quasi-militarist quasi-conservatism, leaving our newly liberated

characters in their smeared makeup and lingerie writhing on the ground in the exhaust of the castle-spacecraft like spent lovers, worrying about how, or perhaps if, they can ever return to the sexual conformity nightmare that is Denton.

It's the sincerity of its lust, I argue, that engendered the *Rocky Horror* performance cult and nurtured it through thirty years. It's a sincerity only rendered more sincere by its fragility and ephemeral nature, and only its consistent association with a lack of sincerity of lust could undo it.

It's Not Easy Having a Good Time

> The success of *Rocky Horror* came out of the failure of *Rocky Horror*. I think that if *Rocky Horror* had come out and been moderately successful it might be gone today. The fact that it failed and we had to look for an alternative way of exhibiting it was added to what became the phenomenon.
>
> —*Lou Adler, "VH-1: Behind the Music"*

> Mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am.
>
> —*Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text*

It seems that the failure/success *pas de deux* that *Rocky Horror* dances is primarily a result of the facility with which the film lends itself to *subversion* of conventional boundaries, but not entirely to their *dissolution*. *Rocky Horror*'s dance is on the commercial edge of failure/success as much as it is on the erotic edge of safe/forbidden sexuality. As was true for the theatrical avant-garde, official success and critical acclaim for *Rocky Horror* would have destroyed the performance cult before it could ever be born. It requires no stretch of the imagination to understand *Rocky Horror*'s underground counterculture success, as Adler describes, as a function of its failure in the "official" bourgeois commercial film universe. In fact, it does not seem out of bounds to suggest that the very eroticism of *Rocky Horror*, which is the basis of its cult success, is derived in no small part from the film's illegitimacy and rejection by all things elite and hierarchical. Of course, of all the subversive qualities of *Rocky Horror*, none is so interesting as its subversion of audience behavior conventions; perhaps what Twentieth Century Fox has failed to understand is that the new traditions of eroticism and boundary breakage that the *Rocky Horror* cult generated are intensely fragile, surviving only so long as they can maintain that razor's edge ballet on the rim between radical revolution and corporatized officialization: One step too far in either direction, and they must shatter.

Robert E. Wood's conclusions notwithstanding, the historical theatrical avant-garde and *Rocky Horror* actually have much in common: primarily their shared predilection for redefining the boundaries that separate the spectator of the art piece from the producer. I say predilection rather than desire, for the *Rocky Horror* cult was never designed; to attribute an aesthetic motive to the cult's activities would be at once a gross overstatement and a callow injustice to the cult's most salient feature: its spontaneous, autochthonous self-generation. In the first step of the proposed avant-garde cultural shock therapy, the audience would be jolted out of their dependence on bourgeois aesthetic rituals, which throughout the past two centuries or so have cultivated a sense, even in the theater, of isolated, individual reflection on art, negating the older, more atavistic desire for a communal experience of shared wonder and spiritual growth. Thus, the spectator would, with theater's help, emerge into a new, liberated and self-determined identity, arrived at through the action of participation in performance. It is performance, of course—in this case that of living cultists—that provides *Rocky Horror*'s most striking and long-lasting radical innovations.[4]

It is, however, the surrogate rituals that interest us—those that the film and cult generate to replace the stodgy conventions they subvert. Some are recognizable (the predictable patterns of science fiction and horror films remain intact; the couple in the car, the dark road, the forbidding castle, the monster running amok, etc.), and some are innovated (the Time Warp and elbow sex, for instance). Most significant to this study is the subversion of the bourgeois aesthetic ritual of passive cinema spectatorship, which is utterly annihilated in the *Rocky Horror* cult performance and replaced with something rich and strange—an audience with no spectators and a cast of living actors that brings the hitherto-unalterable images of the silver screen down to earth, where they can be manipulated for the end goal of liberating each participant.[5] This subversion works because it rejects nothing: Similar to the film's sincere, all-inclusive lust, the cult's monstrous creativity loves the repressive as well as the rebellious elements of its multifarious construction.

In the best traditions of *fumisme*, and with enough vandalism to the theater to satisfy even Marinetti, the cult adores even as it mocks. The stuffy Criminologist is the paragon of the normal, hierarchical body, stuffed into a rigid gray suit that echoes only faintly the stiff corsets of sexual liberation later in the film. His sophisticated good looks are markers of classical, normative beauty. For the cult, however, Gray's prominent cleft chin, classically a coveted marker of masculine beauty, becomes a vaginal opening to be titillated and finger-fucked by a cast member, who caresses it with his hands as he will later to do Janet's screen-image breasts. Gray's neck

vanishes into his Victorian armor, a source of endless running gags from the congregation. For the Criminologist, as the film's bourgeois moral center who holds himself up as an "authority" on deviance, is reserved the iciest of the congregant's vicious play: They even trick him into describing his own testicles as "heavy, black, and pendulous." Every piece of information he delivers is rendered ridiculous, superfluous, and fatuous, but not negated, by the actions of the congregation, who change his (and everyone else's) power to mean what they mean:

> Criminologist: And so, by some extraordinary coincidence, fate, it seems, had decided that Brad and Janet should keep that appointment with Dr. Everett [Scott].
> Congregation: (over) [Snot!]
> Crim: But it was to be in a situation which none of them could have possibly foreseen.
> Cong.: Was it a picnic?
> Crim: And just a few hours after announcing their engagement, Brad and Janet had both tasted [forbidden fruit.]
> Cong.: (over) [Frank's furter] at a picnic.
> Crim: This in itself was proof that their host was a man of little morals . . .
> Cong.: No morals!
> Crim: And some persuasion.
> Cong.: BOTH persuasions!
> Crim: What further indignities were they to be subjected to?
> Cong.: A picnic?
> Crim: And what of the sonic transducer and floor show that had been spoken of? What indeed? From what had gone before, it was clear that this was to be . . .
> Cong.: A picnic?
> Crim: No picnic.
> Cong: (Coda) Awwwwwwwwwwww.[6]

However, the Criminologist's representative power, callously ripped from him by the cult's actions, is later returned to him when his sudden halting of a spinning globe sends cast members who had been riding it careening headlong around the stage. His power to mean is returned to him: His final word is "meaning," and the cast responds ritualistically, singing "me-eeening" as the film ends. The Criminologist is a *teacher*—he instructs the congregation on how to do the Time Warp and does it himself standing on his desk with such childlike enthusiasm that goes a long way toward recouping the cult's adoration. The pattern is equally true of Asshole Brad and Janet the Slut:

A windscreen wiper working under strain. Torrential rain on the windscreen. Brad concentrating on visibility. Janet eating chocolates and listening to the car radio playing Nixon's resignation speech.
[During this shot, the cast pretend to move the wipers back and forth. Some of the congregants will start spraying water around prematurely.]
Cong.: Only virgins squirt too soon.

Objects become rendered into their own subjects, and the cast hovers between objectivity and subjectivity, player and that which is played on.

Cong.: Hey, Dick, have you ever been a quitter?
Nixon: I have never been a quitter.
Cong.: Bullshit!
Nixon: To leave office before my term is completed goes against every instinct in my body.
Cong.: You call THAT a body?
Nixon: But as President . . .
Cong.: You call THAT a President?
Nixon: I must put the interests of America first.
Cong.: What does America need, Dick?
Nixon: America needs a full-time President.
Cong.: Is that all?
Nixon: And a full-time Congress. Especially at this time . . .

This is no ordinary presidential speech: This is the nadir of presidential speeches, the speech that by its very utterance unspeaks every other presidential utterance. This is the most subversive presidential speech in American history, and the *Rocky Horror* cult consumes it, devours its poison like eager coprophiliacs at a banquet. The scene continues:

A motorcycle roars past them.
Janet: Gosh, that's the third motorcyclist that's passed us. They certainly take their lives in their hands. What with the weather and all.
Brad: Yes, Janet. Life's pretty cheap to that type.
Cong.: Yay, that type!

Here, the freaky conventionists appear for the first time, springing whole from the darkness like hellspawn monsters from the womb of chaos itself. The road is closed: They can only have come from the abyss of outer space. Cult practice elevates these characters to the level of minor gods to be worshipped: They are cheered and mimicked by the congregation multiple times, even from this first ambiguous appearance. Their presence changes everything and derails the bourgeois quest of Brad and Janet to secure a

marriage blessing from their high school science teacher Dr. Everett Scott, whom, we have earlier learned, began their romance by urging Brad to "give [Janet] the eye and then panic." It's a stupid quest, but then, Brad's an asshole, and he is now confronted by the limits of his abilities and scope in the form of a blocked road.

The car slows to a halt.
Janet: What's the matter Brad darling?
Cong.: Make a sound like a cow!
Brad: Mmmmm . . . I think we took the wrong fork a few miles back.
Cong.: Asshole!
Cast: But then where did that motorcycle come from?
Janet: But then where did that motorcycle come from?
Cong.: *(hums the theme from "Twilight Zone.")*
Brad: Hmmmm. . . . Well, I guess we'll just have to turn back.
Cong.: Don't turn back, Asshole!
Car reverses. Brad puts his foot on the accelerator. The wheel skids and explodes.
Janet: What was that bang?
Cong.: A gangbang, Slut!
Brad.: We must have a [blow-out].
Cong.: (over) [Blow-job!]
Cast: Right here in the car?
Janet: Oh . . .
Brad: Dammit!
The congregation claps once together.
Brad: I knew I should have gotten that spare tire fixed.
Cong.: Asshole.
Brad: You just stay here and keep warm while I go for help.
Janet: But where will you go? We're in the middle of nowhere.
Cong.: They're in Utah!

Regionalisms abound, making each performance of the cult at once comfortingly familiar and startlingly unique. The cult also encouraged a tendency for regionalisms to be picked up and spread. Sal Piro, President of the Rocky Horror Fan Club, discovered that innovations of his own had been picked up by cults across the country, and I myself was startled to hear innovations I knew were specific to my home congregation in Salt Lake City repeated years later in New York and Chicago:

Cast: What's white and sells hamburgers?
Brad: Didn't we pass a castle back down the road a few miles?
Cong.: [cheers]

It is worth mentioning that Susan Sarandon's entrée into the world of serious dramatic acting would eventually follow her role as a waitress at a "White Castle"–inspired burger chain who seduces an uptight preppy Brad-type in the critically acclaimed film *White Palace*.

Passive spectatorship is eliminated from the film event in a manner very specifically hostile to and, at the same time, very loving of bourgeois conventions and sexual ideologies. Nixon's resignation, Brad's elitism, and Janet's antifeminism are hyperbolized and assaulted by the congregation, but later, so is Frank's oversexed behavior, Riff Raff and Magenta's incest, and Columbia's exposed nipples. The new cult dialogue is, then, actually a conjunction of the traditional and the transgressive, obscenely liberating and highly sexually charged. The film's counterculture moral center, exemplified by the song "Don't Dream It, Be It" (another referent to the sexual liberation power of clothing, a corporate slogan lifted by O'Brien from a Frederick's of Hollywood lingerie catalog), strives for a moment of Dionysian ecstasy when the stultifying self-negation of conformity to socially constructed barriers is transcended in the pleasurable sexualized healing of O'Brien's deranged, boundary-blurring high-heel fetish *communitas*.

Rocky Horror cult performance is subtle, despite its raucous front. It is not really attempting to annihilate the conventions it ridicules but is creating a dialogic relationship embracing warmly both social hierarchies and those forces that seek their dissolution. Just as Frank's sexual paradise consumes itself until it becomes vulnerable to Riff Raff and Magenta's fifth-column sabotage, the *Rocky Horror* cult embraces both the tyrant and the rebel. Barry Bostwick, at the twentieth anniversary convention, asked the assembled Rockyphiles in a self-deprecating way to admit that few of them played the asshole Brad in their home theaters, and he appeared genuinely surprised when a significant portion of the crowd gave forth with an enthusiastic cheer ("VH-1"). Bostwick, whose own response to the performance cult was, by his own admission, Brad-like (he complained, "Wait! You can't hear the movie, dammit! Wait a minute! They're shouting over my lines! Why are they calling me 'asshole?'" ["Cast Interview: Barry Bostwick"]) seemed reluctant to accept that the cult, the fetish that loves the fetishist, would be as ready to embody its own beloved sluts and assholes as it would its groovy gender-bending aliens. But it is . . . or, rather, was.

Whatever Happened to Saturday Night?

> Nothing has stopped it. Three administrations at Fox couldn't kill it, and Ronald Reagan couldn't kill it. I don't see what could stop it.
>
> —*Lou Adler*

> I think it's time, in a way, to hang up your mesh stockings and high heels and move on. . . . Just don't build your lives around acting out on Saturday night, you know? Life's too short.
>
> —*Barry Bostwick*

At the time of this writing, *Rocky Horror* is dying, vanishing from American cinemas, and the glorious, monstrous reconfigurations of its exuberant cult are vanishing along with it. Traveling in the country in the mid-1980s, when I was a regular participant in *Rocky Horror* performance, it seemed that every town large enough to have a cinema had a *Rocky Horror* performance cult. While researching this article between 2000 and 2003, I discovered a vibrant community of self-proclaimed Rockyphiles in three midsized American cities (Seattle, Des Moines, and Pittsburgh) but was informed in each case, with some scratching of heads, that the midnight movie no longer regularly played. A search of the "official" *Rocky Horror* Web site at http://www.rockyhorror.com reveals that many of the listed casts no longer assemble, or even maintain a Web site. What forces could conspire to remove the performance cult from the vast popularity it once enjoyed, when critical and authoritative derision only sustained the tradition for nearly three decades?

From the perspective of the avant-garde theater, one might be able to trace a causal connection between the cult's decline and the renewed attempts by Twentieth Century Fox to "officialize" the event. The company hosted a grand and wildly popular Twentieth Anniversary convention in 1995, where Tim Curry got a massive ovation for saying "It's so comforting to know there are so many people in the world sicker than I am. I think I'm the only person in this room that doesn't look like me." Five years later Fox released a very flashy and exquisitely produced two-disk DVD set with "official" biographies and filmographies of the cast and crew (emphasizing their post–*Rocky Horror* successes and accolades), behind-the-scenes cuts, a featurette in which an aging Richard O'Brien performs an "unplugged" version of the "Time Warp" (lacking, I'm sad to say, Riff Raff's simmering resentment and leering sexuality), and a feature that includes the recording of an "official" audience participation aspect of the performance that "contains members of one of RHPS's finest audiences interacting with the

movie as only veterans can." Unfortunately, the call-and-response is utterly lost in a sea of noise. The DVD also has a "participation prompter" feature that purports to "inform you when it's time to misbehave."

Following this release, *Rocky Horror* in its original stage form was revived on Broadway, on the stiletto heels of a delightfully perverse revival of *Cabaret*. This trend suggests less that Broadway is morally loosening up than that the borders of what art bourgeois aesthetics renders acceptable for consumption are expanding to envelope territories once forbidden—territories that can no longer provide a refuge for avant-garde artists.

From the point of view of the historical avant-garde, nothing could be more disastrous for this cult performance event that can exist only at the fringe of a culture than to be "officialized" by the very systems of bourgeois aesthetics that it ostensibly was created to ridicule and subvert. It seems unlikely that the participants in the event would fail to see these incidents, as I do, as an attempt to co-opt and commodify the performance cult not for the purposes of preservation but to secure more control over the cult's money-making potential for Fox. Even if that is not the case, the acceptance of the film and play by the bourgeois mainstream certainly robs the rebellious and revolutionary savor from the cult for all but the most die-hard congregants. Although I do not begrudge Sarandon her great success, I do not particularly relish the knowledge that the woman I knew as Janet, for instance, is now a famous honoree of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, a fiscally motivated edifice of bourgeois aesthetics that once turned up its nose at *Rocky Horror*. Such recognition rather takes the subversive antibourgeois, sexually liberating *jouissance* out of cult participation, especially if you have an expensive DVD at home telling you "when it is *time* to misbehave." Ho-hum. This is tantamount to trying to add to Fay Wray's electric sensuality in *King Kong* by removing the satin dress entirely and having the ape carry her up in the nude. It wasn't just her delicate frame that attracted Frank to transvestism, as he explains in the bridge of "Don't Dream It," it was the dress clinging to her thigh.

I loved *Rocky Horror*. I will always remember my initiation into its mysteries as a celebratory abandonment of an innocence I suddenly understood as naiveté; the film helped me to recognize that I had no use for it. The *Rocky Horror* cult made me weird, and I still feel weird. I played Riff Raff in theaters all over the United States when I was a teenager. Am I, then, in my incarnation as a professional historian, a hapless stepchild of the lecturing Criminologist, to drive the final nail into *Rocky Horror*'s cult coffin? Even writing about the event as a professional scholar, as I have done here, for an anthology of critical scholarship on *Rocky Horror*, citing much of my evidence from the very DVD I neurotically despise and treasure, is likely to contribute to its demise. I'm sensitive to this irony.

The *Rocky Horror* cult, similarly neurotic, has found a new existence in American living rooms, perhaps gaining a renewed sense of purpose in bringing life to a room long deadened by the omnipresence of television. As Aviram wrote more than a decade ago, though, "There is a deep irony in the celebration of this cult privately at home, however, an irony which would seem powerful enough a reason to have forestalled distribution of the *Picture Show* on video hitherto. The irony is that the Rocky Horror Cult ought to be celebrated in public spaces, late at night in the dark, and not trivialized by suburban solitude and trips to the kitchen for beer" (183). It's difficult not to be seduced by Aviram's Dionysian sensibilities. It is *Rocky Horror*'s eroticism that engendered its cult, and *Rocky Horror*'s eroticism is an extension of its ability to straddle discursive boundaries, to be at once one thing and another, yet never wholly either. The more this cultural product is officialized, the more private the performance cult, the less erotic it feels. The increasing commercialization of *Rocky Horror* comes to resemble the paradoxical slope Baudrillard observes in relation to science: To live, its object must die, and like Orpheus, it is doomed always to turning around too soon to watch in helpless horror as the thing it desires most plunges backwards into Hell (Baudrillard 7). Similar to de Sade's autoerotic libertine, we are in danger of being strangled by the very source of our pleasure. The official/forbidden cult performance at the Midnight Movie felt transgressive and exciting; officially sanctioned cult performance in your living room is just pathetic. Even as I write this closing, though, I can already hear the truly die-hard fans calling down the wrath of the postmodern Dionysus on my head, insistent that their own group maintains the traditions in the most time-honored, public, sex-drenched ambiguous style—that *Rocky Horror* will never *truly* die.

More power to you, you twisted freaks.

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Notes

1. For a lengthier survey of the aspirations and shortcomings of the theatrical avant-garde, please consult Harding, Senelick, and Fischer-Lichte.
2. On the grotesque attraction of bodybuilding as a relocated freak show, see Lindsay.
3. Aviram's analysis, although deeply provocative and resonant, does raise a few eyebrows. Aviram makes several minor errors in the events of the film and their sequence, and I would certainly take exception to the notion that the *Rocky Horror* performance cult restricts its liberating sexual energy to homosexuality.

Rocky Horror's sensibilities, as O'Brien previously notes, have proven equally effective on heterosexual eroticism; I argue that it is the movement between the two, represented by Frank's omnivorous bisexuality, that makes the cult seductive to all of its audience—straight, gay, and bi—and progressively equalizes all forms of lust in a nonhierarchical orgiastic soup, permitting the one to play in (and with) the other; as it were, a dalliance along the edge of the safe and the forbidden, as along Barthes's unclothed and clothed body. This reading is not inconsistent with Aviram's observations and traditional readings of Dionysian cult worship, regarding Maenadism. Therefore, the deeply positive, affirmative erotic fallout from *Rocky Horror* and its cult need not be limited to the gay sub/counterculture in modern America: Straights can be weird, too.

4. *Rocky Horror* critics and scholars have already described the many filmic and bourgeois rituals that the film alone is designed to complicate through the employment of such Bakhtinian notions as carnival, grotesquerie, and billingsgate, as well as gender role subversion and semiotic reconfiguration. The film contains a wedding, a proposal, an academic lecture, a presidential speech, a formal party, a medical theater, a formal dinner, a floor show, a faith healing, a class revolution, and a picnic. However, the wedding becomes a homosexual one, the speech is Nixon's resignation, the party is part of an alien invasion, the medical theater devolves into a Frankensteinian monster creation, the dinner is cannibalistic, the floor show and faith healing turn out to the sexual liberation of the film's stodgiest characters, the class revolution is conducted by space aliens, and there is, ultimately, no picnic (see also the following: Studlar, Telotte, Grant, Hoberman and Rosenbaum, McDonald, and Minor).
5. The origin of the audience participation tradition of the cult is dubious. Certainly the tradition began during the play's stage life in London, where audience members as elite as Mick and Bianca Jagger might have thrown Kit-Kat bars at the stage (see Harding). Meat Loaf relates that Carole King appeared at the Roxy performances in Los Angeles dressed as Magenta ("Cast Interview: Meat Loaf Aday"). How the audience participation transferred over to the showing of the film is likewise murky. Individuals like Louis Farese, Jr., or Sal Piro and the Waverly Cinema group may claim to have "invented" or innovated certain aspects of the *Rocky Horror* phenomenon (see Piro), but by no stretch of the imagination could these individuals be imagined to be responsible for the proliferation of the cult and the persistence of this phenomenon on a nationwide scale for the best part of three decades with very, very few instances of, or even attempts at, overt promotion or officialization. During the late '70s and throughout the '80s and '90s, a traveler could find a welcoming community of initiates on a Saturday midnight in almost any American township, just as an ancient devotee of Dionysus would find welcome in communities of initiates anywhere in Hellas he might have roamed. Tracing the evolution of the cult would require an extraordinary historical effort, as regional innovations have been transmitted and diffused around the country into the multitudes of performance communities. I myself have played Riff Raff in six cities, welcomed by the locals with open arms each time,

and found the event to be replicated in startling uniformity between communities, apart from regional variance (in Salt Lake City, for instance, the congregants responded to Riff's threat to Frank: "Say goodbye to all of this and hello to oblivion" with a choral cry of "hellooooooo Utah!"). The *Rocky Horror* performance cult is also subversive of traditional economic relationships that exist between a producer and a consumer of art. Influential avant-garde theatrical producer Max Halbe believed such subversion was a critical first step in destabilizing the aesthetic superstructure that rests on the base of commodity exchange: No free aesthetic could exist so long as it remained lashed to the wheels of commerce and market demand (see Senelick 23–24). To the extent that *Rocky Horror* casts do not pay for admission, that the cult tends to trash the theater (requiring cleanup costs), and that the projectionists takes his cue to begin the film from the *cast* and not from the theater manager, traditional commercial relationships are undermined.

6. All screenplay quotes in this text are from Jim Sharman and Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *a screenplay*. Cast and congregational additions are my own additions, taken entirely from memory of personal experience and not from the "official" DVD audience participation feature.

7

"What We Are Watching" Does Not Present "Us with a Struggle"

Rocky Horror, Queer Viewers, and the Alternative Cinematic Spectacle

Nicole Seymour

From its advent, the film medium has had a complex relationship with its audience. As Miriam Hansen summarizes, "in [the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries], cinema figured as part of the violent restructuration of human perception and interaction effected by industrial-capitalist modes of production and exchange" (362). In this early period, multitudes of people would crowd into neighborhood music halls and storefront nickelodeons to see moving trains, chaotic city streets, and other dynamic images of the newly industrialized world (Belton 350). For the average American, then, the turn-of-the-century film experience was inextricably

As Alexander Doty writes, "I am using the term 'queer' to mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception. . . . Various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever *anyone* produces or responds to culture" (338). To the term "straight" I would like to add capitalist, normative, mainstream, and so on; in troubling many norms of film exhibition and film viewing, the alternative cinematic spectacle benefits queer people in particular, and those uninterested in the status quo film experience in general.

connected to both "spectacularism" and capitalism; film itself was a reflection and a producer of those particular social features.[1]

Several decades later, a cultural anomaly that I have dubbed the "alternative cinematic spectacle"—a participatory event in which the film text plays just one part, though an indispensable one—speaks to the same obsessions, but with important differences: The *presentation* of the film, not its content per se or even the act of moviegoing itself, becomes the main spectacle, and these presentations particularly trouble the capitalist system that normally inheres in moviegoing. With this specific formula in mind, I argue that, despite not necessarily being homosexually inflected or even advertised as such, alternative cinematic spectacles such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* midnight screenings, *The Sound of Music* Sing-a-Long-a events, and the Cinespia film screenings at Los Angeles's Hollywood Forever cemetery constitute queer experiences.[2]

Although Alexander Doty warns that an emphasis on "notions of audience and reception leaves you open to the kind of dismissive attitude that sees queer understandings of popular culture as being the result of 'wishful thinking' about a text or 'appropriation' of a text by a cultural and/or critical special interest group" (4), I show that the queerness of these alternative cinematic spectacles does not simply emanate from their content or from individuals' "wishful thinking" about that content—be they filmmakers, viewers, or exhibitors. Rather, the queerness inheres in a set of transgressive acts both encouraged and allowed for by the spectacle, including inscribing oneself into the film text, purging internalized norms of film-watching (norms that either render one an alienated entity or demand one's complicity in an ideological project), and the perpetuation of a recursive, alternative film economy. Thus, to rephrase Tamsin Wilton's complaint about "film, by and large," these cinematic spectacles do not categorically force the queer or otherwise marginalized viewer into an ideologically, psychologically, or morally depleting struggle (353).

In 1975, the film version of Richard O'Brien's hit rock musical *The Rocky Horror Show* (retitled *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) debuted to abysmal reviews and minimal box office returns. Over thirty years later, the film has a rabid cult following and continues to spawn everything from CD box sets and books to its own *Guinness Book of World Records* entries.[3]

Queer viewers have long been part of this following—as Scott Michaels and David Evans report, the movie's second run was launched at two Manhattan theaters "frequented by gays, students and punks" (9)—but I argue that this has less to do with *Rocky Horror*'s specifically homosexual content than with the radical "viewing/survival" strategies that viewers typically deploy during the movie's screenings. These strategies developed out of and continue to speak to the outsider status of the audience members, and

they have found their way into other alternative cinematic spectacles such as Sing-a-Long-a and Cinespia for similar reasons. Despite their characteristic location in pointedly alternative events, these strategies also suggest productive ways for queer and marginalized viewers to approach and read the average, mainstream film text; the innovation, creativity, and spontaneity they exemplify indicate that filmgoing need not always be a passive, rote experience, nor a solely analytical one devoid of personal enjoyment.

One might call the secondary *Rocky Horror* "script" the most famous example of such a strategy. Prompted by dialogue or action, audience members hurl various insults, comments, and interjections at the screen—this is no "reception in a state of distraction," to quote Walter Benjamin (240). Many of these comments are now classic, but they are by no means regulated or regularized—Liz Locke's essay "'Don't Dream It, Be It': The Rocky Horror Pictures Show as Cultural Performance" notes how the script shifts over time and depending on place, with new comments popping up in different contexts.[4]

Of course, even if the audience comments have taken on the form of ritual to some degree, their very existence speaks to a fundamentally radical move on the part of the alternative cinematic spectacle: simultaneously undermining the "authority" of the film text and shattering its highly fictive nature. For example, when Barry Bostwick and Susan Sarandon's characters first appear onscreen, audience members shout out "slut!" and "asshole!" Doing the same in a regular movie theater would not simply disturb others but would demolish the much-needed illusion that, in the darkened theater, we are privy to some real conversation, some actual interaction that we are quietly and submissively to observe. Yelling "asshole!" at a character means stepping out of one's normally occluded and subordinate place in the audience and exposing the reality of what Christian Metz calls the theater's "segregation of spaces" (217). In speaking at or toward the screen, the attendees of alternative cinematic spectacles make it clear that they know the film to be a fiction; although it may be open and inscribable in a certain sense, as I discuss below, it is also impervious to the degree that the actors cannot hear us, and we are thus free to "talk back" to them. Such a recognition of film's falsity has even further liberatory implications for the queer viewer: Being hyperaware of film's fictional nature means knowing the filmic exclusion of the queer subject to be merely incidental, though it may be personally troubling.

Although the audience's verbal actions—following a participation "script," singing along, booing and cheering, and making spontaneous remarks and imperatives (e.g., yelling "kiss him!" to Rock Hudson's character in *Written on the Wind*, which was screened at Hollywood Forever in August 2003)—presuppose a fictive, artificial text, they do much more

by penetrating that text in a transgressive, empowered/empowering manner. By adding a nondiegetic soundtrack, so to speak, audience members can comment on the film, insert new meanings into it, and inject sexual—often homosexual—innuendo where there was little or none before. The audience thus renders the film a malleable, living text, one at the mercy of their whims, perspectives, and particular cultural position(s).[5] In Roland Barthes's terms, the films at the center of these cinematic spectacles are "writerly texts," meaning that the audience does not "simply consume the text but 'writes' it in their act of reading" (Hollows, Hutchings, and Jancovich 193). Even though nothing indicates that the filmmakers intended the "sutures" of these films to be opened, however, the audience can and does open them.[6] In fact, we could refine Barthes's theory to say that the "writerliness" of a text does not depend on the text itself—or, rather, on any antimainstream machinations by the screenwriter, director, cinematographer, and so forth. Instead, it depends on the audience being committed to rendering the text as such. Coming from a disenfranchised and underrepresented vantage point, the queer viewer may be particularly inclined toward, or even well-versed in, this kind of cultural reinterpretation—as Wilton writes, "queer consumers (and producers) of culture [may be] so accustomed to self-consciously inhabiting contradictory viewing/reading positions as to make us preeminently skilled deconstructionists" (348). More important, queer viewers in the alternative cinematic spectacle may ultimately find more pleasure and reward in verbally penetrating or deconstructing a film than either Barthes or Wilton seem to expect; they have a unique and public opportunity to write their personal experience into a film that may have otherwise lacked familiar representations.[7]

If verbal participation represents one way of disrupting the normative film-viewing process and writing oneself into the text—thereby ameliorating or precluding the alienation that the queer viewer typically experiences in mainstream film—physical participation represents another. *Rocky Horror* and *Sound of Music* viewers bring various props that are launched, disseminated, or sometimes just displayed at certain points in the films' trajectories. For example, *Sound of Music* Sing-a-Long-a attendees wave bunches of fake white flowers during Julie Andrews' and Christopher Plummer's rendition of "Edelweiss"; *Rocky Horror* attendees dance the "Time Warp" along with the Transylvanian conventioners and squirt water from water guns or spray bottles when it rains onscreen. By thus mirroring the actions of the soundtrack, actors, or plot, viewers of the alternative cinematic spectacle can put themselves *inside* the screen as well as reposition the screen's boundaries to include the world immediately *outside*. Either way, they give film viewing a more democratic angle, rather than accepting

it as a hierarchical system in which they occupy the passive and unrepresented bottom rung.

Rocky Horror actually takes this participation ethos one step further by having separate live casts (or shadow casts) simultaneously act out the story in front of the screen (after a famous line in the film, these performances are known as "the floor show").[8] These participatory actions cause the usually hermetic categories of "audience" and "actors" to break open and bleed into one another, in a tumultuous reworking of Metz's aforementioned "segregation of spaces" (217). Although a theater production unfolds in the same space and time in which the audience exists, just from a different perspective, Metz says films are from another dimension altogether—a dimension necessarily removed from the audience because the production period has since passed. Although the era in which *Rocky Horror* was shot has indeed passed, the employment of a separate live cast certainly troubles the idea that a film necessarily becomes sealed-off and "done" once it has been committed to the negative—that it becomes detached from an authentic "aura," per Walter Benjamin (221). (In fact, if audience participation can be said to show that the cessation of studio production does not necessarily make a film complete, then perhaps no discrete "original" exists to be depreciated in the first place, to play off of Benjamin's terminology.) Together, the floor show cast and the physically participating audience prove that a film need only be a jumping-off point for creative (re)inscription—not a finalized or univocal object that necessarily oppresses certain viewers when it neglects to represent them.

Physical participation in the alternative cinematic spectacle also troubles another definitive idea about narrative cinema: the doubly false nature of film posited by Metz's "Imaginary Signifier" essay.[9] For example, when one watches cowboys chase Indians across the plains in a Western, not only are the cowboys and Indians physically absent from the theater but these men are actually just actors on a set. In other words, the average film captures an event that is simultaneously intangible and unreal. However, the alternative cinematic spectacle has the potential to disturb this "double falsity" on both counts while simultaneously preventing its internalization. In the cases of *Sound of Music* and *Rocky Horror*, the mimesis of the audience, the inclusion of physical props that both mirror and simulate the onscreen action, and the machinations of live actors make the film's action physically as well as visually present. The film's story, and even aspects of its physical setting, are thus real by virtue of the fact that they are respectively happening and existing inside the theater. The two most basic tenets of the regular narrative film experience—fake action and inorganic presentation—have thereby been dismantled, and the contents of the film text have been externalized, rather than internalized by a passive audience.

Aside from the verbal and the physical, the external mise-en-scène of audience costuming also allows attendees to "see" or "write" themselves into the film text. The majority of attendees at these special *Rocky Horror* and *Sound of Music* screenings dress up as characters from the films and often participate in costume contests. Although dressing up as a film character confers a certain degree of reverence on him, her, or it, such an act still has particularly queer radical potential.[10] First, in the case of *Rocky Horror*, both the floor show cast members and the regular audience members dress up as characters in the film. This multipositional, multidirectional transvestitism creates a complex network of identification and power that disturbs the hierarchical relationships between the filmed body and the live body, the performing body and the nonperforming body: relationships that are intrinsic to the mainstream film-viewing experience as well as that of theatergoing. It also complicates the normally sound designations of "cast members" and "audience members." Add to this the possibility of literal transvestitism, and participation via clothing has an even more radical, and queer, dimension. For example, in the *Sound of Music* sing-along screenings, children, women, and men alike dress as nuns, and in *Rocky Horror*, both men and women reenact Tim Curry's transvestite role as Dr. Frank-N-Furter—which further disrupts the supposedly stable categories of gender and sexuality on which cinematic identification so often depends.[11]

In fact, the highly performative nature of the alternative cinematic spectacle—that is, people are not just performing songs and dramatic parts but also exposing the fact that everything from normative film viewership to gender is a performance of sorts[12]—means that attendees are getting closer to a true identification with the film text than one usually has the chance to become, especially if one is queer. Although Benjamin writes that the film actor "lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience [and,] consequently, the audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera" (228), a completely different scenario takes place in the alternative cinematic spectacle. In the case of *Rocky Horror*, stage actors actually exist alongside screen actors. Furthermore, in their mimetic and parodic movements, the regular audience members in both *Rocky Horror* and *Sound of Music* can also be called actors in their own rights. By specifically positioning themselves in the clothing of certain characters, and with their particular accoutrements and mannerisms, all of these attendees are more likely, and better enabled mentally, to cut out that mediating camera and locate themselves on the screen and vice versa. The "mental machinery" that has "adapted [spectators] to the consumption of films" (Metz 213)—a machinery that rests on the supposition that one has to identify with at least one film character even if none of them looks like

you, lives like you, or loves like you—has now begun to operate in a wholly different, and less alienating, manner.

At this point, the cultural contexts of the films that these alternative cinematic spectacles revolve around should be considered. As a classic family film devoid of any explicit discussion of sexuality whatsoever, *Sound of Music* does not offer any obvious overtures to the queer community or "underground" society as such. The films screened at the Hollywood Forever cemetery also tend to be classics (*Sunset Boulevard* [1950], *Strangers on a Train* [1951], etc.) with no overt "queer credentials," aside from possibly having camp cachet in their outdated language and depictions. Nonetheless, the staging of both of these spectacles creates an alternative space to which queer people are attracted—more than simply being "abnormal," the events transgress the norms set by an obvious and present exemplar of wholesome, mainstream culture. The event thus becomes highly charged, and even eroticized, by the prospect of inserting a perverse element into a revered text—a prospect that the participant can instantly make real. As the Web site for the Prince Charles Theatre in London proclaims, "this special screening [of *Sound of Music*] comes equipped with subtitles to all the songs, allowing you the pleasure of experiencing an incestuous, exhilarating bonding session with a few hundred other fruitcakes as you sing-along to such classics as Climb Every Mountain, Do Re Mi, and of course, Edelweiss [*sic*]." Costumes and spontaneous vocal participation aside, the fact that *Sound of Music* sing-along has been framed in terms of incest and "fruitcakes" fundamentally alters the film text and its possible meanings. Indeed, attendees heeding such advertising may be even more inclined to read queerness into or onto the text than they would have before.

Unlike *Sound of Music* and the films of Cinespia, of course, *Rocky Horror* was anything but "classic" or revered from its first appearance. Nevertheless, O'Brien's music, visuals, and dialogical references situate it solidly in the tradition of the mainstream blockbuster, nodding to *The Wild One* (1953) here, spoofing *Frankenstein* (1931) there, and so on. The opening song itself, "Science Fiction/Double Feature," actually provides a catalog of noteworthy horror and science fiction films ranging from the 1930s to the 1960s:

> And *Flash Gordon* was there in silver underwear
> Claude Rains was *The Invisible Man*.
> Then something went wrong
> for Fay Wray and *King Kong*
> they got caught in a celluloid jam.
> Then at a deadly place *It Came From Outer Space*
> And this is how the message ran.

Although not necessarily respected by critics—or even all audience members—most of *Rocky Horror*'s and science fiction's referents are well-known, modern American movies that have become ingrained in the popular consciousness for one reason or another.[13] Science fiction movies often featured a straight, masculine hero and a corresponding feminine love interest—images that still figure into social expectations and pressures years after the films themselves began to look outdated. By drawing on such a weighty and substantial cultural heritage, the bizarre and often hilarious plot of *Rocky Horror* manages to upend cinematic conventions of storyline, characterization, gender roles, and sexuality, lampooning both the mainstream Hollywood film and mainstream morality. In building a cult around such a film, fans not only endorse its critiques but also perform the same cultural work, though of course with an added level of mediation. So whereas O'Brien was immediately responding to and playing off of an established film tradition, *Rocky Horror* devotees enthusiastically respond to this response and participate in the warping (and queering) of the classic/popular narrative film by way of the 1975 pastiche.

Although these alternative cinematic spectacles manage to take an average film—or, in the case of *Rocky Horror*, a patchwork of somewhat canonical film and literary texts—and rework its content, they are perhaps most radical in their subversion of politics as usual. Simply put, participation in one of these spectacles does not implicate the viewer in the film market in the same way that simply "going to the movies" does. This would seem to be a distinct boon for the queer viewer, who often faces the decision of either boycotting mainstream films because of their heterocentric, heterosexist, or even homophobic nature (a choice that alienates them from the rest of the filmgoing populace) or viewing them anyway and feeling at least financially, if not philosophically, complicit in their ideology. In fact, identity issues momentarily aside, film viewing often seems to be part of a circular, inescapable pattern of reinforcing the ideological/ political status quo—Metz discusses how paying for admission "makes it possible to shoot other films" (213), and Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni state that, "as a result of being a material product of the system, [a film] is also an ideological product of the system, which in France [and, we could add, just about everywhere else] means capitalism" (197). Thus, attending a film not only perpetuates the production of further films but also further perpetuates capitalism, which in turn both dictates and inheres in film production. If, then, capitalism rules the day, issues that do not immediately concern those who govern the modes of production (e.g., queer representations and sensibilities) necessarily drop out of the film economy altogether.[14]

Alternative cinematic spectacles both remedy and circumvent the aforementioned pitfalls. Although they can never take the place of "going to the

movies"—primarily because they literally center on the same old films most of the time—they pointedly do not set up the dead-end choice between seeing and complying or avoiding and being alienated, the choice that the queer viewer usually faces at the cinema. Moreover, they also circumvent what Wilton envisions as a more attractive third option for the marginalized viewer. She writes of her "queer-chameleon ability to adopt an alien reading position for the night," to go on "queer holiday" when watching a movie (351–52). Although this may be more adaptive or immediately gratifying as a viewing strategy, it still reeks of a defeatist or even voluntary collapsing of critical distance, a lá Jennifer Hammett—a move that radical queer theorists and feminist critics such as Mary Ann Doane would certainly lament.[15] In any case, this third option simply does not apply to an alternative cinematic spectacle: Although a classic or otherwise mainstream film might be its focus, the very fact that it has been presented as something of a "special event" immediately introduces a level of critique and critical distance into its reception while simultaneously exhorting the viewer not to take the film so seriously in the first place. In this light, Doane's distinction between "submission and critique" (Hammett 247) becomes irrelevant, as these positions are no longer mutually exclusive. To use Hammett's own terms, the alternative cinematic spectacle does not pose or construct an "ideological impediment," first because the event has been staged as participatory rather than submissive, and second because participation and commentary have been staged as entertainment. Moreover, the queer viewer no longer has to take an evaluative position organized around whether or not a film immediately applies to him or her. As alternative cinematic spectacles do not "expect" or encourage viewers to leave themselves or their interests at the door and "just enjoy," the enjoyment actually comes from bringing oneself and one's interests along and writing them into the text.

The alternative cinematic spectacle also subverts politics as usual in a specifically socioeconomic sense. *Rocky Horror* mainly plays at art houses and independent movie theaters, a phenomenon that, in many cases, indirectly underwrites the exhibition of nonmainstream and, often, queer films. Moreover, Robert E. Wood explains that, even in its initial run, *Rocky Horror*'s (relative) success depended on "repeat business" (162), rather than on wide appeal to a large number of one-time viewers—as is the case with most films. Ironically, such repeat business manages to subvert the cultural state of things spelled out in works such as Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In that essay, Benjamin expresses concerns about the fascist potential and capitalist nature of contemporary art, writing that "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition," substituting "a plurality of copies for a unique existence" (221). Although *Rocky Horror* is surely no exception to

the phenomenon of mass reproduction—VHS and DVD copies of the film are widely available—the nature of its public exhibition ensures that even identical prints of the film will not have the same "life." The unpredictable and ever-changing nature of the spectacle, resulting from new audience members, slightly differing and never-static "scripts," different staging choices, and so on, ensures that a given film print will enjoy a "unique existence," even though it may not be the only one of its kind, and even if it never leaves the confines of one particular theater.

The Sing-a-Long-a series also changes the typical process of film exhibition by virtue of being, essentially, a brand-name product. Acting as the intermediary between the film company and the theaters, Sing-a-Long-a secures the rights to a film, including the right to run the lyric captions on the screen, and then farms the event out to various host theaters. The films are then marketed as "Sing-a-Long-a *Sound of Music*" or "Sing-a-Long-a *Wizard of Oz*," and so on, which immediately marks them as alternative or altered versions. Tickets are sold directly through the company, as well as through booking agents and the theaters themselves, which also tend to be independent or historical venues; thus, no regular "box office" exists, or at least not one in which the Sing-a-Long-a films are evaluated or judged alongside current releases. The cinematic spectacles that Cinespia hosts at Los Angeles' Hollywood Forever cemetery—which, of course, has no real theater to begin with, a fact that fundamentally changes the aesthetics of the viewing experience—also incorporate film prints that have to be specifically procured for the occasion. In fact, many of the prints that Cinespia shows are rare ones that first require restoration—a fact that provides the very film print with an almost literal aura.[16]

All of the previously mentioned instances speak to the fact that the alternative cinematic spectacle does not, as Metz says, "ensur[e] the auto-reproduction of the institution" (213). Although some of the prints involved in these alternative cinematic spectacles may have been purchased or rented from a mainstream film company, the fact remains that they are not circulating in the same institutional economy in which most movie releases exist. For example, *Rocky Horror*'s exhibition trajectory (not to mention its financial history) has been wildly unpredictable: As Sal Piro explains in "*Creatures of the Night*": The Rocky Horror Picture Show *Experience*, "the film was considered a failure and did not get a wide release and was shelved. Then, on April Fool's Day, 1976, Tim Deegan, a young advertising executive at 20th Century Fox . . . persuaded Bill Quigley to replace the midnight show at the Waverly Theater with [*Rocky Horror*]" (1). Moreover, "long after its initial run, the film continues to be distributed and promoted by its producers . . . far more widely than was ever planned" (Wood 157). Importantly, unlike the typical filmgoing state of affairs,

the (potential) popularity of particular alternative screenings does not perpetuate the institutional cycle that produces new films—which would thereby constitute a "reproduction of the system." Rather, such popularity extends to, and potentially enacts, the restaging of the *same* film. As Gregory A. Waller explains, the spending power of "midnight moviegoers . . . becom[es] a directly determining factor, since the films they patronize will be booked—revived—again and again, so long as 35 millimeter prints are available and the films turn a profit." In contrast, "the paying customers at a first-run multicinema can in part determine how many weeks a particular film might be booked, but not whether the film will be repeatedly revived after its first run" (180). In fact, Waller's idea that midnight movies constitute a genre suggests that the aforementioned patronization actually has the power to determine the cultural placement of a given film.

Taking all of the above into account, we might consider Comolli and Narboni's claim that "no film-maker can, by his own individual efforts, change the economic relations governing the manufacture and distribution of his film" (197). This statement that may look different in our age of digital video, the Independent Film Channel, and so on, but it essentially holds true in a capitalist society. However, the alternative cinematic spectacle proves that at least certain events can upset these relations by changing the normal distribution and consumption pattern—and by placing viewers, not just filmmakers, in the position of changing the economic (and social) relations referred to previously. More than just constituting alternatives to the mainstream cinematic economy, these events set up their own microeconomies in which the central texts are involved in radical self-reiteration. In fact, if we consider that the reproduction of social and economic relations is a key concern in much Marxist criticism,[17] we might say that such events present us with a truly queer version of reproduction: an unpredictable process of reinstantiation that refuses to replicate normative social structures.

Although these central texts are restaged in ways that circumvent the normative film economy, *Rocky Horror* attendees explicitly play out this idea of radical self-reproduction among themselves. The *Rocky Horror* spectacle includes (or, as some might even argue, centers around) the "devirginizing" ceremony: First-time attendees are usually branded with a "V" in lipstick or marker on their foreheads and brought onstage for a mock group sex ritual, during which other audience members may yell insults, encouragement, or (homo)sexual comments at them. (The very fact that "virgins" are singled out from the larger crowd indicates that most attendees have seen *Rocky Horror* before and actually see it on a fairly regular basis—which again echoes the idea of the same film being transmitted and transacted over and over, yet with a difference each time: the uniqueness of the

particular setting, the composition of the audience, and so forth.) *Rocky Horror* fans thus beget other *Rocky Horror* fans in a sort of nonsexual, though highly sexualized, mode of reproduction. In a mythological sense, this ritual seems to hearken back to the colloquial ideas about "homosexual reproduction" that modernist Djuna Barnes affectionately lampooned in *Ladies Almanack*—a mock epic about how lesbian seductions produce new lesbians, obviating the need for them to go outside their circle (i.e., to men) to reproduce. However, although the *Rocky Horror* experience is often particularly homosexual in nature, it would more accurately be described as "homosocial" in the sense that attendees—whether there for their first time or their hundredth time—share a particular queer sensibility that attracts them to the spectacle and bonds them together in it.

Read in light of works such as Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America*, the folk concept of homosexual reproduction and the *Rocky Horror* tradition itself seem to operate on a similar basis to the nativist family. In *America*, Michaels describes that family as a cultural space passionately policed and maintained by its members, with homosexuality, incest, and sterility as the only possible expressions of sexuality (12–14). In fact, such incestuous, insular impulses have fueled the recent uproar over Sing-a-Long-a's acquisition of the rights to show *Rocky Horror* on a limited-run basis in the United Kingdom. *Rocky Horror* fans and floor show cast members have publicly stated on a now defunct Web site that this move undermines the entire viewing culture that has grown up around the film and also potentially threatens individual theaters' and floor show casts' rights to exhibit the film as they choose and as they have long done.[18] (Some also fear that, if the Sing-a-Long-a *Rocky Horror* does well, Twentieth Century Fox might enter into an exclusive distribution contract with the company.) This uproar further implies that although Sing-a-Long-a also provides a democratic and queer-friendly viewing experience, it may paradoxically end up doing so at the expense of the cinematic spectacle that spawned it.

However strongly its fans hold on to the idea of membership and "insiderness," though, the fact remains that *Rocky Horror* and most other alternative cinematic spectacles exhibit democratic, rather than exclusive, ideals at their very core. The participation ethos, the destruction of various hierarchies that structure normal moviegoing, and the grassroots level at which *Rocky Horror* floor show casts search for theaters and organize screenings speak to its very egalitarian nature.[19] Beyond this, there are even more specific, literal ways in which attendees of alternative cinematic spectacles have more authority and control than filmgoers usually do. Richard R. Day notes how *Rocky Horror* attendees begin shouting "Lips! Lips! Lips!" after the audience has assembled for a screening in a call for the actual projection to begin. As "the houselights dim and the movie begins

[and] the shouting reaches the threshold of pain," he writes, a tiny onscreen image finally comes into focus and "acquires meaning" (216): It is a pair of disembodied lips, out of which Richard O'Brien's voice begins singing the "Science Fiction/Double Feature" theme song. In a very real way, the audience's chant has set the physical film itself in motion, and in a very symbolic way, this chant has "caused" the lips to appear and the overall spectacle to begin unfolding.

However, the film does not go on to unfold in a wholly continuous manner—depending on the floor show cast's decisions and the staging of extrafilmic events (costume contests, the devirginizing ritual, etc.), the person in charge of projection will stop and restart the film at various points. The doggedly teleological process of film exhibition has thus been disrupted. More important, the floor show cast members, not a professional projectionist, theater owner, or member of the film industry, have disrupted it. (Although a professional projectionist may be employed, of course, he or she is instructed when to stop and restart the film.) In a sense, *Rocky Horror* attendees have fundamentally disobeyed the original filmmakers' implicit instructions, as well as the informal instructions that most people internalize over many years of watching movies in the theater: As a discrete object with certain boundaries and certain systems of logic, a publicly exhibited film must be (and, in the normal cinematic situation, can only be) watched from beginning to end without interruption. By establishing these wildly different rules for viewing, *Rocky Horror*'s audience members control the *physical* film as well the public experience of it. Although they are necessarily alienated from the now-bygone modes of production, as a Benjaminian-Marxist interpretation might assert, they are no longer alienated from the processes that govern consumption.

Another aspect of democratic audience control exists in the level of extratextual understanding that the alternative cinematic spectacle allows for—or perhaps even encourages. As previously mentioned, the exhibited Sing-a-Long-a films are never first- or even second-run movies, and some date back as far as 60 years. Viewers have had ample time to memorize the action and dialogue of the films, and they have also had the chance to familiarize themselves with the background histories, details, and minutiae, thus becoming privy to various inflections in and influences on the text. As Alexander Doty states, certain "elements of queer reading" develop from "knowledge of extra-textual behind-the-scenes gossip" (340)—in other words, ways of penetrating the text and finding spaces for pleasure within it often depend on the viewer's particular knowledge of what to "read in" and where to do it. In fact, a particularly acute reading can produce the kind of *jouissance* or bliss of which Roland Barthes speaks. Writing of his first time seeing *Sound of Music* Sing-a-Long-a production, one gay viewer

says that, when Uncle Max approached the children about singing in the Salzburg Festival, "his cry of 'I have an announcement! Surprise, surprise!' led to someone shouting out, 'I'm gay!' [. . . which] was especially funny since Max was played by Richard Haydn, who was a homosexual" (Kenrick, para. 9). The alternative cinematic spectacle thus allows the queer or otherwise-marginalized viewer to negotiate his or her film-watching experience in an expert manner, becoming distinctly empowered in comparison to the average filmgoer. Not only can he or she master the art of what to say and when/where to say it but he or she can become master of both the fundamental and the external elements of the text.

For queer or otherwise-marginalized viewers, these cinematic spectacles present a good alternative to mainstream filmgoing, while simultaneously modeling a widely applicable, radical mode of viewership. Some of the tactics involved in these spectacles would never be appropriate under any other circumstances, but the ways of watching that they suggest—seeking the inscribable spaces, consciously recognizing falsity, refusing to internalize the system's norms, and so on—can be applied in everyday reception. Moreover, these spectacles develop and strengthen a particular queer sensibility. Regardless of whether or not the "beneficiary" is actually queer, this sensibility precludes one from taking the defeatist route of viewership, from deeming a film or other artistic work devoid of potential if one cannot immediately relate to or find obvious inroads to it. One of the last songs in *Rocky Horror* actually seems to urge the viewer to adopt such a queer sensibility: In "Don't Dream It," Frank tells his audience not to "dream it," but to "be it," and to also "give [themselves] over to absolute pleasure." While participating in *Rocky Horror*, singing along to *Sound of Music*, or picnicking "above and below the stars" during a classic Cinespia screening are distinctly pleasurable, escapist acts, they are not apolitical in the way that Wilton would imagine—they subvert the normative reproductive capitalism of the film industry and fundamentally uproot the often-exclusionary and alienating norms of traditional moviegoing. Therein lies the real "absolute pleasure": escaping the struggle or "ideological impediment" that the cinema usually presents, without having to shed one's identity or interests first.

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Notes

1. Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X* defines spectacularism as "a fascination with extreme situations" (50). Critics such as Ben Singer have discussed how such a fascination has figured into film's development, stating that "from very early on, the movies gravitated towards an 'aesthetics of astonishment,' in . . . both form and subject matter" (90).
2. The Sing-a-Long-a company operates sing-along events in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. *Sound of Music* was their first and remains their most popular screening. The independent group Cinespia screens films on a mausoleum wall at Los Angeles' famous Hollywood Forever cemetery. (Their respective Web sites are located at http://www.singalonga.net and http://www.cinespia.org/cinespia.html.) Though many other alternative film events take place throughout the world, I have selected these three to show how dissimilar events can make for powerful reworkings of the film experience, with particular benefits for traditionally underrepresented audience members.
3. Among other records, the 2001 *Guinness Book* reports that 4,446 children performed the film's famous song-and-dance number "The Time Warp," at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham, England.
4. Various scripts posted on the Internet include references to O. J. Simpson and Rodney King, for example, whereas Richard R. Day's 1983 article "Rocky Horror Picture Show: A Speech Event in Three Acts" records a contemporaneous reference to a series of Miller Lite commercials.
5. The film seems like even more of a "living text" considering how certain references generated by the audience—both sexual and nonsexual in nature—change over time. The *Rocky Horror* of five years ago is not the same as the one of today, nor is the *Rocky Horror* screened in Los Angeles the same as the one screened in New York. Although the reception of any given art object always depends on time and place, the average, mainstream film text appears static in comparison to those screened at alternative cinematic spectacles.
6. Daniel Dayan writes of the "system of the suture," the highly ideological language system that "speaks" the film, in his essay, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema."

7. Steve Neale's "Extract from *Genre*" selection quotes Barthes as saying that the "writerly text" (alternately called the "text of *jouissance*") "unsettles . . . historical, cultural, psychological assumptions" to the point that the reader may be discomforted or even bored (99).
8. These casts have their own names, from Belfast's Lip Service to the Satanic Mechanics of the University of Maryland, and they are often in charge of planning and scheduling the screenings themselves. The spectacle thereby becomes even more dynamic and democratic: The screening dates, times, and locations, as well as the existence of a screening to begin with, depend on the work of self-motivated, nonprofessional lay people.
9. Metz actually says that "what unfolds [on the screen] may . . . be more or less fictional, but the unfolding itself is fictive: the actor, the 'decór,' the words one hears are all absent, everything *is recorded*" (214). I thus extrapolate the principle that nondocumentary films are fictive in their unfolding as well as fictional in their content.
10. As evidenced by screenings of *Star Wars* films and the like, fans are not necessarily—and in fact rarely—trying to be irreverent by dressing up as film characters. However, the intimate relationship that such homage presupposes disrupts the normative economy of identification—a film protagonist should be an emblematic figure, not an inhabitable space, and audience members should be interpellated by a film, not attempt to interpellate it or its characters.
11. Although Teresa de Lauretis and other critics and contemporaries of Laura Mulvey have suggested that women must be mentally "cross-dressed" to take pleasure in narrative cinema, all manner of people are voluntarily cross-dressing in *Rocky Horror* and are actively taking pleasure in their viewing experience.
12. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*; although she had a more sustained notion of "gender-as-a-performance" in mind—drag often, rather erroneously, gets tagged as the exemplary, or at least easiest, application of the concept—I do believe that *Rocky* attendees are at least subconsciously exploiting her theory to some degree.
13. The exhaustive annotated version of the lyrics at http://www.rockymusic.org/sfdf/ also looks at the source stories for some of these films, tracing one back as far as Shakespeare. *Rocky Horror*, then, exists as a complex amalgamation of cultural influences, both literary and cinematic, and must be considered in the context of wider popular culture, not just the seminal world of "midnight movies."
14. Many queer theorists would—and have—called homophobia a particular feature of capitalism, not just a by-product.
15. Although Hammett seems to doubt that "we" (feminist viewers to her, though queer or other minority viewers certainly fit into her schema) can escape the ideology of the film system. As Doane and Mulvey et al. see it, however, her prescription to "give up the epistemological ambitions of feminist film theory, and pursue feminist critical and political goals unencumbered by fears of the

alienating effects of representation" seems overly simplistic and even flippant (246).

16. Cinespia often advertises its screenings based on the rarity of the print it has procured, which obviously speaks to the (supposedly) unique tastes of the viewer, as well as to his or her eagerness to experience an atypical cinematic event.
17. See, for example, Louis Althusser's 1977 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."
18. While the "singalongasucks" Web site is no longer active, other sites to exist that critique Sing-a-Long-a's production of *Rocky Horror*. For example, a United Kingdom fan site has a forum at http://www.timewarp.org.uk/sing/index.htm where fans can weigh in on the Sing-a-Long-a's version. Most posts are very critical and say that Sing-a-Long-a's production pales in comparison to the cast-based stage shows run by fans.
19. The *Rocky Horror* "Interactive Theater List" (http://pages.towson.edu/jbaker/rockytheaters/theater.html) has a state-by-state listing of active theaters, defunct theaters, and "Active Casts without Theaters." This odd cataloguing suggests not only that the Rocky Horror phenomenon is larger than the film itself but also that a floor show cast's *raison d'etre* is to bring the spectacle experience to the masses.

8

"Don't Dream It, Be It"

Cultural Performance and Communitas at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

Liz Locke

> Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature, and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as to thought.
>
> —*Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti- Structure*

> As a popular form of religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, that they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity—heroic figures—and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society. As we watch the characters and follow the drama on the screen, we are instructed in the values and myths of our culture and given models on which to pattern our lives.
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> —*M. Darrol Bryant, "Cinema, Religion and Popular Culture*"

Milton Singer's phrase "cultural performance," adopted by social scientists as a unit of analysis for circumscribing "plays, concerts, and lectures . . . but also prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies,

festivals, and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the cultural and artistic" (71), can be productively applied to many of the quasi-cultic creations and recreations enjoyed by many young Americans in the early years of the twenty-first century. Singer's search for a unit of analysis ended when his Indian friends suggested that if he wanted to understand "who we are," he should attend local performance events in which what was on display for all to see was "who we are not." In the same spirit—from skate boarding to eroticons, from goth costuming to online gaming, and from fan fiction to poetry slams—the current generation of adolescents and postadolescents have devised/discovered myriad forms of performative self-expression and group identification that allow for the instantiation of "who we are" via the always temporary category "who we are not."

The Rocky Horror Picture Show—a film that spawned a participatory cult involving about thirty thousand people at its peak (Piro and Hess)—is a unique example of just such performative group expression. On a weekly basis, in theaters across the United States, Europe, and Australia, people gather up props, put on stage makeup, outfit themselves (often in drag), and attend an event at which they shout instructions, comments, requests, mockeries, rhetorical questions, and appreciative catcalls at light flickering on one end of a darkened room. Some dress as closely as possible to the costumes of the film's characters and stand in front of the projection screen facing the audience, reciting every memorized line in sync, mimicking each gesture, turn, and facial expression of the actors behind them. Some have enacted this scene, whether seated in the audience or as local "cast members," more than a thousand times (Piro, *Creatures of the Night*; Sharman). Many of the film's showings are prefaced by preshows involving the initiation of "virgins," costume competitions, trivia bowls, parodies of beauty contests, or skits incorporating material from other movie cults.

When the evening is over, the heightened sense of community provoked by the event and the intensity of the audience's unabashed confidence in itself and in the vivid world of *Rocky Horror* dissipates. Most of the participants then resume their conventional roles as high school students, librarians, e-workers, and accountants. They have experienced a temporary transformation but will show no outward signs of any permanent change in their lives. They have simply, in the words of *Rocky Horror*'s narrator, had a "night out they will remember for a long, long time." For others, however, the event will become a weekly rite in which the preshows, weekly ceremonials, and the film itself will act as catalysts for personal and social transformation.

Rocky Horror performances are characterized by individual and collective transformation and embodiment and are marked by a high degree

of reflexivity on all levels, from the content of the film to the weekly creation of the participatory theater event. The phenomenon is especially well accounted for by Victor Turner's work on liminality and communitas. After a sketch of Turner's ideas, I draw on Julia Kristeva's term "intertextuality" and discuss the relevant elements constituting what Lee Haring (borrowing from Kristeva) calls "interperformance." Haring's checklist, designed for application to folkloric performance events, frames a discussion of the intertextual content of *Rocky Horror* and the interperformances created by its audiences and audience-casts.

Liminality and Communitas

Following Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner notes three stages in what have come to be known as rites of passage (*rites du passage*), those "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age" that occur in every human society (94). It was Turner's particular contribution to anthropology to investigate closely what van Gennep identified as the middle phase of these processes: the liminal or threshold stage. Liminality may not be productively divorced from the structural phases that precede and follow it—separation and reincorporation (or schism)—however, the intervening antistructural period in which "the characteristics of the ritual subject . . . are ambiguous" (94) will serve as the initial route for understanding the transformational value of *Rocky Horror*.

"Communitas" is Turner's neologism for the collective spatial and temporal dimension occupied by liminal personae. His characterization of communitas fits well with reports of what people experience at *Rocky Horror* performances, and his description of liminal entities holds for virtually every agent typically or necessarily associated with them. Turner writes,

> Since this condition [of liminality] and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space . . . their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols. . . . [L]iminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness. . . . [N]eophytes in initiation or puberty rites . . . may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked. . . . [They may possess] nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands. Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they may obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without comment. (95)

Although Turner's focus as an anthropologist was on traditional societies, he wrote that "the collective dimensions, communitas and structure,

are found at all stages and levels of culture and society" (113). He continues, "Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or 'holy,' possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency" (128). I return to the various elements that he identifies as characterizing liminal states and persons in the context of the *Rocky Horror* experience. Later, Turner continues, "The kind of communitas desired [by initiands] is a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared" (138) that "emerges where social structure is not" (126). What Turner calls "normative communitas," an experience that falls within the domain of structured social life, will first figure tentatively and then decisively in this analysis, both for the film and for *Rocky Horror* performances; however, it is the experience of "existential or spontaneous communitas" (132), a temporary state of "betwixt-and-betweenness" (138) that simultaneously collectivizes and transforms social entities, that will concern us at the outset.

The *Rocky Horror* phenomenon creates the experience of communitas by embodying textual and performative elements that can only be called religious. Ron Rosenbaum tells us that he experienced it as "a mutant form of organized religion . . . , a midnight mass that was less satanic than sophomoric, but utterly serious for all that. The prescripted lines the audience called out were like the responsive readings of a congregation to a holy text. The absurdity of the passion play on screen was less important than the state of ecstatic communion the audience worked itself into while watching" (87). *Rocky Horror*'s sacred dimension is diffuse insofar as it has the potential to arise wherever and whenever the film is viewed, yet it is also highly structured and contained insofar as viewing of the film and the audience participation that accompanies it is bounded by time and space. The existential communitas that arises in the carnival atmosphere of the theater will be maintained on the street at a lower pitch by certain audience members who will gather outside to talk or go out for breakfast after the show, but these groups are small, however central they have become in the ongoing performativity of liminality-as-identity within the *Rocky Horror* context.

Inter-, Meta-, and Hyperperformance

Turning now to Haring's elements of "interperformance, the first to lend itself to an analysis of the *Rocky Horror* cult phenomenon is "transmodalization,"

his term for a form of variation that denotes a shift in genre from one performer to another (371). *Rocky Horror* audiences and cast members shift the performances of the on-screen actors to themselves, the generic frame of the event from cinema to drama, and the theatergoing experience itself from film-as-object to film-as-relationship. Haring also discusses "transvalorization"—a "change in the value explicitly or implicitly attributed to an action or set of actions"—as a variant of interperformance. The most readily noticeable shift of performative value during a successful *Rocky Horror* performance occurs in the speech of the audience: It provokes the lips of the opening sequence to appear, it engages in dialogue with a filmed image, it evokes the creators of that image by calling their names, and most important, it smashes the convention that keeps theatergoers together in a state of normative communitas, characterized by passivity and silence.

Umberto Eco makes a case for *Casablanca*, arguably one of the most enduring cult films of all time, that "it is not *one* movie. It is *movies*" (208). He posits that a cult film "must display certain textual features, in the sense that, . . . it becomes a sort of textual syllabus, a living example of living textuality" (199). In the same way, intertextuality, in the strict sense, serves as *Rocky Horror*'s primary framing device on all levels of the experience. Originally, the initial sequence was scripted not with dark red lips but with a montage of scenes from the ten classic science fiction films mentioned in the opening song (Henkin 194). *Rocky Horror* not only cannibalizes the science fiction and horror genres but borrows motifs and conventions from Mae West and Elvis Presley movies, Roger Corman's biker flicks, gothic romances, Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, striptease and cabaret shows, the myth of Psyche and Eros, 1960s-style happenings, and soap operas. In tacit agreement with Eco, Irene Oppenheim writes, "Taken in disparate parts, it's all too contrived and too familiar; but stuck together, *Rocky*, while not altogether different, emerges with something of its own. There's a clumsy good-natured innocence about this stew that (in the right circumstances) can seem redeeming" (28).

Rolf Eichler discusses the intertextual elements in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which he identifies as the template for all subsequent literary and cinematic treatments of the Promethean theme of "man's [*sic*] desire to perfect himself through others" (99). He then goes further than most critics to point out "the effect of intertextuality on a work's reception." In the case of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's readers were in an excellent position to understand the social and moral conventions that held sway in the novel's narrative present. Hence they were also in position to grasp why and when these norms were being challenged and undermined. "The more time that elapses between creation and reading, the more texts will have interposed themselves between work and reader—a fact that becomes the

more significant for *Rocky Horror* since so many texts, plays, and films have now erected a background that is bound to give a new appearance to the author's subject matter" (Eichler 99–100).

This interposition of texts is not limited to those directly concerned in a comparative discussion of *Rocky Horror* and Shelley's bricolage monster, nor even to those genres mentioned earlier. The makers of *Rocky Horror* also extended "intertextual space" (Kristeva 225) to include a wide variety of icons from elite culture. They give us Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, first reproduced in tableau (in the wedding scene), then as a reproduction of the painting (next to the mummy case), and finally parodied in tableau (Riff Raff beside Magenta with a three-pronged laser gun). The Criminologist's scrapbook contains a "Whistler's Mother" signed by Meatloaf and a reproduction of Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. The *Mona Lisa* and *David* appear, first facing right and then left, making us hyperaware of their reproducibility (Eichler 112), and hence their incorporability into mainstream culture. *The Creation of Adam*, signed by Michelangelo, is painted on the bottom of Frank-N-Furter's swimming pool.

But the audience has taken all this yet further. Having no fear of transgressing even the shattered generic conventions exploited by its creators, *Rocky Horror* fans drag in literally everything they can think of. If an intelligible remark is covered by "Grice's four maxims of conversation: be relevant, informative, brief, and truthful," and Day's addendum: "Be witty" (Day 217–18), it will elicit a positive response from the *Rocky Horror* audience in the form of being repeated at subsequent shows; it may even be incorporated into *Rocky Horror* liturgy (see Piro, *Creatures of the Night*; Henkin; Day; Duranti). Obviously, the creators were fully conscious of their *own* intertextual manipulations, but they could not have anticipated what their audiences would do with the result. In the eight-minute preface to the 1992 video edition, Richard O'Brien, who wrote the play, music, and lyrics, says to the camera, "People come over and say to me, 'Hey, have you seen what they're doing with your movie?' Well, I finally went to see it. It was the best piece of theater I've ever seen. It encapsulated live action with filmed image with audience participation. And three out of three . . . ain't bad" ("Interview").

Another variant of interperformance, which Haring calls "allusion," is also in play here. Citing Susan Stewart, he writes, "In folktale as in literature, an allusion is a brief reference to something the interpretive community will recognize from its existing knowledge. Few situations in life, in fact, do not make use of allusion in that sense" (366). We can see allusion at work when considering audience responses to Frank's preparation for his "last supper." Magenta stands holding a huge gong and says in an exaggerated southern accent, "Dinnah is prepared!" Audiences in 1979, alluding to a

television commercial for Shake-'n-Bake, yelled, "And I helped!" When Riff Raff hurls the roast onto the dining table, the audience groaned, "Oh, no, Meatloaf again?" referring to the actor/rock star who plays Eddie and who Frank mercy-butchers with an ice pick. ("You sure know how to pick your friends!" quips the audience.) Frank reaches for an electric knife to carve the roast at dinner, and the audience cheerfully supplied, "Always reach for a Hamilton Beech!"

It is clear that the audience uses intertextuality to create interperformance. However, in the process of remarking on audience responses and behaviors, it also creates "meta-performances"—performances that comment on earlier performances and ensure a high standard for responses in much the same way as traditional storytellers "ensure excellence in folktales" (Haring 368) by using the operation Alan Dundes called "metafolklore," or "folkloristic statements about folklore" (506). For example, when overenthusiastic audience members use their spray bottles too soon—before the on-screen Brad and Janet actually step into the rain—veterans shout, "It doesn't rain in cars, assholes!" Haring's element of "tradition" is also relevant in this regard. He writes, "What is most relevant to the notion of interperformance is that the rules for narrative performance are 'traditionalized.' Thus, if a narrator is perceived as conforming to the rules, he can imitate or even parody a predecessor" (366). *Rocky Horror* shadow casts—practiced performance groups comprised of fully made-up and costumed fans who parallel the action of the film—have taken the participatory aspect of the event farther than any midnight movie cult has ever gone (Hoberman 19).

The concept of "hypertextuality" as developed by Gerard Genette refers to "the transformations which change one story into another, for instance when a prose narrative is versified" (Haring 369). I extend the term to include the concept of "hyperperformance" to describe what happens at a *Rocky Horror* event. Over the years, Double Feature, San Francisco's Strand Theater cast, The Celluloid Jam of the Oriental Theater in Milwaukee, Voyeuristic Intention of the Rialto in South Pasadena, the Eighth Street Players of the Eighth Street Playhouse in New York, and countless other shadow casts formally and informally constituted (see Piro, *Creatures of the Night*) have transformed a film into a live performance event, a movie into a celebratory festival, film buffs into drag queens, theater aisles into dance floors, and cinema houses into unrestrained, yet safe and (usually) sober, late night parties. In other words, "hyperperformance" as executed by the audience and casts of *Rocky Horror* parallels Haring's interrelated notions of "situation" and "tradition." Citing Richard Bauman's and Dell Hymes's work in folklore studies, Haring writes, "The specific conditions in which stories are told actually constitute the *event* as the meaningful context

for artistic communication. . . . When societies adopt borrowed plots and characters, they bring to them certain 'pre-existing cultural emphases' which determine how the borrowed stories are adapted into a new setting. Responding to specific situations, storytellers demonstrate their creativity" (366). The fact that an audience for a film demonstrates *any* creativity is in itself noteworthy, but that an audience would go to such lengths actively to bring its "pre-existing cultural emphases" into the open and into dialogue with a film is virtually fantastic.

The last element of Haring's interperformance model that I consider here is what he calls "quotation." This is obviously related to what I have called *Rocky Horror*'s primary framing device—intertextuality; it is also connected to the notion of metaperformance insofar as the audience is repeatedly engaged in quotation of its own previous response lines. I have already noted the *Mona Lisa* and *David* as examples of intersemiotic quotation; however, the most famous visual quotation occurs when Rocky carries Frank, dead without having satisfied his wish to be dressed like Fay Wray, draped across his tanned, muscled back up a model of the RKO Radio Tower, shaking his fists and growling over his shoulder at his attacker.

It is also possible, however, to discuss recognizable reentextualized quotations from spoken discourse. For example, Frank-N-Furter has told us that he's "making a man with blonde hair and a tan." Thrilled with his creation, he sings, "In just seven days, I can make you a man." The allusion here, of course, is not only to the famous Charles Atlas fitness regiment but also, more loosely, to Genesis 1:26–27. A lesser-known and more direct quotation is spoken as the ultimate call to "absolute pleasure" and serves as the cathartic mainspring of the movie: "Don't dream it. Be it" was an advertising slogan for Frederick's of Hollywood lingerie (Corliss 23).

Working in the opposite direction, *Rocky Horror* performance is the source of one-liners that occasionally crop up in conversations far removed from their original context. I've heard more than one fan express a divergent opinion by saying, "I didn't make him for *you*!" And "What charming underclothes you both have" is a remark I heard from a friend while watching MTV. Oppenheim cites several examples: "This week . . . I received a potpourri catalogue from the Midwest that featured loungewear emblazoned with 'Creature of the Night,' a memorable phrase in the *Rocky* song, 'Touch-a Touch-a Touch-a Touch Me.' The line, 'Don't Dream It. Be It,' has rhythmically entered the language in places as far afield as the sign language text *Survival Sign*, with its cover quote: 'Don't say it. Sign it.' [I] created a T-shirt with my own favorite *Rocky* quote: 'Madness takes its toll.' I still like that one" (29).

Over at the Frankenstein Place

Having said that the liminal is, according to Turner, "almost everywhere held to be sacred," it is my intention now to show that *Rocky Horror* is no exception. Oppenheim makes the connection: "I'm surprised theologians haven't paid more attention to *Rocky*. For there are, I think, religious implications in both the film and its rituals. Certainly among the reasons *Rocky* has endured is that beneath its surface silliness the film tells a tale about initiation into a dangerous world; about surviving lost innocence; about deviance and acceptance; about creation, forgiveness, death, and regeneration" (29). Referring to Turner's characteristics of threshold people already cited, we find death and the womb (the wedding-funeral), darkness and sexuality, and the wilderness (Frank's castle is "in the middle of nowhere"). The range of liminal attributes encapsulated in *Rocky Horror*'s star, Tim Curry as Frank-N-Furter, is impressive. Similar to Victor Frankenstein, his literary near-namesake, Frank is a scientist who creates life in a laboratory. Lou Adler, *Rocky Horror*'s producer, explains the resonance of the archetype: "You need not have seen *King Kong* to recognize the ape in *Rocky Horror*'s final climb. You need not have heard of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley or seen Boris Karloff's monster to know the legend of Frankenstein. Certain themes and cinematic images have become part of us" (Henkin 131).

Reversals of normative convention in *Rocky Horror* are compiled from life as they were for Shelley, but also from Shelley's story itself. Tim Curry's scientist is no recluse—his castle is a site of revelry in the form of a convention and party for his guests from home, the planet Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania. Mark Siegel notes,

> [Brad and Janet's] entrance onto the castle grounds is an appropriately marked transition from the profane world of daily life to the sacred world of ritual. The transitional ground of the forest, the warning sign on the gate, the Transylvanian flag, and the massive ornamental door are all normal ceremonial aspects of rites of separation and transition [liminality], emphasized in the film by Janet's singing "Over at the Frankenstein Place." Their entrance into the castle is further marked by what Van Gennep calls "purifications," rituals that mark the individual's separation from the profane world. . . . Frank notes that their nakedness makes them "vulnerable," and this is precisely the act [of disrobing them]'s ritual significance. (309)

In other words, the liminal phase is disorienting by definition. Other instances include Frank draping himself, blasphemously pieta-like, over a throne as he presides lasciviously at the "Annual Transylvanian Convention," paralleling his ministerial role at the Happschatt wedding. Later,

his newest playmate, Rocky, will sing about his dread of imminent death immediately upon his emergence from the birth vat. Rocky then runs from the embrace of his mother-father-lover-exploiter to seek the sympathy of the alien "unconventional conventionists," who meet his distress with elated dancing and choruses of "That ain't no crime!" Meanwhile, Eddie, the presumably frozen donor of half of Rocky's cerebral tissue, comes roaring out of the walk-in freezer on a motorcycle (his sax-drenched rendition of "Whatever Happened to Saturday Night" is proof that you can have more fun than anybody in the movie with only half a brain), and Janet reverses her position on male musculature while a sullen Brad holds Eddie's gleaming saxophone, iconic of all that Brad is not.

The normative image of the scientist is still our most cherished projection of inviolate, objective masculinity. Even when our scientists are female, they are caricatured as sexlessly dispassionate, but Frank is not only "a sweet transvestite" from another planet, he's bisexual, narcissistic, exhibitionistic, insensitive, rapacious, rude, and hot as hell. He struts around in a black corset with fishnet stockings, sometimes covered by a green lab coat (sporting a pink triangle), abetted by stiletto heels and pearls. He obviously spends hours on his makeup but isn't at all concerned when he smears it for effect. In short, he is what every repressed, sexually anxious, outcast intellectual male or female sees as a self-reflection in her or his wildest dionysiac nightmares. Frank is "the underbelly, the dark side of creation; and it should come as no surprise to us when he suffers satanic ruin. . . . He is the richly charactered magus who dies for our imagined sins, and redeems our fantasies as he lives out our hidden dreams" (Henkin 53–55).

Early critics of Curry's portrayal invariably described it in terms of combined personae: "half Auntie Mame, half Bela Lugosi," "a cross between Greer Garson and Steve Reeves," and "part David Bowie, part Joan Crawford, part Basil Rathbone" (Henkin 133). Frank has ambiguous and indeterminate attributes, but he is indisputably male. He succeeds in winning our hearts to such an extent that even when he whips his "faithful handyman" until he cries for mercy, abuses Janet, shoves Brad to the ground, and kills Eddie, we the audience and his on-screen groupies not only forgive him but emulate him—more than we ever emulated Clint Eastwood or John Wayne. They never really knew us like Frank does. Perhaps more to the point, his abusiveness reminds us of another characteristic of liminal personae: "they may obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without comment" (Turner 95).

Gaylyn Studlar gets it but is obviously not a fan: "Dr. Frank-N-Furter represents a gender transformation that borrows from perverse possibilities but safely recuperates the revolutionary promise of homoerotic hedonism through the sexual politics of masculine aggression" (8). Frank, whose

sexual generativity appears to reside only in the lab, makes himself a man. The reflexive is deliberate. Although he can entertain his homoeroticism with Rocky Horror, he has complete, and completely masculine, power over him. "I made you and I can break you just as easily." He accomplishes his act of creation through asexual (scientific) means, but by accident—the same route taken by Brad and Janet to reach his castle and, thereby, their own sexual awakening. Frank's creation speech may be interpreted on both levels, that of complete control and that of serendipitous accident: "Paradise is to be mine! It was strange in the way it happened. Suddenly you get a break. All the pieces seem to fit together. What a sucker you've been! What a fool! The answer was there all the time. It took a small accident to make it happen. An accident! And that's how I discovered the secret, that elusive ingredient, that spark that is the breath of life." He is the wise fool, the perpetrating sucker; it was an accident, but Frank made it happen.

And even before Frank was, he—well—*was*. As the lips close back into the central point on the screen, they are overlain by a Celtic cross on the top of a church steeple. The doors of the church open and a wedding party pours out onto the steps. Frank, in his guise as God's celebrating minister, stands at the door flanked by the custodial Riff Raff and Magenta in *American Gothic* mode. After a photo is taken of "just the close family," Frank is gone from the scene. Brad and Janet move from the graveyard into the church to celebrate their engagement. Riff Raff and Magenta spin the wedding bouquets on the pews to reveal funereal blooms. Just as Brad suggests that he and Janet should "visit the man who began it," ostensibly meaning Dr. Everett Scott, the staff carries in a coffin. The camera moves from the coffin backgrounded by an American flag, to Brad and Janet on their knees in naive bliss, to a stained-glass cross.

Frank's divinity is campy but efficient. Brad carries the emblem of Eddie's free spirit, and Janet, coy with one male character after another under the spell of Frank's unbridled lustiness, confesses her fascination aloud. The power of redemptive sexuality and its concomitant costs are implicit even before Frank touches Janet or Brad. He "offers" to initiate them into their own sensuality by telling them that he'll "remove the cause, but not the symptom." For the final floor show, Frank decorates each character with identical makeup and clothes, corsets, fishnets, feather boas, and stiletto pumps. Recall that "[Initiands possess] nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands. Their behavior is normally passive or humble" (Turner 95). Of masking, Turner says, "Rituals of status reversal . . . mask the weak in strength and demand of the strong that they be passive and patiently endure the symbolic and even real aggression shown against them by structural inferiors" (177).

Frank, of course, is not masked, and what he "patiently endures" is listening to his "creations" (a term used by fashion designers of their clothing) say what they really think about him and about themselves. Columbia admits she was only able to fulfill her role as "a regular Frankie fan" by using drugs. Rocky Horror tells us that he suffers from a lack of trust in anything but his own libidinous satisfaction. Brad and Janet admit that they have been transformed. Brad is still shaky about it and, paraphrasing Jesus in Gethsemane, begs "Mommy" to "take this dream away from me," but Janet is "released": her "confidence has increased," and her "mind has been expanded." She is unequivocally grateful to have entered the liminal phase and undergone initiation.

The final transformation effected during the floor show is confirmed in the pool. Frank invites his new friends to join him, to "swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh." We know it's all over because Frank is lying in a life preserver emblazoned "USS Titanic." (Alluding to a toilet-bowl cleanser commercial, the audience response is "Come look! There's a transvestite in my toilet bowl!") The song "Don't Dream It. Be It" is now a call to participate in Frank's pleasure, no longer a command to be dominated by it. The masks disappear into the water while the now authenticated initiands lovingly touch Frank and one another, paralleling God conferring consciousness on Adam on the bottom of the pool. Their ritual change of status is celebrated by all five participants, who are now on equal footing, in a chorus-line song and dance, "Wild and Untamed Thing" (which is, musically, the continuation of the floor show confessions, "Rose Tint My World").

Spontaneous communitas, however, cannot be maintained indefinitely; it cannot survive the consensually agreed-upon demands of social life and must eventually settle into normative individual and collective attitudes and behaviors. Liminality is a phase, not a status. It is a bridge for crossing over to a new (or at least newly recognized) social space, but no human society intends for its members to take up residence on it: "Cognitively, nothing underlines regularity so well as absurdity or paradox. Emotionally, nothing satisfies as much as extravagant or temporarily permitted illicit behavior. Rituals of status reversal accommodate both aspects. By making the low high and the high low, they reaffirm the hierarchical principle. By making the low mimic (often to the point of caricature) the behavior of the high, and by restraining the initiatives of the proud, they underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behavior between the various estates of society" (Turner 176). Riff Raff and Magenta step in to "restrain the initiatives of the proud" and to restore "predictable behavior between the various estates of society." Riff Raff, dressed in gold lamé space gear, tells Frank, "It's all over. Your mission is a failure. Your lifestyle's too extreme." After Frank sings his Judy Garland swan song, Riff Raff tells him

he's been "presumptuous" in assuming that he will accompany Magenta and himself back to Transsexual. (The title of the original stage production of Mary Shelley's book in 1823 was *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein*.) As the simpering Dr. Scott tells Brad, "Society must be protected." It's time to reincorporate into society's normative structures or else reject them entirely—an alternative that seems unlikely for the affianced Brad and Janet.

Of course, even dead-below-the-waist Dr. Scott has been influenced by Frank's gift: His paralysis disappears, and his own fish-netted legs appear from beneath his invalid's wheelchair blanket. However, Scott is ultimately an establishment toady—a structure freak who will forgive anything and accept anything as long as he is promised a return to the status quo, even when the authority he submits to is as paranoid and duplicitous as Riff Raff's, "insolent in his lack of power, cruel when he holds it" (Henkin 61). "Absolute pleasure" is not a maxim that any structured society can tolerate for long, and the audience knows it. They will respond as warmly to Riff Raff and Magenta at the next showing as they did at the last one because they know that Frank will be back—he will traipse off that elevator into their lives and fill them with delightfully subversive pleasure again next week. If there is no crucifixion, there can be no resurrection, but in the meantime, order is reestablished, and the liminal is displaced by familiar hierarchical principles in order that it may reemerge another day.

John Kilgore points to van Gennep's final phase of initiation rituals—the necessary reintegration of initiands into formal society—when he defends the value of the *Rocky Horror* experience against those who would interpret it as merely profane adolescent indulgence: "The film moves from a raucous celebration of sexuality, through a lament for its dangers and confusions, to a final, sporting admission of the need to control it. Far from prompting rebellious sensuality, its ultimate balance and reconciliation of opposites leads in just the opposite direction—toward psychic detachment and an amiable acceptance of the need for compromise" (159). The liminal phase is always a leaving-from in order to arrive-at the normative roles a society's members are expected to perform for its own ongoing structural maintenance. Absolute pleasure has no meaning in the absence of normative restraint, any more than does compromise in the face of complete agreement. It is from our divergences with normative social realities that we return to discover who we are.

Community and Communitas

Turner quotes Martin Buber in describing what he means by communitas. He tells us, "Community is where community happens" (127). The audiences of *Rocky Horror* agree. A crowd of strangers comes together in an urban theater at midnight, ready to participate in a communal ritual of expressing their collective outsider status. It makes them feel better. In fact, it makes them feel great. "What makes it so infectious is the feeling of family and community within the theaters" (Piro, "Introduction" i). Many, but not all of them, are young. Many feel constrained by what Turner calls "structure," always experienced as more painful and overbearing by a society's marginalized persons—in our own, especially insecure teenagers, intellectual or overweight women, skinny or nearsighted men, and so on. As with some other forms of ritualistic expression, it's not for everybody, but some hardcore fans call it "going to church." According to Oppenheim,

> Like religious services, the midnight *Rocky* showings communally demarcate the end of a given week. There may, moreover, be an ingrained need or longing for some such gathering together: a voluntary event that reliably occurs like a pulse against time. . . . [There is] something comforting and stabilizing about ritualized repetition. But while ritual can provide a sense of containment in lives that are chaotic, it can also or even simultaneously provide a place for scheduled chaos in lives that are otherwise constrained. The latter, for example, occurred in the mad dancing of the Shakers, or in the ecstatic movement of dervishes. In *Rocky* too, the wildness and play-acting may happen because the film offers itself and the structure of its showings offer a ritual-like reassurance of a beginning and an end. (29)

A return to normative communitas does not just happen at the end of the film with the death of Frank, the departure of the aliens, and the freeing of Brad, Janet, and Dr. Scott to resume their lives in Denton, "The Home of Happiness." It also happens for participants in the exuberant *Rocky Horror* performance experience. Turner's insights into the ritual forms of liminality enacted in traditional societies transfer easily into the context of *Rocky Horror* as a cultural interperformance of initiation into social identity. The way he tells it, even "in complex industrialized societies, we still find traces in the liturgies of churches and other religious organizations of institutionalized attempts to prepare for the coming of spontaneous communitas. This modality of relationship, however, appears to flourish best in spontaneously liminal situations—phases betwixt and between states where social-structural role-playing is dominant, and especially between

status equals" (138). The way Sal Piro tells it, Louis Farese, a kindergarten teacher from Staten Island, suddenly started talking back to the screen at Manhattan's Waverly Theater on Labor Day weekend in 1976. The costuming started on Halloween that year. The floor shows began a few regulars lip-synched to the record as it played before show time (Piro *Creatures of the Night*, 1–2). The audience loved it. They picked it up, and the interperformance rituals of *Rocky Horror* began.

Over thirty years later, there's another generation of people talking back to the screen. Still predominantly white and middle-class, they are male, female, trans- and intersexed, het, homo, transgendered, cross-dressing, queer, bi, and fluid. With luck and desire they ritualize with one another. In so doing, they find a collectively experienced sense of liminality, a "betwixt and between" wherein they can be unassailably vulnerable and safely dangerous for a few hours before reluctantly returning to their mundane, socially approved roles.

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9

The Cult and Its Virgin Sacrifice

Rites of Defloration in and at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

Kristina Watkins-Mormino

> Rocky Horror is like sex, you can only have one first time so make the most of it.
>
> —*James Norman, "What Every 'Virgin' Should Know"*

The loss of virginity is arguably the most important rite of passage in American society today. In the first place, it is a nearly universal experience cutting across ethnic, class, racial, religious, and gender lines. The event of "the first time" may occur in homosexual or heterosexual encounters and within committed or casual relationships. In short, sooner or later, in one way or another, the vast majority of Americans lose their virginity. Second, defloration is a critical rite of passage because it typically is experienced by young people yet always carries the possibility of serious adult consequences. For this reason, much of the political discourse about teen sexuality is motivated and fueled by statistics concerning sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assaults, and unwanted pregnancies. Third, the loss of virginity matters a great deal in a society in which sexual activity constitutes normative adult behavior. Although cotillion balls are fading away and weddings are occurring increasingly later in adulthood (if at all), the

moment of defloration remains an important initiation into mature social interactions.

So, regardless as to whether the experience feels momentous or disappointingly meaningless to the individual, the loss of virginity is a significant event marking a critical change in status. Nonetheless, it normally takes place in secret. Whereas families, communities, and the state play a vital role in such rites of passage as proms, commencement ceremonies, the procurement of a first driver's license or house, weddings, and so forth, they exert limited influence on the circumstances of defloration and often do not know that a covert initiation has even taken place. Moreover, because virginity itself is hidden and difficult (if not impossible) to verify, and because the virgin lacks experiential knowledge of sex, one or both parties to a defloration may even be unaware or unsure of what has occurred. The surrender or loss of an individual's virginity is generally cloaked in secrecy and mystery.

Nonetheless, the event of the first time is collectively celebrated and ritualized through popular culture. In *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, Kathleen Coyne Kelly discusses numerous relatively recent examples from television and film in which a character's virginity is called into question or teenagers agonize over whether and how to lose their virginity, including *Clueless*, *The Real World*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *The X-Files*, and *Scream* (120–40). I might add to these *American Pie*, *Four Rooms*, *Cruel Intentions*, *American Beauty*, *Pleasantville*, and so on, but the list could go on indefinitely and would not even begin to address the ubiquity of the defloration theme in music, fiction, and news sources. (For example, the highly publicized preservation and subsequent loss of pop princess Brittany Spears' virginity made abstinence, teen sexuality, and defloration trendy topics in popular media.) Kelly notes that one result of this bombardment of cultural messages about virginity and its loss is that autobiographical defloration narratives tend to be rather formulaic: "It seems that one of the most intimate experiences of one's life, presumably and potentially the most pleasurable, resists language, falls into triteness and cliché, suggesting the degree to which the experience of virginity is culturally scripted and commodified" (126). Prepackaged defloration scenarios are disseminated in a uniform and far-reaching manner, so that young initiates into adult sexuality prove obliging consumers of sexual messages. Thus, although many families and communities may oppose teen sexuality, societal ritualization of the initial sex act proceeds through pop culture.

Of course, all rites of passage in Western societies have been more or less commercially regulated, but defloration is unique in its lack of actual ceremony and direct community involvement. Groups communally commemorate births, deaths, marriages, comings-out, graduations, and so forth, but

only rarely in the United States does anyone celebrate that virginity has been lost. Old World customs such as the *chivaree* (raucous merrymaking and cat-calling at a newly wedded couple's door) and the public inspection of the bridal sheets for hymeneal blood have never been mainstream events in this country. In general, the wedding, which once heralded the deflowering of at least the bride, has largely lost its significance in this respect, and no one is surprised to see even divorcées and mothers of children walk down the aisle in white. As society has moved toward new normative positions on sexuality, there have been significant shifts in the way our culture deals with both matrimony and defloration—two rites of passage that were once intrinsically linked, at least for women. In spite of escalating divorce rates, marriage is celebrated with a luxury and pomp that borders on the absurd. Defloration, however, has ceased to be marked by any particular festivity.

There is one exception, and again it is to be found in popular culture. Perhaps the only widespread communal observance of the loss of virginity in America takes place every weekend at midnight screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This film, known for its celebration of outrageous libidinous exploits, also has a great deal to say about virginity and its loss. Three of its major characters begin as wide-eyed, inexperienced innocents but soon become sexually active—and even sexually transgressive. Similarly, each weekend cinematic showings draw newcomers to the film—mostly teenagers and very young adults, at least some of whom are as wide-eyed and inexperienced as the on-screen virgins—who participate in an event in which illicit dress, language, and behavior is publicly flaunted. At *Rocky Horror*, they enter into a communal encounter centered on the film, augmented with the lip-synching and performance of a live cast, and involving the participation of the general audience members, who sing along with the characters, direct crude or funny ripostes and interjections to the screen, and toss about prescribed props such as rice, rolls of toilet paper, or slices of toast. Drag, licentiousness, political incorrectness, and profanity are the order of the day. With reenactments and verbal suggestions of sex acts permeating both the film and the audience participation, it is not surprising that the first-time *Rocky Horror* viewer would come to be labeled as a sexual neophyte, a "virgin."[1] Thus, one's initial *Rocky Horror* experience is celebrated as a defloration; yet, far from private, it is an initiation in which the entire community takes part. All the while, the participants receive strong on- and off-screen messages about the nature of virginity and the conditions of its loss.

In the early years of the *Rocky Horror* phenomenon, Tim Curry remarked with more than a hint of ridicule that American kids were beginning to regard going to *Rocky Horror* as a sort of rite of passage (Hoberman and

Rosenbaum 193). In this chapter, I focus on how *Rocky Horror* represents, elides, and stands in for a specific rite of passage: defloration. First, I examine the bridal practices and sexual initiations that take place in the film itself. Then I turn my attention to the "deflowering" of "virgins"—that is, the hazing of first-time attendees—that has become part and parcel of the *Rocky Horror* experience. Finally, I consider the implications of the commodification of rites of passage in American society.

Defloration Rites in the Home of Happiness and at the Frankenstein Place

As Mark Siegel points out in his 1980 article "*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: More Than A Lip Service," the film centers on the ritualistic sexual initiation of Brad Majors and Janet Weiss, an exaggeratedly repressed young couple from the small Midwestern town of Denton, the "Home of Happiness" (305). Having just witnessed the wedding of their friends Ralph and Betty, Brad proposes to Janet during a campy musical number in which the two march down the aisle of the chapel, kneel before the altar, and finally kiss. They are next seen driving off to inform their former science teacher and friend Dr. Scott of their engagement. En route, they find themselves stranded with a flat tire in the middle of a rainstorm and make their way to a nearby castle to make a phone call. Unbeknownst to them, the castle is really a spaceship, and its owner, Dr. Frank-N-Furter, the leader of a band of aliens from the planet Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania, is about to bring to life his creature, Rocky Horror, a blond boy-toy with tanned skin and a sculpted physique (see Figure 9.1).

Frank-N-Furter, who can scarcely wait to bed his creation, soon escorts Rocky to their sumptuous chamber to the tune of Mendelssohn's wedding march. Later that night, Frank disguises himself as Brad to seduce Janet. When she discovers the ruse, she at first protests, "I was saving myself!" but then gleefully surrenders herself to his enticements. Next, Frank seduces Brad disguised as Janet, a ploy that perhaps works because Brad has no idea what a woman—or at least his fiancée—feels like. Realizing that he is in bed with Frank, he whines, "I thought it was the real thing," before himself succumbing to pleasure. What we have, then, are three marriages (the wedding of Ralph and Betty, the down-the-aisle dance of Brad and Janet, and the mock nuptials of Frank and Rocky) followed by three rapid-fire deflorations (Rocky's, Janet's, and Brad's).

The film is thus punctuated by two important rites of passage: the wedding and the loss of virginity. According to the values of the parodically old-fashioned, middle-American world in which we first see Brad and



Figure 9.1

Janet, the two rites are meant to coincide. The wedding graffiti on Ralph and Betty's car announces, "Wait 'til tonite! She got hers, now he'll get his!" This motto reinforces the traditional assignment of gender roles that the couple exemplifies. (She's "a wonderful little cook," and Ralph will be up for a promotion before long.) Betty has fulfilled the woman's dream of marriage. Janet gushes, "Oh, I can't believe it! An hour ago, she was plain old Betty Monroe, and now . . . now she's Mrs. Ralph Hapschatt!" Before the night is over, Ralph will fulfill the man's dream of heterosexual intercourse. Thus, the ceremony at the chapel is not only the couple's initiation into wedded life but is also their initiation into adult sexuality. Everything happens in the proper time, and Ralph hints that it is now Brad and Janet's turn to tie the knot.[2]

There are problems, however. Janet, as the woman, is supposed to want marriage above all, and it is true that she seems desperate to get a proposal out of Brad, greedily snatching up the engagement ring when it falls to the ground. Nonetheless, her initially unsuccessful attempts to kiss and embrace Brad reveal her already budding sexuality. Later, after her defloration, she will sing that she had never so much as engaged in heavy petting before. Nonetheless, at this early point in the film she is clearly eager to be initiated into both marriage and intimacy. Siegel sees the rites of passage of Brad and Janet as emblematic of the rites of intensification through which society was changing its sexual attitudes (307). It is noteworthy, then, that despite the girl-next-door camp with which the character is written and performed, Janet wants *both* sex and marriage. In addition, her catching

the bride's bouquet is an omen of her readiness for passage into the next phase of life as wife and sexual partner.

Brad, in contrast, has a difficult time bringing himself to propose. When Janet catches the bouquet, Ralph assumes that Brad, her predetermined mate, will be the next to tie the knot, but he only responds with a non-committal "Who knows?" During his proposal, he resists Janet's advances, substituting romantic gestures for embraces. At one point, when she rushes into his arms, he swoops her up, places her in front of him, kneels and produces the ring, rather than hold her. At another, he puts distance between them by holding her literally at arms length and going into a dance. As Raymond Ruble notes in "Dr. Freud meets Dr. Frank N. Furter," both are virgins at the beginning of the film—Ruble regards them as equally innocent—and both "embark on an unwitting quest to discover their own sexuality," but Janet experiences a relatively healthy and liberating adjustment, whereas Brad remains repressed. Even in the film's climactic floor show, he struggles against sexual maturation, pleading, "Help me, Mommy . . . take this dream away!" until his sense of himself as a sexual being finally overwhelms him (Ruble 165). Before meeting Frank-N-Furter, however, he seems woefully underprepared for such a transformation (unlike his fiancée).

Already, the idea that through a wedding Janet would "get hers," and through defloration Brad would "get his," seems doubtful. Yet if their wedding had taken place, this notion would have been reinforced anyway, because of the impersonal nature of ritual. As initiates, the bride and groom are inducted into their new roles within and through the agency of a community. The writing on the car, it should be noted, is a traditional wedding prank, probably executed by Ralph's friends and relatives (including Brad). That is, it is a communal endorsement of the spousal and sexual union of the bridal couple. The opening scene of *Rocky Horror* is crowded with cheering friends and family members who participate in Betty and Ralph's initiation into normative adulthood. Likewise, when Frank, barely containing his anticipation, escorts Rocky to his bedchamber, it is amidst a crowd of approving Transylvanians. Echoing the cheering and tossing of rice of the Hapschatt-Munroe well-wishers, they chant, "Frank and Rocky, rah, rah, rah!" and toss confetti, a token of festivity (rather than fertility) better suited to celebrate Frank's pursuit of pleasure through production than traditional reproduction through pleasure.

Because Frank and Rocky's union is so evidently a union of the flesh, the attendance and approbation of the Transylvanians makes clear what might be overlooked at Ralph and Betty's wedding: that the community inaugurates the passage from virginity to sexual experience. Frank, of course, is no virgin, but then, even in the traditional marriage rites that he apes, the purity of the dominant (i.e., male) partner is generally irrelevant. Rather,

the community certifies the inexperience of the bride and verifies his taking possession of her. On this the success of the entire marriage depends, for as Freud pronounces in "The Taboo of Virginity," the normal reaction of a bride after defloration is not only to embrace her groom with grateful satisfaction but also to embrace her lasting subjection to him (201). The properly deflowered bride accepts the sanctioned role of the good wife and enables her husband to assume the position of the father. As Kathleen Coyne Kelly states, the virgin is among other things, "the lynchpin in patrilinear cultures, a commodity to be exchanged between men, . . . the guarantee of as well as the reward for conforming to the heterosexual imperative" (Kelly 141). Thus, by overseeing the deflowering of the bride by the groom, the community plays a part in ensuring that each takes up his or her prescribed and gendered role both within the marriage and within heterosexist society as a whole.

This, at least, is how wedding traditions operate within the controlled confines of Denton, where, as Amittai F. Aviram puts it, "rather heavy-handed visual signs reinforce the conception of marriage not as a celebration of love but as the fulfillment of rigid social norms" (187). However, this program fails "over at the Frankenstein place." Even the nonvirgin party in the bridal couple is meant to be an initiate, but Frank holds fast to his role as initiator, controlling the community of Transylvanians as much as he does his string of sexual partners. *He* is not being inducted into a new status, and his lack of cooperation with the collective from Transsexual becomes clear at the film's climax, when his erstwhile servant Riff Raff assumes command of the mission and executes him, declaring, "your lifestyle's too extreme."

Moreover, although Frank and Rocky's Mendelssohn march to the site of consummation evokes the ritual of the wedding night, Frank dispenses with the necessary complement of actual matrimony, because he does not seek the homosexual analogue of a heterosexual institution. That is, he merely wishes to take possession of Rocky—the sole initiate in this rite—who has been created only for his enjoyment. Frank does not seek a meaningful partnership with him. In the Freudian model, Frank's deflowering of Rocky, Janet, and Brad should create in them a durable devotion to him, were it not for the obvious problem that Freud was describing an operation within the structure of heterosexual monogamy, a social system of which the mad doctor makes a mockery. Frank-N-Furter's actions are regulated not by a set of communal principles so much as by a narcissistic program of acting out all of his desires to live up to his motto: "Don't dream it. Be it." Because his driving principle is narcissistic, he does not submit himself to a larger communal regulation of desire, and therefore he cannot avail himself of whatever authority he might have derived through defloration

within the heterosexist tradition he parodies. He cannot sustain the imposition on those around him of his desires as law, nor can he prevent others from mimicking his pursuit of personal pleasure.

Illustrative of this is Janet's seduction of Rocky. As previously mentioned, Frank easily persuades Janet to have sex with him, and the brief seduction scene ends as she playfully surrenders herself. The actual defloration takes place off camera. The next time we see Janet, Frank has already left her bedroom, and she is filled with remorse and a feeling of abandonment. As she boards the elevator to go find her fiancé, she cries "Brad, my darling, oh, how could I have done this to you?" "It was easy, but it would have been easier without the pantyhose!" retorts the *Rocky* audience, as Janet rises in the elevator and the camera shot takes in the length of her body down to her stockinged feet. Of course, this is but one of the many examples of editorial sloppiness in the film (the hose disappear in the following scene), but it does rather cast in doubt her actual defloration, which was never explicitly shown. Fundamentally, nothing has changed for Janet, whose remorse stems from a sense of having transgressed the laws to which she was subject—the directives that she marry Brad and surrender her virginity to him, as the bouquet catch predestined. She has not truly passed into a new stage of maturity, because she fervently wishes to undo what has been done. However, when she sees Brad on a television monitor enjoying a postcoital cigarette in bed with Frank, she begins to let go of the parameters that had formally set limits on her sexuality. Obviously, she, Brad, and Frank are not bound by the rules of heterosexual monogamy.

When Janet finds Rocky Horror hurt and hiding in the lab, she at once begins to loosen her repression of her desire for him. When initially asked her opinion of Frank's creature, Janet had cast a nervous glance at Brad, replied, "Well, I don't like men with too many muscles," and then looked back at Brad for approval. Later, when Frank was singing in rousing praise of the ideal masculine physique that Rocky embodies, Janet surprised everyone by piping in, "I'm a muscle fan!" Brad immediately quelled that burst of enthusiasm with a look of shock and disapproval. Now that Janet finds herself alone with her adored muscle man, however, Frank-N-Furter has destroyed the two things that might have constrained her from seducing the object of her desire: He has shattered her carefully preserved virginity, and he has placed Brad in flagrant violation of heterosexual monogamy, so that he can no longer represent the Law. As Janet tends Rocky's wounded hand, and he caresses hers, gazing at her with evident desire, she pauses for a moment in a state of indecision, even bewilderment, and then slowly smiles. This smile signals the completion of the process of defloration Frank began and unwittingly fostered but failed to control. Janet's true passage into sexual maturation occurs not when she surrenders her corporal

virginity but when she recognizes and pursues her own fantasies, albeit fantasies prescribed within a male-dominated, heterosexist matrix. Janet quickly passes not from virgin to wife (as a conventional wedding with and defloration by Brad would have necessitated) but from virgin to whore (as her deflowering by Frank has made possible). She avidly strives to take up this new position, serenading Rocky with increasing brazenness:

> Touch-a, touch-a, touch-a, touch me!
> I wanna be dirty.
> Thrill me, chill me, fulfill me,
> Creature of the night!

As Aviram notes, "The disseminative Dionysian power to release, disrupt, seduce and sway is, unfortunately for Frank, not limited to the personality who locally represents it. Once Janet has been seduced, she cannot be stopped from seducing Frank's artificial man in turn, whom Frank had been reserving for his own pleasure as the perfect object of property" (189). Although she is no longer under Frank's direct control, the criminologist/narrator affirms that Janet is, in fact, slave to a "powerful and irrational master": emotion.

Emotion also replaces Frank as master over Rocky. Similar to Janet's and Brad's, Rocky's defloration has taken place off camera, and he next appears asleep, chained to the bed and lying on his stomach, suggesting that he had been the receptive partner in his interlude with Frank. During Janet's seduction, however, he eventually takes her underneath him, assuming for the first time the dominant position that Frank-N-Furter (who always seems to be on top) probably never intended him to take. His defloration is therefore also a process, rather than an event—one over which Frank loses sway.

Frank later tries to reassert his power over his "children" with his sonic transducer and medusa ray, which turns them into statues and ensures that they will reanimate in a state of debauchery centered on his pleasure. He stages their frozen bodies for a burlesque floor show and literally turns them on with the flip of a switch. Yet despite all these measures, Rocky warns, "Somebody should be told, / That my libido hasn't been controlled." Not surprisingly, the unchecked monster is destroyed along with his creator. As Riff Raff shoots at them again and again with his laser, Rocky, carrying Frank on his back, climbs a set piece representing the RKO radio tower. The fall of that phallic symbol signals the demise of them both.

Critics differ as to how Brad and Janet will proceed in their new sexual roles after their night at the Frankenstein place.[3] One reason for the range of opinions, most of them surprisingly optimistic, may be that the version

of the film originally released in the United States omits parts of the song "Super Heroes," in which Brad and Janet writhe in the mire where the castle/spaceship once stood (it has blasted off to Transsexual), singing about their feelings of violation and suffering.[4] In any case, the lyrics from the reprise of "Science Fiction/Double Feature" that accompany the end credits in both versions reveal, "Darkness has conquered Brad and Janet." It is safe to say, then, that their experience has had a negative effect on their future lives. Nonetheless, it has served as a sort of rite of passage insofar as they emerge transformed and unable to return to their former status. Mark Siegel, following the work of Arnold van Gannep, identifies three stages in rites of intensification or passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. He observes that in *Rocky Horror*, the incorporation phase is aborted, leaving Janet and Brad's rites of passage incomplete (307). Into what group, after all, could they possibly be incorporated? Riff Raff cast them out of the castle before beaming it back to Transsexual, indicating that although they were inducted into sexuality by the renegade Frank-N-Furter, they were never initiated into Transylvanian society. Moreover, because their introduction into sexual maturity was removed from and in defiance of their own community, it is doubtful that their newfound status will allow them to assume their new roles harmoniously within Denton. Caught between Earth and outer space, the retro and the futuristic, and devoid of a context in which to understand their newfound identities, they are indeed, as the criminologist concludes, "Lost in time and lost in space and meaning."

Slaying Virgins

Despite its sober ending, most of *Rocky Horror* is an invitation to "swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh." Indeed, many of the regular audience members come to celebrate sexual transgression, and so they naturally relish the metaphorical defloration of "virgins." Nonetheless, it is curious that this term would come to be applied to *Rocky Horror* debutantes throughout North America, as the word "virgin" is never actually uttered in the film. When, for example, Janet tells Rocky that she only ever kissed before that night, Frank-N-Furter's minions Columbia and Magenta are spying on the two through a monitor. Stunned, Columbia asks, "You mean she . . . ?" to which Magenta, amused, answers "Uh-huh," much to her companion's disgust. It is as if "virgin" is a dirty word, better left unsaid. Perhaps it is only fitting, then, that Rocky fans scream the word at every midnight showing. What's more, each live action production company has developed and regularly practices rituals of defloration to which their "virgins" must submit. Yet, *virgin* is by no means a stable term, just as virginity is not an

unambiguous concept.[5] To what, then, is the *Rocky Horror* "virgin" actually likened? What concepts of virginity and sexual experience are being drawn from through this analogy? What understandings of the transformation of defloration are performed by *Rocky Horror* "virgins" and by those who orchestrate their symbolic deflowering?

Let us begin with an exchange I witnessed on a recent Friday night, just after midnight at *Rocky Horror*. I was standing in line at the cinema ticket booth behind a small group of college-aged patrons, when a member of Lips Down on Dixie, the urban Atlanta *Rocky Horror* production company, approached, asking if any of them were coming to see *Rocky Horror* for the first time.[6] There was a tense pause for a few seconds, and then the *Rocky Horror* regular gleefully pointed at a tall, redheaded girl, identifying her as a "virgin"—a first-timer. The redhead unhesitatingly conceded: "You could see it in my eyes, huh?" "Yeah," replied the regular, "the virgin always twitches."

Several understandings of virginity were communicated through this exchange. First, the basis of the analogy between the *Rocky Horror* "virgin" and the literal virgin is a lack of experience. Virginity is conceived as lack, a "no" in response to the question "Have you ever . . . ?" The nonvirgin is distinguished through memory and history, both psychological and corporeal, and answers "yes" to the question "Have you ever . . . ?" From the moment the answer becomes "yes," it can never again be "no," meaning that virginity can only be had or lost once. However, it is precisely the problem of experience that has made it increasingly difficult in recent years to distinguish both the real virgin and the *Rocky Horror* "virgin."

The operative question in determining a person's virginity is "Have you ever . . . " *what*? The prevailing notion seems to be that a person who has had heterosexual intercourse involving vaginal penetration is definitively not a virgin. Anal, oral, and interfemoral sex and vaginal penetration with objects or body parts other than a penis, although clearly activities through which one can constitute oneself as a sexual being, are not necessarily considered as means of defloration. As Kelly points out, "There are other stories to be told about coming into sexual experience, stories that fall outside the paradigm of heterosexual description and metaphor, and as such, have been rendered as untellable and unreadable" (122).

The *Rocky Horror* communities I have known have provided privileged spaces wherein engagement in and initiation into nonnormative sexuality have been validated. However, *Rocky Horror* devotees have proven rather less flexible in defining the "virgin," as the understanding of what qualifies as experience of the film has become blurred. In 1990, CBS/Fox commemorated the fifteenth anniversary of *Rocky Horror* by releasing the film on video. For the first time, it was possible to view the movie independent of the

audience culture that had made it so famous. Since then, it has also been regularly aired on television, and in 2002, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment released it on DVD, with an added feature that allows the viewer to hear the audience participation while viewing the film. *Rocky Horror* regulars responded by making communal interaction at a public viewing of the film—rather than the actual viewing of the film itself—the sine qua non of the experience. The essay "What Every 'Virgin' Should Know" on the official *Rocky Horror* Web site bluntly states, "Seeing it on video doesn't count! Neither does seeing it on TV!" Its author, James Norman, recommends against watching it on video before seeing it in the theater, and he refers to the viewer who has only seen it at home as a "video virgin." The members of Lips Down on Dixie take a compromise approach that acknowledges degrees of inexperience: A person who has never seen *Rocky Horror* at all is a "virgin." A person who has seen it, but without the live theater experience, is labeled a "masturbator" and is treated as a slightly more experienced variation of the "virgin."

A second significant factor evoked in the exchange I witnessed at the ticket booth is the relationship between virginity and gender. If defloration has traditionally depended on vaginal penetration, it is largely because virginity is usually located in the female body. Yet, in *Rocky Horror*, there are two male virgins, each representing an archetypical understanding of what a virgin is: There is Brad, the repressed and awkward neophyte, and Rocky, the embodiment of pure sexual potential, pristine and untapped. The presence of male virgins fits well with the general gender blending of the film and with its openness to nonnormative sexualities and deflorations. Thus, when the *Rocky Horror* veteran asked the group of young men and women at the ticket counter whether any of them were attending for the first time, she considered them all potential "virgins."

The group's uncomfortable pause in response to her question points to a third important consideration in that encounter: the group dynamic. As I discussed in my reading of the film itself, defloration rites have traditionally involved a process of initiation into a new role within the larger community. At the cinema, the deflowering of the *Rocky Horror* "virgin" similarly takes the form of a ritualized induction. In the case of the ticket counter incident, the silence of the "experienced" theatergoers signaled their unwillingness to expose their friend, the redhead, who was a member of their own subgroup, but an outsider to the *Rocky Horror* community with which they were joined through common experience. All friends are not so generous. It is very common for enthusiastic attendees actively to participate in the initiation of their "virgin" friends or relatives, telling them about the fabulous experiences they have had, inviting them to come along, and then happily exposing their comrades' inexperience when asked

to point out the "virgins." In their program book, Lips Down on Dixie welcomes this sort of operation: "Please tell your friends about Rocky Horror—Especially if they're Virgins! We live to embarrass! . . . We deflower the very best." Terrible as this may sound, it is important to keep in mind that the *Rocky Horror* experience is only possible through group effort. Lips Down on Dixie constantly recruits new regulars, and every "virgin" represents a potential member of the cast or crew. The defloration rituals enable them to build a sense of community, because once a newcomer has experienced *Rocky Horror*, he or she shares in a collective experience and is no longer a virgin. Furthermore, those "virgins" who are willing to have fun—even at their own expense—are the ones who are most likely to make a commitment to the communal experience, whether it be by coming again in costume, regularly and boisterously participating in the audience participation, or joining the production company.

The final and most obvious point that can be made about the outing of the redheaded "virgin" is the assumption that virginity may be visually perceived. In *Performing Virginity*, Kelly demonstrates that this has been an extraordinarily durable and universal belief that is to be found in both religious and secular conceptions of virginity. In fact, virginity continues to be read in demeanor. For example, one of the clearest signs of Brad and Janet's initial sexual inexperience is his uptight awkwardness and her frenetic giddiness after Ralph and Betty's wedding. The persistent belief in visible virginity is a guiding principle in the *Rocky Horror* defloration rituals as well. The redhead's virginity showed through her body (in her eyes) and her behavior (she twitched). When I asked several Lips Down on Dixie company members whether they could always tell a virgin on sight, the answer was a resounding "yes!" Even "hip virgins" who dress up for their first time give themselves away, I was told, because they are eager for the fullest possible experience. Nevertheless, despite the supposed visibility of "virginity," the first step in hazing first-time attendees is publicly to identify them. Regulars may "slay them and lei them"; that is, mark them with a visible sign and place artificial leis around their necks. Lips Down on Dixie designates their "virgins" by drawing the letter "v" on their foreheads in lipstick ("m" for "masturbators") and kissing them on the cheeks, leaving bright red lip prints. Of course, this practice places in doubt the idea that "virginity" is visibly evident. Why should "virgins" be marked if their inexperience is already visible? One reasonable reply to this question was that it makes them much easier to locate in the darkened theater after the movie has started. Even so, there remains the problem of why the cast member had to ask whether any of the students were "virgins."

Once the redhead was exposed, slayed, and leid, her symbolic defloration had only just begun. "Virgin" rites are numerous and vary among

Rocky Horror communities, ranging from the merely silly to the shockingly obscene. It is customary at viewings of *Rocky Horror* to have a preshow entertainment, and this is generally when the defloration rites take place, most of them reenactments of sex acts in the form of contests. The cast may request volunteer "virgins" for this, allowing only a few to stand in for all of the first-timers, or they may all be made to go to the front of the auditorium. For example, the virgins may compete to fake the best orgasm, play "Ring Around the Dildo," or see who can be the first to place a condom on a banana using only his or her mouth. In the "Twinkie Race," male contestants lay on their backs and place a Twinkie on their crotches, and their female partners, laying on top of them in the sixty-nine position, race to be the first to eat the Twinkie. In the "Suck-and-Blow Relay," the first team member holds a playing card to his or her mouth with suction and passes it to the next team member, who passes it to the next, and so on down the line. In "Make a Wish," far and away the most grotesque rite I have come across, two regulars lift a virgin with his or her legs spread, at which point a member of the cast jumps in front and mimes the sex act. Much less literal, Lips Down on Dixie cast members have "virgins" blow up red balloons during *Rocky Horror*'s dinner party scene. After leading the "virgins" in a choreographed dance to the song "Eddie's Teddy," they "pop their cherries."

The analogy of the "virgin's" first experience with *Rocky Horror* and the virgin's first experience of sex—oral, vaginal, heterosexual, or homosexual—is thus evoked often and without subtlety. The games seem to be only fictions of real sex, but because sex is a cultural construct as well as a bodily act, the possibility certainly exists that they can have real significance in the sexual development of the voluntary participants. For example, some "virgins" have had a great deal of actual sexual experience without their passage from virgin to nonvirgin having ever been recognized. The games provide them the opportunity obliquely to acknowledge this change in status by participating in the fun with zest or skill. Conversely, a "virgin" who is indeed sexually inexperienced can experiment, assuming the mock role of a sexually active person. A clandestine virgin may use the games to conceal actual virginity by performing sexual experience. *Rocky Horror* itself blurs the distinctions between sex (which occurs behind curtains and off camera) and the suggestion of sex (which is constant). So, too, audience participation activities such as mimicking the on-screen action, costuming oneself as a favorite character, and joining in "virgin" games provide a context through which *Rocky Horror* devotees can perform their fantasies and play with their identities, all the while eliding actual intercourse.

As previously mentioned, defloration rituals in the *Rocky Horror* cult vary widely, and I could not possibly list or discuss them all, but one merits

special attention. It is the *Rocky Horror* "virgin" oath, sworn with the right hand raised and the left placed on the breast (for females) or crotch (for males): "I, virgin scum, do hereby admit in front of all these people that I am a *Rocky Horror* virgin, and I wish to lose all my morals and accept decadence into my heart. Yea, though I walk through the Valley of Heterosexuality, I shall fear no Republicans. Give us this day our daily head in the name of Frankie and Rocky and the holy Riff Raff. Klaatu barada nikto."

It is immediately apparent that what begins as an oath soon metamorphoses into a prayer. With its contempt for virginity and normative sexuality, its celebration of licentiousness, and its political commentary, all combined with a healthy dose of blasphemy, I imagine that a fan of the Marquis de Sade must have composed it. It is also Sadian insofar as it implies a sort of initiation into perversion. After all, the *Rocky Horror* defloration rituals are nothing if not an initiation into a cult. Members of the cult offer up "virgins" at midnight for "slaying." Up to and throughout the initiation, the "virgins" are in a state of nervous anticipation, not knowing what secret rites will be imposed on them. Through their participation in the prescribed ritual, they are instructed in the purpose and ethics of the cult ("to lose all my morals and accept decadence into my heart") and learn of its deities (Frank et al.). They chant, sing, and wildly dance (the "Time Warp"). In the end, their status has changed. No longer "virgins," they have been initiated into the cult that constitutes itself as communally other, as collectively alien. Klaatu barada nikto.

The concepts of virginity and defloration—which were never really stable ideas to begin with—have had to weather rapidly and radically changing attitudes about sex in recent years. Even in 1975, when *Rocky Horror* was released, the ideals and practices of the Hapschatts were becoming a thing of the past, and although today there remain in America subcultures in which brides and even grooms are expected to march down the aisle virginities intact, this is no longer the norm, nor do most people pretend that it is. This shift in societal standards has rendered the lack of ceremonial specific to defloration somewhat problematic. As I have demonstrated, public rituals allow communities to convey strong social messages to those passing from one status to another. For instance, the rites of the Hapschatt wedding herald that Betty will surrender her virginity to Ralph, that the two will assume prescribed gender roles, and that Janet and Brad will follow suit. Notably, the latter two are initiated into sexual maturity privately and in a manner that defies Denton's mandates. As a direct result, they find themselves "lost in time and lost in space and meaning"; they are unable to determine the significance of their sexual experiences and the future direction they should take vis-à-vis the community at large. "All I know," sings the violated Brad in "Super Heroes," "is down inside I'm bleeding." The

sense of pain and meaninglessness of a modern neophyte may in fact be more acute, because unlike Brad and Janet, who at least know themselves to be in direct violation of clear communal signals, young people today lack ceremonial standards against which to evaluate their personal choices. There is no concerted performance to answer the questions of what virginity means, what conditions are normative for its loss, and what status the deflowered person assumes in relation to others. Of course, messages about virginity and sexuality are broadcast through popular media, but these tend to be contradictory and politically or commercially motivated.

Thus, young people possess the exhilarating and frightening freedom to assign or decline meaning in their first sex act, to adopt or reject those defloration narratives already in wide circulation. *Rocky Horror*, as so many other films, suggests multiple versions of the first time, ranging from the conservative to the transgressive. What is uniquely useful, however, is the way in which the cult experience allows the first-time participant to publicly perform his or her *own* virginity, defloration, and sexuality within a context that is ostensibly safe, because everything may be reduced to suggestion and metaphor, and because all actions are communally prescribed. Furthermore, however awkward or embarrassing the experience of "deflowering" may feel, the "virgin" knows that the "nonvirgins" present have gone through similar rites and are reliving their own defloration narratives. Thus, within this cult, all may avail themselves of an opportunity that no other community affords: to cast aside their status as innocents ceremonially and to claim for themselves publicly the pleasures of experience.

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Notes

1. In this article, I refer to both actual virginity and the figurative virginity of the *Rocky Horror* novice. To distinguish between the two, I place the word "virgin" in quotes when referring to those attending the film for the first time.
2. It should be noted that Frank-N-Furter also presides over this initiation. Tim Curry plays the part of the minister at the wedding of the Hapschatts, and his minions Riff Raff, Magenta, and Columbia are present as church caretakers. In the next scene, the narrator, a criminologist, is shown viewing a slide of the wedding photo. A large handwritten red arrow points to the minister (Curry), and the sexton's face (O'Brien) is circled in red. A moment later, he peruses a casebook marked "The Denton Affair," containing more wedding pictures, typed notes, and head shots of Janet and Brad. These details suggest that the Transsexual Transylvanians have already infiltrated Denton, the traditionalist "Home of Happiness."
3. See Ruble 165; Hoberman and Rosenbaum 309; Aviram 190; Grant 21.
4. The song is included in the UK release, and this is the version currently being shown at my local cinema. The first two stanzas of "Super Heroes" are sung after the castle blasts off. The final lines of the criminologist actually constitute the third verse of the song.
5. For example, is Brad truly no longer a virgin after his interlude with Frank-N-Furter? Or, as virginity is usually defined in terms of heterosex, will he only be technically deflowered after vaginally penetrating a woman? Does it matter whether he penetrated Frank or was himself penetrated? And could it be that his awkward struggle against his newfound desires betokens that he is still a virgin after all? (In other words, and to borrow the phrase from Kathleen Coyne Kelly, does he perform his virginity?)
6. I am most grateful to the cast and crew of Lips Down on Dixie for the warm assistance they gave me in researching this article. The troupe is ranked number one in Georgia for offering the best experience to "virgins.")

Part III

Rocky Horror and Sexuality

10

In Search of the Authentic Queer Epiphany

Normativity and Representations of the Queer Disabled Body in *Rocky Horror*

Ben Hixon

The tendency toward normalcy and uniformity in popular culture often manifests itself in individual texts as subtle assumptions and underlying definitions of how a character should or should not act to be perceived as a person.[1] These implicit advocations of normalcy as "the way things are supposed to be" directly result in the marginalization and restriction of certain identities that are not acceptable from the normative point of view, and those who maintain and experience these "undesirable" identities are subject to disdain, disavowal, prejudice, victimization, or violence within a social system dominated by these norms. Attention to the marginalization of specific groups has focused historically on gender expectations, sexual preference, and ethnicity; however, recently a new category of marginality and victimization has come into critical focus: disability. The disabled body traditionally has been conceived of in mass culture as "broken," "inferior," or "bad"; as an identity situation in need of fixing; or

if unfixable, then in need of segregation and seclusion—as something to be thought of with sadness or get well cards, but not with openness or equality. Recently, many political strategies have been developed to "break out" the disabled body into popular society; to highlight the arbitrary, socially constructed prejudice against the disabled; and to fight against their marginalization. One particular strategy used to undermine prejudice is the sexualization of the disabled body. Given that the disabled body frequently has been represented as asexual, this process of sexualization thereby may render the disabled body less "alien." In this consideration of the sexuality of the disabled, queerly sexual and queerly disabled identity categories can overlap, and their respective theorists can work together.[2] An alliance between queer and disability theory has produced an awareness of the body as both a source of fluctuating identity and as a site of lived experience of marginalization.

An analysis of the normative forces that produce marginalization of the queer and disabled identity within *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* can help to expose those forces within larger social contexts. This chapter first looks for such queer-disabled identity positions represented in *Rocky Horror* or, as in the case of Rocky himself, normate identity positions that indicate the queer by contrast, and then discusses whether the "overall" plot flow of the film supports either normative marginalization or queer disruption. Although on the surface *Rocky Horror* is certainly replete with alternative bodies and sexualities, I discuss several methods by which a text such as *Rocky Horror* can use these alternative representations to serve a further strengthening of normative hierarchies. Beginning with an identification of styles of character representation and then moving to a discussion of those textual mechanisms by which the inclusion of queer or disabled characters may still uphold normative regulations, I attempt to show that *Rocky Horror* does indeed subvert normative regulation, and I argue for the presence in the film of an authentically queer, antiableist, counter-normative subtext—one whose effect on the audience includes a breaking out of those normative stereotypes that render the disabled body as inhuman monstrosity. By first establishing character positions on which plot movement is built and then studying plot resolution and identifying narrative "epiphanies" that are resolutions imbued with strong power and incite potentially transformative reactions within the audience, I attempt to make the case that *Rocky Horror* exhibits a type of "authentic" queer disruption of the norm that does not allow for a nullification or pacification of the queer's potency.

The most obvious disabled characters in *Rocky Horror* are doctor Frank-N-Furter's humpbacked butler Riff Raff and the wheelchair-bound government scientist Dr. Everett Scott. Also a site of dis/ability identity tension

is Rocky Horror himself—a beacon of masculine, ableist normativity. *Rocky Horror* highlights difference and marginalization via parody, calling unavoidable attention both to marginalized subject positions—queer and disabled bodies—and to excessively normative positions such as that of Rocky; in both cases, the result is a self-awareness of the social fluidity of identity. If a body's difference through disability is made unavoidably obtrusive to the viewer, then it can be a site of subversion of its normative position, especially when that difference is even further underscored by sexuality. Because sexuality is a peculiarly "social" experience, a disabled body that also experiences sex could be attributed with a social identity or individuality that disrupts some of its fixed essentialism, perhaps working to show that disability is a social category as well as, or instead of, a merely physical one.

The disabled body in *Rocky Horror* is both clearly underscored, calling attention to its differential status, and sexualized or "queered." For example, when Scott first arrives at the castle and appears in the "Zen room," Dr. Frank-N-Furter turns on the electromagnet and pulls Scott into the laboratory by his wheelchair. This clear highlighting of the wheelchair brings to the forefront the crippled, contrary status of Scott, drawing attention to his disability rather than attempting to cover it up or pretend it is normal, which would elide the individual disabled identity and remove it from the normative perspective by making it "pass" as normal and unobtrusive. Instead of supporting a normative stance in the film, the use of the electromagnet draws explicit attention to the disability. Scott's disabled body then becomes sexualized when, during the floor show and the performative dragging of Rocky, Brad, Janet, and Columbia, he reveals his dragged, stocking-clad leg from underneath his blanket (see Figure 10.1).[3]

The effect the exposure of Scott's leg has is the depiction of the disabled body as both a product of and an occurrence of drag, of a social performance in which physical appearance or mannerisms construct perceived and experienced identity. Judith Butler has famously analogized drag and performativity, pointing out how performing a dragged identity—"dressing up" as another identity while leaving the prior identity still in evidence—highlights identity's social construction in that the identity is shown to be defined by its appearance, gestures, and mannerisms. Moreover, Butler has proposed that drag offers an opportunity to disrupt defined and normative identities through their parody. The explicit representation of the disabled body coupled with its sexual dragging first calls attention to that body and then exacerbates its status as marginal by having the representation parody itself through sexualization.

The other explicitly represented disabled body, Riff Raff, occupies a notably different position than Scott. He is also sexualized in his liaisons with his



Figure 10.1

sister Magenta, who is not represented as disabled, but these sexualizations are—especially when compared to Frank-N-Furter's escapades—asexual and devoid of passion or emotion. Indeed, in "Postmodern Gay Dionysus," Amittai Aviram refers to Riff Raff and Magenta as representing the pure Apollonian couple, Apollo and Artemis (189–90), indicative of Nietzsche's formulation of the Apollonian drive as striving toward order and purity. Aviram contrasts Riff Raff/Magenta's asceticism with Frank-N-Furter's Dionysian lust and chaos. Later in this chapter, I discuss the film's finale and the "victory" of the Apollonian drive over the Dionysian, involving a transformation of Riff Raff from marginal, disabled body to normate body with the removal of his hump. However, as the quotes I placed around the word "victory" suggest, I also argue that although *Rocky Horror* appears to resolve with an ascendancy of the norm, the more powerful resolution is counter-normative, disableist, and queer, because of the overriding of normative binaries via the disruptive power of a nonmarginalizing sexuality.

Not only can the sexualization of a marginalized or abjected body call attention to its "undesirability" but sexing or queering an icon of normative *authority* may reduce that icon's normative-inducing power and circumvent its authority. This occurs in *Rocky Horror* with the sexualization of the medical or scientific gaze. The medical gaze is a major regulatory power acting on bodies to partition them into normate and disabled. By overmedicalizing the body, by viewing it as a specimen of disease rather than as the site of a human identity, and by unilaterally imposing on an abnormal

body the qualities of sickness, ill health, and unnaturalness—qualities in need of being removed, thereby rendering the body-person as itself needing to be removed—the gaze of medicine reduces the disabled body to an inferior "wrongness" that cannot be a valid identity in its own right. In this way, the medical gaze and the system of truth-images and definitions from which it gazes work to reify the norm by abjecting and marginalizing the disabled other. However, this gaze draws its social power from the perceived authority of the medical purveyors—the doctors and scientists.

By again invoking a queer emphasis on sexuality as a major site of normative unrest, we can see that *Rocky Horror* undermines the authority of the medical gaze by dragging and introducing desire into the figure of the doctor, the originator of the medical gaze, and the symbol of authority to which society attributes the essentialist and naturalist power of medical definitions. Giving the doctor a subjective and queer identity position cuts away the authoritative objectivity of medicine. Recent theorizing of the medical gaze has elucidated this method of socializing medicine and of blurring together medicine and desire; of particular interest is the work revolving around the poet-physician Rafael Campo. In a 2003 issue of *GLQ*, Joanne Rendell appraises Campo's work on sexualizing the doctor image and attributing desire and personability to the doctor-patient relationship, relocating that relationship from a rigid binary to a more hybridized dynamic. For Rendell, Campo's works "enact critical, often transformative reimaginings of the medical setting and of biomedical thinking, where power and bodies, illness, relations, and identities are envisaged very differently" (206). Rendell focuses on Campo's blurring of the bodies of the patient and the doctor, the sick and the healthy, the normal and the abnormal—a blurring that Campo enacts primarily through introducing a sexual underpinning to the doctor's gaze. Clearly, a similar sexualization occurs in *Rocky Horror*, in which the body of the doctor, the patient, and the sexual lover combine.

Two characters in *Rocky Horror* can be thought to represent the doctor: Scott and Frank-N-Furter himself. As mentioned, Scott's position is one of clearly demonstrated disability, blurring the lines between doctor and sick object-specimen. The much more powerful blurring, however, occurs in the character of Frank-N-Furter. As a scientist, he evokes the doctor's figure of authority; but rather than the humanist figure of scientific power and supremacy, Frank is a Dionysian figure of sexual desire and lust. Though significant to Frank-N-Furter's character, the scientist-doctor is secondary to the lover. Frank's primary scientific act is the creation of a new lover in Rocky, and Frank spends the entire film attempting to promulgate his own sexual extravagance. Because of Frank-N-Furter's own dragging and sexualization, and because of the continued use and reference to Frank

as "doctor," his character representation helps to disrupt univocal medical authority and identity assignation. Frank-N-Furter represents an interesting blend of hyperactive sexuality and scientific humanism—a hybrid of the creator and desire for the creation usually absent in scientist tropes.

The product of Frank's science is Rocky Horror, a blond-haired blue-eyed muscle-bound normate-bodied stereotype. Does Rocky's own seemingly normative presence and prominence in *Rocky Horror* present a problem for a disability activist-oriented reading of the text? Regulatory power often acts to construct norms invisibly, to wrap around the mind of the reader and seep perniciously into the unconscious. An extremely normative character such as Rocky could be interpreted as reifying normative regulations. However, obtrusively emphasizing the normative location of a character, as exemplified with the electromagnetic highlight of Scott's disability, potentially can subvert and circumvent that invisible normative construction. Because Rocky is such a stereotype, such an extreme parody, his character does not cultivate a normative marginalization of disabled bodies but instead ironically highlights the normate body. His character could be said to masquerade as a masculine, white, able-bodied normate, to exaggerate the normative or socially dominant characteristics to play that subject position's normative-given power against the normative itself.

This is a disability appropriation of Mary Ann Doane's own adoption of Joan Riviere's theory of the masquerade. For Doane, Riviere's theory of "excess" femininity as a way to mask individual difference and marginality is "to dismantle the question of essentialism before it can even be posed" (37). Masquerade distances the subject from its actions and social identity and creates incoherence between the representation of woman and the subject that behaves as woman. A "glitch in the system," masquerade is "a way of appropriating this necessary distance or gap, in the operation of semiotic systems, of deploying it for women, of reading femininity differently" (37). Masquerade introduces instability in the signifier: A feminine representation does not necessarily imply a feminine subject. Similarly, a normate representation such as Rocky does not necessarily imply a normate able-bodied subject but, indeed, ironically can parody the normate and thus call attention to its artificiality.

Not only can Rocky be thought of as a body exaggeratingly masquerading as normate but he is also obviously the Frankenstein's monster to Frank-N-Furter's doctor Frankenstein. The monster has historically been represented by a negatively connotated body, but Rocky is both that hideous monster and the beautiful idealized bride of Frankenstein in one. Because Rocky is masquerading as normate but is also created, the normate is presented as both a social identity and one rooted in materiality: He is a physical, material identity in flux.

Frank-N-Furter sets this idea of physical identity construction into song when he sings, "In just seven days / I can make you a man," alluding of course to the biblical story of the creation of the world.[4] Frank in this song contrasts the "natural" construction of a "man" to his "better" construction:

> He'll eat nutritious high protein
> And swallow raw eggs . . .
> Try to build up his shoulders,
> His chest, arms, and legs.
> Such an effort—
> If he only knew of my plan
> In just seven days. . . .

Frank acknowledges the "usual" way one becomes a "man"—the parodic definition of "man" as possessing big muscles and little brain—but contrasts it to his artificial construction. Rocky represents the normate as fabrication, and Frank-N-Furter represents the extreme authority that does the fabricating, as well as a potential source of *re*-fabrication or disruption—a combination that exemplifies and parodies the construction of the normate identity in society and its lack of a basis in any fixed reality.

Rocky is both lover and science project, subject and object, specimen and person. This position is the cyborg as put forward by Donna Haraway: a marginalized subject position that, because of its blurring of boundaries, especially of social with scientific, has particular power and freedom in the construction of its own identity. We can connect the socially constructed Rocky cyborg to the Scott cyborg as explicitly delineated by Scott's metal wheelchair—a cyborgian technological enhancement. Disability theory and the concept of the cyborg have had a small number of crossings-over; for example, Allison Frailberg, in her 1991 essay "Of AIDS, Cyborgs, and Other Indiscretions: Resurfacing the Body in the Postmodern," makes the connection between the cyborg and increasing medical actions and reactions against AIDS, calling attention to the human-machine hybridity performed by, for example, intravenous drug use and the encouragement of condoms and clean needles. She makes the point that resistance to "cyborg-like integration ultimately leaves intact traditional sites of authority, sites with various investments in the 'general public': for example, bio-medical research, the position of the Surgeon General, governmental and legal policy decisions" (28). However, although the cyborg integration Frailberg refers to is specifically on the "patient" side, Scott, as a representation of both medical and governmental authority, further erodes that authority by blurring the rigid boundaries between creator and creation, between

medical gaze and object of medical gaze, between scientist and specimen, and between doctor and patient. *Rocky Horror*'s blurring of disabled body (Scott), exaggerated normate body (Rocky), medical gaze (Scott), and cyborg (Scott and Rocky) is a powerful tool for complicating power structures that construct and restrict body-identities.

Thus far, we have discussed power structures by simply studying character positions and representations in *Rocky Horror* from a disability studies perspective informed by queer theory's awareness of power, marginality, and normativity. Although static character representations are important in that they establish a basic viewpoint of the text, at least equally as important are the narrative and plot mechanisms—the changes in the story and character positions that move the text and pull the reader along. There are multiple methods by which a seemingly queer narrative such as *Rocky Horror* can resolve into one that is "favorable" to the norm. An important development in disability theory is the idea that the disabled character is frequently used by the norm to shore up an authoritative edifice by forwarding or cohering the narrative resolution. Terming this textual device "narrative prosthesis," David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that the representation of disability in texts frequently occurs at the expense of marginalizing disabled bodies, that disability "is deployed in literary narrative as a master metaphor for social ills . . . [providing] a means through which literature performs its social critique while simultaneously sedimenting stigmatizing beliefs about people with disabilities" (Mitchell 24). Representations of disability, which could potentially disrupt the narrative flow by introducing an unruly subject position undefinable within the narrative's established definitions, are actually used in reverse, as prostheses that can "plug up the holes" in the norm's representational reach to empower the norm rather than destabilize it; the disabled body is assimilated and used "as a crutch on which literary narratives lean for their representational power" (17) and thereby robbed of its queer subversiveness. Similarly, Robert McRuer identifies ableist, heteronormative epiphanies—means by which the norm slightly tolerates the queer disabled subject to invite it into the narrative, to offer it "a sense of subjective wholeness, however illusory" (82). Describing an example of epiphany as a filmic device, McRuer defines the "epiphanic moment" as one "in which an individual is said to lose himself or herself briefly, [that] tends to be a moment of unparalleled subjectivity. As the music swells and the light shifts, the moment marks for the character a temporary consolidation of past, present, and future, and the clarity that describes that consolidation allows the protagonist to carry, to the close of the narrative, a sense of subjective wholeness that he or she lacked previously" (85). By giving the marginal identity a definite subject position, a narrative resolution can latch down the queer individual, offering it a

carrot to take away its disruptive power. In this way, texts featuring queer characters often reinforce the norm.

A third method by which normative narratives can include queer representations while still shoring up the norm is abjection. The abject within a text is that which is not identifiable by the viewer—that which is made intentionally and narratively queer and unusual. By featuring an abject representation, a text can promote the expulsion of the queer from its reader by providing an opportunity to "get it out of the system"; the text can then close with a normative resolution that distills any lingering thoughts that the depravity is acceptable in "real" life. This concept of abjection, originally formulated by Julia Kristeva to understand works of literature such as those of Céline and Bataille, is applied by Barbara Creed to horror film. Although Creed does restrict her study of the abject to the idea of the female as monster and, in my opinion, overessentializes by locating archetypes or general classes of the abject, her insight on the abject as a realm of othered monstrosity can be applied to the disabled and the queer as well as to the female. According to Creed, and adopted directly from Kristeva, the abject is that which is unthinkable or unallowable to the life of the subject and so must be excluded from the subject, "propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self" (9). However, abjection is a necessary function of the dominant social order; it is a mechanism of regulating the norm, of accounting for the experience of the unallowable. Thus, "the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic" (9).

The methods by which normative narratives circumscribe the queer and nullify its disruptive power are multifarious and pernicious, and the remainder of this chapter attempts to determine whether *Rocky Horror* falls prey to them. I argue that although by its resolution *Rocky Horror* does indeed implement the methods of abjection, narrative prosthesis, and normative epiphany to assimilate the marginal into the norm, this assimilation is at least ironically highlighted if not nearly completely subverted by a more powerful "queer" resolution.

Rocky Horror is ostensibly a normative text: Its ultimate resolution, the death scene of Frank-N-Furter, Rocky, and Columbia, represents a radical subjugation of the queer by the newly assimilated normative agents Riff Raff and Magenta. Because this normative resolution appears temporally later in the text, it is the "stronger" and the more dominant resolution internalized by the reader and structuring the reader's interpretation of the text. Riff Raff and his sister Magenta revert to their alien doubles and destroy Frank-N-Furter, Rocky, and Columbia, apparently tired of their queer lifestyle. "Frank-N-Furter, it's all over / Your mission is a failure /

Your lifestyle's too extreme," sings Riff Raff on his entrance, immediately following and contrasting with the Dionysian "Don't Dream It. Be It." sequence in which Frank and his company demonstrate their extreme and apparently offensive queerness.

Emissaries of normative backlash against queer instability, Riff Raff and Magenta transform from hybrid Apollonian-Dionysian characters still implicated in Frank's queer frenzy into full, asexual Apollonians. Riff Raff's hump is removed, rendering him normate, firmly associating the humpback body with queer wrongness and the upright body with authoritative, victorious, and righteous restoration of order and linking the disabled or abnormal body with that in need of "fixing." Riff Raff and Magenta's "elbow sex" ritual is still performed subsequent to Frank's death, but unlike previous instances during which the siblings were still members of Frank's household, this elbow sex performance does not include passionate kissing, demonstrating a further removal from the sexuality that demarcates the queer subject.[5]

Frank-N-Furter's death at the hands of these icons of normativity is a depiction of normative "victory" and dominance and a defeat of queer depravity. It could function to cement the distancing and abjection of the queer and cause *Rocky Horror* to be a film-length purging of sexuality and abnormality. In Raymond Ruble's reductionist psychoanalytic account, for example, the normative doppelgängers of Riff Raff and Magenta represent the unambiguous triumph of the Superego over the Id, the latter of which is of course embodied by Frank. Ruble claims that the audience identifies with Frank, so that when Frank dies, the Id and sexual energy of the audience die with him: "Libido flowers, like Frank N. Furter, only to die" (164). John Kilgore, in another psychoanalytic analysis of the film, also feels that the death scene of Frank, Columbia, and Rocky is the triumph of normative authority: "It is clear all along that Frank's Reign of Pleasure must eventually give way to traditional authority. . . . [C]ommunity standards and 'American Decency' prove to be Frank's undoing" (157). Kilgore, instead of Ruble's straightforward equation of Riff Raff and Magenta to the power of the superego, at least recognizes ambiguity in Riff Raff's "nimble switch from fellow 'creature of the night' to the Party of Decency" (157–58) but persists in a reading of the "final" normative resolution as the more triumphant.

What Ruble and Kilgore do not take into account is the possibility that a temporally penultimate and secondary resolution, the orgy, may have more power than its temporally ultimate but symbolically parodic shadow, the death scene. If a secondary resolution is stronger and more "satisfying" than the final normative narrative resolution, and if this normative resolution parodies normative "happy endings" and the normative in general,

then the mechanisms for normative assimilation previously discussed are rendered ineffective. Such is the case in *Rocky Horror*: Frank's death scene, the final end of the film's narrative, is pale and unsatisfactory compared with the Dionysian swimming pool orgy and the "Don't Dream It" anthem because Frank's death prohibits his assimilation into the norm required in the mechanisms previously discussed, and the result is a final normative resolution that does not resolve the narrative for the viewer and so fails to expunge the queer.

The normative resolution lacks puissance, a lack seemingly felt by many fans, because, rather than assimilating the queer to use as a crutch or narrative prosthesis, the normative force—Magenta and Riff Raff—instead kills its potential queer crutch.[6] The audience identifies with the marginalized subjects, preventing the abjection and expulsion described by Creed. Instead, the normative space itself becomes alienated and ejected; the parodies of normative order and propriety, space aliens Magenta and Riff Raff, kill the characters identified with by the audience, and so "kill" the audience, proving very unsatisfying and laughable. Rather than serving as an edifying epiphany, this normative resolution bows to its more powerful predecessor, the queer resolution, which culminates in the pool orgy scene and the anthem "Don't Dream It." The normative must surrender the laurel wreath of textual epiphany, and *Rocky Horror*'s edifying epiphany is queer.

The resolution builds from a drag performance in which Brad, Janet, Columbia, and Rocky sing of their emotions and conflicting desires toward Frank, followed by Frank beginning the "Don't Dream It" sequence by entering a glittering swimming pool, where he is soon joined by the others. Frank sings "Give yourself over to absolute pleasure / Swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh," an acclamation of pleasure inseparable from the idea of the body as flesh rather than some socially defined, idealized subject position; this is followed by "Don't Dream It. Be It," a Nietzschean-style avowal of personal power—a Will to Power touted by queer-theory godfather Michel Foucault as a way to resist social hegemonies. As Brad, Janet, Columbia, and Rocky enter the pool with Frank, their bodies entwine amorously, rejecting any cookie-cutter distinctions of singular identity or subjective wholeness. Scott, although not actually in the swimming pool—further calling attention to his disability rather than hiding it—embraces the bacchanalia by exposing his dragged leg and exclaiming a life lived "for the thrill."

Frank's own authority and dominance is, before the pool orgy, nearly total and could, as Betty Robbins and Roger Myrick argue in "The Function of the Fetish," represent a phallic/normative subjugation of the marginal or feminine individual (274). However, in this scene this phallic authority is negated by the representation of Frank's previously authoritative body as

simply one of a mass of bodies pleasuring each other, lacking any central authority; the revision of normative, subjugating authority such as Frank's by an antiauthoritarian "utopia" is the aim of much of queer praxis and political/cultural activism.[7]

The queer apotheosis of this scene, the mass of flesh eradicating any notion of ability or disability and destroying subjective hierarchy, represents a queer "utopia" that is only enhanced and given increased poignancy by its subsequent destruction at the hands of Riff Raff and Magenta's normative doppelgängers. McRuer's notion of the normative epiphany, discussed earlier, can be contrasted to the queer epiphany evinced here, in the penultimate resolution to *Rocky Horror*: Rather than a flood of narrative power and feeling that will entice the reader into accepting the subservient role of the queer to the norm, the queer epiphany is one that rides a wave of subversive power and feeling and, through the mechanisms discussed here—parody, masquerade, and the overthrow of abjection and prosthesis—shakes down the normative and prevents its assimilation of the queer or disabled, resulting instead in a promotion of the queer as a site of audience empathy and power.

Rocky Horror is a parody on multiple levels, and just as Rocky himself parodies the masculine normate, the "victory" of the norm is here a parody of normative subjugation, a parody of abjection and its associated exclusion of the queer, and a parody of texts that pacify queerness. Frank-N-Furter and his queer company are not abjected and excluded, thrown out as unfit and nonnormative, or made to bow down to normative goodness; rather, it is that act of abjection that is itself abjected and expunged. The destruction of Frank and Rocky, and the normative victory it implies, is overpowered by the preceding queer epiphany. Susan Purdie offers an engaging critique of Kilgore and Ruble's psychoanalytic descriptions, previously described, as part of her discussion of ritual in Rocky Horror. She notes that although Kilgore is convincing, at least more so than Ruble, he fails in that he "ignores the destabilizing effect of the penultimate, forest-crawling song (Brad and Janet are not unambiguously returned to 'order')" (181).[8] She decides that Kilgore's "pattern of energetic excess finally leading to restored calm" (182)—the nullification of the queer by the subsequent normative resolution—is insufficient to describe the uniqueness of the *Rocky Horror* audience reaction among film followings. Purdie also powerfully points to the self-awareness and self-parody of the audience: "Their mood is consistently humorous, with all the self-awareness and distancing that this involves. These participants are not in any way 'enthralled' with the film" (176). A normative epiphany relies on an engaged and satisfied audience—on subjects enthralled to its message—but the death of Frank and Rocky is for many fans anything but epiphanically satisfying.

Rocky Horror is unique in that it offers "authentic" queerness: Unlike far too many instances of queer representation in popular texts, the queer in *Rocky Horror* is not made to serve the normal, the right, the proper, or the way things are supposed to be. *Rocky Horror* has no happy, normative, "fairy tale" ending, whereby the queer is offered a place in the norm and is allowed to live happily ever after. The authentic queer does not live happily ever after; it is murdered by the normative society in which it lives. The authentic queer epiphany brings that oppression home to the viewer or reader on a wave of narrative force and acts as a barricade or firewall against the pernicious, omnipresent assimilation techniques employed by the norm to disempower the queer. *Rocky Horror*'s queer epiphany makes it unique among the homogenous mass of popular cultural texts that provide so many avenues for the normative to infiltrate the individual and, if taken as a grain of salt amid the mass consumption necessitated by life within popular society, a dose of *Rocky Horror* may work toward allowing the queer to remain queer and free from inculcation by the pernicious tendrils of the happily normal ever after.

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Notes

1. The use of the terms "norm," "counter-norm," "normative," "normativity," and so on is meant to signify the prevailing points of view in a society—points of view that tend to be unable to tolerate opposition and thus try to marginalize/erase proponents or symbols of opposing minority viewpoints. Furthermore, the term "normate" as introduced by Rosemarie Garland Thomson refers specifically to an ableist "normal" body, a fictional "standard" or "average" body whose representation as that average is disseminated throughout popular culture.
2. I follow the suggestion of Teresa de Lauretis, given when she coined the term "queer theory" in a 1991 issue of *differences*, that the "queer" is not simply a sexual identity category but can be any that is unpleasing to the norm.
3. As argued by Robbins and Myrick, the stockinged leg is also a fetishistic image, and its placement upon Scott links it with government authority, exposing the patriarchal source of the fetish (274); additionally, however, Scott's assumption of the fetishistic image subverts the power of that fetish by imposing it on what is seen by the phallic normative gaze as an "old male crippled" body, creating a disconcerting hybrid.
4. The biblical allusion casts Frank as the typical "God-scientist" trope—the scientist who considers himself a divine all-powerful authority—this trope may serve to undermine scientific authority/"divinity" by calling attention to the extravagance and unilateralism of that authority, the self-avowed divinity of scientific proclamation that becomes holy writ for normative society, as in the case of biological essentialism and disabled bodies discussed earlier.
5. The phrase elbow sex is commonly used in audience participation scripts to refer to the ritual in which Riff Raff and Magenta perform apparent sibling-Transylvanian bonding by bringing their arms together, most notably at the elbows.
6. Abundant on the scores of Internet fan sites dedicated to *Rocky Horror* are castigations of the "bad ending" of the film, along with fan-proffered revisions of the ending. This distaste of fans for the ending may also be part of the reason for the phenomenon of audience participation, by which audience members can rewrite the text as they see fit.

7. See, for example, Michael Warner's classic edited collection *Fear of a Queer Planet*, in which the "Queer Planet" is the disauthoritative dis/utopia, feared by the norm.
8. The scene to which Purdie refers is the scene that did not originally appear in the American version of the film in which Brad and Janet crawl around in the forest and sing "Super Heroes," a short song about how the 'beast is still feeding."

11

The Queer Pedagogy of Dr. Frank-N-Furter

Zachary Lamm

In her essay "Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures," Judith Butler reflects on what she experienced as a "heady moment" at the end of Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality* in which he "held out the possibility that we might cease to think of sexuality as a specific attribute of sexed persons, that it could not be reducible to the question of his or her 'desire', and that overcoming the epistemic constraint that mandated thinking of sexuality as emanating from sexed persons in the form of desire might constitute an emancipation, as it were, beyond emancipation" (11).[1] For Butler, "The effort to separate the study of sexuality from the study of gender has been an important move to make"—one that she believes has only been made in the Foucauldian milieu of gender and sexuality studies that has pervaded certain sectors of the academy since the late 1980s and that continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of queerness and intimacy (11).[2]

The idea that one might separate sexuality from the prejudicial influence of gender and instead explore pleasures that one might experience as emanating from one's own body as well as the bodies of others—regardless of gender, or apart from the influence of gender—seems not just license to pursue yearnings that may not easily align themselves with the contemporary sex-gender system of sanctioned desires but license to do so without the obscuring effects that such socially coerced systems might have on the naked body—a body that might be more canvas, for oneself and others, than predetermined object of meaning.[3] By not yoking meaning to biology, the sexuality produced within this new realm of possibility would, in theory,

leave us without the socially malignant forces of sexism and homophobia and instead create a world in which "queer" need not serve as an indexical category. Those behaviors that now seem "queer" could become part of the everyday.[4] Distancing gender and sex from the necessary components for sexuality's conception creates a space of liberty in which the freedom to pursue sexuality uninhibited by such—to use Foucault's term—"regulatory ideas" is offered to every individual.

However, before Foucault's valorization of bodies and pleasures (in 1978), there was *Rocky Horror* (1975). Within O'Brien's world, gender and sex become so ostentatiously stylized that their association with sexuality is detached, such that what looks likes gender must be recognized as a game played for one's own enjoyment and the joy that one might receive from giving pleasure to others. This breakdown of regulatory systems is the result of a pedagogy initiated by Dr. Frank-N-Furter, the headmaster of the queer facility in which the majority of the film takes place. He creates an institution in which knowledge of identities—commonly taken as foundational—is recognized as constructed and, therefore, mutable. Frank challenges the epistemological foundations of the conventional and constrained sexualities of his newest pupils: Brad and Janet.

For Michael Warner, queerness is not an "orientation" but, rather, a way of being politically, socially, and sexually an outsider in a normative culture that would shame those individuals who dare deviate from preset moral (and usually religious) doctrine; he calls this usage of "queer" "deliberately capacious" (38). The ultimate goal of a truly democratic society for Warner is sexual autonomy, which, as he explains, "requires more than freedom of choice, toleration, and the liberalization of sex laws. It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them. . . . If the goal is sexual autonomy, consistent with everyone else's sexual autonomy, then it will be impossible to say in advance what form that will take" (7).[5] Because the majority of the population is presumed to be, and presumes itself to be, conventionally heterosexual, society's conception of "normal" is rooted in an ethics that deems monogamy and reproduction to be central concerns of a cultural sexual politics.[6] Heterosexuality occupies the privileged position of "normative" within American culture, privileged not just by religious and political institutions (and heterosexuals themselves) but even by those homosexuals who allot heterosexuality a special consideration when contemplating moral systems.

Introducing queerness into such a system not as an alternative model, but as an appeal to all individuals' desire for sexual liberty, generates the idea that autonomy may have been stunted for everyone somewhere within the process of enculturation and thereby subversively challenges the status

quo by teaching that limitless possibilities for sexual expression exist and that a yearning for such expressions may already be present in even those individuals who most seem to conform—especially when one considers the possibility that *hyper*-conformity might function as a disavowal of queerness that has the potential to make the door of "the closet" all the more visible.[7]

Sometime over the course of my many viewings of *Rocky Horror*, it occurred to me that pedagogy is an overriding concern in the film. The film occurs as an intervention between a ceremony of traditional American "family values"—a wedding—and a return visit to the teacher who first introduced the newly engaged Brad and Janet to each other. The events of the early portions of the film represent two forms of education for the couple, first leading them through the circumscribed narrative of sexual morality derived from American normative culture and then introducing them into a "queer culture" highlighting intimacy's innumerable possible manifestations.[8] That the film posits a connection between learning the protocols of normalized everyday life and the formal educational system is apparent in (at least) two ways from the very beginning of the film: Brad and Janet fell in love while at school in such a way that civil marriage, which functions as a way of regulating sexual behavior through the state (so as to prevent deviation from preconceived notions of normalcy), seems the natural outcome of what the couple imagines to be the love narrative of proper citizens—of which Brad and Janet clearly are representative (they are, after all, members of the Junior Chamber of Commerce).[9] In addition, a return visit to Dr. Everett Scott, the former teacher who introduced Brad and Janet (he is "the man who began it"), seems to them the natural action after becoming engaged—a sort of prewedding honeymoon for the newly engaged couple.[10] In other words, Brad and Janet's engagement, which ostensibly takes place in the private world outside of academic space, is seemingly surrounded on both sides by educational institutions: a transition from an educational institution to the institution of marriage (via engagement) and back again. Of course, they wind up getting off track: physically, socially, and epistemologically.

The world of institutional, academic knowledge that the film associates with conventional morality is embodied in the person of Dr. Scott, Brad and Janet's "ex-tutor" and now "friend"; this world is rivaled by the alien counter-knowledge of Dr. Frank-N-Furter, whose queer views on sex, gender, and science have allowed him access to unexplored possibilities for sexual expression, as well as the secret to the "spark" of life for which Scott and his colleagues at the CIA (where he is now employed) have long been searching. Scott introduced Brad and Janet to conventional scientific knowledge and normative heterosexual coupling; Frank introduces them

to queer science and queer forms of sexual intimacy. The sexual productivity of the queer population (the "unconventional conventioners"), of which Frank is leader, is exemplified in the pleasure we observe in the final floor show and its orgiastic climax, whereas the parallel productivity of queer science is verified in Frank's ability to achieve scientific feats still not realized by the mainstream scientific community. Because queerness succeeds as an epistemological endeavor both scientifically and sexually, it can be assumed that queerness has the capacity to become a viable way of living. Of course, this can only be the case if queerness is taken not as a regulatory ideal but as a foundational principle for ideology—an unstable and contingent foundation, to be sure, but one that can serve to educate mainstream culture about not only the pleasures of queerness but its transformative potential as well.

The destabilizing effects of queerness can be observed throughout the film, but perhaps no instance is more demonstrative of these effects than Scott's revelation of the hose and high-heel shoes he is wearing underneath the blanket that covers his legs when seated in his wheelchair; their exposure forces us to ask the question: Did Frank and his minions adorn him, or was he wearing them when he arrived (and before he arrived as well)? His seeming embrace of this transgendered performance, observable by his groping of his own leg and kicking it up over his head during the floor show, points to Scott's adoption of a queer persona. There are, to my mind, two potential readings of this mise-en-scène: We are to understand either that queerness is desirable for "conventional folk" when opportunity for its presentation (and re-presentation) without stigma is made available, or that queerness is close to the heart of conventionality, veiled by the regulatory functions of socially prescribed normalcy. It makes sense then that Scott's revelations take place during the show's torch song, "Don't Dream It. Be It."

This song represents perhaps the film's most explicitly pedagogical moment, as the addressee of the song's lyrics is more the viewing audience than the film's characters, the latter of which seem to have already picked up on the lesson. Addressing them in this manner at this moment in the film would literally be preaching to the choir, as the majority of the cast sings the refrain behind Frank's lead vocals. The plea for us to dream, as the cast has apparently already done, or—as the presence of the phantasmatic audience seems to indicate—is doing, is a call for us to engage with fantasy, the liminal psychical realm existing between reality and representation that one must access to heed Frank's call. Judith Butler theorizes fantasy as "what is not *yet* real, what is possible or futural, what belongs to a different version of the real" ("The Force of Fantasy" 105).[11] *Rocky Horror* serves to show the pleasures that enactment of sexual fantasy can bring, especially

when identity no longer serves as an obstacle to object-desire; as the orgy begins in the pool, with the music still in the background, one can observe same-sex eroticism (Brad and Rocky), opposite-sex eroticism (Brad and Columbia), and whatever sort of eroticism occurs between human beings and "transvestite transsexuals" from outer space. The sexual frenzy that erupts, in which no object is "proper," seems the culmination of queer thinkers' fantasies of queer world-making from Foucault onward, and the audience's elation and demand for repeat viewing mirrors this critical effect. Thus, the not-yet-real-world fantasy of the scene is manifested in a way that does no harm to the real world but brings pleasure to both on-screen participants and viewers (via the orgiastic performance of the cast members), especially when the mantra that inspired the action ("Don't dream it, be it!") is picked up during audience participation.

How then, one might ask, does this pedagogical process begin that produces the sexually liberated subjects we observe at the film's end? Leaving their native Denton—"The Home of Happiness"—Brad and Janet are forced (by car trouble and inclement weather) to inquire as to whether or not the castle they recently passed has a phone with which they can call for assistance. The film's first large dance number follows shortly, as the couple is introduced to the "Time Warp," which Brad presumes to be the "folk dancing" of "foreigners with ways different than our own"; he, of course, has no idea how right he is. It is important to note, however, that the "Time Warp" itself is a pedagogical anthem, teaching listeners both the steps of the dance and some of the fantastical effects that the dance might have on those who perform it. Even the stuffy criminologist who narrates the film gets in on the action, both performing the dance while standing on top of his desk and providing the instructional lines during a round of the chorus. Although Brad and Janet remain too intimidated by the environment into which they have been introduced to dance themselves, we can clearly see their perception of the queerness of the dancers, and we also see at several points Brad's attempt to disrupt the queerness with interjections of the bland normativity of their outside lives; for instance, after the conclusion of the dance, at Janet's urging, "Say something!" Brad can only think to ask, "Do any of you guys know how to Madison?" The crowd's unenthusiastic reaction illustrates the lameness of the question.

Although at this point Brad and Janet remain largely unmoved from their heteronormativity, Frank's first appearance sets the stage for their conversion into the sexual rebels they become by the final scene. On first viewing Frank through the bars of the elevator, Janet exhibits what we might assume to be the most typical reaction to difference: fear. She screams and begins to flee from Frank but is prevented from escaping. She and Brad are then witness to what has become the show's signature performance,

Tim Curry's rendition of "Sweet Transvestite." Frank's boasting, "I'm not much of a man / By the light of day / But by night I'm one hell of lover" rhetorically constructs ideas that are key to our understanding the events that unfold as the film progresses: By acknowledging the fact that his seeming physical manhood is obscured under the female-gendered clothing and makeup that he wears, Frank problematizes gender assumptions based on visual appearance, as he is commenting on his appearance "by the light of day." At night, however, when visibility is decreased, thereby making gender less perceptible through visual cues, Frank is able to act as a virile lover, one whose gender is irrelevant to the pleasure he (apparently) can provide to partners, regardless of their sex. Syntactically, then, Frank's declaration not only disassociates him from manhood but degenders the term "lover" such that, for him, "lover" seems to replace traditional gender categories as significant components of identity.[12]

What is doubly troubling about this song in terms of gender is its indecipherable concept of the "transvestite transsexual." Although it is true that Transsexual refers to a place on the alien home world of Transylvania, transsexuality also becomes part of the queer world that this song posits. The logic of such a construction of gender is indeed deconstructive by nature, and the systems of sex and gender thus seem inscrutable and, it would seem, undesirable. Logically, if we assume that Frank is biologically male, then his transvestism would cause him to dress as a woman, but his transsexuality would actually make him a woman, thus producing a "female woman," which he seems not to be; if he is female, then following the same logic, he would become a "male man." Neither seems to be the case. Essentially, Frank's original sex would reverse when entangled with gender, and it seems that what is going on here is much more complicated than any sort of simple reversal. Frank's body, regardless of its anatomical properties, becomes a canvas for play with genders while simultaneously refusing to be naturalized by them. This transcendence of gender makes Frank an appealing sexual partner for a plethora of individuals, even when his partners insist (for a while, anyway) on maintaining their own gender identities. He will eventually have sex with both Brad and Janet, but we can see in their initial encounter a resistance to Frank's gender insubordination (to use another of Butler's terms), particularly when Brad refuses to sing and merely speaks his lines in "Sweet Transvestite."

Thus, as we observe Frank's body serving as the embodiment of queered gender, we are tempted to consider Frank's sexuality, for, as both Foucault and Butler observe, Western cultures have tended to render sexuality unthinkable without the application of the filter of gender to the body. Because we cannot consider Frank's body in gendered terms without gender's contingency making our assumptions uneasy, classifying his sexuality—and the sexuality

of those who have sex with him—is problematic, as our taxonomic systems have no place for those outside of the naturalized sex-gender system.[13] The temptation might be to call Frank bisexual, but his inability to fit into a dyadic gender system makes the notion that the most omnivorous form of sexuality possible is simply "bi-" unthinkable, and as we cannot exactly put our finger on Frank's sexuality, it is impossible for him to fit into a hetero/homosexual paradigm, as both require knowledge of the desiring individual's sex-gender classification. As a desiring agent, Frank illustrates just how homogenous heterosexuality truly is and challenges us, along with Brad and Janet, to consider what a sexuality that is truly heterogeneous might look like.

Indeed, Frank plays with gender anxieties in his sex scenes with Brad and Janet to rouse questions of imitation and the naturalization of identity. Although it is true that Brad and Janet both remain autonomous subjects throughout, Frank's ability to impersonate them both makes problematic the notion that the only proper object of desire is "the real thing"; if his play on gender teaches us nothing else, it is that "real thing"-ness is simply a quality that we perceive as "natural." It is also clear that Frank intends to be discovered in his disguise, as his costume is easily removed with the simple ruffling of hair and clothes. This intentional revelation functions pedagogically as a means of seducing the two naive youngsters into crossing the sexual boundaries set by regulatory sociosexual systems, and the temptation to indulge is too much for either of them.

Frank's promise that their transgression will be kept secret is undermined by the surveillance cameras he has installed in each of the rooms. From one of the monitors connected to this system, Janet observes Frank and Brad enjoying a postcoital smoke, and for a moment, her world seems to fall apart. It is clear, though, that both Brad and Janet have enjoyed their first foray into fornication—particularly Brad, who allows Frank to continue fellating him even after Riff Raff announces over the communication system that the situation with Rocky has become dangerous. What happens in the revelation of Frank's identity is not recognition of him as an insufficient or inappropriate sex partner—in fact, he seems to become something more than just a singular being: As he seems a hybrid of genders and sexualities, so too does his inauthenticity allow him to become a hybrid partner, such that Brad and Janet might indulge in his sexual knowledge all the while making love to a fantasy partner, or for the first time acknowledging the desirability of a queer lover.

As for the as-yet-unaddressed issue of the presence of Rocky, the most ostentatiously gendered character in the film, I would like to read him, as I believe Frank does, as a mold of Frank's sexual fantasies, which he has cast and brought to life through his recent scientific endeavors. Rather

than claiming that Frank finds Rocky's "masculine" identity (if he could have such a thing) desirable, I would claim that Frank finds the appearance of "masculinity" desirable, and that the manly package that we associate with "masculinity" is not necessarily attractive to Frank wholesale as a way of being in the world. In the "Charles Atlas" song, Frank composes a list of the anatomical parts for which he lusts ("deltoid," "bicep," "hot groin," "tricep"), all of which Rocky has in abundance; it is this spectacular stylization of Rocky's body that makes him an object of lust. This is not an elusive masculinity that might be claimed by a variety of individuals, and as the contrast between Frank and Rocky makes clear, "masculinity" might not always signify the same thing—though we are taught by our culture to think it does. Indeed, the gay male obsession with musculature might serve as a destabilizing example in which masculinity seems to be outwardly observable but is undercut by the allegedly effeminizing effects of homosexuality.[14] Rocky's seemingly masculine attributes are inborn but not by any means natural, as he is fully a product of Frank's sexual fantasy and scientific genius. When, toward the end of "Sweet Transvestite," Frank announces that he has "been making a man / With blond hair and a tan," he sounds as if this amalgamate being he has produced is akin to something he might have ordered out of a catalogue; his reason: "he's good for relieving my tension." Therefore, Rocky seems fully a product of Frank's autonomous imagination. Frank lacked the object he desired (after tiring of his former lovers, Eddie and Columbia, who subsequently become lovers of each other), so he made what he wanted; he could have made him differently but chose not to.

Though Janet is initially resistant to the muscular appeal of Rocky ("I don't like men with too many muscles"), she is compelled to indulge in the figure who was literally made as a canvas for sexual desire, though someone else's desire to be sure. She does not, however, address him in gendered—or for that matter, even human—terms, referring to him instead as "creature of the night." Rocky began life as the receptacle of Frank's queer desires; he then succumbs to Janet's, as she makes him over in her mind for her own purposes. Her self-indulgent language ("I've got an itch to scratch / I need assistance"; "Touch-a touch-a touch touch-a touch me / I wanna be dirty / Thrill me, chill me, / Fulfill me") illustrates that Rocky serves only as a vessel for Janet's pleasure—though, as with Frank's objectification, he seems to enjoy it. The answer to Frank's question to Janet, "When we made it / Did ya hear a bell ring?" seems to be an affirmative; that is, having sex with Frank seems to have set Janet down a course that would ultimately lead to her seeking out new means of fulfilling her desires—desires that, until meeting Frank, she never seemed to know she had, or, if she did know of them, never dreamed of expressing. Frank occupies the role of tutor that

Scott once filled, imparting knowledge of sexual liberty instead of science, though Frank's approach is clearly more "hands-on."

When Rocky and Janet have sex, however, we might note an interesting circumstance in that both have been trained by Frank in the performance of sexual desires. We cannot entirely be sure whether Frank taught either of the two to be top, bottom, or both—they all seem to be viable options where Frank is concerned—and it is unclear from the filming of their sex scene which position they assume during the exchange. Of course, their apparent gender—that which we presume by looking at them—is no clue to how they actually identify or what role they would prefer during sex. This ostensibly heterosexual scene is queered not only by the lack of interpretive narratological precedence but also because the pedagogical function of their earlier flings with Frank allows for this triangulated scenario in which his two sexual pupils have sex to be read as Frank virtually having sex with himself, as it is from him that each of them has gained his or her knowledge of sexual performance. The spectrum of lovers that Janet envisions hovering over her body (including Rocky and Frank as well as Riff Raff, Magenta, Columbia, and Brad—with whom she has not yet had sex) shows that Janet has indeed "wised up" to her sexual potential, imagining the erotic potential of heterosexual and lesbian, as well as transgendered, sex. Disrupting the cinematic real with an intervention of fantasy short circuits the normative cultural narrative of sexuality and puts on display for the viewer the numerous possibilities for erotic rendezvous available for Janet within even her seemingly limited immediate circumstance. Audiences are thus edified as to the prospective erotic scenarios possible when bodies and pleasures are prioritized over the fetishized versions of gender Western culture has naturalized.

One problem that remains unresolved in this discussion is the issue of dominance, for surely Frank does his best to blur the lines between pedagogue and dominator/dominatrix. To be sure, Frank's household is not a democracy, which raises the question of whether or not what looks like the enacting of others' desires within the film is truly an expression of the individuals' fantasies or a regulated system by which Frank manipulates others for his own pleasure. To my mind, the ecstatic floor show acts as hedonistic counterevidence to the claim that the sex we see is only the product of domination. If domination does occur, it seems to be a scenario in which the dominated or objectified partner participates willingly and receives pleasure equal to or exceeding that of the dominant. Frank may hijack his cast for the floor show using the medusa ray, but once on stage, the whole lot not only indulges in pleasures formerly taboo but expresses the debt they owe to Frank for liberating them from cultural constraints. Although Rocky and Columbia still register a certain amount of "trouble and pain,"

Brad and Janet both profess the libratory effects that their interment at Frank's castle has had upon them: Brad's exploratory query, "What's this? Let's see," demonstrates the erotic lure of the unfamiliar, or queer, and his declaration, "I feel sexy!" reassures us that the effects of queerness have been positive. In turn, Janet's newfound pleasure registers in her gratitude toward Frank:

> Oh I—I feel released
> Bad times deceased
> My confidence has increased
> Reality is here.
> The game has been disbanded
> My mind has been expanded
> It's a gas that Frankie's landed
> His lust is so sincere.

For Janet, her prior heteronormative life has been a "game" that she has ceased to play now that her "mind has been expanded." What is significant about her proclamation is its positing that queerness—signified here by Frank's lust—is more real than the sexuality enacted in the "real" world; his queer lust is genuine such that it can serve as a typifying example even as it creates new venues for "release" for his disciples. Even if he dominates, he nevertheless asserts the sort of "bodies-and-pleasures" ideology for which queer theorists since Foucault have yearned.

The sexual education of Brad and Janet, which necessarily involves their casting off of prior heteronormative ideals, enacts for the audience positive effects that exposing individuals—even ones seemingly content with heteronormative ideology—to queerness can produce. Although Frank's queer counter-knowledge does not guarantee happiness or even produce a happy ending, it does provide a space of freedom within which scenarios can be played out and lives can indeed be lived without the oppressive shame that societies thrust upon their citizens.[15] Frank's death thus becomes a tragedy, which Brad and Janet mourn at the film's close; the fact that they, along with Scott, choose to lie in the vacant lot left after the castle's launch into space indicates unwillingness to return to conventionality—or even their car. Their notions of appropriateness and desirability have been changed in ways that leave their futures wide open: Marriage no longer seems the natural next episode in the couple's relationship, and the film refuses to participate in the normative cinematic narrative tradition that would end the film either with a wedding or with a wedding in the imminent future.[16]

By putting on display those pleasures that might have been forbidden to audiences not only within their lives but within cinematic history, *Rocky*

Horror demonstrates the positive potential that escape from civilization's regulatory ideology can have on subjects who, within such systems, are necessarily repressed (or so the film's, and Foucault's, logic goes). The audience is witness to Brad and Janet's education in queerness, which thereby makes available that same education to the masses. It makes sense then that those individuals most in need of "release" would seek out and enjoy the film, as its pedagogy of sexual subversiveness is virtually unparalleled within the tradition of major studio films. Finally, its long-lasting appeal and insatiable fan base attest to the film's relevance in today's culture, more than thirty years after its initial release.

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Notes

1. The line to which Butler refers is the following: "The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures" (Foucault 157).
2. See in particular the Foucauldian tinge of the Lauren Berlant–edited volume *Intimacy*. In her introduction, Berlant notes, "Foucault's work on recognizing the multiplicity of relations engendered at every moment by sexuality has been central to this project" (4).
3. According to Butler, "Sexual difference . . . is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices. . . . The category of 'sex' is, from the start, normative; it what *Foucault* has called a 'regulatory idea.' In this sense, then, 'sex' not only functions as a norm but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls" (*Bodies that Matter* 1; emphasis added). In other words, we see bodies and unconsciously (in most cases) associate those bodies with a sex category—usually because of visible anatomical features—because that is what we have been trained to do: We see "men" and "women" because we are told that they exist and what they look like.
4. On the interpellation of queer behavior into mainstream culture, see Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere*.
5. Warner also argues for the validity of sexualities that are not inherited: "Sex does not have to be primordial in order to be legitimate. Civilization doesn't just repress our original sexuality: it makes new kinds of sexuality. And new sexualities, including learned ones, might have as much validity as ancient ones, if not more" (11).
6. Lisa Duggan describes these neoliberal homosexual thinkers as "homonormative," implying that they desire the normalization of homosexuality—that is, that rather than working toward a revolutionary movement that would remove heteronormativity as a core value of society, these individuals believe homosexuals should strive to more closely imitate the normative model of heterosexuality. Warner and Duggan cite conservative gay commentator Andrew Sullivan as the most outspoken proponent of this opinion.
7. Consider, for example, the increasing rapidity in recent years with which those conservative cultural and political leaders who most virulently oppose homosexuality—and indeed often seek to persecute homosexuals—have been "outed" as homosexuals.
8. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe queer culture as "a world-making project, where 'world,' like 'public,' differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond few reference points, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright." Further, "the queer world is a space

of entrances, exits, unsystemized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies" ("Sex in Public" 322). Although the queer culture of the film exists within the contained space of Frank's castle, the partner switching, orgies, and unpredictable manifestations of sexuality embody most of the proper elements for Berlant and Warner's characterization.

9. Michael Warner argues, "A marriage license is the opposite of sexual license. Sexual license is everything that the state does not license, and therefore everything the state allows itself to punish or regulate" (*Trouble* 97). In other words, the (hetero)sex that occurs between married couples is the only clearly permissible form of sexual behavior within a state that regulates and legitimizes the romantic lives and sexuality of its citizens at the expense of those individuals whose romantic and sexual desires do not conform to the state's model of normalcy and morality. Warner claims, "As long as people marry, the state will continue to regulate the sexual lives of those who do not marry. It will continue to refuse to recognize our intimate relations—including cohabitating partners—as having the same rights or validity as a married couple. It will continue to criminalize our consensual sex" (96). The state, of course, also regulates the sex of married individuals when they wish to engage with sexual partners outside of the marriage bond, and until recently, some sodomy laws made nonreproductive forms of sex illegal even for married couples.
10. Elizabeth Freeman describes the honeymoon as a "supplement [to] the wedding: the honeymoon . . . physically separates the couple from peers and natal family, isolates them with one another and puts them into contact with a new place, and moves them along a narrative trajectory toward adulthood and (or as) dyadic heterosexual marriage" (146). Perhaps, as Brad and Janet are not married, or perhaps because they wind up in an alternate, improper venue for their preemptive honeymoon, they deviate from the "narrative trajectory" Freeman describes.
11. Butler offers her interpretation of fantasy as an alternative to those feminists associated with the antipornography movement who, in their portrayal of fantasy and its repercussions, "rel[y] upon a representational realism that conflates the signified fantasy with its (impossible) referent and construes 'depiction' as an injurious act and, in legal terms, a discriminatory action or 'real'-effect" (*Force of Fantasy* 105–06). In other words, antipornography feminists have assumed that the fantasy that pornography both enacts and inspires is capable of doing real harm to women through a tendency to conflate the degraded portrayal of women in pornography with the real sexual degradation of women in life. Although certainly not claiming that women do not suffer degradation, Butler sees that the ontological move that feminists want to make between representation and reality misses the intervention of the psyche that occurs as an intermediary between the representative and the real.
12. Betty Robbins and Roger Myrick read Frank's play on gender differently. In their discussion of *Rocky Horror* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, they make the following claim: "The extent to which either film critiques or subverts

gender norms is emphatically limited to the sole domain of masculinity, offering new registers of that gendered position . . . but ultimately maintaining a sexual indifference" (269). Their argument is based on a psychoanalytic reading of the film that associates power in the films with a fetishized phallus (in *Rocky Horror*, Frank has the phallus and leads its worship), and thus power is associated with masculinity. This argument hinges then on an automatic association of power—especially sexual power—with masculinity. We might also compare Robbins and Myrick's view to that of Gaylyn Studlar, who asserts that *Rocky Horror* "construct[s] a deeply ambivalent discourse that depends upon 'femininity' as a vector point uniting revulsion and fascination, excess and lack, pleasure and the perverse" (139). He claims that Frank only flirts with femininity in an effort to explore perversity, but that he "would never be caught dead on the bottom" (155); sexual power here is, for Studlar, unproblematically associated with not only masculinity but sexual positioning—as if there was no way for a "bottom" to be in control (and I believe we are unclear on Frank's positional preference, for while he tops Janet, he is clearly orally receptive with Brad and positioned to receive Rocky after their wedding march). To my mind, Frank and his followers do so much work to subvert gender norms and notions of gendered power that it seems likely critics' insistence on masculinizing Frank may arise more from the theory they bring to the film than from the film itself, especially because the primary evidence of Frank's masculinity, apart from what we can garner of his (alien) physiological composition, is his dominance, which might be the case for any number of reasons.

13. This situation is exemplary of the problem that has arisen in mainstream culture when attempting to classify the sexuality of transgendered individuals. Although "transgendered" clearly does not qualify as a sexual orientation, the individuals who are considered part of that group have not been easily assimilated into either hetero- or homosexual cultures.
14. See Christopher Nealon's essay on 1950s physique magazine culture, "The Secret Public of Physique Culture" (*Foundlings* 99–139). Rocky is clearly modeled on the aesthetic ideals these magazines promote, as Frank's references to Charles Atlas and Steve Reeves indicate. Nealon describes this culture as a manifestation of "foundling," a transitional state of the gay population in which homosexuality was at a liminal stage in the cultural consciousness between an "inversion model," in which homosexuals were assumed to posses the qualities identified with the opposite sex, and the "ethnic notion," in which "homosexual" serves as a viable category of identification, like a gender category.
15. Warner calls this system "the politics of shame."
16. Amittati F. Aviram reads the film as "an allegory of freedom," with numerous classical references as well as a resistance to heteronormative culture that he sees as formative within what he calls the "gay community" (191). The ambivalence and uncertainty within the film is, he believes, represented of the numerous and destabilized sexual identities he believes are available within the gay community, and thus symbolic of the potential for freedom that community offers.

12

"Be Just and Fear Not"

Warring Visions of Righteous Decadence and Pragmatic Justice in *Rocky Horror*

Thomas G. Endres

When I was an undergraduate in the early 1980s, I wrote a paper for my rhetorical criticism class titled, "Terrible Thrills: Hedonistic Pleasure in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*." The thesis of the paper was that *Rocky Horror* advocated hedonism, or the desire to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. It traced, in particular, Janet's journey throughout the film and the pervasive "pleasure-seeking attitude, primarily sexual pleasure, that eventually coerces young Janet to give herself over to 'sins of the flesh'" (Endres 1). Looking through my twenty-something eyes, and integrating philosophies from John Stuart Mills, Jeremy Bentham, and even hedonism's founding father Epicurus, I concluded that *Rocky Horror* "embodies the search for, and delivery of, feelings of pleasure" (5).

Now, more than two decades later, I still see and am entertained by the pleasure-seeking principle of the film. However, I now recognize that there is an obvious undercurrent in the film that has a surprisingly conservative message. My forty-something perspective recognizes two parallel and competing tracks in *Rocky Horror*: the decadent hedonism for which the film is so popular and the subtle, yet eventually victorious, message that

serves as a warning against such a flamboyant lifestyle. Ruble describes this battle as the "age-old human conflict between reason and desire" (161).

That message of reason, however, is often lost in traditional analyses of the film that focus heavily on the outrageous antics of participating audiences. Austin argues that a film is defined more by its audience than by its content or the filmmaker's intent and that cult films such as *Rocky Horror* "are not *made* (as for example, one sets out to make a musical, western, etc.) as much as they *happen* or *become*" (44). Although there is truth to these observations, the critic must also look specifically at the messages and meanings inherent within the actual artifact. Not only should we analyze *Rocky Horror* for what it becomes but we should also examine what it literally says and does. This chapter provides a textual analysis of the competing messages within the film itself, and Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), a humanistic tool for interpreting dramatic imagery, provides the methodological tool for the analysis. Following a brief description of the method, descriptions are provided for both the decadent and conservative visions within the film, and the chapter concludes with comments regarding the usefulness of the method and the effect of the communicative medium.

Symbolic Convergence Theory

Developed in 1972 by Ernest G. Bormann, SCT is a method used to identify and interpret the "dramatizations which catch on and chain out" in group, public, or mass-mediated contexts ("Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 37). A primary assumption of SCT is that human interaction is characterized by the sharing of stories and dramatic imagery; we make sense of our world by combining our internal symbols and meanings with others to create a shared symbolic reality. The specific tool that a scholar uses to interpret a community's symbolic convergence is called Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA), which provides the drama-based terminology for the critique.

The primary unit of analysis is the fantasy theme, which Bormann defines as a dramatizing message such as "a pun or other wordplay, a double entendre, a figure of speech, an analogy, an anecdote, allegory, fable, or narrative" ("The Force of Fantasy" 4). Obviously, *Rocky Horror* is replete with dramatic messages, both within the film itself and between the members of the audience. Cragan and Sheilds summarize all of FTA's technical terms, though this essay will focus only on those most pertinent to this analysis ("Corporate Strategic Planning" 200–203). Fantasy theme messages may reference a specific plot line (action) or scene (location) within a drama. Dramatic images frequently refer to the *dramatis personae* (characters)

within a story, which helps the audience differentiate between protagonists, antagonists, and supporting players. Once the original fantasy theme has been shared, it can be elicited via a symbolic cue such as a "code word, phrase, slogan, or even a nonverbal sign or gesture" that makes a cryptic reference to the larger dramatic reality (200). For example, the catch phrase "publish or perish" has specific meaning to a college professor within the larger scenario of professional engagement and annual evaluation. Themes and cues also give insight into the sanctioning agent (legitimizing force) that condones and explains the reason and motivation for the story line. Examples of such forces given by Cragan and Shields include "a higher power—like God, the Supreme Court, or Democracy—or a well accepted code of conduct like the West Point honor code" (202).

Most important to this analysis are the terms rhetorical vision and master analogue. All the dramatic elements previously described coalesce and create for the adherents a rhetorical vision; that is, a composite drama that forms the basis for a common symbolic reality. Bormann, Cragan, and Shields call it a "unified putting-together" of the various themes that "gives the participants a broader view of things" (Bormann, "In Defense Of" 281). In other words, an audience that adheres to a common set of heroes and villains, that gets the humor of the same inside jokes, and that believes in the authority and rationale that justifies the plot line constitutes a community with a shared rhetorical vision.

Cragan and Shields observe that, in theory, there could be as many different rhetorical visions as there are people, but their research concludes that individuals adhere to one of three major deep structure dramas (*Applied Communication* 40). They call these the master analogues. The three types of underlying metaphors to which people adhere are righteous, social, or pragmatic in nature: "A rhetorical vision based on a righteous master analogue emphasizes the correct way of doing things with its concerns about right and wrong, proper and improper, superior and inferior, moral and immoral, and just and unjust. A rhetorical vision with a social master analogue reflects primary human relationships as it keys on friendship, trust, caring, comradeship, compatibility, family ties, brotherhood, sisterhood, and humaneness. A vision with a pragmatic master analogue stresses expediency, utility, efficiency, parsimony, simplicity, cost effectiveness, and minimal emotional involvement" ("Corporate" 202).

Rhetorical visions are viewed as warring with one another in their attempt to muster adherence within a community. When one vision loses its novelty and explanatory power, it tends to be replaced with a more compelling competing vision framed within a different master analogue. For example, our presidential elections often serve as opportunities to elect candidates who offer platforms in direct opposition to those of the

incumbents. One vision diminishes; another takes its place. In my own work, I have made the case that, in addition to opposing camps, a single artifact may have multiple rhetorical visions with coexisting master analogues (Endres, "Co-Existing" 306). This seems to be the case with *Rocky Horror,* in which decadence and justice run side by side. The battle takes place within the artifact itself, and as the following analysis demonstrates, a subtle and surprisingly conservative vision emerges victorious. In the end, it does boil down to audience action and reaction, as "people act on the meanings, emotions, motives, and values of the rhetorical visions in which they participate" (Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, "Imaginary" 368). Before examining audience response, however, we must first interpret the dramatic imagery to which they are responding.

The Vision of Righteous Decadence

The back cover of *The Official Rocky Horror Picture Show Movie Novel*, edited and adapted by Richard J. Anobile, provides the following synopsis of the film: "Meet Brad (Barry Bostwick) and Janet (Susan Sarandon), two strait-laced [*sic*], middle-American kids confronted by the defiantly decadent morality of the '70s as represented in the person of Dr. Frank N. Furter [*sic*] (Tim Curry), a 'sweet transvestite' from the planet of Transsexual [*sic*] in the galaxy of Transylvania." The phrase "decadent morality" provides an apt symbolic cue for this rhetorical vision. Although one would not normally define decadence as a form of morality, this paradoxical spin on the traditional definition is exactly what occurs in *Rocky Horror*. Recall that a righteous master analogue is one that advocates a superior, proper, and correct path for its adherents. In the case of *Rocky Horror*, decadent behavior is the righteous way. As Kilgore notes, the movie is a "manifesto for sex-and-whatever else feels good" (153).

At the center of this vision is protagonist Dr. Frank-N-Furter, the charismatic cross-dressing scientist who dominates not only the screen but also all the characters within it. His sanctioning agent is pleasure, evidenced in the main plot line of his creating a muscle-bound man as his personal plaything, as well as multiple subplots involving the on-screen sexual conquest of both Brad and Janet and the prescreen sexual conquest of Columbia and Eddie. Frank's entire persona—his looks, his words, his actions—is the driving force behind the decadent morality of the vision.

Bormann notes that fantasies that "clearly divide the sympathetic, good people (we) from the unsympathetic or evil people (they)" are crucial to the successful emergence of a rhetorical vision ("The Force of Fantasy" 12). If Frank is the hero of this vision, then the "they" must be all those whose

lifestyle contradicts his code of sexual pleasure. Most vilified, of course, are the nerdish Brad and the prudish Janet. Following closely behind is the wheelchair-bound Dr. Scott, who stands in opposition to Frank as both a rival scientist and as the late Eddie's kin. Finally, the no-necked Criminologist who narrates the film poses a threat to Frank. They are the representations of moderation, status quo, and traditional morality—which Frank so strongly opposes.

They sympathetic "we" of the vision includes Frank's servants—the elbow-rubbing siblings Riff Raff and Magenta, and the partygoers (Frank's "unconventional conventionists"), who dance the "Time Warp" and witness Rocky's creation. Of course, there is also Rocky himself, who marches arm-in-arm with Frank to the bridal suite while the wedding march blares in the background. Granted, as the vision shifts, so do the allegiances, but the initial scorecard of "us" versus "them" is clearly the Transylvanians and crew against the Earthly establishment types.

Subtle symbolic cues solidify Frank's role as the central protagonist of the vision. Not only do his corset and fishnet stockings set the pace for the eventual stages of characters' undress throughout the film but the tattoo on his upper arm clearly proclaims him to be the "BOSS." In addition, both Riff Raff and Magenta refer to him as "Master," and Riff Raff elaborates by explaining, "We are simply his servants." In one telling scene, as Frank describes to onlookers the accidental discovery that allowed him to create Rocky, the camera zooms in to a close up of his face as he proclaims, "I hold the secret to life itself." In the vision of righteous decadence, Frank is the godlike persona of the creator and master of his universe.

A rhetorical vision is most effective when it not only differentiates the "us" from the "them" but also converts the "them" to "us" status. Bormann recognizes that convergence can occur when "one creative person fantasizes a powerful personal consciousness and does so with such skill that his or her consciousness is shared by converts" ("Force of Fantasy" 10). In Twitchell's evaluation of Frank's persona, which he describes as "'Frederick's of Hollywood' at Fire Island," he concludes that, "what makes it so startling is that it is so alluring" (74). As the movie progresses, Frank casts his spell over his competition and gets them to cross over enemy lines.

This conversion is most obvious with Janet. It begins early in the film, when she coyly grins at Frank's inquiry about whether or not she has any tattoos. Following Rocky's creation, Janet placates Brad by announcing that she doesn't like a man with too many muscles. However, as Frank sings of his ability to create a man in just seven days, right after he proclaims, "I don't want no dissension," Janet demurely discloses, "I'm a muscle fan."

From there, the conversion escalates. Frank visits the bedrooms of both Janet and Brad and, following a sexual encounter with each, gets them to

admit that they enjoyed it and promises not to tell the other of their infidelity. Fidelity, then, becomes immoral under righteous decadence. Over the surveillance monitors, Janet inadvertently discovers Brad's tryst. Her reaction is less about indignation and more about sexual liberation. The next scene finds her in the lab with Rocky, explaining that "I've tasted blood and I want more." While Magenta and Columbia look on via the monitors, Janet places Rocky's hands on her breasts. The entire song "Touch-A, Touch-A, Touch Me" is an anthem to Janet's rebirth as a sexual being who needs "action." With that rebirth comes devotion to a new master. As the Criminologist somberly explains, Janet has fallen prey to a "powerful and irrational" emotion, and "there seemed little doubt that Janet was indeed its slave." Of course, giving oneself over to emotion and desire is simply part of the Frank-N-Furter mantra.

With the intrusion of Scott and the disturbing dinner party where conversation takes place about, and over, Eddie the delivery boy, Frank's influence starts to unravel. Janet runs screaming from the room, and Frank follows. As he tells her to wise up, he reminds her, "I've laid the seed / It should be all you need." Unfortunately, it's not enough. By the time all parties gather in the laboratory, Frank is at odds with many in his congregation. Still, the practice of moral decadence prevails, with the help of a sonic transducer and the medusa ray, which immobilizes and eventually transforms Brad, Janet, Scott, Rocky, and Columbia into statues. Frank offers commentary on the burden of being in charge of hedonistic fulfillment as he laments, "It's not easy having a good time."

At this point, the Criminologist cuts in to explain that "Brad and Janet had both tasted forbidden fruit. This in itself was proof that their host was a man of little morals—and some persuasion." This line is a perfect example of a fantasy theme that acknowledges the rhetorical vision founded in the influence of immorality. When the quartet of statues is unfrozen, each finds himself or herself to be a participant in a floor show of unparalleled decadence. Each is garbed in Frank-N-Furterish corsets and fishnets, coupled with white makeup and feather boas. Each sings, to varying degree, the hymns of the church of Frank. Columbia's is the least praise-filled, though she acknowledges she was a "regular Frankie fan." Rocky follows with his recognition that "the only thing I've come to trust is an orgasmic rush of lust." Brad is next, initially anguishing, "It's beyond me! Help me, Mommy!" He converts in the next verse, however, as he observes, "What's this, let's see. I feel sexy. What's come over me? Whoa! Here it comes again." Even Scott, still in the laboratory, reveals a stockinged and high-heeled leg and reports that the decadence potentially has the power to sap his will.

As implied throughout the film, Janet has the most complete conversion to the vision. When she is unfrozen, her lyrics most clearly contain the dramatic imagery of righteous decadence:

> I feel released
> Bad times deceased
> My confidence has increased
> Reality is here. The game has been disbanded
> My mind has been expanded
> It's a gas that Frankie has landed
> His lust is so sincere.

At this point, Janet offers an exaggerated kiss to the audience. That kiss is the prelude to Frank's entrance on the stage, and his song, "Don't Dream It. Be It," is the movie's most overt portrayal of his pleasure-seeking philosophy. Frank croons,

> Give yourself over to absolute pleasure
> Swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh
> Erotic nightmares beyond any measure
> And sensual daydreams to treasure forever.

The choir of converts joins in as Frank sings, "Don't dream it. Be it." They leap into a swimming pool on the stage and bob and weave together in a tangle of arms, legs, and lips. As Janet surfaces, she smiles and sings, "God bless Lilly St. Cyr," referring to the famous burlesque legend and pinup girl from the 1940s and '50s. Following the pool scene, Frank and his decadent dramatists take to the stage again to proclaim that they are wild and untamed things.

As any *Rocky Horror* viewer knows, the plot line turns at this point. In FTA terms, the competing rhetorical vision—which to this point had been muted—surfaces and supplants the vision of decadence. Before moving forward, we must acknowledge that the decadence of the vision just described is precisely why *Rocky Horror* is so popular. The movie's status as a cult film is based in its over-the-top sensuality. Sal Piro, former president of the national *Rocky Horror* fan club, writes the following in the introduction to Anobile's movie novel: "A feeling of love pervades this cult as they give themselves over to pleasure and exhort the philosophy of becoming all the things they have dreamed" (par. 3). Although this chapter agrees with Piro's observation, it argues that the pervasive feeling is sublimated and defeated by the following warring vision.

The Vision of Pragmatic Justice

Although the obvious shift in the vision occurs near the end of the film, the warring perspective is evident throughout. Early in the film, outside the Denton Episcopal Church where Ralph and Betty have just exchanged vows, an ominous warning is given. Whereas most viewers focus on the large billboard in the scene proclaiming Denton "The Home of Happiness," attention should be turned to a small sign on the church property that reads "Be Just and Fear Not." This sign is a symbolic cue for the subtle yet eventually victorious vision of Pragmatic Justice. Though the sanctioning of justice may seem to fall under the master analogue of righteousness, it is presented in a more expedient and parsimonious fashion. Unlike the righteousness of the decadence vision, which is loudly proclaimed throughout the film, the vision of justice is understated. Its message is simple: Do the right thing or suffer the consequences. Kilgore argued this as early as 1986, when he wrote, "The film only seems to preach the gospel of absolute pleasure; in reality it acknowledges the existence of sensible limitations" (156). And what could be more pragmatic than a sensible limitation?

The vision actually begins in the very first words uttered in the movie. In the opening song, "Science Fiction/Double Feature" (sung by Richard O'Brien but lip-synced by Patricia Quinn), the first verse is, "Michael Rennie was ill the day the earth stood still / but he told us where we stand." The reference is to the 1951 science fiction classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Michael Rennie played a thinly disguised Christlike figure who comes from the heavens, takes the earthly name of Carpenter, is killed by the violent masses but is resurrected, and who warns the world that they must repent of their evil ways or be destroyed. He is speaking of the evils of atomic weapons, not sexual impropriety, but the pragmatic warning is just the same. Michael Rennie, similar to the little sign outside the Denton church, tells us where we stand: "Be Just and Fear Not."

Though a slight digression, it is important to note that all of *Rocky Horror*, not just the opening song, is an homage to Saturday afternoon science fiction and B-movie matinees. Richard O'Brien, the creator of *Rocky Horror*, explains that his intent was to write a musical that "any ten-year-old could enjoy" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 4). Hoberman and Rosenbaum compare the audience participation with *Rocky Horror* to children clapping in stage productions of *Peter Pan* to save Tinkerbell: The intent is simple, not sensual.

This intent is further communicated in the opening credits. Characters are named, followed by a parenthetical description of who or what they are. Frank-N-Furter is simply labeled "A Scientist." Not a prophet, not a messiah, not a savior. Scott is simply labeled a "rival scientist," not an enemy or

a traitor. Brad and Janet, in contrast, are announced as a "Hero" and "Heroine," respectively. Rather than painting them as establishment antagonists, as the righteous decadence vision would imply, they are actually heralded as protagonists. Even the Criminologist, who receives a great deal of abuse from pleasure-seeking audiences, is referred to as "An Expert." Though subtle, these simple titles establish a strong pragmatic foundation.

Following the wedding and the warning at the Denton church, Brad and Janet set out on a journey to meet with their former teacher, Scott. During a rainstorm, they get a flat tire not far from Frank-N-Furter's castle. In the theater, there is much ado about the rain and the newspaper that Janet uses to shield herself from the water. This activity often overshadows an important piece of the pragmatic vision. As Brad and Janet are driving, the radio is tuned to Richard Nixon delivering his resignation speech following the Watergate debacle. In this actual recording, Nixon declares, "I must put the interests of America first." There is no more powerful example during the decade of *Rocky Horror*'s production of someone who has violated standards and must therefore suffer the consequences of his acts.

Brad and Janet arrive at the castle and are eventually escorted to Frank's laboratory, where Rocky is brought to life. Rather than reveling in his birth, Rocky begins his life by singing the song, "The Sword of Damocles." The song is a classic form of fantasy theme, which refers to story lines outside the tensions of the here-and-now reality. As tradition tells it, King Dionysius was a wealthy but cruel tyrant. Many were envious of the king's riches and pleasures, particularly his friend Damocles, so the king offered to let Damocles spend a day imbibing all the pleasures of his office. At first, Damocles enjoyed having servants wait on him and providing him with vast banquets. On looking up, however, Damocles noticed a sword, suspended by a thin thread, hovering above his head. The king explained that he always has the sword above his head, and he never knows when it might fall. Damocles quickly changed places back with the king. The moral of the story is the myth of pleasure and the presence of imminent danger. Such is Rocky's fate: Pleasure is merely an illusion, and to partake of the illusion puts one at risk of death. Denounce the pleasure and you live. Be Just and Fear Not.

The next character we meet is Eddie, the delivery boy turned Frank's lover, who was partially lobotomized to provide half his brain to Rocky. In his song, "Hot Patootie—Bless My Soul," Eddie laments his loss of innocence and the simplicity of dressing up to go out on a Saturday night. The arrival of Frank and his pleasure-principle caused Eddie to believe that "cosmic light" came into his life. Eddie announces, "I thought I was divine," but the viewer realizes that he was adhering to an illusion. In a fit of rage, Frank grabs an ax, chases Eddie into the vault, and murders him. Twitchell

provides a sobering interpretation of the scene, noting that "there is always the image of Eddie being axed to death for staying too long under the spell, for not pretending but believing" (75). He offers an extremely pragmatic conclusion to the struggle between the warring visions of decadence and justice: "we realize Eddie's fate could be ours if we ever took it seriously" (76).

As noted in the previous vision, there is a moment when Frank's righteous immorality has an upper hand, particularly with Janet's willingness to have sex with Rocky. Its dominance is short lived. After Scott arrives, the guests are invited to dinner. By the end of the meal, it becomes apparent that Eddie was the main course. Frank's outrageous behavior, which initially seemed focused primarily on sexual antics, has now crossed over into murder and cannibalism. The latter is such a taboo in our culture that, from this point forward, there is no way for the righteous decadence vision to succeed.

As the movie progresses to its climatic floor show, Frank must rely on science and technology to maintain control over the other characters. During the floor show, Janet seems the most willing to support the decadent vision, yet she was also the most active in retreating from Frank following the dinner scene. As noted earlier, Columbia, Rocky, and Brad (and, indirectly, Scott) all participate in the floor show. However, each character is obviously struggling with the transformation. Their guilt for their transgressions is obvious—the vision of Pragmatic Justice is calling.

Then the tides turn completely. Riff Raff and Magenta interrupt the floor show dressed in alien garb and no longer servants. Riff Raff then informs Frank that he is the new commander, giving as a reason, "Your mission is a failure. Your lifestyle's too extreme." That message is the consummate fantasy theme for the pragmatic vision. Frank overdid it—now he must pay. Using a weapon that shoots laser beams, Riff Raff kills both Frank and Rocky. They fall into the pool, where the ultimate fantasy theme is revealed. Painted on the bottom of the pool is the scene from Michelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam* that adorns the ceiling of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel. The message is clear and concise: The mock-creator has been punished for his sins. Justice has been served.

Though Kilgore is not looking at the movie using SCT, his conclusion about Frank epitomizes the ongoing, bipolar drama: "Hedonism has transformed him into an endearingly ridiculous freak, a sexual Charlie Chaplin more likely to attract sympathy than emulation. If giving oneself over to pleasure means becoming what Frank is, the price seems rather high" (156). In this vision, Frank is the antagonist. Ironically, Riff Raff becomes the emergent protagonist. As Kilgore observes, Riff Raff is not viewed as a traitor by the audience but as "an attractive realist and middleman" (158). This interpretation, which is almost formal and businesslike in its tone,

affirms that the victorious vision is a pragmatic one (rather than righteous or social).

The denouement of the movie reifies the pragmatic perspective. Riff Raff and Magenta transport themselves and the castle back to Transylvania. The camera shows Brad, Janet, and Scott laying or crawling in the grass, and the scene starts to spin out of control. Kinkade and Katovich argue that the trio "escape" in this scene (199), though it seems less of an escape than an abandonment. In the closing scene, the Criminologist confirms their sentence as he says, "And crawling on the planet's face, some insects called the human race. Lost in time and lost in space . . . and meaning." This is not escape; this is not victory. The pragmatic drama has expanded to read, "Be Just, or be killed or be left behind to face a life with no meaning." Still, Kinkade and Katovich are correct in their conclusion that "traditional norms are validated; Frankenfurter is merely a distraction" (201).

Conclusions: The Methodology and the Communicative Medium

SCT provides a useful lens for understanding communicative artifacts. The language of FTA provides a terminology set for identification and measurement of the converged symbolic reality. Still, a full SCT/FTA analysis needs to look more closely at the members of the rhetorical community, who accept, reject, or are neutral to the artifact's messages. Because other chapters in this collection do so, this chapter does not focus heavily on the role of audience; however, their part in the process cannot be completely overlooked. In many respects, the audience is the real-life manifestation of the dialectical tension between the warring visions, and we must conclude that, as with the previous textual interpretation, the audience—although temporarily giving themselves over—also concludes that pragmatic justice prevails.

Twitchell refers specifically to the meaning audiences must draw from the message when he states, "What this movie says (if such a movie may be said to 'say' anything) is that it is okay to be sexually confused; it is okay for boys to run around in corsets and garters, to prance and flout and dance and sing; it is okay for girls to be naughty and dirty, to be sexual, bisexual, transsexual—you name it as long as you enjoy it. Or perhaps, to be more accurate, it is okay to *pretend* to be this way" (75). Eventually, the audience must go home. The makeup comes off, the costumes are put away for another late-night outing, and we return to our simple and practical lives. Evidence of this, ironically, can even be found with Frank-N-Furter himself. According to Hoberman and Rosenbaum, Tim Curry, wanting to see the audience participation phenomenon for himself, attended a midnight

showing in Manhattan wearing a suit and tie. Theater workers would not believe it was him and made him wait in line with the rest of the crowd.

Finally, we must add to this analysis the fact that viewing modalities have changed. When I wrote my first *Rocky Horror* paper back in college, the only place to see the movie was at the theater. The audience participation went hand-in-hand with the viewing experience. For this two-decade-later revisit, I watched the movie on VHS. The experience was very different. Not only was it was the first time I heard the Nixon speech but I found myself continually struck by the messages of the pragmatic vision.

Aviram addresses the irony of attempting to experience *Rocky Horror* in the privacy of one's home. "The irony is that the Rocky Horror Cult ought to be celebrated in public spaces, late at night, in the dark, and not trivialized by suburban solitude and trips to the kitchen for beer" (183). Perhaps, though, this is *Rocky Horror*'s fate, or at least the most natural phase of its evolution. The '70s are behind us, and in this new era, we are simply drawn more quickly to the conservative ideology that was always there. Even the copy of the video I own begins with the following disclaimer: "Dream it in your living room. Be it in the theater!" Nowhere does it say, "Be it in your life." Although we may still occasionally transport ourselves in the live theater experience, the predominant venue will be muted to simply wishful thinking as we stare at our televisions.

And why not? *Rocky Horror* is, ultimately, a morality play that only can lead us to the conclusion that pure hedonism is an illusion and that those who attempt such a life will face retribution. It may not have been created for this specific purpose, unlike the 1936 propaganda film *Reefer Madness*, which eventually achieved cult status because of its inherent ridiculousness. I liken the message more to another cult classic, 1969's *Easy Rider*. On the surface, many see the movie as the celebration of freedom, drugs, and the hippie movement—similar to Frank's righteous decadence. In reality, Wyatt "Captain America" (Peter Fonda) concludes that, "We blew it." In the end, he and riding partner Billy are killed in a drive-by shooting. The final scene, where the camera pans back to reveal the burning motorcycles on the side of the road, seems a precursor to *Rocky Horror*'s spiraling final scene where Brad, Janet, and Scott—victims of their own indulgences—crawl about.

Rocky Horror is a temporary escape from normalcy and traditional definitions of morality. For one hundred minutes, audiences can join Frank and share in the vision of righteous decadence. However, whether it be on the big screen surrounded by costumed congregants or on the small screen surrounded by one's furniture, the outcome remains the same: Pragmatic Justice prevails.

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13

"Your Lifestyle's Too Extreme"

Rocky Horror, Shock Treatment, and Late Capitalism

Kevin John Bozelka

It's around two o'clock in the morning at the nearest *Rocky Horror* venue. Somewhat imperceptibly, the tone of the film, if not the evening, has shifted. Instead of an orgiastic, Dionysian display, the scenes after the reprise of "I Can Make You A Man" feel progressively sleepier. This effect is only exacerbated if the theater's print contains "Super Heroes," the song cut out from the original American run of the film, and the mournful reprise of "Science Fiction/Double Feature." If one takes a break from the audience participation and really concentrates on these moments, it becomes clear that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has turned in on itself, that its wildest propositions have grown tragically untenable. Suddenly, the chants of "Don't Dream It. Be It" start to sound like a trap.

John D'Emilio's epochal "Capitalism and Gay Identity" refined Michel Foucault's history of sexuality by arguing that, along with other nineteenth-century discourses such as psychology, medicine, and criminology, capitalism was one of the chief components in the formation of a homosexual identity in the United States. As abstract money began funding an increasing number of industries, individuals were drawn away from the family (the primary haven for economic stability) into largely urban areas and a system of wage labor. As with Foucault, D'Emilio rejects the hypothesis that this system repressed sexuality. Quite the contrary, it helped create

the spaces for a homosexual identity, if not identity in general, to thrive. And with this migration into cities, of course, comes the precondition for the formation of gay and lesbian communities as we know them today.

However, if homosexuality and capitalism are such tight bed partners, how do we account for the persistence of job discrimination, lack of insurance benefits for significant others, and other virulent strains of homophobia? D'Emilio himself wondered about this paradoxical incompatibility and, writing in 1979, came to the following conclusion: "On the one hand, capitalism continually weakens the material foundation of family life, making it possible for individuals to live outside the family, and for a lesbian and gay male identity to develop. On the other, it needs to push men and women into families, at least long enough to reproduce the next generation of workers. The elevation of the family to ideological preeminence guarantees that capitalist society will reproduce not just children, but heterosexism and homophobia. In the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem" (474).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, capitalism is still the problem—albeit in a rather different way. Increasingly, capitalism is experiencing problems reproducing homophobia because of the need to constantly expand into new markets. As the success of a show like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* makes clear, there is now a legible homosexual subject that capitalism actively (if often ambiguously, especially in the case of a lesbian subject) addresses. Certainly, one can make the case that *Queer Eye* merely adds fuel to the ideological preeminence of the heterosexual family—after all, most episodes center around the maintenance of a well-oiled heterosexual courtship ritual—and although the Fab Five scrutinize this ritual at every turn, the show's format never allows for a strong expression of collectivity among them. In the end, they remain atomized in their flexibly specialized custodial roles.

Then again, this atomization is exactly what capitalism wants, or to be more precise, it is the ultimate goal of the more virulent strain of capitalism most commonly referred to as late capitalism. The exodus of individuals away from the family thus needs to be updated historically for this new era as more and more individuals go into business for themselves, not as multinational tycoons, of course, but as severely localized independent contractors. Angela McRobbie's unflinching portrait of the culture industries (where, it should be emphasized, many gay men become successful) offers a useful perspective on this development. As McRobbie notes, self-employment and freelance work transfer the onus of workplace politics from corporations (and social welfare institutions) onto the individual, thus increasing the profit margins of big business. Self-employed individuals, then, must adopt a modicum of reflexivity and essentially become their

own institutional structures responsible for social welfare. The logistics of undertaking such an endeavor in this era of neoliberal individualization are obviously dumbfounding—however much time labor takes up, the remainder is usually reserved for maintaining the late capitalist system as a whole through consumption.

Going back to *Queer Eye*, then, what some gay men have won in their successful interpellation as capitalist subjects is impeccable shopping credentials. These credentials can then be transformed into capital as they are transferred to heterosexual lunkheads and other clueless consumers. There is something undeniably, gleefully subversive about this long overdue recognition of the enormous contributions gay men have made to the discourse on heterosexuality. "Like the Jewish studio moguls who propagated images of an overwhelmingly gentile United States," Kamal Al-Solaylee reminds us, "gay men and lesbians in Hollywood defined heterosexuality for Americans in the 20th century by influencing its outward trappings." However, the wide-open queer eye of the twenty-first century peers out from a distinctly middle-class—if not higher—vantage point. In praising an ever-increasing visibility, celebrants of this exciting new era of progress tend to forget that the eyes of other disenfranchised groups are peering right back at them. Richard Goldstein summarizes this state of affairs succinctly: "TV shows featuring well-heeled, happy homos feed the perception that gays are doing fine—so why should they qualify for 'special' rights?" Some of those disenfranchised groups are not only lower-class communities of various racial backgrounds but also other gays and lesbians (again, of various racial backgrounds) for whom trailer parks and welfare lines comprise a more accurate queer geography than the well-appointed apartments on *Queer Eye*. That these groups remain invisible to a portion of the well-heeled, happy, and usually white homos on television and in the television audience speaks to the more pernicious aspects of the homosexuality–capitalism matrix—namely, that it now allows some gays and lesbians to make their own significant, widely visible contribution to the unequal distribution of wealth. In short, they are now baldly implicated in the inequities of late capitalism and cannot afford (quite literally) to ignore the precise forms those inequities take.

In this chapter, I discuss *Rocky Horror* as a cautionary tale about the inequities that can result in the marriage between homosexuality and capitalism. Far too much of the commentary on *Rocky Horror* emphasizes the Dionysian aspects of the film—its hybridity in relation to genre and sexuality. For instance, in an analysis of *Shock Treatment*, the sequel to *Rocky Horror*, J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum write "[*Shock Treatment*] was as quintessentially a work of the seventies as *Rocky Horror* was an expression (again slightly delayed) of the sixties" (210). I would

counter that *Rocky Horror* contains a critique of the polymorphously perverse sexual politics of the counterculture—a critique very much informed by a distinctly 1970's brand of cynicism and disappointment. Particularly in the later sequences alluded to in my introduction, the film takes on the contours of such sour countercultural hangovers as *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) and *Some Call It Loving* (1973).

Of course, this is the most common complaint brought against *Rocky Horror* qua film. As Danny Peary notes, "the picture peters out (and, to a first-time viewer, becomes a bit confusing) and by the time Frank-N-Furter was killed, I wished the film had ended twenty minutes earlier. The hectic pace was too much to maintain" (305). One might surmise instead that *Rocky Horror* is about the petering out of the countercultural activity of the '60s and its inability to maintain its own hectic pace.

Furthermore, what *Rocky Horror* dramatizes is how amenable radical sexual politics are to late capitalism and how easily gays and lesbians can get sucked into perpetuating its inequities. Over the course of the next section, I draw out these implications in *Rocky Horror*. I also pay close attention to *Shock Treatment*—its much-reviled sequel—for the way in which it puts these implications into sharper (and, hence, more uncomfortable) relief. Ultimately, I want to demonstrate how the mantra of "Don't Dream It. Be It," *Rocky Horror*'s unchallenged motto, drowns out two of the film's equally significant mottos: "It's not easy having a good time" and, more tragically, "Your lifestyle's too extreme."

In his classic essay "Entertainment and Utopia," Richard Dyer has demonstrated that the classic Hollywood musical functions as an expression of utopia (2–13). Despite the successful fusion of conflicting impulses into one happy community by the film's end, however, musicals only show us what utopia might feel like, not how it can be organized. The climactic floor show in *Rocky Horror*, appropriately titled "Rose Tint My World," illustrates Dyer's notion perfectly. During the "Fanfare/Don't Dream It" portion of the floor show, Dr. Frank-N-Furter, the figure most revered by the *Rocky Horror* cult, sings about the tactile qualities of his utopia as a series of rather inactive second person commands and sleep-like states. He entreats us to give ourselves over to absolute pleasure and swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh. He tells of erotic nightmares beyond any measure and sensual daydreams to treasure forever. Eventually, he becomes so intoxicated by his own advertising slogans that he cannot continue and instead asks gushingly, "Can't you just see it?" But how exactly does one attain such utopian heights? We *can* just see it, Frank—but how do we get it?

Bearing out Dyer's analysis, the film never answers these questions. Or, more precisely, it offers the slightest suggestion of a fundamental capitalist answer—money. As the square representative of precounterculture middle

America, Brad Majors remarks early in the film that Frank's castle "is probably some kind of hunting lodge for rich weirdos." Giving oneself over to absolute pleasure implies the time and resources in which to do so. Brad's dismissive remark actually seals a connection between the queer liberation rhetoric of Frank's song and the money necessary to bring it into a radical sexual existence.

If Frank is the undisputed queen of these weirdos, however, in what way is he rich? For sure, the castle itself implies wealth, and the Zen Room, hazy with marijuana smoke and a pungent reminder of the countercultural 1960s, suggests a significant amount of leisure time, but beyond that, there are no overt economic markers in the film beyond dead-end conjecture about the system of exchange on Frank's home planet of Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania. And although his work as a scientist produces a gorgeous playmate, Rocky, as well as an audiovibratoryphysiomolecular transport device, Frank never hints at how he might transform his creations into some form of capital.

Of course, as queen of his castle, he need not worry too much about capital—his absolute pleasure derives from absolute power—but Frank's brand of rule betrays the taints of fascism rather than the divine rights of feudalist monarchy. In contrast to signs of economic privilege, there is no poverty of fascist markers throughout the film. First of all, there is the swastika-like lightning bolt insignia that the Transylvanians wear on their right arms. It also rides atop the castle on a flag, which some *Rocky Horror* audiences salute with a "Sieg Heil!" during "Over at the Frankenstein Place." Next, there is Magenta's comment that Rocky is a triumph of Frank's will—an allusion to *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl's 1936 Nazi propaganda epic. Finally, Rocky himself fulfills and even epitomizes the requirements for blonde, physically fit Aryan beauty (see Figure 13.1).

Other signposts suggest that Frank may have been a victim of fascism in addition to one of its purveyors. For one, his fishnets and garters garb link him to the prefascist Weimar Republic or, in Hollywood's version, to Liza Minnelli as Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*, released only a year before the first stage production of *The Rocky Horror Show*. The name of a popular German cologne, *4711*, is "tattooed like a concentration-camp identification on his leg" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 187), and when Frank refers to his rival Dr. Scott as Dr. Von Scott, he is implying precisely that Scott has a Nazi past—a point made clear by audiences that again stand up at this point to salute "Sieg Heil!" Nevertheless, by the time we first see Frank in the film, he has come out on top to enjoy his radical sexual identity to its fullest potential. His character paradoxically imbues an image of Berlin decadence circa 1930 with fascist power. According to Gaylyn Studlar, fans respond to this aspect of Frank with the most fervor: "Frank's fans identify



Figure 13.1

with the Frank who, in juxtaposing the pearl necklace of a demure matron with a sequined lace-up corset, spiked heels, and gartered stockings, evokes Marlene Dietrich's erotic ambiguity in von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*, while hinting at the tantalizingly taboo possibilities of sadomasochistic bondage. The joke is that Frank would never be caught dead at the bottom—and his fans know it" (Studlar 149).

The cyclical nature of fascism in this scenario gives pause, though, when one realizes how closely Frank resembles the self-employed creative laborers that McRobbie discusses. Similar to the freelance fashion designer or the rave promoter, Frank has "seemingly circumvented 'unhappy work' and [has] come upon a way of earning a living without the feeling of being robbed of identity" (McRobbie 521). Also like them, however, he necessarily becomes his own social support system, where "reflexivity marks the space of self responsibility, self blame . . . a de-politicizing, de-socializing mechanism" (McRobbie 522). So where creative laborers inevitably wonder "Where have I gone wrong?" as McRobbie surmises, Frank concludes that "It's not easy having a good time," wondering whether or not he made a mistake using half of Eddie's brain to create Rocky. In each instance, it is a larger structure that is the problem, revealing what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno had already concluded in their 1944 Frankfurt School opus *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—that fascism and capitalism are two sides of the same coin.

It is only Frank who is rich in any significant way. What *Rocky Horror* demonstrates in the end, then, is the price of giving yourself over to absolute pleasure. "Don't Dream It. Be It" is an untenable proposition in any collective sense because someone has to mop the floor and dust the control panel as Magenta and Riff Raff do in one scene, fittingly after Frank has already slept with both Rocky and Janet (he gets to Brad by the very next scene). Frank never gains enough reflexivity to account for social welfare (not to mention janitorial services) in his radical sexual lifestyle. Instead, he opts to murder and even eat Eddie because such behavior makes another outrageous notch on his polymorphously perverse bedpost—a limits-bucking modus operandi adopted by infamous cultural laborer Michael Alig. Thus, in flexing his radical queerness, Frank perpetuates the inequities of the fascist/capitalist system. That Magenta and Riff Raff eventually turn on him should then come as no surprise, with the latter singing immediately after the floor show, "Your lifestyle's too extreme."

For the cyclical nature of Frank's fascist/capitalist individuality to function smoothly, however, it needs a cyclical process of production and consumption in place to move it along. It must ensure that there will always be someone in thrall to the demagoguery of fascism and to the seductive rationale of capitalism, as both attempt to seep into every facet of existence—and it certainly helps if these blissed-out monads remain blind to (or willfully ignorant of) the ways in which a lack of reflexivity comes back to haunt the atomized individuals in these systems. So where Riff Raff and Magenta are clearly fed up with how expansively Frank has (ir)rationalized his lifestyle, Columbia, as a groupie and "regular Frankie fan," is the *Rocky Horror* cult's surrogate in the film, and by the time of the floor show, Brad, Janet, and Rocky function in the same fashion as Columbia—clearly in thrall to Frank but avoiding the negative ramifications of their fanaticism as they sing "Rose tint my world, keep me safe from my trouble and pain."

As with most musicals, Frank's utopia has reenergized each character, to which they testify in song. Only Columbia expresses dismay over his tyrannical impulses—Rocky remains pure sexual desire, Brad feels sexy, and Janet's solo practically serves as an outline of Dyer's essay. The rejuvenated feelings she lists correspond to the musical's utopian solutions of abundance, energy, intensity, and transparency, and as Dyer adds, these are only responses to inadequacies that capitalism can address (Dyer 8). Crucially completing the cycle, Frank joins in on the "Rose Tint My World" chorus because he himself was in thrall once, to Fay Wray and her satin-draped frame. He himself was in a powerless position, moved to tears because he wanted to be dressed just like King Kong's favorite plaything, but he refused merely to dream about it. What movies taught him (and teach us every weekend at midnight) was that any dream, no matter how monstrous, can

become viable—something to help stave off mortality and endear you to future generations until someone usurps your throne/zeitgeist (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 304)—but on and on the cycle goes. At this point in the film, we might truly ask ourselves whatever *did* happen to Fay Wray?—for her date with oblivion foreshadows Frank's.

Frank does indeed live out his dream and becomes Fay Wray to Rocky's King Kong. Unfortunately, as in all good melodramas, it comes too late. By the time Rocky hauls him up the RKO tower in homage to King Kong's trek up the Empire State Building with Fay Wray, Frank has already said "hello to oblivion," courtesy of Riff's pitchfork-pronged antimatter laser. Perhaps then what makes this dénouement so dreary to so many viewers is the horrible fates that await our surrogates up on the screen.

Columbia and Rocky are murdered, ostensibly for their expression of grief over Frank's death. Brad, Janet, and Scott stumble around in the aftermath of the castle's launch into outer space. They wail about superheroes who feed on them—a line that serves as a particularly stinging critique of how the cyclical drive of late capitalism imprisons them in cultish consumption—and for the very end, the narrator, a criminologist, bears witness to this ultimate crime against humanity, recalling Adorno in the oh-so-omniscient space in which he frequently positioned himself: "And crawling on the planet's face, some insects called the human race. Lost in time . . . lost in space . . . and meaning." When the audience asks "What's your favorite TV show?" before the narrator says "lost in space" here, our prison gates get padlocked shut for good. We are chained to capitalism's treadmill of the ever new, reveling in references and unable to step off toward an experience untainted by commerce. All that remains is the sad little reprise of "Science Fiction/Double Feature," a snippet plagued with loss, departure, and darkness conquering Brad and Janet—darkness because any system outside of Frank's now seems an unimaginable no place—the literal definition of utopia.

For Amittai F. Aviram, the ending holds subversive potential. "To be 'lost . . . in meaning' is to find oneself in the play of meanings and allusions, in a position that is both frightening and exhilaratingly free" (Aviram 190). But no matter how playful our sexual identities, someone, perhaps equally hybrid in his or her sexuality, is always standing at attention to market to us. We are exhilaratingly free to go shopping, free to maintain an unequal distribution of wealth—insects ripe to scurry through late capitalism's ant farm. In this regard, the much-ballyhooed generic hybridity of *Rocky Horror* gets sucked into this vortex as well. The film does indeed radically mix the musical with the horror film, the science fiction film, the rock and roll film, and perhaps even the melodrama. Yet again, however, this mélange only makes it a more ideal product because movie studios can spread it

across different markets, and the speed on this cultural blender has been upped to "liquefy" in the decades after *Rocky Horror* debuted. Corey K. Creekmur goes as far as to suggest that the concept of genre itself is poised for gooey extinction in an era of multinational, thoroughly diversified Hollywood. There has been an implicit address to "everyone" in an increasing number of Hollywood films since 1975.[1] Horror film lovers can hold hands with musical lovers at the same screening. As with the CD box sets of the 1990s, these all/no genre films offer the illusion of a complete package, of complete satisfaction, but always there is something more to buy—the book based on the movie, the soundtrack album, the action figures, and so on.

There are few spaces to contest this hold because it seems to take up all space, so McRobbie's writes: "And after hours, in the dedicated club/networking space, with free vodka on tap all night thanks to the sponsorship of the big drink companies, who dares to ask 'uncool' questions about the minimal representation of women and non-white young people, about who the big clients are and what they do with the product, and about the downside of the 'talent-led' economy?" (McRobbie 523). Similarly, in the hail of toast and toilet paper, as you feel that kinky rush when you first connect your garter belt to your fishnet stocking, who dares to ask "uncool" questions about the lack of reflexivity in Frank's utopia? Who dares to suggest we take Scott more seriously, that living your life for the thrill is indeed a trap, and that society must be protected from Frank? Who dares to speculate on the economic situation of the theater, especially when, as in some cases, you are let in for free? And what of the sheer waste of toilet paper and toast, not to mention the Riff Raff and Magenta surrogates who have to clean it all up in the morning? Who dares to wonder about the entire mechanism that gets us to the theater every weekend and has us enlisting the services of record bounty hunters across the globe for a coveted copy of the New Zealand *Rocky Horror Show* cast album featuring Gary Glitter as Frank?

By the time of *Shock Treatment*, which was not a temporal sequel but can be more accurately described as a hangover from *Rocky Horror*, late capitalism's victory over everyday existence was now complete. The audience is built into the film as a panoply of slack-jawed cultists blissfully trapped inside Denton Television's studio. They even sleep at the studio—"the nerve center of operations" as Nation McKinley refers to it. Game show host Bert Schnick is so accustomed to the situation that he fails to understand the word "home." With the "everybody" market firmly in place within this hermetically sealed universe, they are perpetually sold that quintessential late capitalist product—mental hygiene—which is never fully attainable, as an endless assembly line of new products constantly reminds us.

In *Shock Treatment*, Janet takes over Frank's function in *Rocky Horror* and becomes the star to sell it to them. Only here, we see every angle of the star-making machine, as fast food magnate Farley Flavors and his minions work to transform her into "Miss Mental Health." Instead of offering a relentless deconstruction of the forces of commerce, however, the film renders them all the more mysterious and ultimately unknowable. Part of what makes *Shock Treatment* so confusing for so many viewers is that Janet's rise to superstardom seems to follow a predetermined logic known only to Farley Flavors and his minions—and sometimes not even them. Cosmo and Nation McKinley, for instance, are two neurospecialists who star in "DTV's most popular hospital series," *Dentonvale*, an eerie foreshadowing of such reality television shows as *Starting Over* and *The Swan*. Their backroom politics with Schnick suggest that they are implicated in the tangled game show machinations that win Brad, now an "emotional cripple," medical treatment on *Dentonvale*. To be sure, they all play an unquestionably integral role in prepping Janet for superstardom, but Schnick makes it clear from the beginning that Farley Flavors will be funding *Dentonvale*—a fact that throws Cosmo into a rage. In his monitor-cluttered office perched high above the studio, Flavors wields the power of a veritable Ideological State Apparatus unto himself. From this surveillance bank, he presides over all in what amounts to a manifestation of the utter omnipresence of capital. Eventually, it becomes clear to the viewer that no character in the film exists outside of the peculiar rationale of Farley Flavors and the Denton television matrix. Schnick sums up this total rationalization of life in his comment after Brad is wheeled off to the rest home/*Dentonvale*: "The subject is committed . . . as are we all."

In *Shock Treatment*'s arid world, disembodied announcer voices skip across the soundtrack. Sometimes we can connect them to characters, but more often, they belong to no one—not even a no-neck narrator. Television monitors clutter and sometimes take over the frame in constant transmission mode. During the *Marriage Maze* game show toward the beginning of the film, for instance, the camera turns away from Schnick to his image on a monitor. Eventually, a cut causes the edges of the monitor to disappear in a shot-reverse shot discussion with Ralph Hapschatt and Macy Struthers. The film thus becomes the television, which has filled up the entire frame. All throughout, monitors are as pervasive in the mise-en-scène as characters. Indeed, Brad and Janet sing to a monitor during "Bitchin' in the Kitchen." Where once they sang to and about Frank, now the superheroes are a fabulous array of appliances to which the couple turn for marital advice and aid. However, the shape of the song is not dictated by any form of self-expression—quite the contrary. Brad and Janet must respond to whatever pops up in the random flow of commercials. Thus, Janet wrinkles her face

in bewilderment at the sight of toothpaste being squeezed on a toothbrush and proceeds to sing "Oh toothpaste—don't you put the squeeze on me!"[2] As for the products themselves, some of them traffic in the kind of pseudo-individualization Adorno uncovered as a representative tenet of capitalist illusion, whereby advertisers attempt superficially to differentiate an utterly standardized product (Adorno 307–9). For instance, the announcer refers to the alarm clock that rushes past Janet on the monitor as a "micro-digital awaker." Much like the *Rocky Horror* cult, characters eventually start to mimic the omnipresent television screens, as when Janet's parents grab for beverages exactly when the television announcer instructs them to do so. Furthermore, we hear the voices of Cosmo and Nation in this scene mimicking Janet's conversation with her parents from some unseen surveillance system (perhaps the television set itself).

This eerie absence of human interlocutors makes for a rather vexed musical. For sure, the musical numbers are firmly integrated into the narrative, but they fail to achieve the community that is the traditional end result of the musical. Only the title number manages to bring previously warring factions together, and there, the characters come under the collective spell of late capitalism in the figure of Farley Flavors. Elsewhere, characters sing into and dance with mirrors, or they sing to and about themselves. Janet begins one song "there's just the two of me alone at last together," while the chorus is nothing more than a rousing ode to "me, me, me!" And as with so many post–1960 musical numbers, the climactic duet between Brad and Farley takes place in their imaginations.[3]

In *Shock Treatment*, then, we have an entire town of atomized individuals, unable to distinguish between reality and television. In fact, most viewers of the film find themselves in the same predicament. After about twenty minutes, we are never quite sure when we are watching a television show within the film. Late capitalism's tentacles have wrapped so tightly around us that all concepts of inside and outside become irretrievably confused. With its claustrophobic setting and severely reduced visual palette, *Shock Treatment* offers a glimpse of what Fredric Jameson calls "a postmodern or technological sublime." Similar to *The Matrix* and other postmodern melodramas, it tries to represent the unrepresentable. We sit dumbfounded in the face of Denton TV's enormous, all-pervasive communicational network, which only duplicates our bewilderment at multinational capitalism. As Jameson might have said of the film, "it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third (late) stage of capital itself" (Jameson 37–38).

Yet the system does not go unchallenged. Similar to little Neos, Judge Oliver Wright and Betty Hapschatt—recently fired from the *Denton Dossier* talk show—embark on an investigation of the Flavors matrix. They break Brad out of *Dentonvale*, and eventually Janet comes to realize her status as nothing more than cog in the machine. However, when Flavors orders these newfound rivals out of the *Faith Factory* finale, one wonders where "out" might be. For the moment, the rebellious quartet winds up sequestered in an office on the soundstage. It would seem that they escaped the fate of the audience, who finally leave their auditorium seats only to find themselves happily singing the hometown song in straightjackets throughout the padded rooms and prison cells of the studio. Once the two couples manage to break out of the office holding cell, though, they merely take the audience's place in the auditorium seats, singing the last and perhaps oddest number in the film, "Anyhow, Anyhow." "We're gonna do it anyhow, anyhow," they chirp, but again, one wonders what exactly "it" is. As they drive off the set in a convertible at the end of the film, they pass a huge, neon Denton TV sign with an enormous Vegas-style arrow pointing back to the set, but rather than showing an escape from Denton TV and the cyclical pull of late capitalism, the end feels as if they will remain on its treadmill. As the song states, "we just gotta keep going."

The ability even to imagine utopia becomes severely limited in a space so thoroughly conquered by capital. Jameson has analyzed how architecture attempts to work out this problem: In a Santa Monica home built by Frank Gehry, he detects a tension between a predilection for cheap materials that underscores the economics of space and a kind of postmodern hyperspace that deliberately confuses inside and outside, thus effacing vectors of power. On the one hand, there is "the production of poverty and misery, people not only out of work but without a place to live, bag people, waste and industrial pollution, squalor, garbage, and obsolescent machinery"; on the other, "the postmodern United States of extraordinary technological and scientific achievement; the most 'advanced' country in the world, in all the science fictional senses and connotations of that figure, accompanied by an inconceivable financial system and a combination of abstract wealth and real power in which all of us believe, without many of us ever really knowing what that might be or look like" (128). According to Jameson, we must take up the challenge of working this tension out dialectically to begin ironing out the inequities of capital and to seize its material manifestations: "There must be a relationship between those two realms or dimensions of reality, or else we are altogether within science fiction without realizing it" (128).

What is missing from *Shock Treatment* is that first term—a visual register to counteract all the technological wonderment/bewilderment of late

capitalism. The film leaves few material reminders of the havoc that capitalism wrecks on space and the environment, and no glimpse of the cheap materials alluding to poor communities. As such, *Shock Treatment* is pure science fiction, similar to *The Matrix*. Just as the movie comes to a conclusion, however, yet another disembodied voice provides us with the film's *de facto* moral: "The sun never sets on those who ride into it." I would like to take this aphorism as an opportunity briefly to wax more positive.

Despite the fact that *Shock Treatment* never attracted a cult of *Rocky Horror* proportions, the *Rocky Horror* cult audience is unquestionably built into it. The slack-jawed Denton TV viewers make this connection obvious, but one can also detect it in the constant allusions to *Rocky Horror* and in the broken cadences of the dialogue that seem to beg for audience participation. Perhaps, then, we could take the *Rocky Horror* cult audience as that missing first term.[4] In a crucial way, the *Rocky Horror* cult is an earlier, more primitive form of the culture industry jobs of late capitalism. What sets it apart, however, is its enormous morphability, and not just its ability to incorporate disparate disenfranchised individuals. I am thinking more of the ragtag nature of the casts, the constant movement in and out of membership, the temporary nature of their collectives, and the props and costumes that, no matter how much time and money is poured into them, can never measure up to their counterparts on the screen. I am also thinking about cast dues necessarily paid at infrequent rates and fluctuating sums, depending on the economic situation of various cast members. Deleuze and Guattari might call such ever-shifting conglomerations rhizomatic.[5] Despite these potential setbacks, the fan-practitioners of the *Rocky Horror* cult manage to perform a show every weekend at midnight.

Again, the vulgar mass watching endless hours of Denton TV programming represents this particular audience, but they have an even closer surrogate in a group of young people who step out from the crowd. Oscar Drill and The Bits are a punkish band "with a suburban garage sound" that plays before Farley's *Faith Factory* show. Fan-practitioners all, they are also Janet's unregenerate groupies. When Brad, Janet, Betty, and Oliver drive off at the end of the film, they bring Oscar Drill and The Bits along with them for their ride into the sun. The film provides no strong narrative reason for this particular dénouement, but conceptually, it narrows the distance—however temporarily—between star and fan, between the sleek, basic black of the upper class and the squeaky clean whites of the middle class.

I take this motley group of passengers as a model for collective behavior in the absence of larger social welfare structures and a sense of reflexivity. Perhaps what cultural laborers can do to ease the self-blame (and chip away at the monolith that indentures them) is to drag as many people as possible through their happy work world. These collective will necessarily be ragtag

and temporary like the *Rocky Horror* cult itself, and certainly more connections to other groups of people will have to be made—the suburban garage is quite far from the squalor and misery of poverty. However, clearly what "the sun never sets on those who ride into it" means to say is that there is no way out of the clutches of late capitalism—only a disconnected series of attempts to burrow directly through it.

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Notes

1. This is how Timothy Corrigan analyzes the notorious box-office failure of *Heaven's Gate* (1980) as a barometer for the shifts in post-Vietnam cinema: "[*Heaven's Gate*] seemingly appealed to no one because of its attempts to appeal to everyone (which is of course no one)" (13).
2. The "Bitchin' in the Kitchen" song contains remarkable echoes of X-Ray Spex's 1977 punk masterpiece "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!" Vocalist Poly Styrene shouts to bondage as if it were a person, laughing at its claims of radical rebellion and deconstruction. The message, of course, was that punk was so semiotically destructive that not even such taboos as whips and chains were effective in registering revolutionary commitment. Everything eventually becomes amenable to capitalism, rendering investment itself perpetually fraught. On their subsequent full-length album *Germfree Adolescents*, released just at the crack of dawn of postmodernism in Western popular music, Styrene romps through capitalism's fun house of commodities and joyously manages to make an affective investment in hygienic Weetabix and synthetic fibre see-through leaves. Janet, in contrast, remains confused.
3. One can see this operation in musical numbers ranging from the meeting at the dance in *West Side Story* (1961) to "I Can't Do It Alone" in *Chicago* (2002), as well as earlier in the "Blue Danube (Why Are We Here)" number from *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955).
4. Richard Pryor's turn as a pathetic wino serves this role in *Some Call It Loving*, where his scenes function as a cognitive clash with the elaborate erotic role playing that occurs at his friend's (Zalman King) mansion. One might indeed describe the latter as a hunting lodge for rich weirdos, populated by an upper class with the time and resources to indulge their most recondite sexual fantasies. Pryor's character, of course, does not enjoy the same privileges.
5. See Deleuze and Guattari, especially 7–13.

About the Contributors

Sarah Artt is lecturer in literature and culture at Napier University and lecturer in film and media at Queen Margaret University. She earned her doctorate in 2005 from Queen Margaret with a dissertation that dealt with contemporary film adaptations of the work of Edith Wharton and Henry James. Her research interests include adaptation and transnational cinema, and her article "Art of the Past: Adapting Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*" appeared in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* in December 2007.

Kevin John Bozelka is a doctoral candidate in the radio television film department at the University of Texas at Austin. His film and popular music criticism has appeared in *Village Voice*, *Chicago Reader*, and *Popmatters*.

Michael Mark Chemers received a doctorate in theatre history and theory from the University of Washington and has an MFA in playwriting from Indiana University. He teaches in the School of Drama at Carnegie Mellon, where he founded and directs the school's dramaturgy program. His work has appeared in many journals including *Modern Drama*, *Journal of Theatre and Performance*, *Comparative Drama*, and *Disability Studies Quarterly*, and his book *Staging Cinema: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* is available from Palgrave MacMillan (2008).

Julian Cornell is an adjunct lecturer in media studies at Queens College, City University of New York. He is also a doctoral candidate in cinema studies at New York University and is working on a dissertation about recent apocalyptic American films entitled *The End at the End: Apocalyptic Cinema at the Close of the Millennium*. His publications include articles on H. G. Wells and zombies.

Thomas G. Endres is a professor of communication studies and director of the School of Communication at the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley. He has authored over two dozen book chapters and articles in predominantly communication-related publications, presented more than one hundred papers and keynote addresses worldwide, and is the author and photographer of *Sturgis Stories: Celebrating the People of the World's Largest Motorcycle Rally* (2002, Kirk House). In addition to his doctorate in communication studies, he also holds an MAPS from the St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity.

Samuel Benjamin Hixon has presented papers in queer theory, bioethics and disability, and popular conceptions of science at professional conferences. He was the only undergraduate presenter at the Duke University Center for the Study of Medical Ethics and Humanities' 2004 conference on poetry and medicine and was

awarded a grant that same year to present at the Society for Literature and Science's annual conference.

Zachary Lamm is a graduate student at Loyola University Chicago. He is currently completing a dissertation entitled "The Queer Work of Fantasy: The Romance in Antebellum America."

Heather Clampitt Levy is an Austin-based poet and lover of Frankenstein films. She taught English composition at the University of Texas at Arlington, and her areas of interest include psychoanalytic film theory, creative writing, and the ways in which technology and data growth inform capitalist culture.

Matthew A. Levy is an assistant professor of English at Pacific Lutheran University. Previously, he served as writing program administrator at the University of Texas at Arlington and as a Writing Center instructor at Texas Christian University. His research focuses primarily on cynicism as a political issue that affects college writing instruction.

Liz Locke holds a doctorate in folklore from Indiana University. Currently a lecturer in expository writing at Oklahoma University, she is coeditor (with Theresa A. Vaughan and Pauline Greenhill) of *The Encyclopedia of Women's Folklore and Folklife* (Greenwood Press, 2008). Her ongoing research interests include feminist classics; race, class, and gender theory; film semiotics; and the persistence of myth in American political and popular culture.

Sue Matheson teaches film and literature at University College of the North, Manitoba, Canada. A twentieth-century generalist, she earned her doctorate at the University of Manitoba. Her areas of interest include modern American literature and culture, women's literature, children's literature, and Western films. She has a book manuscript in progress on male initiation rites.

Kristina Watkins-Mormino is an assistant professor of French at Georgia Gwinnett College, the first four-year college to be founded in the United States in the twenty-first century, where she is building the French program. A medievalist, her research explores sacerdotal virginity in Old French hagiography, representations of Joan of Arc in French culture, and the characterization of love as a life-threatening wound in Old French romance.

Nicole Seymour is a doctoral candidate in English literature at Vanderbilt University, where she teaches undergraduate writing courses centered on queer theory, ecocriticism, and conceptions of authorship. Her dissertation project examines the relationship between narrative dynamics and the representation of queer bodily transformations in post–World War II literature and film.

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock is associate professor of American literature and culture at Central Michigan University. He is the author of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Wallflower Press, 2008) and *Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women* (Fordham UP 2008) and has edited academic collections on *South Park*, *The Blair Witch Project*, Edgar Allan Poe's prose and poetry, and "The Yellow Wallpaper." His work has appeared in journals including *American Literature*, *Studies in American Fiction*, *Arizona Quarterly*, and *Pedagogy*.

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