

# CULT CINEMA: A CRITICAL SYMPOSIUM

Featuring Joe Bob Briggs, J. Hoberman, Damien Love, Tim Lucas, Danny Peary, Jeffrey Sonce and Peter Stanfield

As the marginal goes mainstream, critical connoisseurs debate the frenzied life, near death, and rejuvenation of cult cinema

Most of us know someone who can't get through a day without quoting from *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, *Casablanca*, *Dracula* or some other compulsively worshipped movie. Other people tire of hearing them intone, "Eeelectricity!" "Round up the usual suspects," or "I never drink... wine," but they persevere and we screen them out. At what point, however, does this kind of behavior cease to seem quaintly quasipathological and begin to call to us as a significant spectacle? Is it a matter of the ferocity of their ardor? Or their numbers? Would 1,000 people attending a *Star Trek* convention wearing Mr. Spock ears in San Diego make us sit up and take more notice than if two showed up at a Starbucks in Paramus speaking Vulcan? We finally decided that the only way to seriously examine these and other pressing questions was to publish a special section on Cult Film.

What initially drew our attention was that not only did cult film turn up in our conversations with great frequency, it also arrived in numerous guises. Cult as shock and schlock; cult as nostalgia; cult as marginality; cult as intensity and passion; cult as marketing hype; cult as fad and fashion; cult as subversion; cult as historical era marker. Too many things to too many people, cult film seemed to us to be stretching so thinly before our eyes as to potentially lose its meaning in a dizzying vortex. It seemed an untenable situation ripe for critical investigation.

Cult film has actually been a subject of intermittent, serious study for almost thirty years, and the object of "gee-whizz," hyperemotional expostulations for longer than that. But *Cineaste* is also aware that the past ten years has seen a surge of scrutiny of the cult film phenomenon by well-informed scholars, journalists, and critics armed with something more than the pleasure, curiosity, and wonder of the initial wave of critics. This "New Wave" of cult criticism, so to speak, carries with it the intention of winnowing the wheat of rigorous understanding from the chaff of spurious and digressive chatter.

We approached a number of leading scholars, journalists, and critics—authors of classics in the field, editors of journals devoted to cult film, and new scholars of the subject—and invited them to contribute to our Critical Symposium. In the following pages, and continuing on our web site, we offer a wide range of critical interpretations and strategies—emanating from the United States, England, and Australia—that we believe will contribute to a new clarity about cult film, but leave abundant breathing room for the stimulating clash of differing considered opinions.

Our contributors differ in emphasis, which has created a trio of interrogational repertoires. Their three major focus points can be itemized as: the cult fan; the cult object; and the relationship

between the cult film and the marketplace. Viewing the phenomenon of cult film through the lens of the fan elicits questions about what distinguishes cult interest from the more general category of cinephilia; differences between the opportunities for cult fans now and cult fans back in the day of pre-home-viewing technologies; and the motives and cultural roles of the cult fan.

Viewing the cult film in terms of its definition as an object, our contributors have confronted questions about cult esthetics: whether they are distinctly different from the esthetics of mainstream film; the independence of cult creators; whether there is a distinctive cult esthetic; whether the cult film (or only some cult films) is marked by a defamiliarized attitude toward the body, gender, society, the family, and human identity.

Finally, where our contributors set their sights on the commodification of cult film, they ran up against the overwhelming question of whether cult film is possible any longer, given a marketplace that omnivorously coopts whatever it catches in the cross hairs of its profit motive in order to produce a standardized product. Under this heading, we find consideration of whether and how there can still be the kind of search for the unknown, obscure object of filmgoing desire that marked the cult adventure in the long-ago days of the midnight movie, screened in the kind of independently owned movie theater that barely exists today.

We posed the following questions to our respondents, both for the print and online editions, suggesting that they could choose either to answer the individual questions, or to use them as departure points for their own essay.—The Editors

- 1) What is your definition of cult film?
- 2) What is the social function of cult film?
- 3) In his landmark book *Cult Movies* (1981), Danny Peary asserted that cult films are always marked by excess and controversy far beyond that usually permitted by Hollywood. He also noted the way they stimulate fan devotion of an extreme nature: characteristically an unlimited appetite for screenings of a favorite, and a determination to track it to wherever it is shown. How has the contrast between mainstream and cult film changed since the publication of Peary's book?
- 4) What do you find the most exciting and/or valuable esthetic features of cult films?
- 5) How has the change in venues where cult films are shown, from public theaters to individually owned electronic devices, altered the production and experience of cult?

## Joe Bob Briggs

1) The cult film is taken from a pool of movies your mama told you not to watch. So you start with rebel filmmakers, and then



within that pool you have filmmakers rebelling against the rebels. A small handful of those are so quirky and/or fetishistic that they attract a loyal following of fans who use them as markers to set themselves apart from the mass. Adherence to the cult

therefore becomes the equivalent of a declaration of independence and freedom—it almost demands a T-shirt.

2) Most cult films establish a generation at a certain point in time. For example, *Billy Jack* could probably have been produced only at that one key moment in history—when hippies, bikers, Native Americans, and drug users were all starting to deal with their dark side for the first time since the social revolutions of the Sixties. Two years in either direction and the film would have been incomprehensible. The social function of a cult film is to make emotional sense of the times. You can't understand the cult film apart from the history of the period.

3) The main difference is that in 1980, when Danny was writing his excellent book, no one wanted to make a cult film. Cult films were created entirely by happenstance. The term had a negative connotation in most circles. When I started reviewing drive-in movies that same year, cult films were despised and ignored by the mainstream press. Frequently I would be the only reviewer of a film, and the distributors were frankly surprised that I was interested in writing about, say, *Dr. Butcher M.D.* or *Cannibal Holocaust*. I reviewed for *The Dallas Times Herald* and the only other regular cult reviewer was Bill Landis, who roamed the Times Square theaters and put out a crude fanzine called *Sleazoid Express*. The two of us represented the twin ghettos where these films played—downtown grindhouses and remote drive-ins. I was actually slammed by *The New York Times* for celebrating a movie called *Pieces*, and there were outright protests of my review. I was picketed several times by vari-



**The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974), a cult classic and one of Joe Bob Briggs' all-time favorite films** (photo courtesy of Photofest).

ous interest groups, including feminists, Baptists, gays and African-Americans. Many citizens would have been ashamed to attend the theaters where these movies were shown. Obviously today that's all changed, and many filmmakers attempt to make a cult where none exists. The first attempt at this was *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*, which in my opinion is not a cult film at all, because it was a self-conscious effort to create a cult through titling and marketing. And today many mainstream publications have both critics of "popular culture" and critics who review what

would have once been called cult films. The directors who were shunned in the late 1970s and early 1980s tend to get nice obituaries from *The New York Times*, the very newspaper who considered their films beneath contempt when they were alive.

4) This is impossible to answer, because a true cult film is unique. It has no twin. It's usually a product of a misfit filmmaker in a transitional period who hits on the themes of greatest interest to youth at that particular time. (There are also examples of films becoming cultish later. Ignored by the generation who made them, they are adopted for various reasons by the next. Prime recent example: *Showgirls*)

5) It's cheapened the concept. Everyone with a five-minute video on MySpace or YouTube claims to have invented a cult classic. Unfortunately the word is now so devalued that we probably need a new one. Future historians of the culture will no doubt use Danny Peary's book as a text describing a period that began around 1970 and ended around 1995. When Tobe Hooper made the cult classic *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in 1974, he had trouble getting work. By the time Quentin Tarantino made *Reservoir Dogs*, being a cult *auteur* was a ticket to fame and stardom. The fact that *Reservoir Dogs* premiered at Sundance, once the exclusive preserve of liberal leaning dramas that would be at home on PBS, indicated that the whole terrain had changed forever.

Joe Bob Briggs, the drive-in movie critic of Grapevine, Texas, and a past contributor to *Cineaste*, has been writing about B movies for newspapers and magazines for thirty years, has hosted two national television shows devoted to cult film, and most recently authored *Profoundly Erotic: Sexy Movies That Changed History*. Joe Bob's web site, *The Joe Bob Report*, is at [www.joebobbriggs.com](http://www.joebobbriggs.com).

## J. Hoberman

1) A cult film is created by its audience. The audience "remakes" the movie—sometimes, especially these days, literally. Individuals or groups of individuals fetishize particular movies, usually for reasons not at all intended by the actual filmmakers. Many cult films were initially obscure or arcane but others are reborn blockbusters. The two most significant



21st century cult films so far seem to be *Donnie Darko*, as amplified by the filmmaker's web site, and *The Sound of Music*, as transformed by its fans into mass karaoke. I'd argue that *The Passion of the Christ* was another. Basically, a cult film involves an initial, individual epiphany and the subsequent participation in a ritual, where the movie is experienced again and again—usually as part of a group. Jonathan Rosenbaum and I discuss this as a religious phenomenon in the first chapter of our book *Midnight Movies*, which is a natural history of film cultism. Incidentally, the most widespread form of cultism is centered on movie stars. Stars were made to be fetishized—there's a sense in which Joseph Cornell's Rose Hobart is the greatest film fetish of all, made for a cult of one. But cult stars—whether Maria Montez or James Dean or Humphrey Bogart—typically get their aura posthumously.

2) A cult film can confirm individual identity, as well as serving to establish and define a particular community. (The British sociologist Dick Hebdige provided a pretty definitive account of how this works with youth subculture dress codes.) In the mid-1950s, *The Wild One* functioned as a cult film for motorcycle clubs. As such they inverted the movie's official meaning—the bikers were the heroes. Hunter Thompson has an entertaining account of this in his book on the Hell's Angels.

3) I don't accept Peary's premise. Excess and controversy are true of some cult films but by no means are they true of all. Certainly the great midnight movies of the 1970s—*El Topo*, *Freaks*, *Pink Flamingos*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Eraserhead*—were provocatively outré. So, in another way, was the original cult film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. But other cult films—say *Blade Runner*—were simply commercial flops that gathered enthusiasts over a period of time. And others, like *The Wizard of Oz* or *Casablanca*, were part of the Hollywood mainstream. In fact, *Casablanca* has inspired the single best essay on cult movies, written by Umberto Eco in the mid '80s. Attractions are certainly important but the key is identification, conscious or otherwise, with a particular scenario. *The Green Berets* became a cult film for Vietnam vets, once it was released in VHS.



One of the more sedate sequences in *Showgirls* (1995) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

4) The making of a cult film is essentially democratic—anti-supply-side and, in some respects, antiauthoritarian. At the very least, it's an example of popular *bricolage* or culture developing from the bottom up rather than top down. Godard and Truffaut and the other young critics who wrote for *Cahiers du cinéma* were close to cultists. Personally, I find cults intrinsically interesting—after all, it's an extreme, spontaneous analog to my job. (Critics also have cult films—Malick's *The New World* would be a recent example—but that's hardly the same thing as audiences spontaneously embracing a particular film.) Personally, I'm always intrigued by why people like what they like—the more irrational, the more fascinating.

5) Cult films used to produce a material community; however dispersed, people gathered in movie theaters. I was at an academic conference in the early '80s, where one politically-minded filmmaker paraphrased Lenin in suggesting that to start a revolution one should open a movie house! That's less likely now. The development of home video, along with the possibility of actually owning one's cult film, effectively dispersed that community. (It's also deprived the cult object of its aura.) Although there are exceptions, a cult is more apt to be virtual. Like many other forms of community, it has its existence online. The midnight movies of the 1970s were in large measure a nostalgia for the community of the counterculture. In the age of Netflix, we have nostalgia for the no longer extant movie houses that showed midnight movies.

J. Hoberman has been reviewing films for *The Village Voice* for thirty years. His books include *Vulgar Modernism*, *The Magic Hour*, *The Red Atlantis*, *The Dream Life*, and (with Jonathan Rosenbaum) *Midnight Movies*.

## Damien Love

1) A film of any stripe that, while ignored or buried by the general market and/or critical Establishment, is kept alive, or resurrected, thanks to the devotion of a particular section of the audience—often responding to the very elements, extremes, or eccentricities that saw the films “fail” (commercially) in the first place.



That used to be the definition, anyway. Today studios (and audiences) seem keen to employ “cult” as though it was a genre in itself, usually denoting a film employing some combination of gore, sex, violence, “bad taste” humor, people acting weird, 1950s/ '60s/'70s/'80s punk music, or big rabbit-like things. I'm fairly certain I've seen at least one press release hailing an upcoming film as “the new cult movie from....”(Some of this is probably the fault of Quentin Tarantino's initial success, but he shouldn't be blamed. His obsessive love of cult gives his films a different vibe; in a strange way, simply by so relentlessly mashing-up, referencing, replaying, and magnifying moments by filmmakers that have moved him, his work actually begins to feel deeply personal. He reminds me in this respect of the great American band The Cramps.)

Of course, we could define any film that has any kind of a following of whatever size as “a cult film,” in which case, every movie is a

cult movie, including the TV-movie from 1987 your mother's neighbor taped and loaned her and they both loved.

2) Most films I'd tag as cult would fit Manny Farber's definition of “Termite Art,” at least as I understand it. By this I mean they have no pretensions toward any kind of social function, or any other function outside their own boundaries, but just get on with burrowing into themselves. This is why they are valuable. Seeking out films like these exposes a viewer to ideas, passions, and ways of doing (about life and about movies) that the mainstream generally does not accommodate.

I guess, though, there's a social function to watching a cult film as part of an audience that is gathered for that purpose, one similar to going to see a band play live. A weird “one-of-us” communion. The best example might be the young audiences that rediscovered Todd Browning's *Freaks* in the 1960s and early '70s: a generation proud to call themselves “freaks” to differentiate themselves from the society their parents had created. The new audiences brought a new way of seeing, and so a movie that had once been chased out of town as work of base exploitation found itself held up by a cult as a pioneering social document.

This has little to do with the kind of social ceremony some fans make out of attending screenings of some cult movies, such as those who ritualistically go to see *The Rocky Horror Show* in basques and stockings, or sing-along with *The Sound of Music* or, indeed, *Mama Mia!* That's simply mass geeky bad taste, and there's nothing wrong with that.

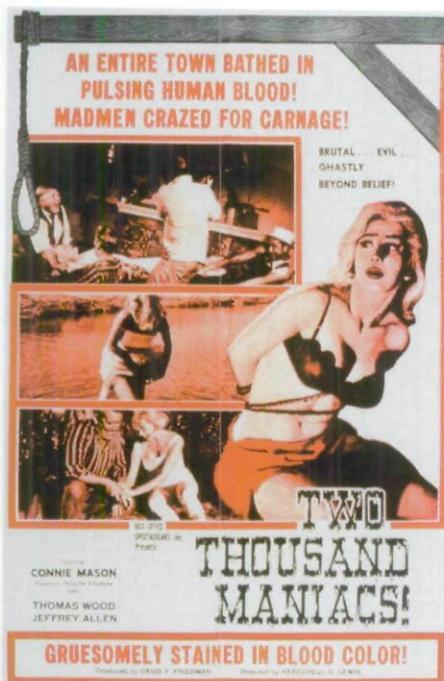
3) I'm not sure a cult film like *Vertigo* was marked by too much excess or controversy. But, in terms of how the contrast between mainstream and cult film has changed, I'd say, not by much.

In the realms of popular culture, nothing dates like controversy, and that goes double for movies. (Ask the city officials who once banned *The Life of Brian* around the U.K.) Yesterday's shock and outrage becomes today's cliché, kitsch, tedium, and selling point. The surface tics and exploitation excesses of old cult movies are commodified, have any dangerous edges knocked off, and get resold in the mainstream in much the same way as has always gone on in the music industry. But while modern mainstream exploitation films might be happy to ape the “extremes” of cult films gone by (the sub-John Waters seminal gags of *There's Something About Mary* and its *American Pie* derivations; the brain-eating in *Hannibal*; the “torture porn” strand of a *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* that is amped up in every new studio horror), I'm not sure that the mainstream is any more able to accept the attitudes, ideas, and passions driving some of the most significant cult films.

The Jock joshing of *American Pie* and its ilk is antithetical to Waters' unabashed celebration of the excluded underclass outsider; the remakes of George Romero's zombie movies have some of the splatter, but none of the sly, bleak, steady gaze at society breaking down; the new *Death Race* has fast, loud cars,



Todd Browning's *Freaks* (1932) was rediscovered by college audiences in the late Sixties and early Seventies (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Herschell Gordon Lewis' gore-fest, *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

but doesn't have the satirical Pop glee of *Death Race 2000*; feeble copies of atmospheric David Lynch was creating two decades ago appear in every other mainstream teen-horror movie released these days, but no studio would ever bankroll an *Inland Empire*.

The mainstream sprays aging "cult" and exploitation styling on its product to try and look hip, in much the way a reactionary film like *Juno* dresses itself in "indie kid" clothes to sell to teenagers a sanitized, simplified, right-wing, pro-life message that would make Sarah Palin smile.

4) This obviously varies film to film: I'd say *Out of the Past* and *Two Thousand Maniacs* are both cult movies, but they share few esthetic features. In general, it could perhaps be boiled down to a somewhat obsessed and obsessive approach to filmmaking, in style and content, one that sees filmmakers pursue an idea unfettered by thoughts of the box office, or the thoughts of focus groups. The old studio system, under which B-movie practitioners were generally left to their own devices so long as they stuck within the limits of budget, running time, and the Production Code, probably produced more cult movies than we'll ever see again.

5) Potentially immeasurably, but I'm not sure we're anywhere near that potential being realized. The availability of decent quality DV cameras and desktop editing of course means almost anyone who wants to can make a movie and send it out to the world via the Internet. But the Internet is so huge now, and so swamped with everybody's work, it takes either a lot of luck, or massive muscle to make even a niche impact. To use the music industry analogy again, the most (commercially) successful artists discovered as part of the MyFace generation have been those who most closely conform to the molds of exactly

the kinds of artists the large record corporations were already signing up, anyway, through traditional A&R methods. (In the punk booms of the past, musicians were fired up by the idea of making music; today, now the Internet has supposedly democratized the media, more musicians and perhaps filmmakers seem interested in the idea of "making it.")

I'd reckon there are less cinema screens showing cult movies (made between the 1910s and 1980s, say) today than at any point in the past twenty-five years. At the same time, however, it is far easier to see all these films, as they're appearing on DVD around the world, and the Internet has made it far easier than ever before for queuing consumers to order from vendors across the globe. Instead of driving through the night to get to a screening, the cultist now just has to wait for the boxed set of Robert Siodmak, Edgar Ulmer, or Jean Paul Civeyrac to arrive—then maybe invite a couple of friends over. Soon, we probably won't have to wait, and will be able to download and share peer to peer. The cults still exist, but so many members don't tend to gather in the one place as often anymore.

Damien Love's independent imprint Kingly-Reprieve Books has published new editions of "lost" works including horror auteur Val Lewton's novel of the Great Depression, *No Bed of Her Own*, and Sam Fuller's newspaper noir, *The Dark Page*. The author of *Solid Dad Crazy*—a book about Robert Mitchum, "but not a biography"—his writing has appeared in publications including *Uncut*, *The Guardian* and *Bright Lights Film Journal*.

## Tim Lucas

1) Any film that exists well below the general radar of the majority of moviegoers, but which has, through word of mouth, attracted a growing circle of rabid devotees over the years. I don't believe that films like *Casablanca* or *The Wizard of Oz* qualify, nor do I think that it's a prerequisite that the audience needs to dress up like the characters and throw toast.

2) This question presumes that some social function must be necessary to the experience. I don't believe this. Though there was a time when the whole idea of cult movies was promulgated via public forums like midnight screenings, today's cult movies are generally watched in solitude by cultists who connect through magazine articles, blogs, and message boards. It's possible to watch *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* or *Harold and Maude* today in a cultish gathering, but this would be an exercise in nostalgia as the movies themselves have grown well beyond cult status. Such screenings are indistinguishable from any other film that groups of people might want to experience on a big screen in appreciative company.



Today, of course, a young man might decide to woo a young woman or man by sending him or her a DVD-R of his favorite movie; the nature of this gift makes them an audience of two and, in this context, whatever that movie is, it's a cult movie because it has been shared as a gesture of intimacy.

3) Completely. Home video has equalized everything. I do think an element of extremity is necessary to defining a cult film, because a cult film is a film that finds an audience despite the prevailing tastes and attitudes of the public at large. Cult cinema is alternative cinema. Peary's book is a relic of the cult movie as it existed in theaters, as cult movies were perceived before the advent of home video. He wrote about worthy films of all stripes that were rarely screened, hence the "unlimited appetite" you mention. Sam Fuller (to pick a name out of a hat) was then a name known only to the cognoscenti. Looking at the films he chose to include in the first volume, very few *haven't* moved much closer to the mainstream of the public taste—and quite a few of them were there at the time of its publication, frankly. It was a cult movies book conceived for the mass marketplace.

4) Fresh, new, revolutionary approaches to storytelling and filmmaking—that make a person leave a theater or eject a DVD with fresh, new, revolutionary ways of looking at their lives.

5) The loss of the shared experience has its positive and negative sides. It was a great feeling to be among the first people to have seen, for example, *Eraserhead*—you could make friends with a stranger simply by discovering that you happened to see it at the same time and place; it didn't even matter if you both liked the picture or not—only that it was an event you both survived. On the other hand, the way an audience feels about a film collectively can sway the individual viewer's opinion, so a cult film experience today is far more intimate and undiluted. You might say that, given the widespread availability of all kinds of films today, everything outside the multiplex can be approached as a cult movie.

Tim Lucas is the editor/copublisher of *Video Watchdog* and the author of several books on film, including the award-winning *Mario Bava All the Colors of the Dark* and, most recently, *Videodrome*. His 1994 novel *Throat Sprockets* documents the infectious properties of an imaginary cult film.



The mutant baby in David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

## Danny Peary

1) For many years we were told “cult movies” were specifically money-losing obscurities that were screened in 16mm by small groups of nerdy cinephiles who were badly in need of sunshine and social lives. I subtitled the three cult movie books I started writing in the early 1980s *The Classics*, *the Sleepers*, *the Weird and the*

*Wonderful*, to indicate that I believed many more movies deserved to be under the cult movies banner. Rather than make up a definition myself, I wanted to acknowledge what film fanatics already were calling cult movies, particularly during the heyday of financially-successful midnight movies and repertory houses where audiences talked along with *Casablanca*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *All About Eve*, and even *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. “Cult Movies,” as I saw it, was a genre comprised of films from other genres plus films, including many shown at midnight, that defied categorization. Always referred to as “extreme,” midnight movies were the most obvious “cult movies,” yet pretty much sabotaged anyone trying to define the term. That’s because *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Eraserhead*, *El Topo*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Harder They Come*, and the others were made by directors with 100% different visions, located in entirely different worlds, populated by characters whose paths would never cross (although John Waters told me that he believed Devine would screw *Eraserhead*), and had completely different fans.

But they all had one important thing in common with each other: they had to be written about and talked about in terms of their fans. That is what distinguishes all cult movies. When you talk about *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Searchers*, and *Out of the Past* as a horror film, a Western, and a film noir, you will surely discuss content, technique, and performances, but when you discuss each as a “cult movie,” you must explain who their fans are and why they are so attached to that film.

How does a movie become a cult film? I would say there is a thrilling sense of discovery (“I’ve never seen anything like this before!”), there is a powerful immediate emotional or cerebral connection (“The director/writer/character and I are on the same wavelength!”), and you have the desire to see the film over and over no matter how inconvenient and to champion the film to every person you know (“You must see this film!”). If other people have the same reaction, then we have the birth of a cult movie.

2) I think of cult movies more for being, as the name implies, a cultural phenomenon than serving a social function, although since movies do shape our personal politics, we can take heart when cults form around progres-



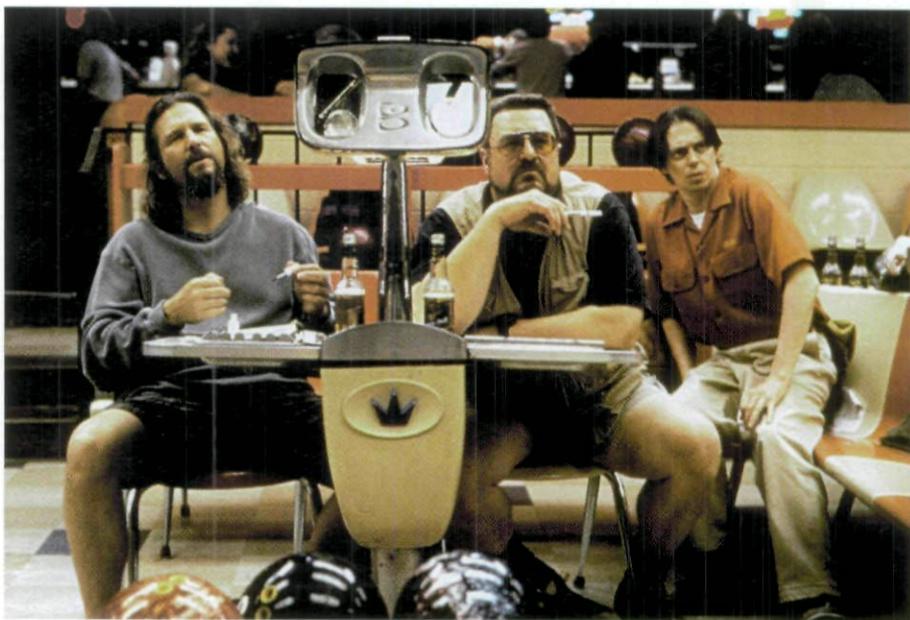
So bad it's good: Ed Wood's immortal *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

sive films. I will say that during this time when the last repertory houses are vanishing and the only movies on campuses are recent blockbusters, cult movies take on particular importance because they individually and collectively keep us excited about movies in general and inspire the young to seek out films of the past. And it's to be appreciated how these films bond people from different generations and social levels. Think of the diversity of fans for the cult films of James Dean, Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne (both right and left wingers), Stanley Kubrick, Sam Peckinpah, and the Coen Brothers—particularly *The Big Lebowski*, to name just a few

examples. I'm not a great fan of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* but I love that it attracts such a diverse audiences that it recalls the days when everybody in small-town America, from the millionaire to the paperboy, would gather as one in the local movie palace to watch the latest Hollywood film. Any movie, but particularly a cult movie, can be a great equalizer.

3) That's not exactly what I asserted. A film surrounded by controversy has a leg up on becoming a cult movie, but of course not all cult movies are controversial. They should, however, cause arguments or debate or at very least frequent discussion. A film with “excess” also has a good shot at becoming a cult movie because excess leads to attention and, again, to controversy, but I think that word has a negative connotation, as in “too much” or “too extreme.” I'd rather just say, simply, that films that break rules (mostly in positive ways!) are likely to be cult movies. Films that aren't in the mainstream are better candidates for cult status because fans must rescue and keep them alive. But I don't think a film that is originally marketed to a mainstream audience is disqualified from becoming a cult movie—it might happen instantly, as with *Moulin Rouge* or *Fast and Furious*, or take a while, as with *Dirty Dancing*. Probably my hardest task in my books was to convince readers that one-time mainstream films like the classics *King Kong*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Citizen Kane*, and *Dr. Strangelove* could be considered cult movies because their devotees today are different from the original mainstream viewers.

4) Cult movies break rules in regard to both themes and filmmaking, and they can be subversive and become part of our collective psyche. But in terms of esthetics, something else is even more striking. I said elsewhere that the most famous midnight movies have entirely different visions, and you can throw



“The Dude” (Jeff Bridges), Walter Sobchak (John Goodman) and Theodore Donald “Donny” Kerabatsos (Steve Buscemi) in Ethan and Joel Coen's *The Big Lebowski* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

in other cult titles I've mentioned like *Citizen Kane*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *Dirty Dancing* and still see that none of these films are at all alike, other than that they ignored barriers. Young, creative filmmakers take note: What all these cult movies point out in a *Rashomon*-like way is that there is an infinite number of original ways to write, direct, produce, do special effects for, and act in movies. The future is bright.

5) Obviously there are a dwindling number of venues around for cultists to watch their favorite movies together and for newcomers to happen upon those pictures others cherish. But I have faith these films will be kept alive simply because their fans won't let them die. I do hope museums keep having minifestivals of cult actors, directors, and movies and hope more current film critics will reference these older films when discussing new films. That would at least send the uninitiated to the video store. There is one interesting trend today regarding film festivals. In the past, veteran filmmakers wanted their new movies to make a lot of money and were upset when they instead were relegated to cult status. Today's recognition-seeking independent filmmakers are more than satisfied if that is the fate of their films. They enter their low-budget movies into festivals in the hope they will be discovered and viewers will be so passionate there will be strong word of mouth. Those are the essential ingredients needed to be a cult movie.

Danny Peary is the writer of *The Tim McCarver Show*, the NY Correspondent for FilmInk (Australia), and contributes regularly to *brink.com*. His film books include *Cult Movies 1, 2 & 3*, *Cult Movie Stars*, *Guide for the Film Fanatic*, and *Alternate Oscars*.

## Jeffrey Sconce

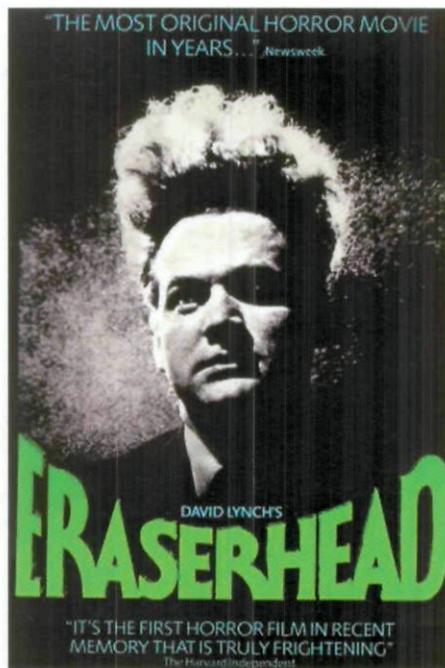
What is it like to be in a film cult? I can only speak from my own limited experience in cinematic enslavement. Dallas, 1977: A



small circle of friends emerges from their seventh consecutive Saturday midnight screening of David Lynch's *Eraserhead*. As we leave the theater, a bored usher accosts us with biting sarcasm: "Can you believe you paid four bucks to see

that?" "Yes!" we respond in unison. "We've seen it seven times!" We exit into the parking lot, smugly triumphant in having "blown the mind" of this lowly popcorn jockey, knowing that we alone have the brains and the taste to "get" *Eraserhead* while this poor soul, sadly, would have to settle for the more simple pleasures of *Orca* or *Smokey and the Bandit*.

Are such moments of cult solidarity still available to young cinephiles? Certainly there have never been more opportunities to sample the entirety of film history and argue



David Lynch's debut feature was the nightmarishly weird *Eraserhead* (1977) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

about films, genres, and directors for hours on end. Between Netflix, bit torrent, TCM, and international Amazon, any reasonably motivated person can probably track down almost any extant title in the world in less than a few weeks. The growth of the blogosphere, meanwhile, gives us all the opportunity to engage complete strangers in passionate debate over the talents of Ron Howard, or better yet, his little brother Clint. Does this mean "cult" cinema still thrives? I would say no, not really. I've never actually liked the term "cult" very much. If we designate as "cult" any film with an unusually devoted audience, the term remains imprecise and fairly meaningless. In theory, Doris Wiseman, *The Goonies*, Pilipino gore, Japanese "pink films," *Titanic*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Zontar*, and *The Sound of Music* would all qualify under this criterion, reminding us that there is probably a "cult" of at least one viewer for every single film ever made.

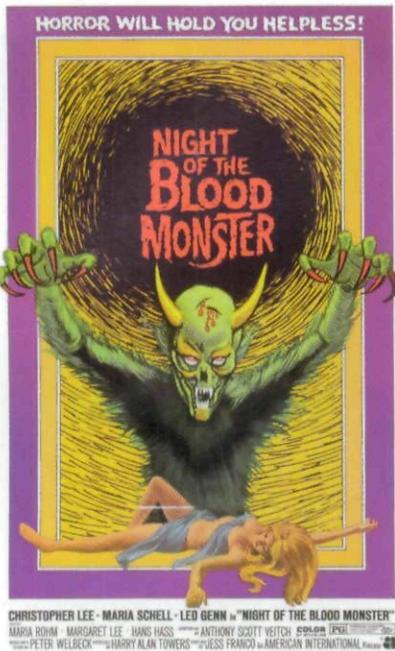
To the extent that there was something called "cult cinema," I think it was very specific to a finite window in the history of cinephilia and exhibition. "Cult" thrived when film culture itself was growing in the 1970s/'80s and yet access to certain films remained somewhat limited. Midnight movies were one sacrament in this religion, as was dutiful attendance at the local rep house. Seeing Godard's late-Sixties *oeuvre* (yes, that's a cult too, let's face it) used to require proximity to a university or film society and required a certain work ethic in service of the cinema as whole. Schedules had to be cleared. Laziness and torpor overcome (Will *Letter to Jane* ever screen again in this municipality? Better not chance it!) Back in 1977, having no insight into the future media platforms on the horizon, I stupidly thought I would actually have to go to a theater to see *Eraserhead*,

and that I had better do so as much as possible before *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* or some other lame stoner fare displaced it on my local screen. In its original form, then, "cultism" evoked an esoteric sense of social, cultural, and esthetic exile, a type of distinction difficult to maintain once every film became available to every viewer, and once domestic viewing replaced theatrical screenings as the privileged form of spectatorship.

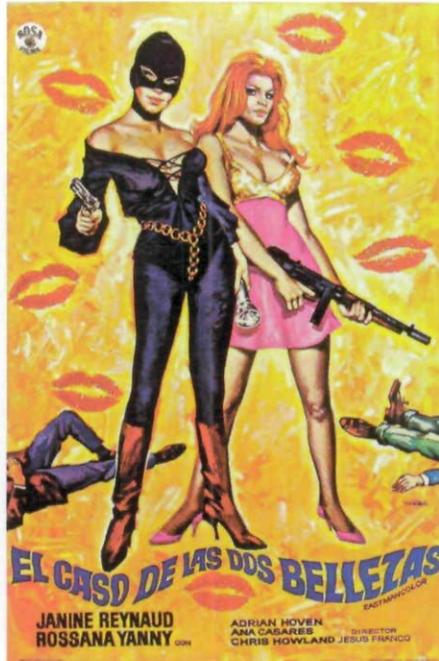
At the height of the cult boom, Danny Peary argued "cult" cinema defined itself through "excess and controversy," but this too seems a less salient criterion in today's media environment. One could argue the moment *Cannibal Holocaust* appeared at the local video store, conveniently filed in the "cult" section, any final remnant of "excess and controversy" passed into history. And given the acceleration, fragmentation, and hypervisibility of contemporary filmmaking, is it even possible to signify "excess" or provoke controversy anymore? Some cultural center would have to remain to be attacked and defended. Even if an enterprising gorehound somehow found a way to marry *The Matrix*, *Wavelength*, and *Saw* to photograph a circular blade cutting through a skull in excruciatingly precise slow motion for an hour and a half—each droplet of brain spray meticulously rendered through the latest in digital imaging technology—would anyone even notice, much less be outraged?

No doubt some viewers still form intense "cultlike" attachments to individual films, watching them over and over again to that strange point of intimate defamiliarization that accompanies such complete diegetic immersion. But I think in general the *cultism* of cult cinema has changed over the past few years, morphing right alongside the growing access to thousands of previously obscure titles. Today "cult cinema" appears to have become more or less a synonym for various historical schools of "exploitation"—low-budget horror, '60s/'70s soft-core, Italian Giallo, Hammer, grindhouse, blaxploitation, Eurotrash coproductions, Asian Extreme, etc. For Anglophonic audiences in particular, "cultism" has the tendency to transform this hodgepodge of international "trash" into an ahistorical playpen of "gee-whiz" Otherness. *Isn't Japan kinky-strange? What's up with the Italians and all those zombies? Mexican horror films are really, really weird, man.* Calling such fare "cult" really only cloaks the "cultist" with a mantle of connoisseurship, providing a few extra inches of critical distance that help better protect said cultist from the implications of simply enjoying exploitation for what it is—*obsolescent sex and violence*. I realize "exploitation" is no less loaded a critical term than "cult," but it at least has the advantage of placing these films back into the social, historical, and industrial contexts of their original production and circulation.

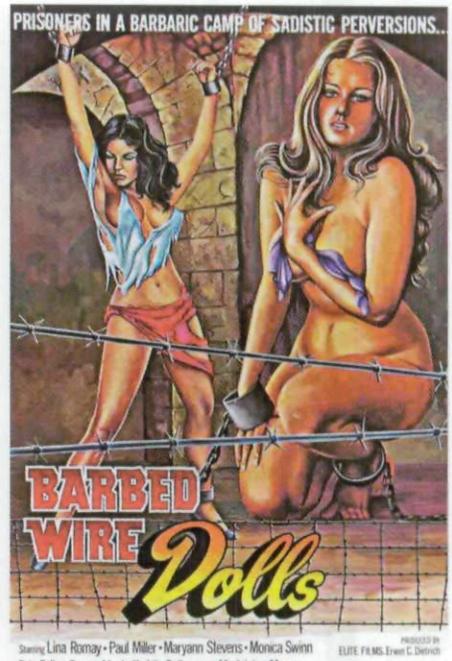
This trend toward creating a metagenre of "cult" from various national traditions in exploitation also suggests that today's cultism is less about the intense fetishization of a single film than an obsessive mastery over an



Copies of Jess Franco movies are often swapped like baseball cards by cult fans.



Spanish pulp film auteur Jesus "Jess" Franco has reportedly made over 200 films.



Jess Franco delivers lesbianism, nudity, torture, sadism, plus some sleazy elements.

entire genre or subgenre. "Cultists" now seem to collect Giallos, Jess Franco movies, and hicksploitation titles like baseball cards, reconstructing an entire historical avenue of cultural production rather than singling out a particular film for repeated engagement. It is an interesting shift from a type of heady romanticism, one born of "cult's" oldest foundations in the secrecy and esotericism of the "occult," to a world where everyone can serve as an archivist of his or her own obscure pocket of film history. If, for example, one is an aficionado of schlocky LSD cinema of the Sixties, then Otto Preminger's fatally misguided *Skidoo* is a must—but once *Skidoo* has been seen, there is little to do other than check it off the master list of the genre—God help anyone who would try to watch it a second time.

In many respects, this transition in cultism from an experience of immersion to one of critical mastery is symptomatic of a larger crisis in cinephilia over the past twenty years or so. On the one hand, I can't imagine that I would ever care as much about a movie as I did about *Eraserhead* in 1977. To see a film on a big screen in 35mm seven weeks in a row, with a full week separating each individual screening to facilitate reflection and anticipation, presents a type of textual engagement that is now rare if not completely impossible. On the other hand, the idea that one can now use DVDs to reconstruct the entire exhibition history of a long defunct Alabama drive-in is nothing less than amazing. The cultist challenge of the new century, I imagine, is to prevent this new plentitude from damning the cinema to the cruel fate of music in the era of the iPod—songs and albums often reduced to little more than data, more important as potential examples of certain types of music than as music itself. I probably don't need to see *Eraserhead* again,

but I do sometimes worry the day will come when I'll have the sick realization that I've never had access to so many movies in my life, and yet cared so little about any of them.

Jeffrey Sconce is an associate professor in the Screen Cultures program at Northwestern University and the editor of *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Financing* (2007).

### Peter Stanfield

Flicking through Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik's *Cult Film Reader* (2008) 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 a consumption choice, is simply a term for any product or activity that can be pitched by commercial agencies as existing outside the mainstream. With the glee that only cultists can muster, Mathijs and Mendik write in the introduction to their reader, "[A] cult film is quickly becoming as powerful a business force as a blockbuster." So what's the difference? The contradictory move of cult from the margins to the center should not surprise anyone who has read Thomas Frank's *Conquest of Cool*, where he argued that the advertising industry was appropriating the concept of nonconformity as early as the mid-1950s. Cult may have at one time signified a radical, and perhaps even subver-

sive, form of film consumption, but now, like "alternative," it is little more than an empty signifier: a coopted marketing tag used to sell DVDs and anthologies of scholarly studies.

The opening of *Ghost World* (2001) shows the film's heroine dancing and singing along with the cult Bollywood movie *Gumnaam* (1965). It is the beginning of a journey we witness as she tries on a variety of alternative lifestyles that at first beguile and then evaporate like her ever-changing hair color. Cult, like alternative, carries connotations of a progressive political engagement, if only in the way it appears to undermine bourgeois notions of cultural capital, but the alternative cult spheres of activity explored in *Ghost World* are shown to be just as exploitative and reactionary (racist and sexist) as the mainstream to which it supposedly stands in opposition. The girl's only viable option is to disappear into the arcane world of prewar blues—the only authentic experience the film allows her. When she asks if there are any more records like Skip James' "Devil Got My Woman," she's told there are none—it is unique—not much here then to build a cult upon and even less a lifestyle.

The repeatable experience (with minor variation) seems to me to be an axiom of the cult experience—exemplified in building collections of zombie movies, or trying to pull together a complete Jess Franco archive. I have a hard enough time trying to find everything Samuel Fuller put his name to, but imagine the delirious frustration that would be experienced by an avid collector dealing with a filmmaker like Franco who has made nigh on 200 films and who claims to have authored, under pseudonyms, countless pulp novels. Or rather don't imagine it, visit instead "I'm in a Jess Franco State of Mind" blog (<http://robertmonell.blogspot.com>)



Seymour (Steve Buscemi), a middle-aged collector of vinyl records, introduces teenager Enid (Thora Birch) to the world of cult fandom in *Ghost World* (2001) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

The value of studying cult film lies in what it can tell us about shifting practices in film consumption. In this sense, the importance of Peary's work is less in what he has to say about a particular film than in the book's publication at a point in time when the viewing of film was shifting from a theatrical experience, in cult terms documented in Hoberman's and Rosenbaum's *Midnight Movies* (the title since appropriated for a series of MGM produced DVDs) to the domestic consumption of film on video. Peary's cult encyclopaedias are aids to producing individual film libraries; collections that can be listed, traded, and fetishized—finding that Spanish version with the otherwise censored fifteen seconds.

The video age also gave us the incomparable *Psychotronic Video* magazine (1981-2007) that left no filmic revenant undocumented; an indispensable guide to what the first issue defined as "forgotten junk." It is, I would argue, the most significant film journal to be published in the last thirty years. In its unabashed, cheerily irreverent manner it tells us more about the vagaries of film consumption, cult or otherwise, than any of the more scholarly forums. Writing about the magazine's genesis, its art director Akira Fitton notes that its publisher and key writer Michael Weldon:

[U]sed the term Psychotronic to describe the variety of genre films that influenced him and got into his head as a young man. Before he came along, each genre was subdivided into different categories like sci-fi, horror, crime, biker, war, and so on. Like him, the very same films influenced many of us, but serious film critics often dismissed these

films as trash, garbage, z-grade, and crap. But now Hollywood makes big-budget versions of the very same material. After he gave it the name, Psychotronic, many of us were no longer embarrassed to admit we liked these films, and we found out that there were a lot of Psychotronic film fans out there. Michael legitimized it and I am very happy he did.

I'm not convinced Weldon has legitimated Psychotronic films, either as esthetic objects or even objects of study, but he has certainly given junk film a presence it wouldn't otherwise have enjoyed, and for this reason alone he is king of the cultists.

Is there anything left to unearth from film's pulp past? Are there any more *films noirs* to discover? Any unseen clips of Marilyn Monroe as movie extra? Any more lost footage to restore to a Peckinpah movie? Any film not listed on some Internet database, discussed on some blog, on sale on eBay? By the time a film cult comes into general view it is already dead, wrapped in a clean shroud, and being sold in the cult film section of the shopping mall's DVD store or the Internet's virtual simulacra of a downtown alternative store. When was the last time you discovered anything without first being told it is the latest cult sensation? To recall Adorno's maxim, "The public clamor for what they are going to get anyhow." And that is as true of the cultist, Franco or Buffy fan, as it is of my daughter and her friends' fixation on *High School Musical*.

Peter Stanfield is Director of Film Studies at the University of Kent and author of *Horse Opera: The Strange History of Singing Cowboys* and *Body & Soul: Jazz & Blues in American Film*.

## CULT FILM RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

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### WEB SITES

- The Cult Film Archive of Brunel University [www.brunel.ac.uk/cult](http://www.brunel.ac.uk/cult)
- Cult Media Studies: An online community for the academic study of cult media <http://cultmediastudies.ning.com>

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