CULT CINEMA: A CRITICAL SYMPOSIUM

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, "Electricity!," "Round up the usual suspects," or "I never drink...wine," but they perseverate and we screen them out. At what point, however, does this kind of behavior cease to seem quiedy 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 marketing hype; cult as fad and fashion; cult as marginality; cult as intensity and passion; cult 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 deprofessionalized 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 coops 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) 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 films?

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 filmmak-ers 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 declara-tion 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 emo-tional 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 cir-cles. 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-
Who will survive and what will be left of them?

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

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.

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-1990s, 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.
4) The making of a cult film is essentially democratic—anti-supply-side and, in some respects, authoritarian. 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 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.

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.

Todd Browning's Freaks (1932) was rediscovered by college audiences in the late Sixties and early Seventies (photo courtesy of Photofest).
but doesn’t have the satirical Pop gleam of Death Race 2000’s feeble copies of atmospherics 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 questing 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 Giveyrac 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 author 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 successful midnight movies and repertory movies do shape our personal politics, we can than serving a social function, although since as the name implies, a cultural phenomenon by person you know ("You must see this wavelength!") and you have the desire to see every ("I've never seen anything like this attached to that film."

2) They are virtually always so bad it's good: Ed Wood's immortal Plan 9 from Outer Space (photo courtesy of Photofest). So bad it's good: Ed Wood's immortal Plan 9 from Outer Space (photo courtesy of Photofest).

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-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 audience 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 initially 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 film festivals 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 lovely 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 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 Wishman, 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 cinemaphilia 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 œuvre (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 municipalite? 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 Gallo, 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 historical playpen of "wee-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—obscene 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
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 amaz-entire exhibition history of a long defunct

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.

is 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 delicious 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)
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 unashamed, 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 anyway." 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.