

Cult Film

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The interest in cult cinema seems to stem from 1950s America, as the spending power of the teenage consumer was increasingly catered for, not least by the movie industry.

This was the period in which television was permeating the American home, more so than even in Britain, and cinema increasingly had to resort to shock tactics and sensationalism to lure in audiences. Sophistication was not an option; studios knocked out cheapie flicks with lurid, disposable feels such as the 1956 film *The Girl Can't Help it*. This was a lightweight but enjoyable film, which had cameo appearances by various prominent rock'n'rollers such as Little Richard, Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent and Fats Domino, which although largely superfluous to the plot, gave the film 'teen appeal'.

There was also the starring role of Jayne Mansfield to contend with, whose remarkable physique proved to be a quite different selling point, and was exploited in a variety of sight jokes, the most unsubtle of which used a milk bottle which popped open, ejaculating milk as she walks past the goggle eyed gent holding it. 1956, incidentally was the year that television in the US commenced colour broadcasts, another blow to the film industry. The relatively lewd nature of films such as TGCHI would have been unthinkable in a television broadcast in the fifties, and this was something that the big studios exploited to the max.

This is not to say, however that Cult films are purely a post-war product; films such as Fritz

Lang's *Metropolis* remains a striking and distinctive piece of work. Dating from 1926, silent and three hours long in its longest print, the film is hard for the modern viewer to watch, but its imagery and effects have made it one of the best known and referred to films of its era. Similarly, Films featuring dance routines by the choreographer Busby Berkley (Such as *The Gold Diggers of 1933*) are rarely viewed for the quality of their plotlines; but the surreal, intricate and dehumanised dance routines are so excessive they have rarely been topped since, and are as great a cultural signifier of the period as streamlined steam locomotives or modernist concrete buildings.

Cheap horror films were also popular, such as the 1959 Roger Corman Film *A bucket of blood*, described by the director as a black comedy. This film was such a low-budget production, that when filming finished sooner than expected, Corman used the remaining time and funds to film *the Little Shop of Horrors*, which used the same props and sets. A variation on this was the genre known as Grand Guignol. Derived from a confrontational French theatre style, the typical Grand Guignol film featured a middle-aged ex-screen starlet or two such as Bette Davis, Joan Crawford or Olivia De Havilland, a plot that tended to hinge round mental deterioration or torture and huge swathes of overacting.

An early example of this is *Sunset Boulevard* from 1950, with silent film starlet Gloria Swanson playing just that, a reclusive and disturbed woman who is still convinced that she is 'The greatest star of them all!' The best-known example of this genre is the 1962 film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* Filmed in austere black and white, with Bette Davis and Joan Crawford hamming it up something rotten, the film is as famous for the bickering between the two stars as it is for the gothic horror of the story-particularly the twist in the

final few minutes that turns the film on its head.

By the 1960s, celluloid became an established medium for fine artists-witness work such as Andy Warhol's films, featuring his 'superstars' such as *Sleep* and *Eat*, which were interminably long and banal pieces, or Yoko Ono's similar conceptual pieces, which tended to feature John Lennon getting an erection or smiling to the camera on a film that had been slowed down so much that it ran for several hours. But this experimental attitude promoted a new wave of films that appear to owe more to fine art than the conventions of Hollywood, such as Nicholas Roeg's *Performance*, or Michaelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*.

By the end of the sixties, there was a distinct blurring between the arthouse and the commercial; while the Monkees' only feature film *Head* proved to be an essentially plot free railing against Vietnam and their own plastic image as opposed to a standard teen flick, The Paul Morrissey film *Trash*, 'produced' by Warhol, an out of focus, partly improvised piece about Heroin Addiction was subject to lobbying for an Oscar Nomination for Holly Woodlawn, one of Warhol's 'superstars', who played a key role in the film. Interestingly, although the former missed the teen market it should have hit by a country mile, the film (which was not shown in the U.K. at the time of release) later assumed a mythological status which led to the ICA in London shipping over a print in 1977. The film is an age away from the simple slapstick comedy of the Monkees' television series, featuring cameo appearances from such diverse cultural icons such as Annette Funicello (star of many of the teeny 'Beach Party' films of a few years previous), faded Hollywood bad boy Victor Mature, the boxer Sonny Liston and the all-American wierdo rocker Frank Zappa, and incorporating footage of atrocities in Vietnam, clips from Hollywood classics, and television excerpts, most notably a

sequence that constantly refers to ‘The world’s largest Ford dealership’, where one of the cars for sale is priced at 666 dollars. Very few pop-star vehicle films have been as allegorical, political and impenetrable as *Head*, although note must be taken of the 1966 Paul Jones (ex Manfred Mann) film *Privilege* with the theme of pop star as government tool for the manipulation of the masses.

Although fifties schlock films were not given cult recognition at time of release, by the turn of the 1970s, theatrical productions such as *The Rocky Horror Show* and the work of maverick directors such as John Waters were indebted to fifties trash cinema-witness the use of the title track to *The Girl can’t help it* in one of the sequences in the first film that brought Waters recognition, *Pink Flamingos*. The RHS is particularly interesting, as it was turned into a film, which was released in mid 1975, and flopped dramatically. However, after a little re-editing, the film was re-released in 1976, as what was then termed a ‘midnight movie’. This time it proved successful, and many elements of the obsession a fan has with a cult film came to the fore with this: audience participation proved to be an important part of the experience, with the audience dressing up, taking props and joining in with the dialogue of the piece.

This ‘Midnight Movie’ phenomenon is of special note to the concept of the cult film, though more specifically in the United States. This started to occur in the seventies, when movie theatres, particularly those within reach of a large student population started running obscure exploitation films as late-night features¹. The films shown essentially provided a spectacle that was simultaneously quaint, bizarre and unlike anything in contemporary circulation.

Although tacky fifties Sci-fi was an early staple, some films (such as the Rocky Horror Show)

¹ Chibnall, Steve. Cartmell, Deborah et al [Eds.]. *Trash Aesthetics*. London; Pluto Press, 1997. P86

were barely out of general release before they were launched on this circuit.

But the catalyst for the current interest in cult cinema, particularly in Britain must be a combination of the video recorder and the increasing amount of television channels available to the consumer, from the 1980s onward. Before these, the only outlet for cult film would have been at the more arty independent cinemas, making them difficult to see outside of the few places in the UK that had one. But the video boom of the 1980s put the cult film on the shop shelf as their reputations grew, and by the late 1990s, television channels like Film Four provided another outlet for them. This made the cult film immediately more accessible to the consumer, and indeed there are now many different imprints releasing such work, much in the way that the Compact Disc revolution has led to the re-release of the most obscure records for reappraisal.

The Cult film is now almost mainstream; Biopics of Ed Wood; John Waters becoming an established director (his breakthrough film *Hairspray* was apparently the No1 film rented out for children's parties at one point), and of course the creation of films intended from the start to appeal to 'knowing' audiences.

But what is cult film?

There are no hard and fast rules as to what turns a film into a cult item. However, these films all have some (often curious) aspect or another that makes them interesting. It might be the director, the actors/ actresses, the special effects, the music or the subject matter, for

example². Danny Peary, writer of the trilogy of Cult Movies books, takes this argument up too, stating that the attraction of these films is that they “differ radically from standard Hollywood films in that they characteristically feature atypical heroes and heroines; offbeat dialogue; surprising plot resolutions; highly original story lines; brave themes, often of a sexual or political nature; ‘definitive’ performances by stars who have cult status³” and so on. In his essay on *Casablanca*, Umberto Eco speaks about attributing the fascination with the work as being due to what it fails to do, rather than what it achieves. Many films designated as cult movies have failed in some way or other; While many failed as commercial entities, there are other factors in evidence that could be considered. For example, the Monkees’ *Head* failed to get the band taken more seriously. BTVOTD failed to turn Russ Meyer into a mainstream director, and *Death Race 2000* was not always recognised as a satirical piece.

Also, a cult movie tends to be caught very much in its own period, rather than transcending it, and this tends to be part of the appeal. A film such as *The Wizard of Oz* still holds appeal to a similar audience to that which it sold to in 1939. They almost certainly would not care about the apocryphal story of the munchkin that was unintentionally filmed committing suicide on set, or about deleted sequences from the original print.

In these days of marketing demographics, the cinema industry produces product intentionally destined to be cult pieces. Films such as *Being John Malkovich*, or the work of Kevin Smith or Quentin Tarantino are marketed to appeal to a ‘select’ audience to whom a light-hearted romcom or a good versus evil action film would be anathema, even though they are mainstream products, and represent a strong box-office draw. Such an instant cult following

² <http://www.uta.fi/~tlakja/cult.html>

³ Peary, Danny. *Cult Movies Three*. London; Sidgwick and Jackson, 1989.

for a film would rarely have been considered thirty years ago, and certainly not by a major studio. It is only the eventual phenomenal success of the *RHPS* that awakened filmmakers to the potential of cult appeal as a selling point.

That is not to say, however, that cult cinema cannot be produced today. A prime example of this, and conforming to many stereotypes of the genre, is the 1997 film *Velvet Goldmine*, directed by Todd Haynes. On release, the film underwhelmed critics, despite the hype and anticipation that heralded it. On paper, it seemed like a winner; A semi-fictional account of rock decadence (read: David and Angie Bowie and the Mainman entourage) and sexual fluidity in early 70s Britain, produced by an up and coming *auteur*, starring many hot new actors and with a soundtrack that mixed classic glam rock tunes with remakes and pastiches by several cutting edge rock musicians such as Thom Yorke from Radiohead and the group Placebo.

In practice, however, the film showed itself to have a rather garbled plotline, suggesting that Oscar Wilde was, quite literally, an alien, and the clumsy portrayal of 1984 as a repressive totalitarian state, a la both George Orwell's novel and Bowie's aborted musical production of it. Bowie had refused to allow Haynes to use any of his songs, so the film had to resort to numbers by Roxy Music, Brian Eno and Cockney Rebel, and the film proved to be a rather revisionist version of the era-much of the dialogue comes from contemporary quotes by Bowie, Lou Reed and Iggy Pop (plus a smattering of Wilde-isms), but while characters like, say, Mandy Slade are instantly recognisable to Bowie buffs as being Bowie's first wife Angie, other key players of the era are distorted into completely different people. The film is unsatisfying as either a work of fantasy or a factual document as it veers erratically between

the two.

But despite its disastrous reception (“Ziggy Plop!” said the now-defunct *Select* magazine), the film has gathered a dedicated cult following—one has just to search the internet to find several fan-pages dedicated to it. Despite its numerous faults, it has to be said that the film is beautifully shot throughout, the soundtrack remains entertaining despite the conspicuous lack of Bowie material, and although most of the principal players are rather unengaging, there is a feast of entertaining bit-part characters such as Toni Collette’s Mandy Slade, and the performance artist The Divine David’s role as a particularly flamboyant member of the Bijou Records entourage. The film seems to be particularly popular amongst a select band of young gay men, especially those who feel outside of the mainstream.

Cult cinema is difficult to define, as it is pan-genre, and although some films are similar enough to have featured on double bills together, such as *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and *Myra Breckenridge* in 1970, or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Phantom of the Paradise* in 1975, cult films tend to stand very much alone. A film can be a cult item because it proves to be more effective than its sum of parts or it could be because it falls into the camp double bluff of the “its so bad its good” kind. The style of the film tends to be a more important consideration than the plot, and like with 1960s episodes of the TV show *Doctor Who*, the more quaint and unconvincing the special effect, the better. But perhaps the main appeal of the cult film is that it was either rejected by, or never intended for, the mainstream. Finding art in that which is perceived as trash by the mainstream can be a lot more satisfying than simply consuming that which is an accepted part of the dominant cultural ideology.

