

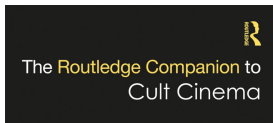
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## The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema

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### Cult cinema and gender

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## 15

# CULT CINEMA AND GENDER

*Brenda Austin-Smith*

What do cult films show and say about gender? Do they use conventional representations in order to perform the textual transgressions they are defined by and celebrated for? Or do cult films, and the practices that sustain their circulation, thumb a collective nose at gender as another oppressive way of organizing social life? To look at cult film and gender means looking not just at texts, but also at audiences. Who are these people, and what are they doing with these films? Are cult audiences a vanguard of revolution, or are their peculiar film attachments symptoms of reaction to the emergence of feminist and queer gender critiques? What follows is an overview of debates about gender representation and viewing possibilities generated by the growth of scholarship on cult film and cult consumption, and a brief tour of the complicated cult landscapes of production and reception.

The hallmarks of canonical cult cinema are very familiar to us by now: narrative weirdness, an air of rebellion, and arcane or strange content are all typical of cult, as is a winking, self-aware stance in relation to genre. For all of their apparent resistance to conformity, however, many claim that cult films tend to observe or recuperate distressingly conservative representations of gender and sexuality, opting for transgressive gestures that flout limits on the depiction of straight sex, for example, rather than exploding gender categories or championing queer pleasures as something other than ephemeral. This has been true of both grubby and glamorous examples of cult film. As Elena Gorfinkel (2008: 34) writes of both high and low cultural manifestations of the cult impulse,

The art house, while championing continental esthetics and highbrow tastes, also gained a tacitly prurient appeal, a place where, according to exploitation producer David Friedman, “the cold beer and greaseburger gang” could rub shoulders with the “white wine and canapés crowd,” in the interests of seeing exposed female flesh.

And as Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton observe, the associations of cult cinema with a male viewer of a certain age, has meant that sexual content has often taken a conventional form, intensifying rather than questioning the norms of cinematic depictions of gender. For these reasons, many associate cult cinema with a philosophy of transgression that sees the elimination of restraint (on depictions of sexualized violence against women, for example) as a sign of political and aesthetic progressiveness, expressed, for example, in Steve Chibnall’s celebration of “the

rejection of censorship for adult viewers” (Chibnall 1998: 85). Whether defined primarily as a genre, or as a set of ritualized practices that coalesce around a group of privileged texts, the term “cult film” is one used most often in relation to the cinephilia of young straight, white men.

In her influential essay “The Masculinity of Cult,” Joanne Hollows traces the attraction of the term “subculture” for film fans seeking an identity positioned in opposition not just to mainstream commercial films, but also to the majority of young people around them, who are imagined as conformist and false in relation to the cult film fan’s fierce, unvarnished authenticity. The association of mainstream cinema with weakness, prudishness, and cowardice all work to feminize it, adding to the appeal of “cult film fan” as an identity attractive to spectators who see themselves as rebel figures when they watch objectionable films. What Hollows calls the “strategies of exclusivity” in the formation of cult fan identity – the “dare you to watch this” practices that demand “hardness” and stamina in the face of gory displays, for example – don’t just work to distance the cultist from typical viewers, but can also work to shut out actual women from the “boyzone” of cult film enthusiasts (Hollows 2003: 45). The assertively heterosexual cast to such demonstrations of conventional masculinity also leaves out, at least implicitly, the viewing practices of many men who identify as queer rather than straight.

There are other ways of describing and experiencing films according to other cinephilias, however. Hollows writes about the exclusion of films such as *Titanic* from the realm of cult, in part because of its mainstream success, but also because of the legions of female fans who made films like it so successful (Hollows 2003: 38), and whose gendered presence is in some quarters regarded as the negation of the cult experience (as if women spectators exerted an emasculating force when acknowledged as audience members).

### One of the boys

In their influential essays, both Joanne Hollows and Jacinda Read characterize cult film viewers and scholars as gendered in their assumptions and practices. Their critiques of cult film’s default masculinity also, however, insist on space for women in cult. Both take pains to argue that there is nothing essentially male about cult film viewership or scholarship, and both detail the character of female participation in the cultures of cult. One sign of this participation is women’s self-conscious embrace of cult’s masculinized practices and attitudes. Female spectators of canonical cult can, for example, watch film as “one of the boys,” in critic Sarah Thornton’s words (Thornton 1995: 104). Watching cult films as “one of the boys” can appeal to female spectators for a lot of reasons. This cultural identity can help justify an interest or pleasure in violent or taboo images often regarded as unseemly in women. Such a viewing identity also allows some women viewers to distance themselves from all that is devalued as ‘girly,’ and in so doing, to claim and experience the kind of aesthetic credibility often awarded to cult subcultures, even temporarily (Hollows 2003: 39). In practical terms, it can also provide company (and implied protection) for attendance at the “sleazo” sites of midnight screenings that Hollows describes as one of the celebrated geographies of cult that has sometimes excluded women viewers (Hollows 2003: 42). I would add that watching as “one of the boys” also allows women to manage whatever discomfort might arise from the coincidence of cult films and porn, providing a space from which to ignore, mock, or enjoy material that might otherwise create more of an issue were they to claim its pleasures more publicly. Watching as “one of the boys” is what Mathijs and Sexton call a “hidden strategy of cult enjoyment” (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 116).

While Hollows’ essay focuses on cult spectators, Read’s essay turns to the cult scholar, examining the sexual politics of those who claim a minority or outsider identity for themselves as academic fans of cult cinema. These are the critics who, Read claims, adopt and announce their

attachment to “paracinema” (Sconce 1995) as a way of forestalling feminist criticism of their viewing pleasure. These academics proudly brandish a ‘politics of incorrectness’, which “simultaneously acknowledges and disavows both feminine competencies and feminist politics” (Read 2003: 62). For Read, the masculinity of cult finds its academic counterpart in scholars who use their awareness of cult’s gender problematics in order to revel in the pleasure these incorrect texts provide, casting themselves as academic minorities whose outsider status in the thoroughly feminized and feminist world of academia deserves recognition and protection, since he (and the examples she provides are both male) is brave enough to come forward as a ‘delinquent misreader’ (Read 2003: 65). This move is akin to the “insulation trajectory” theory whereby fans acknowledge criticism of a revered film or director without altering the strength of their initial fan attachment (Hunter 2010).

Rebecca Feasey’s study of Sharon Stone extends the utility of the “one of the boys” identity to the manoeuvres of cult actresses in ways that address the ambivalence with which the sexualized female stars of cult films (Elizabeth Berkley of *Showgirls*, Sylvia Kristel of *Emmanuelle*) are regarded by fans. Stone is a subject – and target – of analysis in the collection *Bad Movies We Love*, in which she appears as a figure of ridicule, both for her apparent willingness to appear nude early in her onscreen career, and for her later attempts to establish a career as a serious actor with more than erotic thrillers to her name. As Feasey observes, she is both criticized for the roles she plays in borderline exploitation films (as if she had total control over the parts), and then mocked for her presumption when she takes roles that emphasize something other than her body. Feasey contends that Stone reclaims a sense of agency in the collection’s foreword, something she was invited to write by the authors. There, Stone at first adopts a self-deprecating tone, seemingly in accord with the treatment of her star-image by the authors. But over the course of her introduction, Stone performs a verbal “sleight of hand,” adopting an ironic stance in relation to her own performance history, joining in on the joke, and slyly undercutting the condescending tone of the writers. Stone achieves this control over her presentation only through distancing herself “from her own femininity ...” thus becoming “one of the boys” in the contemplation of her own career (Feasey 2003: 182).

### Women and/as cult directors

Toward the end of their chapter on “The Cult Auteur,” Mathijs and Sexton address the paucity of women in the pantheon of celebrated cult directors, noting that only a few, such as Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino, have secured that status through their work in Hollywood. Arzner’s film *Dance, Girl, Dance*, a flop after its 1940 release, gained cult traction in the wake of 1970s and 1980s feminist film criticism, especially for a scene in which Maureen O’Hara’s character Judy stops a performance, walks to the edge of the stage, and tears into the heckling crowd of (mostly male) audience members. Judy confronts the hypocrisy of the men – both working and upper-class – who have come to taunt and ogle the women onstage, and ends her spirited tirade with a reminder that that the wives and daughters to whom they return “see through you just like we do.” To watch and hear a character explicitly voice a challenge to the power of the male gaze – as if inspired by the theory of Laura Mulvey – within the diegetic world of a Golden Age film was, and still is, a thrilling filmic moment.

Lupino’s cult appeal stems from her career move from actress to writer-director, the controversial topics of her films (bigamy, for example), and her determination to make the most of sets, outdoor locations, and personal acquaintances who could be pressed into acting. All this is typical of low-budget directors associated with cult, but Lupino’s still muted reputation seems out of synch with her cult auteur credentials. In a recent article on *Outrage*, Lupino’s portrait

of a woman's trauma and isolation in the aftermath of sexual assault, *New Yorker* critic Richard Brophy ties the film's depiction of masculine violence, whether explicit or subtle, to current analyses of rape culture. Although dramatic, *Outrage* is nothing like the typical exploitative rape-revenge film. Although the film itself is obscure enough to draw the attention of cult collectors inspired by the inaccessibility of an independent Hollywood era low-budget black-and-white film directed by a woman, its seriousness and compassion still position the film outside the margins of cult's boy's club, and place it more firmly in the realms of an expanded cult cinema in which perspectives of women have a place.

Women like Stephanie Rothman, Catherine Hardwicke and Kathryn Bigelow are all well-regarded as directors, but as Mathijs and Sexton point out, are denied status as cult auteurs for reasons that include their close production associations with figures like Roger Corman, or their work across a variety of genres that never coalesces, in the responses of viewers, into a cohesive, auteurist oeuvre (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 74). Not so Doris Wishman, "the female Ed Wood" (Mathijs and Mendik 2011: 57) who forged a strange and ambitious career in the sexploitation and "roughie" film business over thirty years of work. Mathijs and Sexton mention Wishman as a director whose position in the sexploitation world animates passionate debates about the ambiguous status of women in cult production (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 74). But scholars like Moya Luckett, Tania Modleski, and Rebekah McKendry have all found in Wishman's catalogue something worthy of attention. While Modleski maintains that Wishman's work cannot be completely rehabilitated because of its traffic in sexualized violence against women (Modleski 2007: 49), Luckett and McKendry take a slightly different view. Referring to her as "the most prolific woman director of American film in the sound era" (2003: 142), Luckett stresses the feminine character of low-budget sexploitation film-making, and points to how often Wishman's films connected salacious locales (of the nudist camp for example), to the female protagonist's wish for a more fulfilling life and career, a vague narrative tendency that found its "fantastic limits" in *Nude on the Moon*, which depicts the orb as "harmoniously ruled by naked women" (Luckett 2003: 144). Both Luckett and McKendry also note the distinguishing quirks of Wishman's roughie films, set in city spaces, in which women confront the multiple dissatisfactions of heterosexual relationships. In these films, perversely motivated cutaways, monotone dialogue delivery, and a reliance on stereotypical characters (often unnamed) adds up to a curious aesthetic that foregrounds women's sexual frustration and all around repression (McKendry 2010: 66). Though women in films like *Bad Girls Go to Hell*, *My Brother's Wife*, and *Too Much Too Late* are physically brutalized by men and exploited, in the end they triumph, and the men who are narratively responsible for their descent into vice usually die. Watching Wishman's films brings to my mind a few more things that argue against a too-quick dismissal of them: one is that a considerable number of her roughies feature scenes of couples embracing, caressing, and of men kissing women's necks and bellies, gently erotic details surprising to encounter, given the tendencies of the genre. The other, prompted by McKendry's analysis of Wishman's weird editing style, catatonic actors and stock characters, is that the film most reminiscent of Wishman's in its depiction of female repression and sudden violence, is Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, a canonical work of woman's experimental cinema. Though these two directors are distinguished on the surface by many things (budget, language, artistic context), there is a flicker of resemblance between their filmic concerns that is worthy of consideration.

### Genres and genders

Horror, pornography, and melodrama, the "body genres" (Williams 1991) that elicit physiological responses from viewers, are among the most favoured in cult film circles, and with each come gendered assumptions about their aesthetic qualities and appeal to spectators. In keeping with

the masculinized cast of cult, the violence and shock of certain kinds of films – especially horror and gore – are prized as supreme experiences by many male cult fans. Describing his own shift in fandom from *Dr. Who* to British horror, Matt Hills remembers the moment as part of a vague personal association of *Dr. Who* with “‘failed’ or inadequate masculinity,” while horror “provided a clearer sense of ‘enduring’ masculinity and an imagined ‘toughness’” (Hills 2002: 85). This illustrates perfectly the “anxieties of cult consumption” that shape the reception of cult film (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 110). But horror’s treatment of gender is less tractable than its narrative conventions suggest. Many see cult horror films as essentially conservative in their plots and gendered imagery. Women and girls are the prey of masculine monsters; sexually active female adolescents are the inevitable victims of the serial killer, and subject to attacks that take up more screen time, and cause more character distress, than those visited upon male characters. Within this general group of horror films, and among those popular in the cult of horror period of the 1970s and 1980s (Mathijs and Sexton 2011), there is another category of films that have achieved cult status because they focus so single-mindedly on torture, bodily dismemberment, rape, and physical desecration. Depictions of gender-based violence in these cult films are difficult to rescue from charges of misogyny, although histrionic performances enable a cult text like *Blood-Sucking Freaks* to claim redemptive status as satire or exploitation at the very same time that it offends.

Criticism of horror has by extension suggested that taking pleasure in films like *Friday the 13th*, or *Halloween* is indefensible, especially for women, who are theorized as occupying psychological viewing positions as either perpetrator-identified sadists, victim-identified masochists, or something that oscillates between these states (Hansen 1991; Berenstein 1996). In *Phantom Ladies: Hollywood, Horror and the Home Front*, Tim Snelson puts the case this way:

Film scholars continue to struggle in explaining the relationship between women and horror. Following a tradition of psychoanalytically informed feminist film theory, most accounts rely on the assertion that the horror spectator is typically positioned as male and that the genre is founded upon the subjugation of women; female horror spectatorship is best a displeasurable and at worst an untenable textual position.

(Snelson 2015: 2)

Taking up Laura Mulvey’s work on the male gaze, scholars like Linda Williams, Carol Clover, and Barbara Creed have all theorized an array of “looks” in horror in connection to women in the diegesis, and in the audience. Referring to men and boys daring to look at images of horror, while women and girls cover their eyes, Williams asks rhetorically why this refusal to look at the screen is a surprise, given that a woman watching a horror film is asked to “bear witness to her own powerlessness,” and in any case, has “so little to identify with on the screen” (Williams 1984: 63). Countering this claim that women avoid images of horror is research by Brigid Cherry and Amy Vosper, who have conducted audience studies of female spectatorship of cult horror films and discovered women and girls who express persistent pleasure in watching horror films. Cherry finds that female viewers “refuse to refuse to look” when watching horror and suggests that women’s identification with Clover’s “Final Girl” may be one of many ways to delight in the genre. It is also possible that female fans of the genre, familiar with its tropes of clueless girls insisting on acting in obviously stupid ways (“I’m going downstairs to see what’s making that noise!”) celebrate the dispatching of such empty-headed characters out of sheer irritation. Interesting to note is that Snelson’s historical investigation of women viewers of 1940s horror film suggests that the kinds of horror women enjoyed most in that period were atmospheric, Gothic-themed films, something that both Cherry and Vosper also report in their work on contemporary viewers. It is not that female viewers necessarily dislike or can’t abide



explicit violence, writes Vosper, but that they prefer their gore integrated into a “cerebral” and intellectually stimulating storyline (Vosper 2014).

Though Gaylyn Studlar chides midnight movies like *Pink Flamingoes* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* for their recuperations of gender divisions, even as they animate visions of “per-versely erotic freedom” through their outrageous characters (Studlar 1991: 153), it is worth considering degrees of sexual self-awareness between and among monsters in horror films. Monsters in *The Mummy*, *King Kong*, and any number of horny alien films may be attracted to the women they kidnap, but their mechanical behaviour speaks to drives rather than charm and makes running away the narrative choice of everyone they approach. No hero or heroine would willingly remain within grabbing range of these creatures. But the gendered dimensions of cult films like *Rocky Horror* and *Ginger Snaps*, for example, featuring characters that revel in their transformations, emphasize the sexualized charisma of the monster, as well as the pleasure the monstrous character takes in that power. The werewolf’s bite supercharges the effects of puberty in *Ginger*, making it virtually impossible for boys in her school not to respond to her aggressive allure as she catwalks along the hallways of her school. And Frank’n’Furter’s grand entrance from the slowly descending elevator in *Rocky Horror* remains a powerfully erotic display that is impossible for anyone in the frame, and many in the audience, to resist.

For all the gender fluidity that characterizes theories of cult viewers of horror, specific attention to queer characters in, and viewers of, horror concentrates on vampire films such as *Daughters of Darkness*, *The Velvet Vampire*, *The Hunger*, and *Interview with the Vampire*, rather than on slasher, serial killer, or other canonical cult films. Scenes of same-sex attraction and elements of sexploitation in the often art house production values of these films have propelled them to cult status, and has attracted analyses focused on the structural queerness of the monster as a presence that invokes fear, hatred, and persecution, as well as fascination and attraction on the part of both characters and spectators. Invoking the tradition of carnival as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, Harry Benshoff argues that while monsters in horror film speak to the outsider status of queer spectators, identifying with the monster offers all viewers, straight or gay, the temporary delight associated with “the lure of the deviant” (Benshoff 1997: 13). Nevertheless, he writes, “Queer viewers are ... more likely than straight ones to experience the monster’s plight in more personal, individualized terms” (Benshoff 1997: 13).

Despite its strong associations with queerness, the vampire horror film takes a cishet turn in *Twilight*, a film whose reception has ignited debates about the cultural status of the (presumably) teen girl viewer as much, or more than, the quality or significance of the film itself. Lisa Bode’s analysis of film reviews of *Twilight* reveals that negative reviews of the film included more critical language used to describe the audience for the film (Bode 2012: 64). Whether intently focused on the screen, or shrieking at the sight of Edward sparkling in the sun, for some reviewers the teen girl is always on the wrong side of cult culture.

## M and Ms

Sure, a traditional romantic comedy or a drama may be *somewhat amusing*, but once it’s over, it’s just as easily forgotten. ... those movies aren’t entertaining at all. ... And what’s worse, they lack balls.

(Gore 2010: ix)

This comically energetic dismissal of tame movie choices by Chris Gore provides a hyperbolically suitable entrée to the discussion of film genres with significant cult followings, for whom

the audience is assumed to be largely (but not exclusively) straight women and girls: musicals and melodramas. Ian Conrich's observation that musical performance in cult films is often a "knowing perversion of the cultural values, performances, subjects and utopian aspects of the classical musical film" (Conrich 2006: 116) fits the rowdiness of cult musicals like *Rock 'n' Roll High School*, and the parodic qualities of *The Happiness of the Katakuris*. Similarly, the appeal to nostalgia of musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* map onto assumptions about the feminized audiences for these films, even though their karaoke versions have successfully traded on a broader appeal. This is why auto-ethnographic studies such as Garth Jowett's of what watching Hollywood musicals of the 1950s meant to him as "a heterosexual male in the last half of this century" are so critical (Jowett 2001: 149). Jowett describes childhood dancing in front of his parents' mirror, his mother's abiding love for the movies, and his conviction that the singing and dancing men of his most cherished musicals "are at the heart of the true masculinity I know" (Jowett 168).

It is, finally, hilariously ironic that melodramas elicit from some viewers the kind of disgust and resistance one would expect in response to cult practices in which machismo is achieved and sustained by watching the goriest cinematic scenes imaginable. Hollows, for example, quotes an interview in which a cult filmmaker declares that he's seen everything, but that he "can't sit through" the television serial melodrama *Dynasty* (Hollows 2003: 37). As a thoroughly feminized genre, classical and contemporary melodramas such as *Dark Victory*, *Stella Dallas*, *Beaches*, and *Steel Magnolias* have been subject to strong critiques from feminist film theorists for their conventional plots and stereotyped portrayals of women who sacrifice everything for love and family, even if it means, in the case of Bette Davis in *Dark Victory*, dying alone at home because you don't want to interfere with your husband's attendance at a medical conference. But in these films women viewers find images of themselves – often, in fact, in emotionally charged close-ups – and are in every way central to the storyline. Although the emotional travails they endure are structurally reminiscent of the physical threats and injuries sustained by female victims of horror in that they are often repetitive, prolonged, and undeserved, they arise from domestic situations familiar to viewers rather than from encounters with reincarnated masked murderers. The suffering that heroines of melodrama experience is as intense as that of any action hero, but it is psychological, internal, and registered in facial expressions that communicate their pain in tears, and that at other moments embody anguish too wrenching for full articulation. The stoicism of female characters in melodrama, compelled by ethical or situational concerns to quell their voices (like Kay Francis in *Confession*) saturates the genre with determined silence befitting tales of torture victims who refuse to give up information. That melodramas are more likely to be mocked for traits of excess and incredibility than are horror films, is another example of cult's valorization of emotions like shock and fear, and its apparent unease with emotions like extreme sadness. Nor are the cultish activities of repeat viewing, memorization of lines, and imitation alien to viewers of melodrama, as Helen Taylor's study *Scarlett's Women*, and my own research on women spectators of Hollywood melodrama, whose relationships with these films and their character-heroines manifest as "a willed and durable enterprise of self-fashioning make clear" (Austin-Smith 2007: 143–156).

Filed images of gendered beings are fixed and permanent in ways that the reception and creation of meaning from those images can never be. Influenced, shaped and qualified by contexts, and by multiple adoptions and rejections of identification, cult cinema is shot through with recuperative, redemptive, and evasive strategies of production and viewing. It is not that cult film's treatment of gender is resistant to analysis, but that the art of cult film is an experience rather than a problem. Its troubling and fascinating contours will continue to be described, and with good fortune, the debates will continue.



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