The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema

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Cult cinema in the digital age

Publication details

https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315668819-29

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Published online on: 04 Dec 2019

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CULT CINEMA IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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In his 2010 article 'Wake Up, Geek Culture: Time to Die', stand-up comedian and author Patton Oswalt complains about the mainstreaming of geek culture within contemporary society, illustrating his argument with a series of provocative examples such as 'Boba Fett's helmet emblazoned on sleeveless T-shirts worn by gym douches' and 'The *Glee* kids performing the songs from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*' (Oswalt 2010). With a semi-ironic tone mixing sarcasm with unabashed nostalgia, Oswalt reflects that he used to be a nerd 'back 30 years ago when nerd meant something' but that today the 'hidden thought-palaces' that defined fandom when he was a teenager have instead been replaced by 'easily accessed websites, or Facebook pages with thousands of fans' (2010). Central to his critique of contemporary fandom is the notion that the Internet has made geek culture too accessible to a mainstream audience and that it therefore 'lets anyone become otaku[1] about anything instantly' (2010). For critics such as Oswalt, the exclusivity of geek culture is under threat within a digital environment that makes previously inaccessible materials available to a wider audience through streaming services such as YouTube, and it is this broadening of access to the 'mainstream' that is seen to threaten the demise of geek culture.

As should be evident to anyone who has followed recent debates within cult cinema scholarship, these comments are remarkably similar to the prevalent discourses surrounding cult cinema in the digital age. From Jeffrey Sconce's observation that cult cinema 'was very specific to a finite window in the history of cinephilia and exhibition … when film culture itself was growing in the 1970s/1980s and yet access to certain films remained somewhat limited' (2008: 48) through I.Q. Hunter's claim that it is 'much easier to be a cultist now, but it is also rather more inconsequential' (2008), there is a repeated emphasis within critical writings upon the threat posed by digital technologies that have made cult films more widely accessible and therefore no longer exclusive to a specific subcultural community. This issue is raised by Sconce himself when he claims that the original form of cultism 'evoked an esoteric sense of social, cultural, and esthetic exile', whereas in the contemporary era this kind of distinction is 'difficult to maintain once every film became available to every viewer' (2008: 48). The perceived threat of accessibility tends to be framed through a discourse of historical decline in which the adoption of digital technology marks the eventual death of the cult cinema phenomenon. Peter Stanfield, for example, argues that 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.

(2008: 50).

Even the most canonical cult films are seen to be under threat of losing their cult status within this context, with Mikel Koven claiming that the 'ease at which one can obtain a copy of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* … removes the film's cult status' (2008). Underpinning these discourses of cult's transformation in the digital age, therefore, are a set of discourses that tend to reproduce the following set of oppositions:

PRE-DIGITAL	DIGITAL
Physical/Material	Virtual/Immaterial
Authentic/Real	Inauthentic/Simulacra
Difficult to access	Easy to access
Delayed gratification	Instantaneous
Non-commercial	Commercial
Anti-market	Consumerist
Radical	Apolitical
Subculture	Pop culture
Midnight screenings	Available anytime
Limited audience/Exclusive	Available to all
Marginal	Mainstream[2]

In many ways, this discourse is nothing new. There is an extensive history of criticism on cult cinema that highlights the perceived threat posed by films becoming accessible to a wider audience (see Jancovich et al. 2003; Martin 2008; Newman 2008). As I've discussed elsewhere, the transition of cult cinema into the domestic environment with VHS spurred many similar discourses of inauthenticity (Smith 2019), although it is clear that this discourse has become amplified within the digital context. Moreover, as Jamie Sexton has observed, these kinds of discourses surrounding cult's perceived decline reflect a 'nostalgic harking back to a bygone era' suggesting a 'yearning for a time when cult was more rarefied, when cult was less commercial, when cult *meant something*' (2014: 142). These attempts to contrast a contemporary era of accessibility with an earlier more exclusive age of cult cinema are therefore imbued with what Matt Hills has termed a 'mainstreaming discourse' through which 'technological developments are presumed to dilute cult's subcultural capital' (2015: 104). This notion of cult cinema being diluted and losing its sense of alterity within the digital context are therefore tied to a retro-nostalgia that contrasts a constructed notion of cult's past against a contemporary context in which cult cinema is presumed to have lost its subcultural value.[3]

In this chapter, I want to go beyond mapping out these discursive battles to explore more precisely how digital culture has impacted cult cinema. It is evident that digital technologies have had a significant impact on cult – from the increased availability of cult texts via downloading and streaming through to the emergence of digital communities of cult cinema fans online – yet there is a need to interrogate exactly how cult has evolved within this new digital context. Building on Matt Hills' work in this area, I will explore to what extent digital media 'might support new modes of subcultural distinction' (2015: 103), charting the myriad ways in which subcultural capital is being generated and fought over within digital spaces. Whereas Hills focused most of his attention upon retrospective processes whereby associations

with earlier inaccessible cult forms such as midnight movies imbue older cult fans with 'retro-active subcultural capital' (2015: 118), I am instead focused here upon the ways in which digital cult cinema communities are themselves new sites for battles over cultural distinction and the emerging locations of subcultural capital. In order to establish how these digital shifts relate to a broader history of technological changes within cult cinema, I will begin by charting the prevailing discourses surrounding the introduction of digital technologies such as DVD, Blu-ray and online streaming before then discussing the specific subcultural politics under-pinning digital filesharing communities. Central to this account will be the private BitTorrent community Cinemageddon which has positioned itself as a leading hub for the circulation, res-toration and archiving of cult film materials. While cult cinema is often presumed to be a histor-ical phenomenon associated with 1970s–1980s screenings of midnight movies in mythologised cinemas such as the Elgin in New York and the Scala in London, I intend to demonstrate how cult cinema and its associated subcultural politics have adapted and flourished within the digital context. Bringing into play the power structures inherent within discourses on cult cinema and technological change, this chapter will therefore investigate the evolving meaning of cult cinema in the digital age.

Cult cinema and technology: Repetition, availability and access

In a 2008 blog discussing the relationship between cult cinema and new media technologies, Michael Z. Newman argues that 'cult media used to be pretty marginal, and it prided itself on its marginality' whereas, he reflects, in the contemporary age, 'I think it is much less so' (2008). Newman attributes this change to the rise of technologies such as DVD and online streaming since this digital technology 'makes the repetition of movies so much more available and accessible and makes the ordinary viewer more likely to engage with their favorite movies as cultists do' (2008). Repeat viewing has long been seen as a key marker of cult cinema, and this process has evolved alongside technological developments such as VHS, Laserdisc, DVD, Blu-ray and, most significantly, the Internet. As Elena Gorfinkel observes, 'Today, what video started – in its reconfiguration of conditions of films' access, scarcity and its experience of evan-escence – digital formats, DVD, Blu-ray, Netflix, YouTube, and the iPhone have considerably magnified' (2008: 37). The broadening of access to cult film materials and linking up of cult cinema fans through digital networks has offered many opportunities for cult communities to develop online, but that broadening of access has also functioned to threaten the subcul-tural politics underpinning the cult cinema phenomenon. As editors Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lazáro-Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis observe in the introduction to their *Defining Cult Movies* collection:

> On the one hand, these technologies have made cult movie fandom much less dependent on place, and have allowed the distribution and diffusion of cult materials across space. This has made possible the creation of large niche audiences that may be spatially diffuse but can constitute a powerful market force. On the other hand, this also threatens the sense of distinction and exclusivity on which cult movie fandom depends, and threatens to blur the very distinctions that organise it.
>
> (2003: 4)

There is a clear tension underpinning this shift from cult being conceived primarily as a public, social practice located at repertory cinemas to a more private, individualised practice within the home. On the one hand, there is a presumed loss of the post-countercultural communitarian

ethos of collective film screenings since audiences more often watch cult films at home on their own, but, on the other hand, the networked nature of digital technologies provides opportunities for those same audiences to share material and interact with each other as part of a larger global cult community. Rather than disparate isolated individuals cut off from the collective experience, therefore, we see the emergence of thriving communities on social networks such as Facebook and Reddit devoted to particular strands of cult cinema and this digital infrastructure functions to support and sustain the development of numerous cult communities online. This process also means that information on cult cinema is more widely shared with detailed accounts of cult film traditions no longer restricted to print publications such as fanzines and movie guides but made freely available on online blogs and on user-generated sites such as Wikipedia. Digital technology therefore both facilitates these fan practices by allowing these cult communities to develop and flourish, but also functions to diminish the associated subcultural capital since knowledge about these films is no longer restricted in the way it was in the pre-digital era.

One of the responses to the increased digital availability of cult cinema online is an embrace of analogue technologies that are associated with earlier periods within the history of cult cinema. As Jamie Sexton has observed, 'Although many cultists have embraced new technologies, there exists a marked enthusiasm for older technologies and practices within sectors of cult fandom' (2015: 15). From the resurgence of interest in vinyl film soundtracks through to the rise of collectors of VHS cassettes, there is a prevailing emphasis on the materiality of the cult object and this should be understood partly as a response to the threat posed by digital technologies which, as J. Hoberman argues, have 'deprived the cult object of its aura' (2008: 45). This romanticised nostalgia for residual technologies is reflected in the decision by the renowned cult cinema exhibitor Alamo Drafthouse to open a 'Video Vortex' store in their North Carolina cinema that is devoted to VHS rentals at a time when the film rental market is now almost entirely online (McNary 2017). Comparable to the wider resurgence of interest in vinyl records at a time when music streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music are dominating the music industry, there is a concomitant emphasis upon the physical, material pleasures of home video packaging and an attempt to embrace pre-digital technologies such as VHS that are nostalgically tied to an earlier supposedly more 'authentic' cult moment. Alongside this phenomenon, we also have the release of cult films in 4k digital restorations and limited-edition Blu-ray box sets through labels such as Arrow, Severin, 88 Films, Mondo Macabro and Shameless, reflecting a continued interest in physical formats such as DVD and Blu-ray amongst significant sectors of the cult audience.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the sphere of cult cinema fandom that has been most heavily impacted by digital technologies are the 'informal' (Lobato 2012) distribution channels through which fans share rare or inaccessible films with each other. Following the introduction of VHS, there has been a long history of 'grey-market' trading of these kinds of titles amongst cult cinema fans – from films that were outright banned such as the 'video nasties' in the United Kingdom through to titles that have been withdrawn from circulation such as *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) – but this is a practice that has expanded considerably with the introduction of digital filesharing and streaming. Through private BitTorrent communities such as Cinemageddon and Karagarga, there are now thousands of previously rare and obscure films that are being made available and circulated through networked communities of cult cinema fans. Digital filesharing and streaming has therefore meant that these kinds of films are no longer exclusive to a small number of VHS or DVD-R collectors but are instead being shared widely through communities such as Cinemageddon to all who have registered with that particular tracker. In doing so, these communities have developed what I have elsewhere termed 'bootleg

archives' (Smith 2011) in that they are building an extensive collection of films that were previously relatively inaccessible, and are thereby helping to make available entire strands of cult film history that have been hitherto neglected. For Jeffrey Sconce, this trend towards amassing extensive collections of numerous cult film traditions 'suggests that today's cultism is less about the intense fetishization of a single film than an obsessive mastery over an entire genre or sub-genre' and he argues that within the digital sphere, 'everyone can serve as an archivist of his or her own obscure pocket of film history' (2008: 48–49). What this perspective ignores, however, is the collaborative nature of this phenomenon. Within communities such as Cinemageddon, these are not individual archivists tending to their own personal collections but rather a collective of archivists working together through digital platforms to restore and preserve areas of film history that have been largely forgotten elsewhere. It is important therefore that we address how these communities function in relation to prevailing discourses on cult cinema, especially in relation to the generation of subcultural capital, and investigate what they can tell us about the evolution of cult practices in the digital age.

Cinemageddon: Bootleg archives, collaboration and community

Launched on 17 April 2007, the private BitTorrent tracker Cinemageddon functions as an informal digital archive of cult cinema traditions worldwide with a community of 24,296 registered users sharing a total of 162,128 active torrents.[4] Uploads are organised into generic categories, such as Action, Exploitation, Gore, Hidden Gems, Martial Arts, Sci-Fi, Tinfoil Hat and XXX, and while films are the primary focus of the collection the site also collects eBooks, soundtracks, posters and other cult paraphernalia. As with other private trackers, Cinemageddon functions on an 'invite-only' system where users can only join the community if they have been sent an invite from an existing member. This process encourages a sense of exclusivity that contrasts with public BitTorrent trackers such as The Pirate Bay and freely available streaming services such as YouTube. The Cinemageddon community is particularly encouraged to upload materials that pertain to one of the site's forty-one ongoing 'Projects' which are designed to help compile exhaustive archives of films from specific cult directors such as Godfrey Ho, Joe D'Amato or Jess Franco and cult genres such as Eurospy, Pinky Violence or Clones of Bruce Lee. The broad success of this strategy is reflected in the site's Eurocrime project which has 1,287 titles in its archive, comprising arguably the most comprehensive collection of Italian 'Poliziotteschi' films in existence alongside various other European crime film traditions.

These projects generally conform to pre-digital cult categories with a particular focus on cinema traditions from the 1960s–1980s featuring directors and stars whose cult reputations were established well before the advent of digital streaming and filesharing. The emphasis is less on the discovery of 'new' cult cinemas, therefore, than it is on the preservation and maintenance of pre-established and pre-digital cult film traditions. However, what sites like Cinemageddon have facilitated is the exhaustive attempt to track down and share every example of these particular cult traditions with the rest of the community, shifting the emphasis away from individual cult films towards the collecting and archiving of entire bodies of work. Moreover, the administrators at Cinemageddon impose a number of rules on uploads designed to support the sharing of particular kinds of cult films, and to exclude films which are perceived to be too popular or otherwise inappropriate for the site. For example, it is advised that any film that has more than 3,000 votes on IMDB is probably too popular for Cinemageddon while films such as *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) and *The Wicker Man* (1973) and franchises such as *Friday the 13th* (1980–) and *The Evil Dead* (1981–) are all specifically named as titles that are excluded. The site therefore functions under a particular understanding of cult cinema that privileges the rare and

the marginal at the expense of anything that might be perceived as popular or 'mainstream' cult. This privileging of specifically marginal forms of cult cinema within the Cinemageddon community functions both to diminish the threat of copyright claims being made against the community from major film studios, and also to reassert a sense of subcultural distinction from the mainstream within a digital context where subcultural capital is perceived to be under threat.

What particularly marks this community out from pre-digital collections of cult cinema are the increased opportunities for collaboration between fans in building this archive, and one of the ways in which the community collaborates and adds value through their labour is via fansubbing. While limited processes of fan translation and subtitle production have been undertaken since the early days of VHS, this practice has flourished in the digital era and while it is particularly associated with anime fan communities (Denison 2011), the practice has spread to encompass numerous other film traditions. Whereas anime fansubbing communities tend to be focused on making the latest releases available to non-Japanese speaking audiences, the Cinemageddon community primarily focuses on broadening access to titles from 1960s–1980s cult film traditions that have never been subtitled before, and they do this by incentivising contributors to work together to translate and subtitle films from particular directors and generic cycles. Given that cult discourse is still primarily an Anglophone phenomenon and that non-US/UK titles within the cult canon tend to be those that have previously picked up international distribution in the West through a dubbed or subtitled release, these communities are therefore working together to widen access to areas of global cult cinema that have not hitherto been available through formal circuits of distribution.

Furthermore, these collaborative processes also help build a sense of community and collective participation amongst the membership. There are parallels here with Virginia Crisp's research into the online dissemination of East Asian cinemas through English-language filesharing communities. What she found in these groups is that 'there is an important collaborative and community aspect to online distribution. It shows that the films themselves are not the primary focus, but act as the facilitator to community participation' (Crisp 2015: 153). As I discussed earlier, digital technology is often framed in terms of broadening access to cult cinema and its practices – and the attendant risk that this poses to processes of subcultural distinction – but it is important to recognise that a site like Cinemageddon also facilitates the collaboration of fans who work together to restore, preserve and archive cult film materials. The site would therefore qualify as a 'rogue archive', which Abigail De Kosnik defines as follows:

> Internet sites that can be accessed by all online users[5], with no paywalls or institutional barriers; that allow all content to be streamed or downloaded in full; that do not delete, hide, or edit content based on copyright holders' allegations of legal infringement or for any other reason; that are committed to the persistent publication and long-term preservation of all content that they store; that have search-and-retrieval features so that users can locate specific texts; and that have either weak ties or no affiliations with traditional memory institutions such as government archives, university libraries, and brick-and-mortar museums.
>
> (2016: 18)

As De Kosnik notes, these kinds of archives are 'not restricted by copyright laws… and some simply contravene copyright laws that they feel hinder, rather than help, cultural preservation' (2016: 77). Unlike public trackers such as The Pirate Bay which are primarily designed for the free sharing of all kinds of content, private trackers such as Cinemageddon incentivise their members to contribute to building a stable archive that can preserve a particular kind of

content – through rewards for contributing titles that are not already part of the collection, and for maintaining a seeding ratio so that these titles continue to be available for other members to download. To some extent, therefore, the members of Cinemageddon share the attitude that De Kosnik has identified amongst other filesharing communities who tend to think of 'media piracy as a form of collecting' (2012: 524) and frame themselves as 'media archivists' who are preserving 'films and television shows that official institutions might ignore, allow to be lost, or keep out of circulation for a prolonged period of time or indefinitely' (2012: 529).

It is clear then that there is a significant amount of fan labour involved in these processes, including the time taken to track down the films, to translate and subtitle them, and to then carefully catalogue and organise them into an archive. As Oliver Carter has observed in his ethnography of a file-sharing community he refers to as CineTorrent, these communities function as an 'alternative economy of fan enterprise where fans are responding to the current limitations of commercially released … cinema on DVD by taking it upon themselves to make unreleased titles available for distribution within the alternative economy' (2018: 33). This informal 'alternative economy' therefore functions in a symbiotic relationship with the formal distribution companies, often making films available that are perceived to have relatively little commercial value. Indeed, Carter observes that 'though legally uncertain, the activities of CineTorrent and its membership are expressed as a moral act, providing a service that is not economically viable outside of this alternative economy' (2018: 139). What is interesting is that even established critics such as Tim Lucas, who discussed Cinemageddon in his long-running magazine *Video Watchdog* (1990–2017), have praised the site for making films available with fansubs or dual audio tracks, given that these are 'unlikely to surface commercially' (2009: 5). According to Lucas,

> If you go to the movie file-sharing site Cinemageddon … and are lucky enough to find a window into their limited membership, awaiting you there is a wonderland of opportunities under the searchable terms 'fansubbed' or 'fansubs.' By typing these words into the CG search engine, you can access dozens, even hundreds of downloadable files wherein the uploader has wedded home-made English subtitles to an official or televised film source from another country.
>
> (2009: 4)

It is important to note, however, that Lucas is highly critical of the fact that members sometimes upload commercially available titles, which he feels is

> ripping off the companies who are investing in the restoration of the films its members hold dear, rather than merely focusing on the homegrown archaeology that makes them a truly vital source for anyone interested in arcane avenues of film.
>
> (2009: 5)

What we see here are the tensions between these BitTorrent groups and other valued members of the cult community such as the commercial companies that restore and release films for formal distribution on DVD and Blu-ray. While the administrators at Cinemageddon have introduced a '12-month rule' that means that community members cannot share any new DVD or Blu-ray rips for a period of a year from release, there has nevertheless been a heated debate within the cult fandom surrounding the ethics of Cinemageddon and especially its impact on the wider cult eco-system.

To explore these debates within the cult community and their relation to broader battles over subcultural distinction within the digital context, it is worth focusing briefly here on a

representative discussion that took place on the message board 'The Latarnia Forums' in 2009. On a thread titled 'Rethinking "That" Site', author Mirek Lipinski starts by making clear his own ambivalence about the piracy taking place on the site, but he then admits that 'whenever I check out Cinemageddon, I'm instantly enticed by the care and dedication over its "projects," which seem valuable to me as a library of rare or hard to get films – an archive of film history, if you will' and he notes that 'there is wonderful work being done in making rare foreign films available – and with English subtitles' (Lipinski 2009). Similarly, templar71 declares that they are 'astounded at the work that some enthusiasts have put into their uploads, whether it be adding subtitles or making composite prints to come up with the closest thing possible to an uncut version of a film' but, on the other hand, they are 'dismayed by those who choose to upload readily-available films that you can rent in any Blockbuster or buy in any chain store' (templar71 2009).

For these members, the primary ethical problem with Cinemageddon is the sharing of films that are already available to buy, and while this is partly related to the relative subcultural value of marginal as opposed to popular cult films (as indicated by the specific choice of 'Blockbuster' and 'any chain store' as locations for signalling their wide availability), the opposition to this practice is more often framed in relation to the threat to the formal distribution companies that produce DVDs and Blu-rays of cult films. As Lapinski explains, 'If such sites become the norm, particularly with cult stuff, for which there is a limited audience, why would DVD companies want to put out official releases of these films, when they know that much of the audience already has these as [sic] films as downloads?' (Lapinski 2009) The risk posed to formal distributors is therefore not only that their DVDs and Blu-rays will be ripped and uploaded to the community, but that the availability of so many rare cult films on Cinemageddon will reduce the potential market for these titles if they were to be given a formal release. Nevertheless, despite this threat to the economic viability of formal distributors, the contributors to the Latarnia thread still express some level of admiration for what the community on Cinemageddon has produced, with 'Howling Beast' admitting that

> I'd probably be pretty angry if I was a company like Code Red and found my stuff up on there. But when you look at all the fansubbed Naschy films, Santo films, Italian western and horror films, it just really makes you understand how important the site is.
>
> (Howling Beast 2009)

The value of a site such as Cinemageddon is therefore related to the notion that it is providing a resource that isn't available elsewhere, and that through restoring, fansubbing and circulating these films they are building an archive that wouldn't otherwise exist.

This debate is therefore tied to a broader discussion of the ethics of piracy, and I think it is important that, as Ramon Lobato has argued, we avoid thinking about piracy as a 'singular practice' and instead think about numerous 'piracies' that can encompass a variety of ethical positions (2012: 70). For example, in his study of a pirate DVD vendor named 'Juan' in Mexico City, Lobato foregrounds how 'pirate circuits can also be networks for film preservation and archiving' (2012: 70) and he traces the processes through which Juan makes Mexican films available that have no formal distributor in place. Lobato argues that what is 'distinctive about Juan's form of piracy' is that this is often 'the only distribution these films receive' (2012: 89), and he contends that this complicates the ethical position of this form of piracy given that it preserves and makes available these films in economic circumstances where the 'profit potential for many of these titles is slim to non-existent, and few legitimate distributors would bother with them' (2012: 90). As should be evident, BitTorrent sites such as Cinemageddon function in

a similar manner – preserving and archiving titles that have no formal distribution and making them available to anyone who signs up to the private community. Such sites therefore provide a valued function within the wider cult eco-system, and while their reliance on acts of piracy creates evident tensions within the cult community, the illicit nature of such acts clearly plays into the transgressive subcultural politics of cult fandom and its broader association with non-conformist politics.

Conclusion

In his deliberately provocative critique of the concept of cult cinema within the contemporary era, Adrian Martin argues that 'there is a difference between the pleasure of discovery [as] a solitary pursuit and the instant ecstasy of an on-line community' (2008: 41), and he concludes his account by posing the following question:

> Honestly, what would you prefer: a film that you discover for yourself, via some obscure distribution or exhibition byway, before uncovering the existence of a few scattered soul brothers or sisters around the world, alike only in their love for this Unidentified Filmic Object – or a film that is smoothly conveyed to you, signed, sealed and delivered as a certified cult item?
>
> (2008: 42)

For Martin, the ways in which the concept of 'cult cinema' has become used as a marketing tool adopted by the industry, rather than emerging through happenstance and word-of-mouth, means that cult in the digital era has become tainted by commercialism and ultimately has been co-opted by the mainstream. What this kind of account neglects, however, is that the digital era of cult cinema also comprises private BitTorrent communities such as Cinemageddon which are precisely based around bringing together scattered communities of fans from around the world who are invested in sharing an explicitly marginal form of cult cinema through a relatively obscure distribution byway. Indeed, the Cinemageddon community complicates many of the oppositions between digital and pre-digital cult culture that underpin Martin's argument, and that I set out in my introduction. While cult cinema in the digital age is often presented as being 'easy to access' and 'available to all', we find in these BitTorrent communities a continued emphasis upon a limited, relatively exclusive group of users who have access to the cult materials and that control who is invited to be part of the community. Moreover, the nature of their non-commercial (and to some extent anti-market) practices and their sustained emphasis on explicitly non-popular forms of cult cinema, means that they clearly function as locations for the production of subcultural capital in distinction to an imagined notion of the 'mainstream'.

The technological developments underpinning cult cinema in the digital age, therefore, may technically make the films more widely available, but that doesn't necessarily lead to the inevitable commercialisation or co-option of cult practices. As Jamie Sexton observes, access is not the only factor that influences cult cinema and 'equally important are issues such as knowledge, awareness, and expertise' (2014: 142). In other words, cult materials may be more easily available within a digital context where audiences can easily seek out films on YouTube and information on Wikipedia, but that doesn't necessarily mean that these practices will be adopted more broadly. Cult communities are continuing to emerge that rely explicitly on processes of subcultural distinction from the mainstream, and BitTorrent communities such as Cinemageddon demonstrate that digital technologies are actually contributing to and facilitating that process.

Digital technology has not led to the death of cult, therefore, but has instead been the stimulus for another stage in the evolution of cult cinema practices.

Notes

1 Otaku is a Japanese term for an obsessive fan. Initially pejorative, the term has since been taken up as a self-description by fans both within Japan and internationally.

2 These are similar to the oppositions between subcultures and the mainstream set out by Sarah Thornton in her 1995 study *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* so it is clear that this discourse surrounding the threat of digital technology is tied up with a broader oppositional politics in relation to conceptions of the 'mainstream'.

3 Declarations of the death of cult cinema are reminiscent of the claims of the end of youth culture identified by Rupa Huq who has observed that 'journalists who had long left behind their own gilded youth declared that modern music was bankrupt of pop's resistive role of earlier generations' (Huq 2006: 4). Given that cult cinema is so intimately tied up with youth culture, it is perhaps inevitable that this nostalgic longing for a more 'authentic' earlier period of cult cinema is often tied up in a nostalgia for the author's own youth.

4 These details are correct as of 22 February 2019.

5 Private BitTorrent trackers such as Cinemageddon and Karagarga do require users to register via an invitation from an existing member, so while theoretically 'all online users' could access the site, in practice the membership is more restricted – nevertheless, there is no paywall or institutional barrier in place.

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