

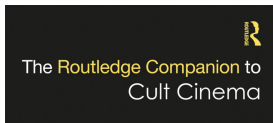
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3

CULT-ART CINEMA

Defining cult-art ambivalence

David Andrews

Cult cinema is a super-genre whose participants fetishize the cultural illegitimacy of their own cult activities and forms, often wearing their “shame” as a badge of honor in cult contexts. In a sense, this illegitimacy lends these participants a narrow mystique with a restricted legitimacy. Because this legitimacy is only intermittently recognized outside the cult nexus, we may refer to it as “subcultural legitimacy.” These assertions can help us understand cult cinema’s complex overlaps with other fields. For example, cult cinema’s intersection with art cinema produces “cult-art cinema.” As a cult variety, cult-art cinema is striking in that it exemplifies the cult identity even as its manifest aspiration to high-art distinction threatens to erase that identity. At the same time, cult-art cinema’s cult identity always calls into question its high-art distinction. This conflicting, often ambivalent nature is at the heart of cult-art cinema.

To understand this, we must be very careful in how we think about both cult cinema and art cinema. What is cult cinema, anyway? Is it, for example, more useful to think of it as a group of subcultural artifacts or as a group of subcultural processes? There are, after all, traditions for presenting cult cinema in both ways. For example, in their introduction to *The Cult Film Reader* (2008), Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik seem to define cult cinema primarily as a set of movies:

Cult films transgress common notions of good and bad taste, and they challenge genre conventions and coherent storytelling, often using intertextual references, gore, leaving loose ends or creating a sense of nostalgia. They have troublesome production histories ... and in spite of often-limited accessibility, they have a continuous market value and a long-lasting public presence.

(11)

There are, however, problems with presenting cult cinema as a group of movies. Even if cult fans, or “paracinephiles,” seem mainly interested in the movies, there is nothing permanent about which movies are designated “cult movies.” As a result, cult theorists often perform maneuvers similar to those made by aestheticians in the philosophy of art before the interventions of Morris Weitz and George Dickie: they define certain movies and certain types of movie as exemplifying the cult concept in a way that restricts what may and may not be called a “cult

movie.” In other words, these theorists promote the historical reality of *some* cult movies as the ahistorical essence of *all* cult movies. But this cannot work. Have *all* cult movies had “troublesome production histories”? Have *all* of them “challenge[d] genre conventions and coherent storytelling”? Even if they had, how would these facts restrict future usage of the concept?

A more serviceable approach is charted in *Defining Cult Movies* (2003). In introducing this collection, Mark Jancovich and his colleagues pursue a strategy of defining cult cinema in terms of “subcultural ideology”:

[T]he “cult movie” is an essentially eclectic category. It is not defined according to some single, unifying feature shared by all cult movies but rather through a “subcultural” ideology in filmmakers, films or audiences [that] are seen as existing in opposition to the “mainstream” ... it is by presenting themselves as oppositional that cult audiences are able to confer value upon both themselves and the films around which they congregate.

(2003: 1–2)

This definition is useful because it acknowledges the textual multiplicity and contingency of cult cinema but still manages to move beyond it, pursuing the sociological realities that unify the cult phenomenon. Through their ideas of cult adversarialism, Jancovich and his fellow editors see how cult participants re-value abject positions, achieving subcultural legitimacy through their opposition to the “mainstream.” But we should be careful here, too, for this idea of cult adversarialism is easily overdone. As scholars have made clear, the cult nexus is not deeply militant in its opposition to dominant sectors like mainstream cinema or art cinema. This oppositionalism is often nominal, limited to subcultures or pursued as a marketing strategy only. What is more, cult cinema is not the only super-genre to have constructed itself as an adversary to a context-specific “mainstream.” Art cinema as a whole has presented itself as adversarial, often by opposing the mainstream cinemas and cult cinemas that depart from pure-art values.

Which is to suggest that art cinema is as slippery and complex as cult cinema. If it is odd that cult cinema overlaps with a field that aspires to cultural legitimacy, it is equally odd that art cinema overlaps with a field that opposes this kind of legitimacy. What makes this oddity possible is the fact that art cinema is itself a flexible group of sociological processes and not an unchanging canon of masterpieces. The main difference between art cinema and cult cinema is ideological in nature. Art cinema subscribes to (mostly) dominant cultural ideologies, while cult cinema subscribes to (several) non-dominant ones. By looking at cult as an area of cinematic production and distribution that promotes non-dominant ideologies, we can avoid confusion with avant-garde cinema, which is a deeply adversarial sector of art cinema whose legitimacy, like that of cult cinema as a whole, is subcultural in nature – but whose values, unlike those of cult cinema, are dominant and traditional almost by definition.

The cult sensibility, as now constructed, does share some principles with high-art sensibilities. For example, both cult cinema and art cinema portray themselves as indie outsiders in an industry dominated by Hollywood – and both cinemas now seem equally disingenuous in making these claims. This common adversarialism is why it was often possible for tastemakers like Andrew Sarris, Susan Sontag, and Amos Vogel to refer to art-house tastes as “cult” tastes in the United States at least through the 1960s. But it is the differences between these cinemas that usually dictate our thinking about them. For example, the cult sensibility departs from art cinema’s high-art values by *endorsing* an active audience. The art-house sensibility, by contrast, has never overtly embraced an active audience. The neo-Kantian ideal of aesthetic disinterest is the linchpin of most legitimate aesthetics, and this principle applies to film as well as

to more traditional art forms. Practical understandings of “disinterest” usually equate it with “close attention,” a viewing posture that aids immersion, allowing viewers to gather as much of a work’s detail as possible. The ideal of disinterest is also useful to cultural authorities and to institutions in that it justifies and maintains social control; it has been thought that training people to adopt this posture cultivates everything from fair play to individual restraint in public places, like crowded museums and art houses. As a consequence, this ideal has been tied to notions of refinement and spirituality.

Cult consumption opposes this form of the aesthetic attitude. Indeed, this sort of consumption has been celebrated as a class-oriented rejection of the high-art posture. This rejection may be seen in the boisterous, populist behaviors that have often typified cult consumption in public. Thus, screenings of midnight movies like *Freaks* (1932), *Reefer Madness* (1936), *Mom and Dad* (1945), *Blood Feast* (1963), *El Topo* (1970), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *The Toxic Avenger* (1984) have been known for the carnivalesque hullabaloo they have inspired in audiences. Cult audiences seem unified by their need to express themselves physically; they often seem most pleased if they can laugh without regard for appropriateness. It is no surprise, then, that this mode of consumption has alarmed traditional auteurs (see, e.g., Peter Greenaway), who have always argued that the aesthetic object should be the sole determinant of cinematic experience. The last thing that an auteur, in the classic sense, wants to do is to encourage viewers to seize control of the cinematic experience, which is one goal of cult cinema’s egalitarian, often interactive modes of consumption.

Types, examples, and exclusions

As noted, a cult-art movie seems to have, or aspire to, two kinds of status: cult value and high-art value. This “quasi-legitimate” strain of cult movie may be identified the same way that we identify more legitimate art movies: by presenting evidence of auteurism and canonization. Here cult-art cinema creates special problems. Though paracinephiles have long sought to devise, in the words of Mathijs and Mendik, “an alternative canon of cinema, pitched against the ‘official’ canon” (2008: 6), we cannot assume that this canon amounts to cult cinema’s high art. A canonical cult movie is usually considered a “classic,” but these classics come in many varieties, most of which are *not* ascribed high-art value. This is true of Henenlotter’s movies and Troma’s many gross-out comedies; it is also true of individual American cult classics, from Herschell Gordon Lewis’s aforementioned *Blood Feast* to John Carpenter’s *They Live* (1988), Lloyd Kaufman’s *Tromeo and Juliet* (1996), Jay Lee’s *Zombie Strippers* (2008), and Raimi’s *Evil Dead* movies (1981, 1987). As it turns out, the cult-cinema canon has relied on a variety of criteria, which are loose and derive from many quarters. Thus, cult cinema is rich, byzantine – and its canons are in rapid and continual flux.

Before emphasizing three intentional kinds of cult-art movies, I want to discount two unintentional kinds. The first type involves cult-art movies appropriated from other spheres. The cult canon has often included experimental cinemas, mainstream cinemas, and world cinemas that were initially made and celebrated far from cult cinema as we currently imagine it. Some of these films represent unintentional cult-art movies, like Robert Wiene’s *Das cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1919), Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), and David Lynch’s *Eraserhead* (1976) as well as Luis Buñuel’s *Un chien andalou* (1929); Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1938); Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958); Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le week-end* (1967); Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971); Stan Brakhage’s *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes* (1971); David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), *Dead Ringers* (1988), and even *Crash* (1996); John Dahl’s *The Last Seduction* (1994); the Coens’ *Big Lebowski* (1998); and Richard Kelly’s *Donnie Darko* (2001),

to cite only a few. The overlaps with more legitimate cinemas in evidence in this list indicate that the cult sensibility has not been limited to movies that were inexpensive to make or that have only ever enjoyed a lowbrow status, which has been cult cinema's principal classification since the 1980s. Instead, cult tastes are *underground* tastes that may "cultify" any film so long as the process is directed by subcultural audiences who embrace subcultural values and modes of consumption. If we blend these ideas of cult with the understanding that cult auteurism is often unintentional, we can reconcile two seemingly divergent facts: on one hand, auteurs like Welles, Brakhage, and Kubrick were traditional auteurs whose main allegiance was to a traditional aesthetic; and, on the other, some of their movies have been praised as cult-art icons.

This kind of cult appropriation and elevation amounts to a populist intervention that forcibly reappraises a movie that may have failed in legitimate forums or that may have fallen out of favor with mainstream critics – a description that applies as readily to recent indie films like *The Last Seduction* and *Donnie Darko* as to Hollywood classics like *Touch of Evil*. *The Last Seduction* and *Donnie Darko* were both mid-budget indie art films that initially failed in legitimate channels: *The Last Seduction* at first failed to find a theatrical distributor, while *Donnie Darko* failed to earn back its production financing in its first go-round in theaters (Newman 2011, 211–213). But in both cases, these movies earned an underground cult following in their non-theatrical releases that gave them a chance for a successful re-release in theatrical art houses, which in turn allowed them to earn even more money in their subsequent releases to ancillary windows. It is as if the people spoke – and though their voice has always been deemed "illegitimate" in legitimate sectors, it lent these films an unintentional cult status that led to box-office successes and to positive reappraisals by traditional critics, ironically salvaging their legitimacy.

The second type of cult-art movie that we should put to the side is the kind of cult movie that results from the fetishization of directorial incompetence, that is, "badfilm." There is nothing wrong with celebrating "bad" movies. But we must understand what we are doing when we call bad movies "auteur movies." Auteurism implies control, purity, and intentional aspiration – and cult auteurism implies these notions as much as any other auteurism. Thus, it is possible to modify existing auteur methods to identify cult-art cinema and cult-art movies. But we can only rarely construct cult auteurism and the cult-art movie in terms of the bad movie, which is a pleasurable failure, a *tour de force* of ineptitude. This cult tradition is most often a sign of an unintentional, or an accidental, auteurism that is an effect of promotion and consumption.

Of course, some campy cult movies that qualify for so-bad-they're-good status have been made that way on purpose. Here we might consider Russ Meyer's *Mudhoney* (1965), Jess Franco's *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971), John Waters's *Pink Flamingos* (1972), Nobuhiko Obayashi's *House* (1977), the transgressive shorts that Richard Kern made between 1983 and 1993, Rodriguez's *Planet Terror* (2007), Anna Biller's *Viva* (2007), and so on. The bad movie and cult auteurism clearly go together here, for the intentional camp irony of such works indicates that we should not call them "bad" in any straightforward sense; rather, they seem rich in complex effects that their creators intended. Although we may be able to align such movies with the cult of pleasurable bad taste, we cannot align them with directorial ineptitude – for their directors found a way to do what they wanted to do within their particular constraints. But the more common kind of bad movie – where camp laughter seems to work against directors, not with them, and where the irony is a function of the viewers and their environment – does not exemplify the auteur ideal in any sense. In this case, the "authorship of the aura" is more properly attributed to the audience and not to the director.

One of the problems here is that intentional badness is typically disowned by bad cult directors. Certainly, the first generation of bad cult directors – individuals like Wood, Doris Wishman, Larry Buchanan, and Andy Milligan, who have all been celebrated in critical forums

as intentional auteurs – did not fetishize their own incompetence. Indeed, there is often little evidence beyond these directors’ embrace of what others have defined as their “trashy” aesthetics to support the idea that they were trying to make pleurably horrid movies. For the most part, then, their auteurism is a product of cult consumption, not of cult production – which means they are better positioned as significant “failures” whose technical and stylistic incompetence influenced later directors, like Jim Wynorski and Henenlotter. But not even the later directors have consistently promoted themselves in terms of an ironic camp control that may function as a subculturally legitimate sign of auteurism. They might label themselves “unimportant” and glorify bad taste and cheap things, but they rarely take any explicit pleasure in the bad cinematic qualities imparted by their own incompetence. Bad auteurs become bad auteurs, it seems, almost despite themselves, with their very authoritative ineptitude a product of certain styles of cult consumption and evaluation. This dynamic reminds us of cult cinema’s audience-driven ethic. But it is so far from the traditional that it is worth asking whether the idea of the unintentional bad auteur makes sense in broader contexts.

As noted, regarding intentional cult-art movies, there are at least three main types to consider. What unifies these three types is their ambivalence about their cult identity, an ambivalence that seems to be a function of their makers’ high-art aspirationalism – which is forever qualified, it appears, by their cult identity. Perhaps the best example of this ambivalence involves new cult movies that have *too much* legitimacy as a result of their provenance. This phenomenon is most evident on the festival circuit, where Bong Joon-ho, Tomas Alfredson, Tarantino, Park Chan-wook, Lars von Trier, and others have released movies that might well be classified as cult-art films. In their production values, distribution, and overall prestige, movies like Bong’s moody toxic-creature film *The Host* (2006), Alfredson’s equally moody vampire movie *Let the Right One In* (2008), Tarantino’s riotous Nazi-revenge picture *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), Park’s vampire comedy *Thirst* (2009), and von Trier’s torture-porn meditation *Antichrist* (2009) are all first and last traditional art films. They have won awards, critical acclaim, and global distribution through their mastery of the devices of traditional art films and through the reputations of their makers. Indeed, these directors are all veterans of the festival circuit, where they have served on juries and have made regular appearances at Cannes. The thing that distinguishes their new movies as cult-art movies, then, is their generic content: the severed body parts, the chills and thrills and spasms of violence, the monsters. Or, in a different sense, what has made all these movies cult-art movies is that their genre-coded materials are still not always accepted by traditionalists. Indeed, though horror and sex have long been regular parts of traditional festivals, horror films and sex films continue to face resistance on the circuit from the most conservative cinephiles and critics. There is, then, still an argument for labeling these art films “cult” movies on a formal basis alone, even if they remain highly distinguished cult productions that are more legitimate than illegitimate. But this argument is, I believe, fading, for other equally traditional critics have recently been depicting cult violence as more of the same, perceiving in it the tedium of art-world tradition. When the critics and institutions have been all converted, these art films won’t be able to function as cult movies at all.

A more sustainable, albeit still ambivalent, cult-art identity is evident in the quasi-legitimate films of auteurs like Mario Bava and Dario Argento and Johnnie To, most of whose work has been released through illegitimate cult-movie mechanisms and not through legitimate art-film mechanisms – but whose work has since then gathered acclaim in both illegitimate and legitimate circles. Here we might want to step back and think about the cult nexus as a loose collection of low-budget genres that in the United States has for the past thirty years actively promoted itself as a “cult” area. Given how accepted this practice has become, with whole institutions being devoted to this idea of a low-budget cult sector of movie-making, we might

well say that *all* the movies produced in these illegitimate spheres have some loose claim to the label “cult movie” just as a movie that manages to navigate its way through legitimate festival channels has some automatic claim to the label “art film.” Needless to say, cult movies that arrive through these means have not earned any cult *classic* status, let alone any high-art status – but they are free to begin earning this status subculturally. Thus, cult auteurs, like traditional auteurs, first seek praise for their movies through critics, viewers, and institutions, albeit in channels defined as illegitimate. Indeed, the most respected films of many auteurs currently deemed “quasi-legitimate” (including Bava, Corman, Meyer, Koji Wakamatsu, George Romero, Radley Metzger, Wes Craven, The Mitchell Brothers, Wakefield Poole, Gerard Damiano, Tobe Hooper, Just Jaeckin, Obayashi, Argento, Tinto Brass, John Woo, Andrew Blake, Takashi Miike, To, Eli Roth, Nacho Cerdà, and others) were shortly after their production often identified with their illegitimate cult auteurism and their illegitimate embrace of genre-branded materials and genre-branded distributions. But as these movies achieved classic status within cult, the trend over time has been for them to become detached from their original distribution channels, freeing them to develop new affiliations with more legitimate institutions, including art-cinema institutions. Hence, legitimate forums like film festivals, museum archives, repertory theaters, and crossover magazines like *Sight & Sound* have often been among the first forums to promote the canonical value of these movies and directors at the cultural level.

If we made a list of admired movies by these and other quasi-legitimate auteurs, we would find many cult classics that have been admired culturally and/or subculturally for their aesthetics, their contributions to the art of cinema. They include *Black Sabbath* (1963), *The Evil Eye* (1963), *Blood and Black Lace* (1964); *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964); *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965); *Secrets Behind the Wall* (1965); *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); *Camille 2000* (1969) and *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1975); *Last House on the Left* (1972); *Behind the Green Door* (1972); *Bijou* (1972); *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973); *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974); *Histoire d'O* (1975); *House* (1977); *Suspiria* (1977) and *Tenebrae* (1982); *La chiave* (1983); *The Killer* (1989) and *Hard Boiled* (1992); *Paris Chic* (1997) and *Hard Edge* (2003); *Audition* (1999); *Fulltime Killer* (2001) and *Breaking News* (2004); *Hostel* (2005); and “Aftermath” (1994) and *The Abandoned* (2006). In addition to these quasi-legitimate classics, we could add the Hollywood classics of cult directors like Samuel Fuller, including *Shock Corridor* (1963), *The Naked Kiss* (1964), and *White Dog* (1982), and the high-art canons of cult Hollywood genres, such as film noir. Indeed, we could even add the slashers and torture-porn movies that have recently arrived from France, such as *Dans ma peau* (2002), *Haute tension* (2003), *Frontière(s)* (2007), *À l'intérieur* (2007), and *Martyrs* (2008), along with certain Japanese pinks, including *The Glamorous Life of Sachiko Hanai* (2004). Praised as auteur vehicles and lumped into movements (e.g., the “New Wave of French horror” and the “pink nouvelle vague”), these films are quasi-legitimate examples of cult-art cinema. When we add them and other cases to our idea of art cinema, we re-orient traditional ideas of the genre, expanding it quantitatively and qualitatively. However, in making these additions, we must remember that it is legitimate critics who have always been most responsible for the elevation of these movies. It was, for example, legitimate critics from forums like *Sight & Sound* or *The Village Voice* who most directly canonized the “high end” of film noir by praising films like Jacques Tourneur’s *Out of the Past* (1947) over more lowbrow noir classics like Edgar G. Ulmer’s *Detour* (1945).

But there is one final type of cult-art movie, one that does not rely on legitimate critics for its status – for a cult-art movie does not have to be recognized by outsiders in order to function as art cinema *within* a cult subculture. Cult promoters, cult critics, and cult institutions are more than capable of making value distinctions among cult movies on their own. To get a sense of the true scope of cult cinema *and* art cinema as super-genres, then, we must acquaint ourselves

with sectors that legitimate critics rarely, if ever, visit. For example, if we looked at contemporary American softcore, we would find a cult auteur like Tony Marsiglia, whose value was once beyond dispute according to sites like b-independent, Softcore Reviews, and Alternative Cinema. As a result, we would have to integrate ultra-low-budget, cult-softcore movies like *Lust for Dracula* (2004), *Chantal* (2006), and *Sinful* (2007) into our notion of art cinema. We would also have to add a number of very different auteur vehicles, like Tom Lazarus's corporate-softcore films, *Word of Mouth* (1999) and *House of Love* (2000). From there, we could move to Spanish exploitation and look at the work of independent horror auteur Franco, whose output is often praised in cult circles but rarely recognized outside them. Franco's low-budget films, though often exceptionally confusing, have achieved a patina of the personal through the passage of time and their insistent swirls of psychosexual incoherence. Or we might study American hardcore by looking at single videos, like Gregory Dark's *New Wave Hookers* (1985), or entire *oeuvres*, like that of Michael Ninn. Indeed, as a subculture, the adult industry seems to value Ninn movies like *Latex* (1995) over the "prestige" hardcore of the much higher-profile Blake.

These lists could go on indefinitely. Though it is helpful to compile such lists in untraditional contexts where high-profile institutions have yet to clarify the kinds of directors and movies that count as high culture, we needn't enumerate every auteur and "masterpiece." Nor do we need to perform formalist inquiries, surveying cult cinema for traditional art-film techniques (like disinterested stylization, deep focus, the long take, the tracking shot, and slow pacing) or relevant cult mutations of these accepted techniques. Cult-art movies clearly exist, as certified by the fact that movies in so many low forms – including the Italo-Spanish spaghetti western, the Japanese pink, the Italian giallo, the British Hammer film, the American torture-porn movie, and the Hong Kong martial-arts film, to name just a few – have functioned as high art in the subcultures that have grown around them. When made, circulated, and praised with flair, these cult-art movies have even generated a qualified status outside of those subcultures.

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