ERNEST MATHIJS AND JAMIE SEXTON

CULT CINEMA

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An Introduction

Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton

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"*One has to be in a state of* euphemia, *cultic purity … Any religious ritual is arbitrary unless one is able to see past it to a deeper meaning …. It had to be approached on its own terms …. It was heart-shaking. Glorious. Torches, dizziness, singing. Wolves howling around us and a bull bellowing in the dark. The river ran white. It was like a film in fast motion, the moon waxing and waning, clouds rushing across the sky. Vines grew from the ground so fast they twined up the trees like snakes; seasons passing in the wink of an eye, entire years for all I know … Duality ceases to exist; there is no ego, no "I" … as if the universe expands to fill the boundaries of the self. You have no idea how pallid the workday boundaries of ordinary existence seem, after such an ecstasy. It was like being a baby*"

– Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (1992)

"Keep you doped with religion and sex and TV
And you think you're so clever and classless and free"

– John Lennon, *Working Class Hero* (1970)

Contents

List of Figures ix
Acknowledgments xi

Introduction 1

Part I Receptions and Debates 11

1 Cult Reception Contexts 13
2 The Cult Cinema Marketplace 26
3 Prestige, Awards, and Festivals 36
4 Censorship and Criticism 46
5 Fandom and Subculture 57
6 The Cult Auteur 67
7 Cult Stardom 76
8 Camp and Paracinema 86
9 Transgression and Freakery 97
10 Gender and Sexuality 108
11 Transnationalism and Orientalism 120
12 Religion and Utopia 131

Part II Themes and Genres 143

13 Exploitation and B Movies 145
14 Underground and Avant-garde Cinema 155
15 Cult Cinema and Drugs 164
16 Cult Cinema and Music 172
17 Classical Hollywood Cults 184
18 Cult Horror Cinema 194
19 Cult Science Fiction Cinema 205
20 Cult Blockbusters 214
21 Intertextuality and Irony 224
22 Meta-cult 234

Filmography 243
References 253
Credits and Sources 274
Index 277

List of Figures

1.1 Midnight movie classics from 1970 to 2002: from left to right, *El Topo, The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Donnie Darko*.
1.2 A collage of imagery from *Ginger Snaps* arranged around the "morbid sisters" motive and dialog: "out by sixteen or dead in this scene, together forever".
2.1 *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* owes much of its cult status to peer-to-peer sharing and bootlegging.
3.1 Halle Berry holds her Razzie award for Worst Actress of 2004 in one hand and her Oscar award in the other at the 25th Annual Razzie Awards, a spoof of the Oscars, on February 26, 2005, in Los Angeles. Berry won for *Catwoman*.
3.2 The Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film, a festival with a communal atmosphere that mixes art and exploitation. Clockwise from top left, the posters for 1983, 2010, 2005, and 1993.
4.1 Several horror films that showcased the rapid advancement and excessive use of special effects offended moral crusaders and policymakers, and became known as "video nasties." Clockwise from top left: *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Evil Dead*, and *The Beyond*.
5.1 The fifth annual Lebowskifest.
7.1 Rose Hobart from *East of Borneo*, which was recontextualized in Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart*.
7.2 Vincent Price hams it up as he pretends to undergo the impact of psychedelic drugs in *The Tingler*.
8.1 Through the cult and camp following for *The Wizard of Oz*, the Wicked Witch of the West (Margaret Hamilton), Dorothy (Judy Garland), and Glinda, the Good Witch of the North (Billie Burke) have become identity affirmers for fans.
9.1 The exchange of bodily fluids: licking in *Emmanuelle*, *The Brood*, and *Showgirls*.
9.2 Divine and Edith Massey (as "The Egg Lady") in *Pink Flamingos*: challenging attitudes towards size?
10.1 In *Fame*, Ralph (Barry Miller) and Doris (Maureen Teefy) perform with the audience of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.
11.1 Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*, with nunchakos, at the center of enduring intercultural and cross-ethnic representation.
13.1 *Reefer Madness*, a classical exploitation film.
13.2 Pam Grier as the sexually assertive protagonist of blaxploitation film *Foxy Brown*.
14.1 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was described as "the cult *par excellence*" by critic Harry Allan Potamkin.
14.2 Joe Dallesandro became a cult figure primarily through his appearances in Paul Morrissey's films made under the aegis of Andy Warhol.
15.1 Still from the "Stargate" sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which became known as a "psychedelic" sequence.
16.1 A still from *The Sound of Music*, and a DVD cover of *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, the image and wording of which clearly draws on *The Sound of Music*, which famously includes the sung words "The hills are alive with the sound of music".

17.1 Championing family and community values over capital gain: the yuletide cult of *It's a Wonderful Life*.
19.1 The "hyperdetailed" world of *Blade Runner*.
20.1 Fans of *The Lord of the Rings* dressed up to attend the premiere of the Firefly fanseries at the Norwescon 33 convention in April 2010.
22.1 A piece of Criterion fan art: an imaginary cover for Russ Meyer's *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*
22.2 Cover of *Primitive London* DVD, part of the BFI Flipside DVD and Blu-ray collection.

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Introduction

Cult cinema is a term that is often met with some confusion. One of the problems of responding to the puzzled enquirer who asks "what exactly *is* a cult film?" is that the phrase has been adopted and employed in a variety of ways in its relatively brief lifespan. This book is an attempt to provide an overview of the predominant means by which cult cinema has functioned and been understood in all of its complexity, without simplistically contending that its instability is evidence of its redundancy as a valid concept. Such dismissals can only be accepted if one believes that words and terms can always be reduced to short, definitive explanations. Many words, however, have unstable meanings, often because their connotations fluctuate throughout time and also because they are used in different ways across varied contexts. David Lee has argued that "meaning is not an inherent property of words but is strongly influenced by contexts of use" (1992: 16), stressing the heterogeneous and complex nature of words.

To begin with, there is the range of meanings associated with the word "cult" proper. Generally speaking, there are two frameworks through which the word "cult" is approached, a sociological one and a religious one. The religious understanding refers to "cult" as the ancient or original procedures of practice that are externally present in the observation of a belief. These procedures of practice represent the care (from the Latin *cultus*) given to exercising a belief. The emphasis of these procedures lies on rituals, routines, and on material elements of the belief (idols, temples, shrines, attire).

The sociological understanding of the term "cult" also deals with religion, but it approaches it more as a degree of institutionalization. According to Ernst Troeltsch's (1931) typology of religious beliefs (which concentrates on Christian religion only) a cult is a form of religious behavior that is different from a church or a sect. Whereas a church claims its belief to have absolute truth and is geared towards the elimination of competitive beliefs, a cult is less concerned with universality of belief. Cults are also far less professional and bureaucratic in their organization than churches (with only a very small number of full-time salaried clergy), and they are not as closely allied with state-powers as churches usually are. Troeltsch also notes that like sects, cults promote a purity of belief. But unlike sects they do not usually advocate a return to purity. Instead, they embrace a new purity (this is why they are often called NRM: New Religious Movements), which makes their type of belief more open to esotericism and prone to mysticism. Cults are also different from sects in that they originate much more organically, whereas sects are typically break-offs from churches.

Troeltsch's typology was further refined by Howard P. Becker (1932) and Colin Campbell (1977), who emphasize that cults are usually small in size, that the observance of belief is of a private nature, and that their difference from churches means they are often portrayed as deviant – in opposition to mainstream culture. Cowan and Bromley (2008: 10–11) specify this last point by arguing that cults, like many religious beliefs, operate with a concept of 'unseen order' which acts as an incentive for the "harmonious adjustment" of behavior to a greater good. The unseen order motivates explanatory narratives that interpret its relationship to the everyday world (myths), and it acts as a sort

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of compass for prescribed behaviors (rituals). For Cowan and Bromley a main difference between cults and established religious groups lies in the fact that culturally "their myths, beliefs, rituals, and practices . . . differ significantly from those of the dominant culture" (2008: 11).

Although cults have always carried a pejorative connotation, an organized resistance against cults has arisen in recent decades, especially since the second half of the 1960s (Cowan 2003; Beckford 2003: 30). Christian counter-cult movements have tended to regard all cults as deviations from orthodoxy, and therefore as heretical. Secular counter-cult movements too have increasingly opposed cults because of the perception that high-profile controversies (such as the Manson Family, Jonestown's People's Temple, the Solar Temple, or Heaven's Gate,) but also more moderate movements (such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation, of which the Beatles were famed followers) have created cults using methods of conversion such as "brain washing" and "mind control," and that cult members are essentially slaves to charismatic leadership ("gurus"). For example, in "Why the Cults Are Coming", Marvin Harris (1981) argues that one reason for increased cultism is as a response to perceptions that society is too alienated in its post-industrial age. For Harris, this response is ineffective because cultism too runs the danger of alienation, of seeking solutions to spiritual crises through worldly means – economic and political. This is worth noting because of the immediate context it provides for the increase in use of the term with regard to cinema that occurred around the same time.

The phrase "cult cinema" – which has brought the connotations of the existing word "cult" to bear on the world of film culture – is a particularly knotty term, which renders it difficult to pin down in any definitive manner. It is subject to differing applications and battles over its meanings (as when disputes arise over which particular titles are cult films). Despite its contested nature, it is not totally elastic: its use has been influenced by historical and other contextual developments, so that when one looks at the ways in which the word functions within various contexts (i.e. in journalistic articles, in academic papers, on a variety of internet discussion platforms), there are a number of recurring themes which tend to be associated with it.

This book provides an overview of a range of topics which we believe are important to cult cinema. Within each of the chapters we attempt to describe the concept or category in question and to outline ways in which it has been important to cult cinema, to provide information on historical and/or theoretical features which centrally inform such categories, while also making reference to films where necessary to illustrate particular points. In this way, we hope to provide a thorough overview of cult cinema from a number of different perspectives, which we feel has the benefit of pointing to the diverse ways it has functioned within film culture. While we are aware of the contested nature of cult cinema, we nevertheless offer our own interpretation in the light of previous research. We also think that an introductory book of this nature should reflect the diversity of interpretations and designations involved in the field of cult cinema, and in this sense the book can be considered as following a "constructivist" approach to cult media (though of course we only focus on cinema) outlined by Philippe Le Guern, who posed the question: "Is it, in the end, the usage of the concept of cult, its mobilization, and its varying interpretations by audiences that should be examined, independently of the question of whether cult corresponds to an objective reality and a proven body of work?" (2004: 4) We certainly think that the usage, interpretations and values attached to cult are particularly important; yet while we do not think that any film is immanently cult, we do think that the ways in which the concept has been utilized in different contexts and developed historically has nevertheless led to a body of texts that are frequently referred to as cult films, and this is reflected in films that are repeatedly mentioned throughout the text. We have, however, also attempted to present a wide range of films here in order to point towards the large, and varied, body of work that has been termed cult. The large number of films mentioned and discussed in the book precludes us from being able to explain in what sense *every* film is to be considered cult, though we do frequently do so. If an explanation is lacking, we should stress that it has been discussed and/or listed as a cult film within print or online.

We should also mention our use of another concept that is difficult to pin down, and which is often used as a yardstick against which cult cinema is measured,

namely the concept of the mainstream. The mainstream is referred to a number of times within this book and we would like to make it clear that we also use this term in a similarly constructivist manner as we use cult: it acts as an umbrella term which refers to a number of values, most often denoting the "norms" of film production, textuality, and consumption. However, what counts as the mainstream (and what counts as the norm) may differ according to context. For Jancovich *et al.* (2003a) the mainstream tends to be a rather fuzzily defined imaginary concept among a number of different "taste cultures," yet despite such imprecision it still functions as a crucial concept among fans who use it to define themselves against more "normal" or "average" film viewers (2003a: 1–2).

The History of Studying Cult Cinema

Considering our claim that cult cinema has been influenced by its historical and other contextual developments, we will provide a brief overview of the historical emergence of cult cinema as a subject, particularly within an academic context. Hitherto there has not been a great deal written on how cult has emerged and developed historically within film culture, though some works have contributed to this field. These would include the contextual introduction sections in Mathijs and Mendik's collection *The Cult Film Reader* (2008a) as well as Greg Taylor's history of "cultism" within American film criticism, *Artists in the Audience* (1999). Other historical work can be found in occasional articles or as fragments of larger works, which include Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1991), Jancovich (2002), Smith (2006), Sexton (2011), and Stevenson (2003e).

While the use of the word "cult" within film culture stretches back much further, it was probably in the 1970s that the term "cult film" or "cult cinema" began to be used (at least relatively frequently), and it tended to refer to films that gained repeat audiences and who would often indulge in behaviors considered "ritualistic," hence the adoption of the religious metaphor. Thus, in addition to the ritual of continually returning to "worship" a particular text, other rituals such as repeating the lines of the films (as was the case with *Casablanca*) or dressing up and talking back at the screen (as was the case with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) were observed as evidence of cult viewing practices. The 1980s saw the rise of academic studies of cult cinema, with most attention being paid to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (see, for example, Austin 1981a; Siegel 1980), but also including Umberto Eco's (1986, first published in 1985) canonical study of *Casablanca* as a cult movie. While the first two articles are largely sociological in nature, primarily focusing on audience responses as cult, Eco's article was an attempt to map out the textual nature of the cult film (albeit through a single example), noting that a cult film is particularly rich in *intertextual* detail; that it is an example of "living textuality," consisting of a large assemblage of characters and situations which draw upon archetypal characters and situations from other films. While he states that all movies do this to an extent, he claims that *Casablanca* does so excessively, so that it is not "one movie. It is *movies*." (1986: 208). He ended by claiming that this process of excessive quotation, which he did not believe was a deliberate strategy of the film's creators, was more recently becoming a self-conscious component of film production and that we were entering a "Cult Culture" (1986: 210). Several chapters in this book explore the importance of Eco's ideas: Chapter 17 discusses intertextuality in relation to classical Hollywood cults; Chapter 21 explores the importance of intertextuality more broadly, particularly through the strategies of parody and irony. Chapter 22 looks at the importance of "meta-cult," which Eco argued was culture that self-consciously draws on cult (1986: 210).

As academic studies of cult cinema grew Eco's arguments became questioned. J.P. Telotte, for example, claimed that Eco overstated what he described as the "imperfections" of *Casablanca*, thus "trivializing what the public perceives to be a classic of the American screen" (1991b: 44). Whereas Eco viewed it as a kind of incoherent patchwork, Telotte stressed how the film managed to unify all of its various, disparate elements. Barry Keith Grant, meanwhile, questioned Eco's stress upon the cult film as a "collagelike assembly of interchangeable parts" as he stressed that this was a general characteristic of *all* classical Hollywood genre films (1991: 125). Both of these articles appeared in Telotte's 1991 collection on cult cinema, which was the first academic book entirely devoted to the cult

film phenomenon. This collection was also important for broadening academic cult studies: while the two films that had up to this point gained most coverage as cult films – *Casablanca* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – featured prominently, a large range of additional titles were also included. These films were approached from a wide variety of frameworks, though among these different perspectives there was an assertion that the cult film came in two notable guises: the "classical cult" film and the "midnight movie." The former were films produced within the classical Hollywood system between, approximately, 1917 and 1960 (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985) and which had endured through being repeatedly viewed by particular audiences at repertory screenings or through frequent television appearances. Issues explored in relation to the classical cult film in this volume include nostalgia, the role of the cult star, and the function of camp, topics discussed respectively in Chapter 7, Chapter 8 and Chapter 17. The midnight movie phenomenon (discussed in Chapter 1) – which had already by this point led to two books on the subject (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991 [1983]; Samuels 1983) – was at this stage perhaps the most noted manner by which films were designated as cult, and was where *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* gained its cult reputation. Scholars in this section discussed issues such as transgression (covered in Chapter 9), performance (covered in Chapters 7 and 10), nostalgia (Chapter 17), as well as distribution/exhibition trends (Chapter 1). And yet, while midnight screenings still occur, this edited collection was published when their heyday was passing. In Gregory A. Waller's empirical survey of midnight movie screenings in Kentucky between 1980 and 1985, he notes the "shrinking market" for midnight movies and claims that one of the reasons for this is because "many once-popular midnight movies – and movies that might have become successful at midnight – became available on videocassette" (1991: 177).

The importance of the videocassette, and home viewing more generally, was only briefly mentioned in Telotte's edited collection, but it would soon become a central focus of academic studies of cult cinema. The idea of repetition – of viewing films again and again – became much easier when films were accessible on videotape. As Anne Jerslev noted, videotape also enabled viewers to be able to have more mastery over films through functions such as fast-forward, rewind and freeze-framing (1992: 194). Videocassettes had a huge impact on film culture generally, and inevitably affected the processes associated with cult cinema. The domestic arena now became an important site in the construction of cult films: new "sleeper" patterns could be formed, for example, when films which flopped or disappointed at the box office found a new life on videocassette. Or, as was the case of the "video nasties" in the United Kingdom (see Chapter 4), new forms of censorship could lead to the formation of particular subcultures based around a corpus of videotapes. Video companies could also use "cult film" as a marketing label, releasing films that already had a cult reputation (or fitted vaguely into a cult-like genre such as exploitation) in order to sell films.

Novel viewing conditions and the expansion of cult discourses into marketing would feed into new approaches to cult cinema within academia. In 2000, Mendik and Harper edited another book-length collection on cult cinema, in which a variety of approaches to the cult text were evident, including theoretical analyses of films which had already established a cult reputation, the study of "transnational cult" films, cult stars and video nasties. Perhaps the best-known (and notorious) chapter in this collection was I.Q. Hunter's piece on *Showgirls*, much of which explored his own liking of the film and the politics of taste. The interrogation of cult in relation to taste – why people like particular works and for what reasons, and how these relate to particular social conditions – became particularly notable in the 2000s, with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu the most influential figure being drawn upon to analyze such issues. Bourdieu had already been drawn upon by Jeffrey Sconce in his influential 1995 article which investigated enthusiasts of a variety of exploitation films, a mode of ironic connoisseurship he termed "paracinema" (see Chapter 8). While Sconce's article did not discuss cult film as such, it certainly made an impact on subsequent studies of cult cinema, and paracinema tends to be considered a subsection of cult cinema. Work by Hawkins (2000), Hills (2002a), and Jancovich (2002) all extended research into areas of cultist taste (and other cult media in the case of Hills), and this was

also evident in some of the chapters within another collection on cult cinema by Jancovich *et al.* (2003b). The growth in the study of taste and cult was undoubtedly linked to the rise in academic studies of fans (see Chapter 5), a research area that has often overlapped with cult studies (Hills' aforementioned cited work was a study of fan cultures) and which has also been influenced by Bourdieu. Another research area influenced by Bourdieu which also overlaps with cult studies is the study of subcultures, particularly those subcultures identified through intensive forms of media consumption.

While the mass consumption of video technology marked an important stage in the domestication of cult cinema, the increasing digitization of media technologies has arguably led to a new stage in such domestic trends. In particular, the increasing embedding of the internet into people's lives and the success of DVDs have led to new patterns being observed within cult studies. DVD, which usurped VHS as the dominant media upon which films were domestically consumed in the early 2000s, actually expanded the types of material available to view at home. As the discs were cheap to manufacture an increasing body of film material began to be released, with small companies emerging to cater towards more "niche" tastes. This was undoubtedly aided by the growth of the internet which in the 2000s was being used by an increasing number of people. This had a number of impacts for cult cinema, relating to areas including e-commerce, sites of consumption, as well as ways in which cultists could share information and communicate with other cultists. E-commerce meant that it was now easier to obtain a wide range of films; this would have been particularly important for those who lived outside of the metropolitan areas in which "specialist" films were more likely to be accessed (such as repertory cinemas and specialist outlets selling more exclusive videos). This is not to claim that cult films are *always* more obscure, marginal films (see Chapters 5, 17 and 20 for discussions of more "mainstream" cult films), but such fare does constitute a significant corpus within traditional canons of cult cinema. The virtual networks created by internet connectivity not only enabled people to search out and obtain films and film-related goods from a range of actual locations, it also created a wealth of accessible information on films so that people could find out about new films, seek out production details about particular films, interpretations of films, or details about stars and actors, for example. The proliferation of information, whether through databases such as the *Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*, fan sites, online journals, blogs, or wikis, to name only a few notable examples, is important because of the ways in which cultists often want to know more about particular films. This eagerness to know more, or to "master" a film, manifests itself not merely through repeat viewings, but also through gaining knowledge of films in other ways, so that films become much more than just specific viewing encounters and feed into the cultist's broader cultural life in a variety of ways.

The significance of online culture for cult cinema first made itself present within Mendik and Harper's and Jancovich *et al.*'s edited collections but only as a marginal presence, most notably in Julian Hoxter's (2000) analysis of internet fan sites on *The Exorcist* in the former, and Harmony Wu's (2003) consideration of online cult material in relation to Peter Jackson in the latter. Yet a number of articles have been appearing over the past few years which consider the importance of network culture for cult cinema either directly or indirectly, including Brooker (2002), Jenkins (2006), and Telotte (2001). We discuss digital issues occasionally throughout this book, most notably in Chapters 4 and 5, where we point to some trends within cult fandom that have been sparked by new technologies and their uses, and in Chapter 22 where we consider the emergence of cultist DVD labels. The fact that technological change is increasingly accelerating and being used in novel (and often unsurprising) ways makes it difficult for academic work to keep abreast of such shifts. No doubt when this book is published there will have emerged new trends and a number of more recent articles that we will not have been able to consider. We have done our best, though, to at least indicate some of the debates engendered by technological changes and how these have impacted on the field of cult cinema.

At some point in the oscillation between availability and scarcity the conscious avoidance of easy access becomes an important attitude. Anecdotal evidence from studies of collecting, the long-term reception of the video nasties, and so-called "residual media" suggests transferable technologies impact on the "street

value" of their reputations (Staiger 2005a; Egan 2007; Acland, 2007). Jancovich quotes director/cultist Frank Henenlotter:

> all those obscure films that I would have risked injury and death to see (literally, in some of those theatres) are now available at your local clean video store! It's a little unnerving. I'm wholeheartedly in support of this, but I'm still not used to the fact that those films that I spent my whole life trying to see are now *consumer items* (quoted in Jancovich 2002; our emphasis)

Henenlotter was speaking about the early 1980s, and things have accelerated since. We should, however, remain aware that new technologies do not displace older technologies and therefore render them redundant. Instead, they reconstitute relations between different types of mediated activities, whether watching films, writing about films or talking about films. Thus, public visits to the cinema to watch films may have been overtaken by domestic viewing, but they still remain important, and for some the cinema experience takes on ever greater value in relation to watching cinema on the home screen (whether this be a large, high-definition set or a small laptop screen). And while VHS has "officially" become an obsolete format, its marginal status can create a new set of cultists. Analogous to music fans preferring vinyl over compact discs these cultists trade or swap VHS cassettes, or post older videos or videotaped televised films of movies which are otherwise hard to get as digitized AVI files (on sites such as Cinemageddon and Karagarga). New technologies do not necessarily wipe out old technologies: they can co-exist in interesting ways, feeding into value judgments or new cultural patterns. The circulation of a low-fi quality VHS bootleg is of high significance for the cult surrounding *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (Davis 2008). The relations between old and new technologies, between the public and domestic film viewing site (and between mobile and static platforms), will undoubtedly continue to inform the future trajectory of cult cinema. It may be that cult cinema becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between other forms of cult media, but we do not think that this is certain. In the age of "convergence" the distinctions between different media platforms may have become increasingly intertwined, sometimes murky, but we do believe that despite such overlaps many people do distinguish between cinema (films, movies) and, for example, television. It is for this reason that we think that cult cinema is worthy of an overview as a self-contained subject, albeit one that cannot be isolated from the broader, interconnected media sphere within which it exists.

Definition of Cult Cinema

Numerous attempts have been made to define cult cinema. Many of these approach the topic from a vernacular angle, highlighting elements that cannot be caught in a description and – hence – remain intangible and very subjective. If anything, this means that a definition of cult cinema can only be intersubjective. Many overviews of cult cinema give lists instead of definitions, in the hope that the aggregate of illustrations of how individual films are cult leads to an explanation of why they are cults.

If we look beyond lists, definitions of cult cinema come in four contexts: sociological studies, reception studies, textual interpretations, and aesthetic analyses. Sociological studies assume that a cult film is a film with an intense following, not unlike religious cults. It is a contested parallel, which we will explore further in Chapter 12. However, if cult cinema is seen as a form of cultism in which religiosity has been replaced by an intense mode of consumption, the kind Douglas Cowan and David Bromley have called "audience cults" (2008: 89–90), it offers valuable insights into how exactly cult followings develop and what kind of cultural status they take on. Similarly, cult film can be approached as a form of deviant subculture. The most strident example of the sociological approach is presented by Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich (1992). They define a cult film as one whose audience community intensely celebrates "themes that (1) place typical people into atypical situations, (2) allow for narcissistic and empathic audience identification with subversive characters, (3) question traditional authority structures, (4) reflect societal strains, and (5) offer interpretable and paradoxical resolutions to these social strains" (Kinkade and Katovich 1992: 194). This definition describes a double bind: these components are features of the films themselves as well as characteristics

of what audiences experience. For Kinkade and Katovich, a contradictory attitude is essential. Cult audiences rebel against the mainstream and canon of cinema and hold that "nothing is sacred"; at the same time they present their own fandom as "sacred."

Reception studies investigate the trajectories through which films develop cult followings as part of their passage through markets. Such studies often offer theoretical outlines of cult films' place in culture, mostly through illustrations and case studies. For Hills (2002a) and Staiger (2005a), cults are a very visible form of fandom. For Jeffrey Sconce (1995, 2007) and Mark Jancovich (2002), cult receptions are to be understood as struggles for cultural positions, rooted in battles over taste hierarchies. Reception approaches also concentrate on the conditions under which cult followings are developed and maintained (Waller 1991; Hawkins 2000; Klinger 1994). In this view, cult films are films whose celebration or appropriation by cultists is the accidental consequence of their fractured reception trajectories. Often failures upon their initial release, and frequently encountering obstacles in their search for audiences, they develop committed followings during repeat screenings (often at fringe times) and they go on to enjoy long lasting fandom. For Danny Peary (1981: xiii), cult receptions are minority receptions, which means that they concern methods of distribution and consumption outside the mainstream. Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 4–8) isolate active fandom, a sense of community, the liveness of the viewing experience, commitment and endurance, a sense of rebellion, a paracinematic desire for the deconstruction of canons, persistent legends of distribution, specialist or niche events, and a long-term presence, as characteristics of cult receptions. We will examine these concepts more closely in the first section of this book.

The textual approach follows closely on the reception studies approach. While the stress in this approach is on offering a definition based on the analysis of the films, there is a strong acknowledgment of the role of viewers. A central point of attention in these studies is the complexity of communication between text and viewer. A key component of that communication is the use of what is often called "allusions" or "inferences" (by Carroll 1998 and Bordwell 1989 respectively). These are salient moments or small clues within a film that are picked up by savvy viewers who relish their expertise in recognizing these "cues." Other central points in the textual interpretation approach are "nostalgia," "irony," and "camp." These concepts refer to hyperbolic uses of modes of representation, picked up by viewers eager to appropriate these in their enjoyment and celebration of the films.

There are a few attempts to define cult film from a uniquely aesthetic angle, as films whose reception is secondary to understanding them. Most of these are valuable because they emphasize issues of "exoticism," "rarity," "genre," "trangression," and "quality" (Grant 1991; Cox and Jones 1990, 1993). Often, these studies concentrate on specialized subgenres and formats (such as the giallo, anime, martial arts, vampire movies, sleaze movies). These studies are essential in outlining the stylistic components that trigger enthusiasm, aberrant reactions, or repeat-viewing devotion. We will explore many of these instances in the second section of our book.

At their narrowest, aesthetic approaches seek to understand cult films as so unique that they defy interpretation, and operate purely on an affective and visceral level (hyperbolic camp, pornography, extreme horror, weepies, schmaltz, or maudlin melodramas). These films are defined through their representational and stylistic excess, which frequently motivates their subsequent critical interpretation. Such definitions are most common in fanzines and specialist blogs, but echoes of this sentiment are traceable in academic studies as well: for instance, Jancovich *et al.* have defined cult via a "multitude of sins" (Jancovich *et al.* 2003a: 1), while Welch Everman refers to it as something "kind of offbeat, kind of weird, kind of strange" (Everman 1993: 1). Harper and Mendik have compared its intensity and physical impact to an "orgasm" (Mendik and Harper 2000a: 7), while for Allan Havis (2008: 2), the very nerve of cult film is related to "personal frisson," which he explains in the form of a recurring dream. Umberto Eco has perhaps come closest to a description of this elusive factor. He has explained the cult cinema experience as having an "archetypical appeal" that provokes a "sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a déja vu that everybody yearns to see again"' (Eco 1986: 200). Even though Eco is quick to separate the term archetype from any "mythic connotation" (1986: 200), and

even though he shies away from invoking any reference to pontifical language, or to Carl-Gustav Jung's collective unconscious, his reference to a desire to relive some "magical moment" as a group is central to his argument.

Based on these previous attempts, and with the historical shifts in usage of the term in mind, any updated definition of cult cinema is both an amalgam of what has been said before and a departure from it. In our view, *cult cinema is a kind of cinema identified by remarkably unusual audience receptions that stress the phenomenal component of the viewing experience, that upset traditional viewing strategies, that are situated at the margin of the mainstream, and that display reception tactics that have become a synonym for an attitude of minority resistance and niche celebration within mass culture. In turn, filmmakers have used audiences' management of their "cult attitude" to consciously design films to include transgressive, exotic, offensive, nostalgic or highly intertextual narratives and styles. Although such opportunistic programming of cultism has created the impression that the term cult is now merely a marketing ploy, there continue to be receptions – especially in relation to the use of new technologies alongside traditional theatrical exhibition – that generate unexpected audience engagements which reconfigure the very notion of viewership.*

Structure of the Book

This book is structured into two main parts, each of which include a number of chapters on subjects that we feel are of particular importance to the study of cult cinema. The first part is "Receptions and Debates." Receptions are particularly important within the field of cult cinema, as the term emerged as a phenomenon that described particular reception patterns as opposed to specific textual features. In Chapter 1 we outline the important reception contexts which have been historically intertwined with cult status and move on to look at more specific instances of reception that can feed into cultism. In Chapter 2 we look at the importance of the marketplace in relation to cult cinema, an area that has been neglected in many studies of cult because of the way in which cult cinema has often been perceived as antipathetic to commercial strategies (a view which we do not share). Chapters 3 and 4 interrogate the institutions and mechanisms of prestige and evaluation that govern films' immediate reception into public culture. Among the elements we discuss here are awards, festivals, conventions, censorship, and criticism. In Chapter 5 we focus on fandom and subcultures, both of which are interlinked with the study of cult cinema in important ways and which have increasingly gained academic attention in the recent past. Chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on two concepts that have attracted very specific forms of fandom, namely auteurs and stars. In Chapter 8 we discuss camp and paracinema: viewing strategies that have been labeled cultist because they are seen to diverge from normative viewing positions in order to create alternative evaluative criteria. The importance of differing from cultural norms has been a key theme running through debates on cult cinema and in the final three chapters we explore the idea of difference further. Chapter 9 analyses the concepts of transgression and freakery, Chapter 10 deals with issues of gender and sexuality, and Chapter 11 looks at issues of exoticism and transnationalism. In the final chapter in this part, Chapter 12, we look at how the historical bond between the concepts of cult and religion can inform modes of appreciation.

Part II of the book, "Genres and Themes," analyzes modes that have been prominent within discussions of cult cinema. We therefore identify the ways in which particular genres have been linked to cult cinema through exploring relevant historical and conceptual issues. In our discussion, we will first pay attention to motives, tropes, traditions, and genres that have been located outside of, and regarded as antithetical to, mainstream cinema, such as exploitation films and B-movies (Chapter 13), underground and avant-garde cinema (Chapter 14), drugs (Chapter 15) and forms of music such as rock, punk, or glamrock (Chapter 16). We will next discuss modes of cultism within genres and themes from films that use formulas and motives more firmly entrenched in traditions close to, or within, the mainstream. Chapter 17 looks at Hollywood cinema, Chapter 18 at the horror film, Chapter 19 at science fiction, and Chapter 20 at blockbusters. In each case, we will identify which films within these traditions are more likely to receive cult reputations, and through which means. Our last two chapters will focus on the notions of intertextuality (Chapter 21) and meta-cult (Chapter 22), and interrogate the

increasing self-awareness and use of modes affiliated with cultism within discourses in the critical reception, production and marketing of cinema, a process that has impacted greatly on how films are identified as cult today.

The large number of chapters in the book reflects the many diverse threads that feed into the overall topic. Inevitably, there are overlaps between some sections. No one category is ever entirely isolated from others. The parts and the chapters are constructed to provide a structure which can be used by readers to navigate their way through this book. Within chapters, where there are overlaps with other chapters, we note this by referring to other chapters which provide further detail on the particular material under discussion. We hope the book thus allows readers to explore particular aspects of cult cinema and to map their own journey through this broad field.

As this book is primarily an overview of cult cinema studies up until this point (even though we would like to think of it as also extending current studies), it reflects some of the "blind spots" within such research. Perhaps the most important one that we are aware of is the very American-centric nature of cult cinema studies up until this point. That is, the focus on cult receptions has tended to focus on reception within the United States. It is true that there has been research on cult reception outside of the United States (primarily, but not limited to, the United Kingdom), but this is comparatively marginal. Following from this, the majority of films which get listed as cult films and discussed as such are also from the United States. There are certainly exceptions, and there are particular geographical areas that have become prime sites of cult production (notably Japan and Hong Kong, discussed in Chapter 11), but their films still tend to gain their cult reputations at least partly in the United States. While we have attempted to provide a range of cult films from different countries, we are bound by the state of research in the field up until now (although the growth of the internet has started to complicate, if not entirely eradicate, such trends). We hope that more research charting cult reputations in a greater diversity of contexts, such as Latin American cult cinema or Eurocults, will increase over the forthcoming years. Likewise, we anticipate that more research will be conducted into "female cults" (which we briefly touch upon in Chapters 6 and 10) and other areas that have hitherto fallen beneath the radar of cult cinema studies. This, we feel, demonstrates that there is a great deal of work still to be done within cult cinema studies, which signals a healthy and productive future for the subject.

Part I

Receptions and Debates

1

Cult Reception Contexts

We have proposed in our introduction that cult cinema is primordially known through its reception. In this chapter we provide a conceptual view of various elements that inform cult reception contexts. In order to illustrate how cult receptions differ from mainstream or normalized trajectories our attention first goes to the paradigmatic historical exemplar of cult cinema, namely the midnight movie. Next, we will outline the significance of a phenomenological approach to cult film reception. Subsequently, we will theorize the kind of experience cult receptions offer, and the value it generates.

Midnight Movies

Traditionally, the midnight movie is associated with New York. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum (1991: 310) observed that, on a worldwide scale, "New York is Palookaville when it comes to midnight movies," and there were vibrant late night scenes across North America and Europe.[1] Yet the New York scene is the only one thoroughly investigated and therefore we will use it as our key example.

Most scholars agree New York's midnight movie scene started when, in the late 1960s, underground and avant-garde theaters, with established clienteles and institutional affiliations, started programming risqué and exploitative materials. Mark Betz (2003) argues this shift was encouraged when "kinky" foreign art films and American underground films came together, near the end of the 1960s, in an exploitation/art circuit that emphasized the countercultural potential of cinema. Parker Tyler (1969) suggests a cross-fertilization between filmmakers who started to include more sex and violence in their films, and the demands of theaters catering to more permissive taste patterns, created a momentum in which practitioners and patrons encouraged each other to go ever further (Tyler 1969). The film usually credited with initiating the transition is the infamous *Flaming Creatures*, with its Dionysian theme and brutal rape-orgy. It was seized at several screenings and stunned audiences at others (for more on this film, see Chapters 3 and 14). Soon, other films with provocative aesthetic attitudes, and shocking or politically radical imagery drew similar receptions: *Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, *Blow Job*, *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, and *Chafed Elbows*, which Tyler describes as "the offbeat of the offbeat." It had a "marathon run at a small East Village theatre" (Tyler 1969: 53). Probably the most cultist trajectory was that of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* and *Invocation of My Demon Brother*, both of which ran for long periods of time at late night slots in theaters East of Greenwich Village (Betz 2003; Tyler 1969). A constant reference in the receptions of these films was that of physical and mental liberation from repression – a function similar to that of ancient rituals.

At the beginning of the 1970s a string of New York theaters started midnight programming. The underground repertory was complemented with exploitation films with kaleidoscopic and apocalyptic motives, revivals of previously banned films, new and explicit horror, films pushing the boundaries of sexual permissiveness, and exotic and surreal foreign films (Figure 1.1). The acceleration was a sign of the

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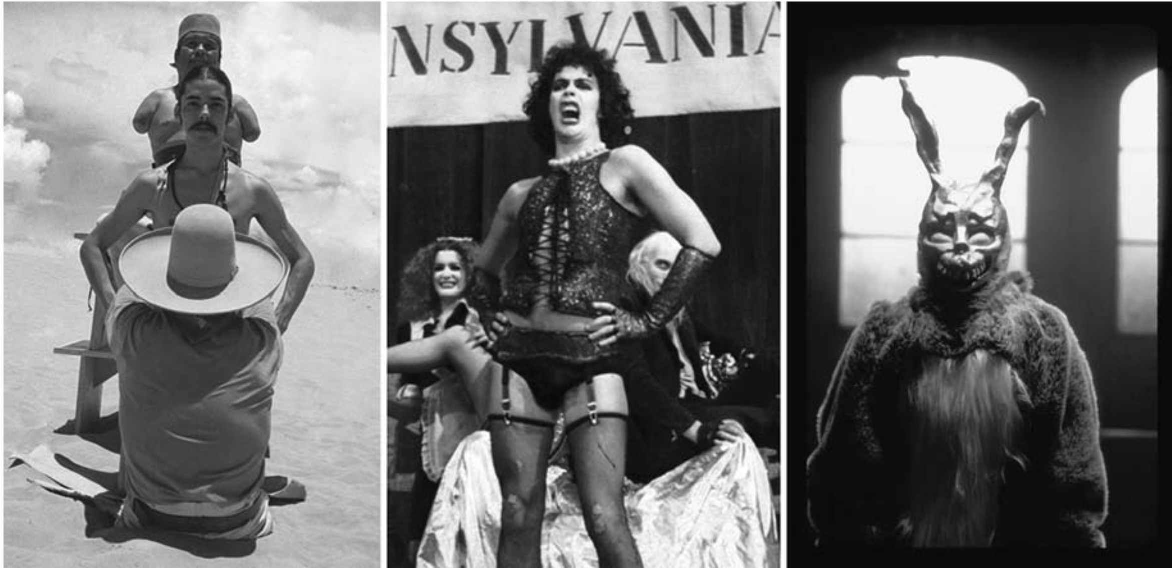

Figure 1.1 Midnight movie classics from 1970 to 2002: from left to right, *El Topo, The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Donnie Darko*.

vibrancy of the counterculture, and of its widening into radical "outsider" films – the weirder the better. Topping them all was the visceral and symbolically heavy Mexican western-on-acid *El Topo*. Virtually unadvertised, *El Topo* sold out the Elgin theater for half a year. After a while, its screenings were described as a "midnight mass" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 94). With the success of *El Topo*, the midnight movie really took off. Films as diverse as George Romero's zombie film and civil rights-metaphor *Night of the Living Dead*, Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* (a mystical adaptation of René Daumal's *Mount Analogue* to which Jodorowsky improvised a clever ending), and the mind-boggling surrealism of *Viva la muerte* attracted repeat audiences looking for "underground" thrills, and gusts of revelations – often aided by illegal substances. With these films, the midnight movie added an anti-establishment stance to its radical aesthetics; increasingly graphic depictions of sex and violence and explorations of immorality correlated with the audience's anxieties about the "violence engulfing the United States" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 99, 112). Even if this feeling that the midnight movie exemplified a revolutionary attitude was more an impression than a fact, for midnight movie viewers the era's general unrest seemed to synchronize with what they experienced on screen – as if it predicted "the end of the world as we know it."

As the 1970s progressed, the countercultural movement lost momentum. Midnight movies became ever more outrageous, but as their popularity widened across campuses, generic and aesthetic radicalism replaced ideological commentary. Art house and B-movie distributors such as Janus films and New Line Cinema became engaged in the midnight movie. Lesbian vampire movies, porn chic, blaxploitation movies, and foreign philosophical allegories such as *Antonio das Mortes*, *The Saragosa Manuscript*, or *WR: Mysteries of an Organism*, replaced the original batch of films. The most notorious among these films was *Pink Flamingos*, which tested viewers' threshold for revulsion – exactly the reason for its successful reception.

By the late 1970s, the midnight movie had become a staple of alternative cinema exhibition, the urban and college town equivalent of the drive-in. It was characterized by a hedonistic and wildly extravert context of rambunctious yet joyous celebrations. Many of the films championed in the circuit were as flamboyant as their audiences, with as figureheads campy rock musicals such as *Tommy*, or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Proudly self-referential, these films were as much performances of cults, as cults themselves. Because of its endless runs *Rocky Horror* became a repertory in its

own right (Weinstock 2007; Austin 1981a). Occasionally, "original" cults would still develop, around enigmatic films such as *Eraserhead*.

In the 1980s, much of the midnight movie attitude moved to VCR viewing, where "pause" and "rewind" functions on the remote control replaced the theatrical repeat viewing experience. What survived were nihilistic or flamboyant post punk movies such as *Heavy Metal*, the hardcore *Café Flesh*, or *Liquid Sky*. By the end of the decade many of the original midnight theaters had closed their doors, and filmmakers joined the burgeoning "independent" scene, or went underground again, with Abel Ferrara (*King of New York*) and Larry Fessenden (*Habit*) as crossover exceptions (Hawkins 2003). Only with large intervals would new midnight movie cults appear. The most prominent ones – *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Donnie Darko* – became the phenomenon's de facto eulogies. In 2001 "everything changed", writes Joan Hawkins:

> The World Trade Center in New York City was destroyed . . . The geography of downtown Manhattan has changed. So has the mood in the USA. And it's not at all clear what new avant-gardes and cult films might rise up to address what seems at this point to be a new era (one in which irony, for example, may not be considered an appropriate response to anything) (2003: 232).

For Hawkins, the cult of the midnight movie, a "moment when we believed that direct intervention in the country's spectacle would do some good," was over (2003: 232).

As befits cult receptions, the midnight movie did not really die. Since the 1990s the demise of the original phenomenon was balanced by three other trends. First, new films found their ways into festivals, which increasingly included midnight showings as part of their programs. Second, midnight premieres also became a feature of blockbuster releases vying for cult status. Third, the midnight movie phenomenon went into meta-mode. *Donnie Darko*, for instance, arguably the most famous midnight movie after 9/11, is also a meta-midnight movie. Its audiences at the New York Pioneer Theater, aware of the legacy of the midnight movie phenomenon, were not only continuing a tradition that had existed for more than thirty years, they also consciously knew they were contributing to the heritage of the phenomenon by keeping it alive, or honoring the tradition by paying lip service to it. A decade after its first midnight run, college campuses, art houses, and festivals still screen *Donnie Darko* at midnight for this reason. Other instances of the meta-mode of the midnight movie include nostalgic revivals and queer celebrations of often overtly mainstream "classics" such as John Hughes's teen comedies (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*), or sword and sorcery fantasy films (*Conan the Barbarian*). Their midnight success relies on the kitsch and camp attitude *Rocky Horror* had cemented as a core characteristic of the cult reception trajectory, and it reclaims some of the irony Hawkins claims it lost by exposing topical political attitudes through cheesy old movies. In its most recent form, this reflexive nostalgia has also included the original midnight movies, with relaunches of *El Topo* joining the never-ending runs of *Rocky Horror* and occasional newcomers, such as *The Room* (Bissell 2010).

In sum, the midnight movie highlights the key characteristics of a cult reception trajectory: films lumped together in a lively and "countercultural" exhibition context by their capacity to commit, through outrageously weird and explicit imagery, subcultural audience collectives, and to elicit performances of fandom and obsessions with the interconnectedness of elusive details intrinsic as well as alien to the films that enables allegorical and political interpretations that position themselves outside the realm of normalcy.

The Difficulty of Researching Cult Cinema

As the exemplar of the midnight movie illustrates, cult reception contexts are extremely heterogeneous. According to Mathijs and Mendik (2008a: 4–10), part of why they are called cult is because these receptions contain multitudes of competing and opposite discourses that stand in contrast of what a "normal" consumption process ought to be like. How does one begin to research such diverse contexts? At the basis of the cult reception context lies a fundamental philosophical question: does the value of a cultural product lie in its features and intentions or in the eye of the

beholder? This question has important implications for the methodology of researching cult cinema.

Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 15–16) distinguish between two schools of thought on this problem, with different implications:

> ontological approaches to cult cinema are usually essentialist: they try to determine what makes "cult cinema" a certain type of movie . . . Phenomenological approaches shift the attention from the text to its appearance in the cultural contexts in which it is produced and received. Such attempts usually see cult cinema as a mode of reception, a way of seeing films (2008b: 15).

In the ontological approach, the reception process is one that affirms the properties of the product. In the phenomenological approach the reception process negotiates these properties in the light of how they make themselves known – as a kind of phenomenon. Mathijs and Mendik refer to the work of Jerome Stolnitz as an effort that tries to solve the deadlock between these two positions. For Stolnitz (1960a, 1960b) any value is less a matter of the properties of the work or the viewer than of the experience generated by the flow of meaning during the process of perception. Stolnitz distinguishes between objectivist, subjectivist, and objective relativist views of experience. Objectivism, like the ontological approach, places the essence of value in the work itself – as if the work carries meaning within itself. This makes perception a process of detection. Subjectivism, on the contrary, identifies value as a faculty of the perceiver – as if the audience places its own meanings upon the work. This makes the work "empty."

Most reception studies of cinema embrace this approach. Janet Staiger (1992), for instance, explains that in order to understand how films work, and how the strategies through which they are given value operate, one has to distinguish between meanings generated through texts, through readers, and through contexts. Throughout, however, one has to accept

> that cultural artifacts are not containers with immanent meanings, that variations among interpretations have historical bases for their differences, and that differences and change are not idiosyncratic but due to social, political, and economic conditions, as well as to constructed identities such as gender, sexual preference, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality. (Staiger 1992: xi)

Staiger argues that the best methodology for stressing contextual factors is to shift the focus of subjectivism from the mind of the spectator to the material conditions (the labor) involved in assigning meaning to a work – she calls this methodology a neo-Marxist approach. According to such an approach, studies of receptions should place emphasis on the use-value, exchange-value, and symbolic value of films (the latter being the value that is not expressed in material terms but in terms of the knowledge, expertise, kudos, and status, but also the dangers for exclusion and isolation any affiliation brings).

There have been several attempts to carve out procedures for this methodology. One attempt, by Barbara Klinger (1997), distinguishes between diachronic and synchronic approaches to film reception. The first stresses the materials that feature in a chain of events over time during a film's reception; the second emphasizes the materials from events that co-occur within the reception. The first method gives breadth, the second depth. Because cult reception trajectories are known to be volatile it is necessary to use both approaches simultaneously. Moreover, cult reception contexts are highly influenced by what Martin Barker (2004) has called unpredictable "ancillary materials": already existing artifacts and discourses that relate to the upcoming release that lead to polemics and legends and that prevent a nice match between expectations and the actual experience. The best example is probably the myth surrounding the troubled production history of *Casablanca*. Another good example is the abrupt way in which *Night of the Living Dead* was introduced to audiences, as part of a matinee double bill, before it became a midnight movie. This means that an essential part of the cult reception context is that it is "fractured." Its smooth running is interrupted or otherwise compromised, and audiences struggle to find an appropriate frame of reference for the newly released film.

Another attempt concentrates on the units of meaning that circulate in receptions. Each reception contains "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" references. Following David Bordwell (1989: 13), intrinsic references can be labeled "cues," elements of the film and its immediate