CULT FILMS AND FILM CULTS: FROM *THE EVIL DEAD* TO *TITANIC*

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

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June 2004

This thesis entitled

CULT FILMS AND FILM CULTS: FROM *THE EVIL DEAD* TO *TITANIC*

BY

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the School of Film

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LATHROP, BENJAMIN A. M.A. June 2004. Film Theory and Criticism

Cult Films and Film Cults: From *The Evil Dead* to *Titanic* (71pp.)

Director of Thesis: Ruth Bradley

This thesis will explore the relationship between a theoretical definition of the specialized audience practice associated with the cult film from Telotte, Kawin and Staiger and the contemporary user-defined genre of the same name. It is my belief that the study of cult films could be greatly clarified by separating cult audience practice from the cult film text itself. By combining a survey of theoretical literature of audience reception and practice and genre theory with internet based primary source material generated by members of contemporary cult fan communities, I hope to construct a set of more distinct and useful definitions of cult films and film cult practices.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee, Ruth Bradley, Adam Knee, and Jenny Nelson, for their assistance and guidance in this project, and I would like to thank my parents, Roger and Cindy Lathrop, and Danielle McCullough for their love and support.

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Introduction

Cult film is an area of film study which simultaneously evokes a powerful sense of distinction while remaining one of the most elusive and slippery of descriptive terms. In order to arrive at a better understanding of the phenomena of cult film, one must first seriously investigate the various uses and historical meanings associated with those words and how those definitions and uses have changed over time. At present, the phrase "cult film" is used to represent two distinct concepts: a text-based genre and a type of specialized audience practice. The term "cult film" places the emphasis on the film text, as if to say that the *film* is what determines "cult". This has supported the contemporary use of the phrase as a generic label for an ill-defined group of strange, exotic, or semi-underground genre films. However, the qualities of these texts which could identify them as this kind of film are very subjectively defined and often inconsistent. Historically, it has been the response and behavior of a film's audience (its *cult*) which has been the deciding factor in the use of the term. The boundaries of this kind of special audience practices are also flexible, but they do have some more tangible evidence. The combination of these two ideas has been the root of much confusion in regards to the development of the perception of cult film. This is due to not only the impermanent and constantly changing meanings of each concept, but also because of the historical relationship between both the ad hoc genre of strange films and fervent or exceptionally personal audience response.

Cult film as a text-based genre came to be through a variety of historical exhibition and marketing practices. The circumstances of these practices have served to

conflate the contemporary "cult" genre, which is predominantly made of films which highlight socially transgressive masculine fantasies and horrific and violent spectacle, with cult-like audience behavior. This mixing of both concepts essentially binds all ideas of cult practice to this particular kind of film, leaving many other films out of consideration. By putting the burden of "cult" on the text, this definition assumes that a film cannot be a cult film and a non-cult film simultaneously. That is to say, a film must be of a certain type, having particular generic qualities as prescribed by contemporary "cult" fan cultures, in order to become the object of cult-like devotion. It also assumes that all films of this "cult-type" will evoke the same kind of exceptionally devoted audience response from "cult fans."

By identifying and distinguishing these two modes of cult film, and discussing the historical and theoretical development of cult along these lines, a better understanding of how the two function independently and in unison can be reached. This will allow for articulation of more useful sub-categories which better describe the many facets of cult film. In order to accomplish this, the following argument will cover the early history of the cult film. This will include the phenomenon of the "midnight movie" from its predecessors in the 1940's and art house beginnings in the 1960's to the ultimate gentrification and technological transformation during the 1980's. The gradual construction of the contemporary cult film genre will be discussed in terms of its relationship to changes in historical exhibition modes and advances in home theater and communication technology, such as home video and the Internet.

The third portion will present an in-depth analysis of the *Evil Dead* film series, in particular the third installment, *The Army of Darkness*. This series is an example of

contemporary texts which effectively combine both aspects of modern cult film. These films began by actively targeting fan cultures of the horror genre, stripping narrative to its bare essentials in order to allow for an abundance of wild and violent stylistic excess and spectacle. With the second film, the concept was developed and refined, elaborating on the role of the main character as a conflicted but ultimately heroic archetype. This transformation was completed to better fit the needs and desires of the film's audience. The fan culture that has developed around these films is incredibly active and fervently devoted, making *The Army of Darkness* a perfect example of a "cult synthesis" film.

The third chapter will conclude with some investigation of cult-like behavior surrounding the blockbuster action melodrama, *Titanic*. This relatively recent text is arguably the antithesis of the cult genre film. However, the use of this film by a very active segment of its audience is undeniably cultish. This example is of particular interest due to the immediate textual differences from the perceived cult genre, the traditionally non-cult-like theatrical release pattern of the film, and the make up of the film's fan audience, which, unlike fans of "cult," is mostly female. As cult film is currently perceived by its self-styled fans as being a kind of masculine counter-cultural aesthetic based on a specific film type, *Titanic* serves as an important example of how an audience can create the meaning they are looking for from any text. Titanic also illustrates how re-evaluating cult film can open new ways of looking at and discussing other films.

As many of the qualities which begin to define cult film and practice deal with notions of gender, performance, cinematic excess and visual spectacle, elements of psychoanalytic theory and gender studies will be touched upon. However, the focus of this study is not to fully explore or debate the concepts. Instead it will survey the ways in

which fans and scholars describe cult films and behavior. Closer examination of the

motives behind a spectator's devotion to a particular film would be more appropriate

work a more capable psychoanalytic theorist. Here the goal is to organize the realm of

cult film within a historical context, so that the basic elements of this curious

phenomenon might be seen in a new light.

Chapter 1.1: History of Cult Practice

One of the main goals in this paper is to clarify the confusing and often plastic definition of cult film. "Cult" is used in a fairly casual manner to describe a loose body of films and cinematic conventions, which are tenuously connected to a perception of texts associated with historical theatrical exhibition trends. The word is also used however to describe forms of audience behavior which are somehow more involved and carry a greater intensity than what is presumed to be the "average" experience of a film. That is to say the term is used for both a "cult film," which is identified according to some generic criteria, and a film which has a "cult" following. To charge head long into this miasma of intra and extra-textual complexity would be a mistake. Instead, by separating some of the more common cinematic devices and trends in fan activity related to the common understanding of the cult film, we will see a clearer picture of the ways that these films function. The most fundamental distinction that must be made in order to achieve a more workable set of terms for dealing with the cult film phenomena is to separate cult audience practice from the perceived cult film genre.

The cult film has historically been understood in terms of its special "cult" audience. This cult spectator is usually defined in terms of how they are different from the mythical "average movie goer". In spite of the potential problems with assuming what "common" behavior is, this kind of opposition does provide a fair starting point for discussing these particular behaviors. The cult audience is presumed to be more active in its experience of a motion picture, and to have a heightened level of commitment for the

film text and/or its stars. Cult audiences are also defined by the kinds of films they seek out, and the places and ways those films were historically shown in.

The behavior that most traditional cult audience activities are predicated upon is the action of repeated viewing of a particular film text. Multiple screenings of a film not only provides the cult spectator with an in-depth knowledge of the film, but it also forms the base for personal ritual. Regardless of what it is about a film text that attracts multiple viewings, those qualities become a constant source of pleasure that the cult spectator regularly seeks out. This regular, ritualized practice creates a bond between viewer and film that opens the door for more active engagement of the text.

An external, and therefore more obvious, method of cultish engagement manifests through various forms of "call and response" with the film text. This kind of exchange between the film and the audience in its most common form is simply repeating favorite lines of dialogue as is often cited in discussions of the "classical cult film" (Card 66, 69, Staiger 49). An extreme but often discussed version of call and response is the fan-created counter dialogue and the theatrical participatory ritual of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) (Staiger 45, Wood 156-158). This instance shows that "call and response" is not limited to verbal exchanges, but can also include costuming, roll-play, other sensory enhancements, such as the use of squirt guns to simulate rain, etc., and a communal bond between participants. The bond that is initiated by repeated viewing is strengthened by this kind of audience interaction with the text during viewing and is then carried on after the screening experience is over.

The use of a film outside of the immediate experience of watching it is perhaps the most definitive cult practice. A basic assumption about "normal" consumption of

motion pictures is that they are brief outlets of escape and entertainment. For the cultist, the film is taken out of the dismissive category of "entertainment" and used for very personal ends. Timothy Corrigan discusses this behavior in terms of "public images" being used as "private space" (Corrigan 26). Corrigan states that the cult audience actively seeks films which are somehow "unusual", but more importantly after having found this public text, it is "then brought home, appropriated by viewers, who make these images privately and personally meaningful," (Corrigan 26).

Corrigan stresses the roll of the spectator in the creation of cult film. It is the spectator who activates a text by making it an intimate part of his or her own life. This level of personal engagement is distinctive from the "normal" film experience in that it is not only more personal, but also it differs in that it makes watching a film an active rather than passive activity. The conscious and personally resonant appropriation of popular texts Corrigan suggests is explored further by Henry Jenkins in his work on cult television fan communities. Jenkins discusses fan activity through Michel de Certeau's term "poaching." For Certeau and Jenkins, the spectator who essentially takes what they want from popular texts regardless of the text's creator's intentions is likened to a poacher hunting on another person's property (Jenkins 24). Through the ritualized audience practices common to the cult film, members of the audience find their own ways to "poach" what they need from their chosen text.

The practice of repeatedly screening a particular film, to continue de Certeau's analogy, is a way of returning to familiar hunting ground. The more the film is experienced, the more familiar the spectator becomes with it and the more readily and deeply it might be mined for personally resonant material. Jenkins summarizes the effect

of this kind of prolonged use through a very clever analogy to the classic children's book The Velveteen Rabbit. In the story, Jenkins explains, the value of a toy is discussed as being "not in its material qualities…but rather in how the toy is used, how it is integrated into the child's imaginative experience;" it is in this way that these objects of make believe can become "real" (Jenkins 50). Jenkins goes on to discuss how the physical wear and tear on a toy is not "vandalism," as perhaps an adult or outsider might perceive it, but instead it is evidence of having been "actively reworked" and "transformed from sacred artifacts into 'cultural goods'"(Jenkins 50-51). It is in this way that a film text, through frequent and energetic use by cult spectators, can be made more personal and more "real". It is also interesting to compare the "adult" view of a well-worn toy to the often rowdy and seemingly disrespectful behavior of a cult film audience. From another viewpoint, transgressing traditional theater etiquette (shouting at the screen, wearing a costume etc.), the cult film spectator is instead cherishing the film text in a way that many would not recognize.

This sense of a different perspective is very important to the cult film. While the films themselves are usually discussed in terms of their difference, the audience's perceived, and more importantly, *desired* difference is equally important. By aligning one's self with something that is strange or transgressive, the cult spectator can achieve a sense of distinction from the perceived norm. J.P. Telotte has said "the cult is also desire itself, a longing to express the self, to express difference,"(Telotte 12). In this way the cult film becomes a kind of public affirmation of self-distinction. The reality of this difference is often suspect, as Telotte suggests by saying "…we at least want to feel different from the norm and from the conventional self we are supposed to become,"

(Telotte 12). Corrigan also remarks on this safe and temporary transgression by describing the cult spectator as a kind of cultural tourist (Corrigan 27). These slightly dismissive conclusions are not completely satisfactory. As has become increasingly the case, cult film provides a markedly "easy" kind of rebellion. However, that sentiment and desire, whether socially real or privately imagined, is none the less genuine.

Difference also surfaces in the historical mode of exhibition for cult films, commonly known as the "Midnight Movie." This specialized exhibition scenario, where a film or collected series of films would be shown in a theater at midnight, usually on a Friday or Saturday night, is intimately tied to the development of the cult film. The midnight screening, like the cult film itself, is simultaneously familiar and strange. The familiar practice of going to the movies at one's local theater is subtly transformed by attending a show at such a bizarre hour. A more radical change from normal scenarios can be seen in urban venues with Midnight Programs. Many of these were located in areas which were unfamiliar and often "seedy" parts of town, and were usually near to, or possibly were, "Adult" or pornographic theaters (Waller 169-170). In addition to the change of location, any leisure activity that takes place on the weekend and late at night is going to carry with it a more casual, party-like atmosphere, and is likely to attract a younger audience, or at least a crowd which is potentially more willing to experiment as has also been the case with the drive-in theater. These kinds of changes of or to the film going environment can have powerful effects on an audience and encourage a type of relaxed but still active kind of screening.

Arguably the Midnight Movie trend has its historical beginnings as far back as 1929 with the first touring "ghost shows" such as "El-Wyn's Midnite Spook Party,"

(Walker 21). These programs toured movie theaters nationwide and consisted of a screening of a horror or suspense film and a live stage magic act, usually stressing a macabre or supernatural theme (Walker). As the advertising publications for these programs attest, the emphasis of these ghost shows was on a shared audience experience and the camp value of the programming (Walker 91, 99). In the 1950's the ghost shows evolved to incorporate more explicit popular icons such as Dracula and Frankenstein's Monster and even the spirit of James Dean (Walker 86, 143). What is interesting about the ghost shows is that not only did they take place almost exclusively at midnight, but also they are also a prime example of a fan created extra-textual experience based on ones' personal and communal experience of a particular genre of film.

The ghost shows went to great lengths to produce a film going experience where the film text itself was less important than the audience's *use* of the film. Glow-in-the-dark skeletons were suspended by wires over the darkened theaters, planted assistants in various costumes would jump out during the films or performances to startle the audience, and almost every other conceivable form of carnival style ballyhoo (such as contests where theater patrons could "win a dead body") were used to involve the audience directly with the film (Walker). While it is an exaggerated example, it is an interesting case of re-appropriation of both particular film texts and a more vague film type. Other interesting parallels to more contemporary midnight movies include the primarily young, middle class audience and their relatively easy acceptance of an active theatre going experience.

The midnight movie in its more modern form took hold in the late 1960s and early 1970's. The practice was mostly limited to metropolitan areas on the East Coast,

and many of the early films shown in this way came out of the New York underground cinema movement. Small repertory theaters around Manhattan began to cater to local artists and filmmakers, often showing new experimental films and featuring small exhibitions of art work in the lobbies (Hoberman 39-42). In the early 1960's, artist and film scholar Jonas Mekas was asked to begin programming showcases of new filmmakers at the Charles Theater. These screenings were held on weekend nights at midnight and featured premiers from such luminaries of experimental film as Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, George and Mike Kuchar and Andy Warhol (Hoberman 42, 46-59).

Many of the films made and shown by this community were very consciously interested in issues of sexuality (particularly male homosexuality) and the complexities of dominant popular culture and traditional cinematic form. The audiences for these films were usually a mixed lot of artists, students and other bohemian "scene makers". This combination, perhaps, made the films and the phenomenon of their late night exhibition that much more perplexing to mainstream critics. The reviews of these critics would often focus more on the audience than the films, elaborating on both the perception and reality of the midnight crowd, and generating a sensational account of a new trend (Hoberman 42). This kind of publicity presumably expanded the market for midnight showings of newer "bizarre" films and revivals of older ones. As the midnight movie grew in popularity, exhibitors and theater owners began to export the idea to smaller cities often taming the program choices in the process. By the late 1970's the midnight movie was a fairly common event at theaters throughout the rest of the country.

In his extensive study of early 1980's midnight screening exhibition practices, Gregory Waller remarks on the temptation to call the early 1970's the "Golden Age" of

the midnight movie (Waller 167). While this period certainly set a standard for how the films were shown, and also established a large degree of avante garde credibility, it is the more common suburban experience of the late 70s and early to mid 80s that has had the greater effect on the contemporary understanding of cult films as a genre. As the midnight screening practice spread through the country, it was also reshaped and arguably watered down to a great extent. The programming tended to move towards films that would appeal to a primarily young, middle-class heterosexual audience, including campy but still masculine genre pictures such as *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai* (1984), and films associated with rock 'n' roll culture like *Heavy Metal* (1981) and *Rock 'n' Roll High School* (1979)(Waller 170-171).

It is also this move from the city that began another important change in the mutation of cult film. The new programming choices started to break down the notion of a cult film as being a particular text that is repeatedly screened and read in a specialized way. Instead, the suburban midnight programmers began to book films according to their perceived type rather than booking old favorites and playing them indefinitely. Under these circumstances, there was still some consistency with the reading strategies and modes of behavior, but not in the films. The texts that were programmed were a jumble of genres that became generically re-formatted through the cult-like mode of exhibition. Judgements were made, by theater owners, distributors and audiences, as to how well particular programming choices fit the midnight screening scenario. These decisions, based on the perceived history of midnight movies, transformed midnight programming trends into a workable set of generic affiliations that are still in use today.

Chapter 1.2: History of the Cult Genre

While the act of playing a film at midnight invariably changes the audience's experience of the text, many of these technically "midnight movies" are not commonly understood to be "cult films" (Waller). However, many of the more popular or famous Midnight Movies, like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Eraserhead* (1977), have become canonical examples of the cult film genre. Certainly, a film's historical connection to such a celebrated exhibition practice has an effect on its future generic placement. As Rick Altman has illustrated many forms of extra-textual classifications have helped to form common generic understanding. Altman notes how systems, ranging from the Motion Picture Association of America's film rating system to TV Guide, create a sense of generic affiliation, but perhaps the example that most parallels that of the cult film is his discussion of the "video nasties" (Altman 93).

The United Kingdom's Video Recordings Bill was designed to rate all videocassettes available for sale in the country with the intention of controlling the distribution of so called "nasty" videos. This government action essentially created an officially sanctioned genre based on a conventional (if not conservative) view of "good" vs. "bad" taste rather than any other previous generic labels or syntactic or semantic affinities to other genres (Altman 95). In a similar way, the creation of the cult film genre has relied heavily on perception of difference from "mainstream" films based on apparent transgressive qualities that often include some element of "bad taste." While the cult film genre in America has not been legally scrutinized in the way the video nasties were, the history of limited access and the mystique of the midnight screenings have enhanced the

notoriety of a wide variety of films. This perception has connected films by association

that have a broad range of disparate generic affiliations on the semantic and syntactic

level.

While exhibition practice and audience behavior were important in forming the

general opinion of what a cult film is like, the specific genre of "cult films" has been

defined by how other films, regardless of exhibition scenarios, compare to a handful of

historical examples. Looking at the film texts themselves, and not at any abnormal

behaviors or practices that may surround them, they fall into all manner of other genres

and subgenres. As the traditional spectator-based qualities of these films become less and

less important to the definition of the genre, the term "cult" becomes less accurate.

Jeffrey Sconce initiated the term "paracinema," which allows for a better distinction

between genre and audience practice. Sconce describes this term as being " a most elastic

textual category, paracinema would include entries from such seemingly disparate

subgenres as 'bad film', splatterpunk, 'mondo' films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis

filcks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and

just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile

delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography" (Sconce 372).

However, this wide array of different but very select genres is still held together

by a mode of audience response. Sconce states that "Paracinema is thus less a distinct

group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural

sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus" (Sconce 372). While this "counter-

aesthetic" could presumably be applied to any text, it appears that there are some

qualities of particular texts that attract and invite this kind of reading strategy. These

elements are perhaps the most solid qualifiers one can use in attempting to define this strangely intangible genre.

Creating a kind of map of the shared qualities of paracinema is mostly hampered by the subjectivity of said qualities and the terms used to describe them. One of the most common textual elements associated with this genre is some kind of connection to "counter-culture" or "subversive content." Defining these terms historically might be easier than to do so contemporarily, as exposure to a wider variety of cultural perspectives has become the norm. For example there are several programs currently on network television that feature openly homosexual characters or personalities. While the representations of these people may still be problematic, the fact that they are being represented at all would have been a radical concept during the time frame of the early midnight movies.

For simplicity, the "subversive" in terms of that which is socially transgressive will have to be determined by the individual viewer. How a film is being used either historically or out of the film's original context could be used as a guide for finding "the transgressive" as seen by the film cultist. Such as in the case of the character of Mildred Pierce, which has been appropriated by modern audiences for her perceived representation of feminist values in the 1940's. Another instance would be the case of a film resonating with a subculture that exists during the time of its release, such as *Repo Man* (1984) and the punk movement (Telotte 9, 15).

What is apparently the most attractive would be cinematic representations of transgressions which the cultist somehow identifies with in their own lives. Films that have some connection to a pre-established subculture or already cult-like fan base seem

to attract more of this kind of specialized audience attention. Interestingly a positive representation of a subculture does not seem to be a prerequisite to a film being adopted by that group. Ironic strategies are often employed as demonstrated by the drug culture's use of the anti-marijuana film *Reefer Madness* (1938). However, films with more earnest intentions towards an existing group or fan base tend to get stronger reactions. This has historically been the case with films tied to popular musical genres or groups, such as *Quadrophenia* (1979) or *Pink Floyd: The Wall* (1982).

The homosexual community and the art and avant garde cinema (and any nexus of these groups) were mainstays of the early midnight movie programs. The films made for and by these groups have had a lasting effect on the perception of the cult genre, as have the later films by directors made famous during that period, such as David Lynch and John Waters. However, while the film texts may have been introduced to the cult canon for one reason that is not to say that popular use has not changed over time. Many of the self-styled radicals who promote paracinema claim that it is an anti-aesthetic and seek to counter intellectual and artistic elites (Sconce 374,375). However, many films, which in their time were used to confront and debate conventional perceptions of sexuality, such as *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, are now often used towards opposite purposes as a kind of homophobic fantasy.

The other, and perhaps more easily discernable mode of difference is a subversion of mainstream Hollywood cinematic conventions. Corrigan has described the cult film audience as seeking out films that are "unfamiliar in character and story," and have "unfamiliar style, frame, and imagistic texture" (Corrigan 26). Character and story elements may be made strange through association with or depiction of fringe groups or

the subversion of traditional sex or power roles. Foregrounded visual style can also distinguish a film for a cult audience. The attention to aesthetic concerns stresses the importance of style over narrative structure. It is possible that one of the attractions of this cinematic excess is that it opens the text for the cult spectator. Sconce drew on the work of Kirstin Thompson to show how the excess common to paracinema frees the spectator, allowing for more active reading strategies (Sconce 391). In this way the excessiveness of the cult text allows the viewer to interpret, appropriate and project on the text in ways that more conventional and confining narratives do not.

An audience's reaction, its choice to hold a film in a special, more private regard is the clearest, most solid factor in the labeling of a cult film. Exactly what a film does to attract this attention is less clear. Corrigan argues that "No film…is naturally a cult film; all cult films are adopted children" (Corrigan 26). Meaning that such a film cannot be made so by its makers, but rather through the audiences' appropriation of the text. Corrigan puts his finger on the exact site of a film's transformation into cult text, but this process still allows room for a cult film by design.

Corrigan's definition focuses on the claiming of a film by an audience. This action can take place when a film is removed from its context and used for a different purpose, such as modern subversive or camp interpretations of the work of Douglas Sirk, or of B level science fiction films such as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959). However, it can also happen with films specifically generated to appeal to a presumed specialty audience, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986) targeting a particular kind of especially devoted horror genre fan. Bruce Kawin neatly describes these two types of cult-attracting films as "inadvertent" and "programmatic" (Kawin 19). While it remains

the choice of the audience whether or not a film becomes part of their "private space," it is possible for a film to consciously ask its presumed audience to engage it in this way.

These conscious or "programmatic" cult films offer an excellent opportunity to study the relationship between a film and its audience. The programmatic cult film is specifically interested in the precise targeting of a niche audience. More so, it is a film that has little regard for anyone else. As Kawin has deftly put it, these films have "been designed to please a cult audience, ignoring the Milquetoasts who would never enjoy or understand it anyway" (Kawin 18). As is becoming increasingly the case, groups that are the target of programmatic cult films tend to be established fan cultures of particular genres. The film is then designed around specified modes of generic manipulation and play that exemplify what is attractive about the genre(s) to the desired fanbase.

This kind of generic play that is common to the programmatic cult film is similar to the activity of the paracinematic aficionado. The fan of paracinema picks and chooses elements from various cinematic "cast offs" in order to perhaps separate himself from a perceived mainstream. When a film chooses to do the same thing, borrow and reference from a history of previous films specifically or though generic conventions, it is as if the film too seeks to differentiate its self from the norm. This kind of film may appeal to the fan of paracinema, in that it is a kind of "digest format" cult film. A ready-made object which summarizes and repackages all the best, or worst, parts from other films, such as the rock n roll-zombie-action film *Wild Zero* (2000). Another way in which such a film is attractive is the way in which a spectator with a certain degree of paracinematic knowledge might be able to deconstruct the programmatic text, thus putting their wealth

of trivia knowledge to use, like the exploitation pastiche *Kill Bill* vols. 1 & 2 (2003,2004).

This type of generic play often centers on the mixing and re-combination of various generic elements. Many argue that the conscious combination of these popular texts is product of post modernism. Indeed, the dissemination of post modernist theory may very well have had a great influence on contemporary filmmakers, cult filmmakers included. However, much of contemporary genre theory argues that the mixing of film genres is hardly a recent practice. In fact, genre films are inevitably the products of the combination of multiple sets of conventions.

Janet Staiger has written extensively on her rejection of generic purity in cinema. Staiger argues that the producers and consumers of films in classical, or what she calls "Fordian Hollywood," were very open to mixing various generic elements. Rather than making films along a set "pure" generic pattern, films were constructed to appeal to the broadest audience possible. This meant consciously combining multiple patterns and formulas for any given film (Staiger 67, 68). Staiger also contends that genres are still useful to film studies while there is nothing to support the idea that Hollywood films of the Fordian era were generically pure, that is not to say that the patterns or genres themselves are not pure (Staiger 71). Essentially that there is a separation of the tangible film text that uses genre, or rather multiple genres, and the intangible concept of the genre itself.

Altman has worked along similar lines, forming a model where an established generic pattern is combined with an experimental new element. Altman says that the established pattern acts like a noun and the new element as an adjective. The noun genre

"musical," for example, can be combined with new adjectival elements to create a "*backstage*-musical." Usually, the adjective would be formed from features believed to have made a previous film successful. Presumably then, the new combination will re-invigorate the generic "noun". If the film is well received, a cycle of films will follow the same formula. As the cycle gains acceptance the adjectival qualities can themselves become "nouns", and therefore become available for a new adjectival attachment, creating perhaps the "*romantic*-backstage" cycle. This process of combination and re-combination then continues indefinitely, continuously creating and expanding on generic types (Altman 62-68).

Staiger and Altman both present cases for generic combinations that thoroughly problematize clear genre distinctions. This is arguably the common practice in the construction of mainstream genre films, but another use of genre seems to be at work in cult film. Many programmatic cult films combine multiple and seemingly disparate generic elements in order to allow for more opportunities for generic pleasure. Adam Knee has described this kind of "compound genre film" as a film that "concurrently engages multiple distinct and relatively autonomous horizons of generic expectation; the extent to which these horizons remain distinct is the extent to which we perceive the text as being compound in its generic nature," (Knee 141-142). Clashing different generic traditions together not necessarily to re-invigorate a sagging genre, as Altman's "adjectival genre" model does, but rather to combine two distinct forms of pleasure for a particularly receptive niche audience.

The programmatic cult film, when seeking the acclaim of a genre based fan culture, often uses this compound genre strategy. This kind of specialized audience has

an intimate understanding of a particular genre's conventions and history. To appeal to these viewers, the cult film demonstrates its own depth of generic knowledge. Inter-textual and self-reflexive references become like a game played by the film and its presumed audience. The more obscure the reference, the more the target viewer's pleasure in discovering it in the cult text. It creates a bond between filmmaker and viewer based on a shared knowledge and appreciation of a particular body of generic works.

Perhaps one of the most basic problems with defining cult film is that it depends on a correct combination of both text and audience reception. The reading strategies or historical exhibition practices of the Hollywood western are not as important to determining its genre as the themes and iconography found in the individual texts. While there are some recurrent themes in the cult film, they are nowhere as consistent as in other more traditional genres. It has also been shown that the film text may at times be a secondary consideration, as the many cases of ironic or camp re-readings illustrate. Though this is again not a very reliable factor as audience response is not universal.

Presumably there are qualities found in the texts of paracinema that are more attractive to cult spectators, because they tend to more easily allow for the specialized forms of cult-like audience behaviors. But, just because a film is excessive and/or in some way subverts the conventions of mainstream Hollywood, it does not mean that the film will attract a cult following. Even in the case of the programmatic cult film, where the text is by nature a cult-like object, it is not assured cult success. While a programmatic cult film may fit nicely into the definition of paracinema, it does not necessarily fit into a category defined by audience practice or reading strategies. Conversely, many inadvertent cult films (and potential inadvertent cult films for that

matter) do not fit into paracinema, by virtue of the semantic or syntactic qualities of the individual text, but the associated cult audience behavior undoubtedly makes these films cultish.

This is why we must separate the two meanings of "cult" from each other. A "cult film" as a specific text that is distinguished by its perceived difference from contemporary beliefs of a cultural mainstream has become a kind of user defined genre, for which Sconce's "paracinema" seems to fit fairly well. These films include both programmatic and inadvertent cult films and are not guaranteed to illicit a uniform mode of audience reception or a traditional cult following. Instead of using a particular text as the site of cultish devotion, a broader, less specific kind of attachment tends to be formed with all films of this type. For instance, ritually watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the same venue, acting out along with the film and possibly appropriating the images of that film as a means of communal fantasy and roll play, is a traditional example of a text specific cult-like attachment. The notion of a paracinematic or cult genre instead aligns the cultist with a diverse body of work from which they pick and choose various icons for their private use. A specific film is not the object, rather it is the perception of a certain type.

Separating these definitions opens up "non-cult" texts for discussion of cult-like audience behavior. The perception of the cult or paracinematic genre has hindered discussion of more "mainstream" films as cult films. The presumed non-exclusivity of a widely popular film discredits it for consideration by "cult" fans. However, the connection that the phrase "cult film" has to the "disreputable" body of paracinematic texts, has made it an often pejorative statement. This use of the phrase is responsible for

popular apprehension of the term "classical cult film," and the use of "cult" to describe films like *Titanic* (1997). If the genre of cult film, which is arguably dominated by heterosexual males, is kept apart from individual audience practice, which is theoretically available to anyone, many more texts open up to discussion of their dialogue with their fans.

This kind of separation can lead to the question of "what then is not a cult film?" It would be safe to say that a cult film is a film with a cult. However the exact specifics of how that cult works, how its members behave and why they have taken to a particular text or body of texts cannot be pinned down. As the cult is ultimately the decision of the individual spectator, any film theoretically has the potential to be a cult film. However, there is a general body of work that is conventionally understood to be, or have a higher probability of being interfaced with in a cult-like fashion. As traditional methods of genre theory do not satisfactorily define this body of films, a closer examination of how the users of these films define the genre will produce a more refined definition. Also, by looking at how audiences use films, a broader application of the understanding of cult audience behavior may be possible. While certain groups may use certain films in ways that are almost identical to that of the film cultist, they may never use the same terminology. Much of this may have to do with the historical perception and contemporary image of the paracinema aficionado. Through this investigation a closer definition of what could be called a "true cult film" could be reached. A film that achieves a synthesis of both a strong textual affinity to the popular user-defined paracinematic genre and an equally powerful or active fan following could be best labeled a "cult film".

Chapter 2.1: Contemporary Use and Definitions

Cult film, and arguably film in general, has been moving towards a new dominant exhibition space over the last twenty five to thirty years. Advances in, and increased availability of, technology has allowed the home to seriously threaten the public theater as the primary site of film viewing. Many have decried the disappearance of the midnight movie and blame new formats such as home video and cable television for killing cult film (Hoberman 328). This view equates all cult practice with a particular historical instance, namely the New York underground scene discussed in the last section. In that time and place, the midnight movie served as a galvanizing experience for marginalized groups, particularly homosexual men. However, as the exhibition trend was exported to other parts of the country, the communities it brought together changed. As midnight movies moved into the suburbs, they became perhaps less revolutionary, but still capable of powerful and private meaning. This shift was gradual and began well before the omnipresence of video.

Cult film and the midnight movie did not simply disappear; instead they have transformed according to the process of gentrification that had already started by the late 1970s. The term "cult film" is now a widely used if contentiously defined, generic label for a combination of films that are both user defined and heavily influenced by commercial marketing. The traditional communal and ritual practices of film cultism remain alive and well, but they now exist along side a new set of technologically enabled ritual practices. The cult film genre has moved in a very definite direction as outlined by

Sconce's "paracinema", but the methods its fans employ while interacting with these texts maintain a cult-like quality.

The availability of affordable, home-based cinema viewing technology has presented many new opportunities for film related ritual. The main factor in this new practice is convenience. Instead of leaving their houses and going to the potentially "uncomfortable" environment of an urban theater at midnight, the viewer is able to watch a film whenever they want in the privacy of their own homes. This technology also allows for a greater degree of control over exactly what is seen and how. Barbara Klinger has pointed out how through this technology, viewers can control the once "unapproachable medium" of cinema; and quite literally take "public images" as discussed by Timothy Corrigan into one's "private space" (Klinger 134).

The technology of the home cinema allows for a high degree of control, which in turn opens up more possibilities for cult-like behaviors. Perhaps the most obvious is the way in which home video is conducive to multiple viewings. Since the viewer with their own private copy of a film has no limits to access of the text, there is nothing keeping the owner from watching it as many times as they would want to, whenever they would want to. As discussed in the previous section, repeated screenings of a film can form a ritualistic habit and increase one's familiarity with the text itself. Klinger has noted how the ease at which these home cinema technologies allows for ritual screenings can give a film "an indelible place in [the spectator's] everyday routines," (Klinger 134).

As home video became a viable option for moviegoers, the frequency of midnight screenings declined dramatically. By the mid-1980's, many of the films that had been made popular on the midnight circuit were available for rental or purchase on Beta or

VHS tape (Waller, 171). The midnight movie scene changed to be, as Waller says

"dependant on the product offered" rather than what underground film historians J.

Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum called its "unique status as the 'most social form of

filmgoing'" (Waller 172). That is to say, the changing audience for cult films was more

interested in bizarre movies rather than any public experience. That being the case, the

convenience of the new technology won out, and the Midnight Movie became a much

less common feature of theatrical booking.

The commercial potential of the home video market has played a large roll in the

formation of the modern paracinematic canon. This is especially due to the active

marketing of film producers, exhibitors and distributors towards niche markets.

Distributors, who own the rights to older films, possibly made famous on the midnight

circuit or sharing some textual qualities with midnight fare, have been able to repackage

these seemingly undesirable films for sale to the new video cult audience. Also,

producers have found that new films with certain qualities that may hurt a theatrical

release, such as extremes in violence or sex, can still be made financially viable ,and

possibly even more profitable, by exploiting these niche video markets (Wu, 90).

These specialty video markets are based on the new cult practice of collecting

copies of films that have a perceived difference from other mass-market product. The act

of collecting personal copies of particular texts is not only an interesting new method of

claiming ownership over the public images of a film, but the practice of seeking out new

additions to one's collection is also a cult-like activity. Certain hierarchies of distribution

and retail have developed along with video as a format, and this has made the acquisition

of certain titles a kind of "adventure" in a similar way that traveling to the downtown

midnight movie theater once was. Many cult titles are sold based on the promise of their somehow underground or subversive qualities. Often in retail outlets and mail-order scenarios, cult films are placed in close proximity to pornography, which Joanne Hollows states is a way of securing "the thrill that comes from cult's illicit and 'outlaw' status"(Hollows 43).

The retail practices associated with cult also contribute to the developing perception of the constitution of the genre as a whole. Video sales and rental stores are very active in the construction of generic distinctions simply through the routine act of organizing their products. Rick Altman has demonstrated that genre is often determined by a film's connection to other films in the mind of the viewer (Altman 83-84). By physically grouping films in a store, or intellectually connecting them through lists in a catalogue, the business of video has put its own generic stamp on a body of work thereby demarcating it as cult. This method of marketing cult films on home video has greatly affected the perception of the genre, and a similar process of generic refinement has occurred due to advances in television.

Cable television has also had a large impact on how audiences gain access to cult films. Cable became widely available at approximately the same time as home video recorders, and like video, most of the early programming choices available were of the ephemeral type typified by paracinema. Also, early cable channels began specialty-programming blocks that shared many of the films, and therefore the same audience, as the Midnight Movies of the time. During the early 80's, MTV: Music Television aired midnight circuit favorites such as *Reefer Madness* in combination with rock and roll themed documentaries and avante garde influenced music videos after eleven PM on

Friday and Saturday nights (Waller 172). Other pay channels also padded their schedules with films of a paracinematic bend, many of which had been popular choices for midnight bookings (Waller 172).

In addition to simply enabling the film cultist to watch and re-watch a film at home, these technologies allow for even further control. In a theater projecting a celluloid print, the film must be played from beginning to end. The home video formats of VHS, Beta, laserdisc and DVD all allow for some form of active searching of the format. This way, viewers can fast-forward through undesired sections of the text or repeatedly scrutinize particular sections in slow motion. Given this high degree of control, a cult spectator can easily bypass any and all potential hindrances to the desired portions of their chosen cinematic objects.

Not only does home viewing allow control over the film, but also it regulates the screening group and environment. While the historical midnight movie could be used as a public meeting place for people with similar interests or affinities, the move from the theater to the home made the cult experience a private party. The new cult viewer is able to include or exclude others at his own discretion in the same way he can pick and choose which titles to seek out or ignore. The home cult viewer, while potentially physically isolated from other cultists, none the less is able to maintain a connection to fellow cultists through other forms of communication. When a regular theater program is not available, the cult fan must utilize other methods of finding new texts. One such method, the television "horror host," was, like the midnight movie of the 1980's, a kind of nostalgic hold over from an earlier time.

In the 1950's, local television stations needed to find a way to use their extensive libraries of old genre films that had since fallen out of fashion. Many stations began to air programs where an older horror or science fiction film would be hosted by some colorful character. These hosts, like the voluptuous "Vampira" and the comical "Zacherley", would be intercut into the broadcast performing skits that adopted the iconography of the films they presided over. The programs, not unlike their predecessors the "Ghost Shows", packaged a film text and an active reading strategy together for its audience. The host's comedic relief was often based on affectionate parody, not only of the genre but also of the particular film for each episode, and this behavior encouraged a kind of active re-appropriation the text and text type (Skal 237-247, 266-268).

With the advent of cable television, programmers were faced with a similar problem to their 1950's counterparts. Several of the new channels had extensive film collections, but these were mostly films that had inexpensive broadcast rights, many of which would fall easily into the category of paracinema. Late night paracinemeatic programming became a mainstay of weekend cable television with shows like USA Network's "Up All Night," Turner's "100% Weird" and "Monster-vision," which featured cult-critic John Bloom in his "Joe Bob Briggs" persona. Each of these formats presented a type of film and a personality. This personality served as a source of identification for the home cult viewer and as a means of encouraging a particular reading strategy for the available films.

The endorsement of cult reading strategies has been perhaps the most prominent in the program "Mystery Science Theatre 3,000." This show took the horror host format, but pushed the element of outside characters interacting with the text to new limits.

Instead of periodically interrupting the film, the show's characters provided a running commentary of ironic jokes and active re-working of the dialogue. Jeffrey Sconce has said that "Mystery Science Theatre 3,000" is just another example of the co-opting of "the ironic reading strategies honed by the bad film community through countless hours of derisive interaction with late-night science fiction"(Sconce 373). While the relative popularity and success of merchandising related to the show does illustrate how these particular modes of cinematic experience are being marketed to wider audiences, this program also shows that the group experience of the Midnight Movie is not limited to public interaction but instead is possible through other mediums of communication. The cult status of the television show effectively bridged the gap between the cult experience of the public theater and the home.

The most popular form of communication that has been embraced by the cult community is the Internet. The Internet makes all manner of information readily available to the film cultist. Time and geography are essentially no longer restrictions, as the virtual space that cult fans can come together in is always at one's fingertips. Another advantage of the Internet's virtual community is the level of anonymity it provides. The cult fan can construct their own electronic identity however they choose. The cultist often uses this opportunity to use displays of their esoteric film knowledge as a way of distinguishing themselves.

The Internet has essentially taken the place of print catalogues and fan publications and also provided a new space for cult fans to exchange information. On Internet hosted "message boards," film fans can post new topics for discussion, which other fans can respond to or simply read. Fans can "meet" and discuss films which they

have a shared experience of, or recommend or review new titles for the benefit of others.

What is particularly interesting about fan dialogue on the Internet is that in order to

communicate, they must also publish their own words and opinions. This form of

electronic publishing allows for an excellent opportunity to research the "climate" of the

contemporary cult fan community.

Chapter 2.2: Fan Generated Definitions

Typical cult film practice has left public spaces but the terminology and historical

body of films remain. In order to reconcile the changing cult genre canon and fan

practices, users of these films continually attempt to refine the boundaries of the genre.

However, cult film fans have consistently run into many of the same problems scholars

have in their attempts to solidify a definition of "cult". The users of these films engage in

frequent and energetic debates that test the limits of previous generic outlines. The

electronic message boards on the highly frequented web site; "Internet Movie Database"

in addition to being an impressive repository of film production information, is a location

used by thousands of film fans to discuss cinema on the web site's electronic message

boards. IMDB.com hosts posting areas devoted to all manner of film related topics,

including "cult films". This web page is easily described as "mainstream," as it is

generally well known and features many prominent Hollywood related advertisements,

and it is this mainstream quality is what makes it an interesting source of information on

the contemporary cult film fan. The "cult" section of the IMDB discussion boards is

separated from other areas in the same way that video stores and catalogues are

organized. This arrangement further reinforces the ideas of a cult film genre, which are

then elaborated on by the postings of the fans that frequent the web site. While many of

these fans lack a strong academic vocabulary or extensive background in genre theory,

their enthusiasm for the subject offers many insightful and often surprisingly articulate

discussions of how these films work, and how they work together.

For the cult film fan, evidence of active audience practice or a history of cult-like

behavior (or cult following) are not necessarily prerequisites for a "cult film". However

films with these traits are typically assumed to be part of some larger generic history, and are usually included, if not totally understood, in context with other films. A rather telling example of this kind of assumption was illustrated in an online message board thread titled "Cult favorites you never really liked." The initial posting by "VicVega2003" in this thread reads simply, "I geuss "Rocky Horror Picture Show" was okay, but I don't understand why it's considered to be the greatest cult film ever made." The title of the thread and the use of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as the subject of the posting clearly puts that film within the commonly understood body of cult films (or "Cult favorites"). However, it can also be assumed that the brief summation of "VicVega2003"'s opinion is based entirely on the film text of *Rocky Horror* instead of any other factors.

Other posters on this thread continue to discuss *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as it relates to their own practices of private instead of public experience. However, there are attempts to put the film in a different historical perspective. Poster "njbusa" writes, "…it was fun to see the movie in a theater with a bunch of people dressed up like the characters participating in the movie. Seeing the Rocky Horror Picture Show at the theater was like attending a party." This post begins by demonstrating that the atmosphere and experience of *Rocky Horror* in public is different than watching the film alone, and that that practice has value. The message continues by saying, "On the other hand, watching the Rocky Horror Picture Show at home on TV is not fun. The story is weird, but not thought-provoking-weird or funny-weird (like Being John Malkovich)…A cult movie should be enjoyable if you watch it at home when you are alone or with a couple of friends." Here the poster establishes that history and existing audience practices

are not especially important factors by explicitly privileging the private viewing experience and directly comparing the film to a much more recent film.

This kind of stress put on the film text itself is very common on the cult film message boards. Again, this seems to be due to the cult film's move from public to private spaces. With no real frame of reference, other than perhaps exposure to a more diluted version of the Midnight Movie, it is no surprise that many contemporary fans of cult films imagine them to be a primarily home video based practice. With the film text as the focal point, Sconce's "paracinema" or the similar if not more colorful "psychotronic" (a term coined by fan zine publishers) seems to fit more closely with contemporary fan understandings of the genre than the potential misnomer "cult". For example, the films *Switchblade Sisters* (1975), *Bio Zombie* (1998), and *Infra-Man* (1975) were all topics of threads on the IMDB cult message board. These films range from sexploitation to Hong Kong made children's adventure and none of them have any substantial following in the way that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or even *Repo Man* have, but they are none the less included under the generic heading of "cult".

Audience practice is not a contentious issue for paracinema fans except when it crosses paths with the "mainstream." Whether a film is old or new, inadvertent or programmatic does not matter to the popular definition of the "cult film" genre as long as the film in question is somehow outside of "mainstream culture." This issue of how the mainstream is perceived and in some ways constructed by cult fans manifests in different ways. Many interesting examples of how cult film relates to the mainstream appeared in a message board established to discuss the potential cult qualities of the recent film adaptations of <u>The Lord of the Rings</u>.

The title of the thread, "Is The Lord of the Rings a cult film?" is very similar to several other threads often found on the "cult films" board. These threads usually are not very active and are often summarily dismissed by other posters. For example, in this thread "serious" responses were peppered with statements such as those by "el-porko," "Negative comments will flow if you don't delete this post, believe me," and "True cult film fans just automatically KNOW what's a cult film and what's not. If you have to ask you're not a real cult film lover," by "PhantomOfLiberty." This particular thread, however, was unusually active and had been posted on one hundred and ten times within eleven days (the average size of threads on the cult film board is usually around twenty posts).

The thread starts by asking opinions on whether the *Lord of the Rings* films are cult films as they "seem to have developed quite a following." The next several posts (all made within a few hours of the original post) express enthusiastically that the films are not a cult films based on their perceived mainstream qualities. Poster "Howlin Wolf" says, "Its way too popular to be 'cult'!" Another poster, "jkstevens57," states, "Immediate, widespread success. Almost universally enjoyed by theater patrons and critics alike…these are all things a 'cult' film is not." These two comments explicitly place the cult film outside of their view of mainstream acceptance. "Popularity" and "success" are both listed as qualities cult film are not supposed to have, and yet the posters seem unaware of how the existence of a message board on the Internet dedicated to cult films could itself be interpreted as a form of success.

The poster identified as "PhantomOfLiberty" inadvertently brought up an interesting point saying, "A cult film has an UNDERGROUND following and NOT

every man, child, dog and their mothers. To summarize: Lord of the Rings is as

mainstream as a film can be." This statement contains the assumption that every person

who saw any one of *The Lord of the Rings* films is actively invested in the franchise.

Instead of an "underground" following, which implies smaller numbers and some form of

secrecy or exclusion, the poster believes that these films are followed by everyone

possible. The statement also ignores the history of cultish fans of J.R.R.Tolkien's work

and the possibility of how this pre-existing group might be inclined to read the film as

something different than an expensive fantasy adventure film. Implicit in that kind of

assumption is a strange hierarchical system common in cult fan discussion. That

somehow fans of Tolkien are less marginalized than other more "authentic" fans.

Both Jancovitch and Sconce have discussed how fan groups often use this kind of

hierarchy in order to establish their separation from other consumers of mass culture

(Jancovitch 312-315, Sconce 371-377). This kind of paracinematic film cultist sees

themselves as actively involved in rejecting mass culture through their privileging of

"cultural detritus," (Sconce 372-374). These fans thereby distinguish themselves from the

problematic images of both mainstream feminized consumer and the stereotype of a "fan"

(often depicted as "passive overweight and asexual") (Hollows 46, Sconce 375).

Essentially here the argument against the cult status of *The Lord of the Rings* films is that

it threatens to conflate the "underground" cult fans with the rest of the "geeks," and

worse still with "ordinary people." While this is a common sentiment on these message

boards, it is not the only one.

A later poster, "Infofreak," suggests that *The Lord of the Rings* is "a mainstream

film with a cult following," clearly supporting a separation of cult as genre from audience

practice. This statement does its best to reconcile the qualities this film does not share

with the paracinematic genre, a large budget, wide release, large profit margin, with the

undeniable cult-like response of the film's audience including its pre-established Tolkien

fan audience. Another member of the message boards, calling themselves as "Funkyfry",

chimes in to agree with the possibility of a film being both "cult" and "mainstream." This

poster goes so far as to state that "cult film is not a genre of film, but rather a description

of the types of audiences a film has…so LOTR has "cult" fans as well as "mainstream"

fans." Other posters who insist on maintaining "cult" as an exclusive type with very

particular textual qualities quickly denounce these comments and other similar

statements.

        Much of this apparent stubbornness about the make up of the cult genre develops

from the construction of "cult" as a masculininzed subcultural refuge. A preoccupation

with unearthing forgotten or discarded films is the result of an attempt to distance one's

self from consumer culture. It is fairly common for someone who devotes themselves to

some aspect of mass culture to be viewed as a "conformist dupe" (Jankovich 312). As

this is often the case, many cult fans seek to remove themselves from that category by

evading what they believe to be "mainstream" media through aligning themselves with

more marginal and less popular material.   This attempt at "outsider" commercialism is

most often executed by constructing one's consumption as "collecting" in order to avoid

the more problematic role as feminized consumer (Hollows 46).

        A mainstream film like *The Lord of the Rings*, therefore, is poised to infringe on

the exclusivism of the cult genre. As current trends in Hollywood production seek out

properties with established followings, many of these fans believe that what was once

their private cinematic world is quickly becoming too accessible. Once a concept with "paracinematic potential" is combined with mainstream modes of production, it becomes immediately unattractive. Message board member "ted cogswell" responded to suggestions that cult may be more inclusive by denouncing more commercial features and restating a subjective definition of the cult genre. "I don't come here to read about LOTR or HELLBOY, I come here to learn about wacked-out crackpot oscurities and exploitation, not overexposed mainstream product, which is al LOTR is…"

The subjectivity of these kinds of definitions are consistently baffling. The poster uses *Hellboy* (2004), a film adaptation of a comic book about a brooding blue collar demon that was summoned by agents of The Third Reich and later captured and raised by a secret government organization committed to fighting super-natural forces, as an example of "mainstream product." *Hellboy* had a comparatively modest budget, was based on an obscure property, and starred character actor Ron Perlman (who is perhaps best known for his roll as "Vincent" on the cult TV series "Beauty and the Beast"). The story of the film involves government conspiracies, talking corpses, demon/human romance, undead Nazi assassins and Lovecraftian monsters from outer space. While the film also contains a fair amount of conventional action film plot devices and "one-liners", from a "mainstream" perspective, *Hellboy* does not fit the mold. However, from this particular kind of cult fan perspective, regardless of any potential paracinematic textual features, the wide theatrical release and relative box office success show that the film is perhaps too easily accessible by "outsiders."

Another form of limiting "outsider" access to cult film is through the selection of obscure and exotic texts. Genre films from other countries are desirable to cult fans for

the relative difficulty associated with acquiring copies due to varying international distribution practices. They are also made interesting from the process of being taken out of their national context. In particular, films which build on traditional (American) generic conventions and add a new twist, which is usually in the form of excess and spectacle. This has traditionally been the case with horror and action films, and the marketing and distribution of particular genres from non-US sources has developed a system of sub-generic categories based on country of origin.

The films of Italian director Dario Argento have been used in this way. Argento is known for making intense suspense films that push the limits of stylistic excess, such as the highly theatrical *Suspiria* (1977) which features elaborate murders set to the throbbing synthesized sounds of European rock group "Goblin." The high level of violent spectacle common to his films made them targets of the United Kingdom's video recordings act. However, this attempt at censorship seemed to only increase Argento's cult cache in England and the U.S. (Hutchings 131-132). While the films themselves have many qualities that would associate them with paracinema (gory visuals, unusual and excessive stylistic features, and frequent subversion of sex and gender rolls), they remain different in their respect to "the mainstream." Argento's films have relatively large budgets and high production values. While he works in genre which are often looked slightly down upon, in his native Italy, he is much less of a marginalized figure than he is made out to be by his fans in other countries (Hutchings 132-133). This kind of difference between perception and reality of what is "mainstream" across national borders continues to be an issue with cult fandom. Fans often use the exotic nature of films from outside their own country as another way to distinguish themselves.

This kind of exoticism is particularly evident in American fans of Japanese popular culture. There is a perception in the cult fan community that Japanese media specializes in particularly intense exploitation and shock entertainment, and that many Western taboos are much more acceptable there. While there may be some truth to this belief, it is based almost entirely on the limited body of works that have been aggressively marketed to American cult audiences. Argento still has a sizable cult following the U.S., but in the tradition of cultish one-upmanship his place has recently been usurped by Japanese filmmaker Takashi Miike. Miike, similarly to Argento, specializes in suspense and crime genre films. His trademark excesses push the limits (by American standards at least) of taste and on-screen brutality. It is therefore not surprising to see his films enthusiastically adopted by American cult fans. Miike's *Ichi the Killer* (2001), *Audition* (2000) and *Visitor Q* (2001) are frequent topics of discussion and praise on the IMDB "cult films" message boards.

The intensity of the spectacle a film can provide has become a generic determinant for cult film. Using films in this way, as a kind of endurance test, not only serves to separate the fan from other film consumers but it also cements the genre in the masculine and horrific cinematic modes. Joanne Hollows has stated that the accent on the high levels of shocking or disturbing material in certain films is used in their marketing to a cult audience "sustains the masculinity of cult through the emphasis on a gendered prowess." The attraction to certain texts becomes based on the desire to use these films to "measure 'hardness' by demonstrating how far or low you can go" (Hollows 44).

An interesting exchange of this type was found on the IMDB "cult films" message boad thread dedicated to recent "extreme Japanese cinema." A poster identified as "Blacknredd" while discussing Miike's *Visitor Q* remarked, "…as much as I didn't like watching that movie, I liked it at the same time." This statement is immediately followed by message board member, "el-porko,"saying simply "Loved every minute of it." This dialogue demonstrates how the presumed intensity of the spectacle is not only the source of attraction to these texts, but also a way of testing one's self against others. "El-porko's" quick and casual reply rebukes "Blacknredd's" hesitant commitment to the film. A film may be too "extreme" for some viewers, even "hardened" cult viewers, but others can, or at least *claim* to, handle these with relative ease.

These trends all illustrate how the cult film genre is being contemporarily constructed as a kind of masculine counter-aesthetic. The "cult" object of the genre is not a particular film text, but instead a vague type. This essentially paracinematic body of films range from extremes of spectacle (especially violent or sexual in nature) to rare and obscure texts. Each of these types serves to separate the cultist from a perceived image of potential mediocrity. These "cult genre" films are still being used in the definition and confirmation of the cultists' private lives, however for them to be used in the way that they are, the cultists must in some ways deny the existence of other possible cults. The exclusivism of the cult genre is paramount, as the contemporary cultist needs the films in order to distinguish themselves from the perceived norm.

Chapter 3.1: *The Evil Dead* and Cult Synthesis

One of the more problematic aspects of Kawin's "programmatic cult film" is that it seems to account for only half of the equation. If "cult" can be divided into both a mode of audience practice and a text based genre, then the programmatic film weighs in on the genre side. However, it would seem that all films are "programmatic" in that they all are, in some way, targeting a specific audience. However, not all programmatic cult films win the devotion of the fans they attempt to appeal to. If the "cultness" of the programmatic cult film rests on qualities of the text, these films may still be part of the cult or paracinematic genre, but that doesn't make the term any more useful. Perhaps then, the term would be more helpful in terms of a kind of cult synthesis. A case where a programmatic text actively tries to attract a cult following and *succeeds*.

While there may not be a singular method of accomplishing this connection, it is safe to assume that if the target audience is a cult or paracinematic fan audience, then a film that uses genre and encourages a particular set of reading strategies would be attractive to that group. However, it would appear that a simple ironic take or outright parody of a genre does not have the kind of resonance necessary for a strong audience/film bond. A delicate balance must be struck and the audience must recognize an affection similar to their own for the material in the text. Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* films are an example of a programmatic cult film series that uses genre in this way. The *Evil Dead* films foreground the absurdity of their treasured generic conventions while fulfilling and reveling in the fulfillment of the cult audience's horizon of expectations.

The programmatic cult film of this type is a very consciously post-modern text. It generates a forcefully visible pastiche, so as to initiate a dialogue with its presumed

audience and provide it with multiple entry points for generic pleasure. It is essentially a movie about movies. Through this interaction with the audience and with generic conventions, the cult film is able to engage a variety of different perspectives and uses of genre simultaneously.

The Evil Dead (1981) begins with the conventional horror film scenario of a group of young people going off on a weekend retreat. Predictably their choice of camping spot, an isolated and decrepit back-woods cabin, is less than ideal for a vacation. The kids search the cabin and find a grotesque book made from human skin and a mysterious tape recorder. When played, a voice on the audio tape reveals the book to be the fabled "Necronomicon" an ancient and storied spell book. The tape also reads aloud passages from the book which prompts unseen evil spirits to begin possessing the frightened youngsters, transforming them into ghoulish monsters. Only one of the group, Ash (Bruce Campbell) is able to avoid being possessed, and the gruesome task of dismembering his former friends falls upon him.

The film condenses exposition to the bare minimum, and instead relies on the presumed audience's generic knowledge to fill in any gaps. Less time is spent developing characters and elaborating on the plot allows for more screen time for excessive visual display. Story here takes a back seat to Raimi's stylistic concerns, appealing to the genre fan by "freshening up" familiar elements. The wide berth given for cinematic excess also allows *The Evil Dead* to focus almost entirely on the shocks and gory spectacle horror fans actively seek out, giving them a concentrated horror film experience.

The Evil Dead ends with Ash surviving the night and destroying the Necronomincon. The last shot of the film is a fast moving first-person "charge" at Ash,

towards which he recoils in fear, thus suggesting that the horror of the previous night is not over. *Evil Dead II* (1987) does not immediately pick up on this obvious lead in for a sequel. Instead it opens almost identically to the first film, except the car load of college kids has been reduced to only Ash and his girlfriend. It remains ambiguous as to whether the film is a sequel or a remake as the first act is essentially a revised and integrated flashback of the first film. There is a scene, shortly after Ash dispatches his possessed girlfriend, where the camera charges towards him just as it did at the end of *The Evil Dead*, however the action continues suggesting that this is the moment where the true "sequel" begins.

It becomes apparent that in this film, the action focuses on the character of Ash. At different stages of the narrative, Ash is put through a variety of transformations. At first the film concentrates on elaborating Ash's role as the horror film protagonist, cowering in fear from the source of terror. Later Ash is temporarily possessed by the evil spirits and becomes a monstrous version of himself, placing him in the roll of horrific antagonist. After recovering, Ash is put back into the hero roll, but now of a comedy. Ash's hand is possessed and turns against him forcing him to cut it off. To his surprise, it still has a life of its own and Ash has to continue fighting his own dismembered appendage. These scenes confuse expectations as they combine the semantics of horror (monsters, gore, severed body parts) with the syntax of slapstick comedy.

This is similar to the compound genre film, as both the horizon of expectations of the horror and comedy genres are fulfilled. What makes it different is that the horizon of expectation for the horror genre from the cult horror fan is often more akin to those for comedy. The cult film spectator is used to viewing horror semantics without being

horrified. Instead it is the common practice of the cult-horror audience to enjoy in the absurdity and spectacle of such scenes.

At the end of the film, Ash undergoes a final transformation. Shifting to an action-adventure mode, Ash constructs a prosthetic hand from an old chainsaw, and dons an elaborate leather harness and holster for a sawed-off shotgun. He emerges from the work shed as a living weapon, ready to battle the unnatural forces of the woods. In the tradition of George Romero's protagonists in his celebrated Living Dead films, particularly in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Ash takes a proactive roll and sets out to combat the source of horror. Not only is Ash fighting back, but he has also absorbed the iconography of the horror genre to do so. Typically, a chainsaw is wielded by the villain in the modern horror film as an instrument of terror, the most notable example would be "Leatherface" in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* films. Here, it is used to reclaim power as Ash moves from horror film victim to action film hero.

In the surprise ending of the film, Ash is suddenly pulled into a magical vortex, which deposits him into a fantastic medieval past where he is revealed to be "the chosen one," a hero foretold in an ancient spell book. Without explanation, the newly forged action-horror hero is dropped into the generic context of a period action-adventure film. This opens the text up to fan speculation, as to what kind of new possible pleasures could be found in this new combination. With the third installment, *The Army of Darkness,* that question is answered.

The Army of Darkness takes the hapless hero of *Evil Dead*, parts I and II, and sets him loose in a veritable genre playground. The play between horror and comedy of the previous films is here opened up to include cinematic allusions to all manner of

historically masculine genres. The opening shot features a grandiose orchestral score while the camera focuses on Ash's shackled legs evoking many period epics. This connection is made stronger as following shots zoom in on actor Bruce Campbell's exaggerated posturing of suffering, clearly informed by the melodramatic style of Charleton Heston in films such as *Planet of the Apes* (1968). Later, Ash escapes a pit full of monsters by utilizing his belt as a whip in the style of Indiana Jones. After easily dispatching a runaway deadite-monster with his sawed-off shotgun, the camera sweeps in on Ash as he deftly spins the gun on his finger. This shot not only uses the syntax of the western, in particular the figure of the gunfighter, but also mimics the famous first shot of John Wayne as the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach*.

Intertextuality in *The Army of Darkness* also extends to the story environment. Ash is not only presented as an amalgam of cinematic heroes, but he is constantly being inserted into a variety of situations directly taken from genre film history. The film's premise is essentially that of A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court originally a Mark Twain story that has seen many cinematic incarnations, most notably the 1949 version starring comedian Bing Crosby. The look of *Army of Darkness*'s fantastic medieval world as well as its overly choreographed action sequences borrow heavily from big budget studio period-action films such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) starring Errol Flynn. The skeletal warriors that make up the titular army are a direct reference to special effects pioneer Ray Harryhausen's fantasy epic, *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963). All of these cinematic quotations not only create a kind of shared generic verisimilitude, but they also serve as points of connection through mutual knowledge for the filmmakers and the audience.

Much of *The Army of Darkness* functions as a fairly mainstream action-adventure picture. As in *Evil Dead II*, a kind of compound generic effect takes place. At times the film works in the conventions of the action genre, and fulfills the requisite set of expectations. Then the film will suddenly switch gears back to horror, or rather the adjectival horrific-comedy of the previous *Evil Dead* films. The quick movements between various modes seems to happen much faster and looser in Army of Darkness than in the earlier films of the series. Exactly what this means for the cult-spectator becomes clearer after repeated viewings.

Interspersed between the many instances in which Ash is portrayed as the fearless monster fighter, there are just as many times where he is shown cowering in fright or begging for mercy. Ash is fully capable of sword fighting undead warriors two at a time, but he still shrieks and runs in terror when he is alone in the woods. The elasticity of the narrative allows for Ash to be dropped into situations in an episodic manner, making him simply react according to whatever generic mode is currently operating. In the woods, Ash works through a horrific mode, during the battle scenes an action mode is used, later on perhaps a comedic mode comes into play. However this seemingly random juxtaposition of styles seems to be working towards a purpose. By constantly forcing the viewer to take radically different positions to the narrative, the film effectively foregrounds the absurdity of the generic conventions it celebrates.

The series has always used humor and the syntax of slapstick comedy (particularly sight gags taken directly from *The Three Stooges*) to enhance a pre-existing take on the semantics of horror. While this is still the case in *Army of Darkness*, the technique is taken further making the absurdity, and more importantly an acceptance and

enjoyment of the absurdity, of the generic conventions clearly set in the foreground. For example, in an early scene, Ash and his love-interest Sheila play out a conventional interaction that leads to their romance. Sheila enters a workshop with a shirt she has made for Ash who is tinkering with his newly built robotic hand. Ash is upset by her intrusion into his gendered space and yells at her. She slaps him melodramatically and he then sweeps her into his arms. The camera moves in close, the light is soft and Campbell's shirt is unbuttoned to the middle of his chest. The music swells and they kiss, but not before Ash delivers the now famous one-liner: "Give me some sugar, baby."

As if the overt conventionality of the scene was not enough to convey its silliness, the character's line pushes it over the edge. This is the case throughout the film, as most of the narrative is an ardent pastiche of action and horror genre conventions peppered with a multitude of outrageous one-liners. These lines of dialogue serve to subvert the tone of the scenes back into a comedic mode, but also to insist on a different kind of sincerity to be found in them. The one-liners are absurd on their own, as are most of the popular quips uttered by Ash's action film contemporaries, such as "Hasta la vista, baby," or "Yippie kai ai ae, mother fucker." However, in the context of this film, the "one-liners" draw attention to the macho fantasy that the genre supplies, and deflate it. Campbell's over the top portrayal of a traditional action hero makes it less "serious" and more of a fun game for the audience to play along with.

The elasticity of narrative logic in the *Evil Dead* series that allows for the constant re-definition of the characters and story events also enables a freer use of generic pastiche. The films don't simply remake the characters and events, they do so by re-arranging them in terms of their generic significance. The films slip between generic

modes so as to portray the various aspects of Ash's character. In the third film, this use of genre is further expanded to rely more on direct cinematic reference to previous genre films and characters. By directly associating Ash with elements of genre film history the film is able to play with traditional film representations of heroism and masculinity.

In addition to a dialogue with the history of cinema, the *Evil Dead* films have also been informed and influenced by contemporary genre films. During the 1980s there was a noticeable shift in action and horror films towards a focus on the body (Neale 52,93). The roll of the body during this era, particularly in the Hollywood action film, has been explored thoroughly in the work of Susan Jeffords. In her book <u>Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Regan Era</u>, Jeffords examines many mainstream films that appear to have greatly influenced the direction of the *Evil Dead* series. While *Army of Darkness* does not completely match the ideological side of Jeffords' argument, the film is a product of its time and has taken many cues from its contemporaries. Many of the characteristics of the "hard body" can be found in the character of Ash, though they are continually undermined and foiled by other parts of the narrative.

Jeffords describes Hollywood action films of the 1980's as foregrounding white male bodies that were "heroic, aggressive, and determined" as a kind of "collective symbol" for President Regan's political agenda (Jeffords 24-25). These characters are solitary figures pitted against seemingly insurmountable odds but are nonetheless able to survive and triumph due to the strength or "hardness" of their bodies. The hero's hard body is tested, often by depicting repeated violence and injury to the body, but always proves to be "superior" to its enemies in its resiliency (Jeffords 52-53). The durability of the hard body can be seen in a character like John McClane (Bruce Willis) from *Die*

Hard (1988). Another interesting manifestation, when a hero's body is shown to be too soft, and therefore must be made harder in order for him to succeed, is the case in *Robocop* (1987). Both of these films show their influence in *Army of Darkness*.

Die Hard was released one year after *Evil Dead II*, but the similarity of the two films' resilient protagonists was played up in the beginning sequences of *Army of Darkness*. Both John McClane and Ash undergo constant attacks on their bodies emerging after each one more battered and bloodied but even more determined to survive. Ash's *Evil Dead II* incarnation is forged into this mold by the end of the film, and it is exactly that persona that crawls out of the execution pit in the opening of *Army of Darkness*. Beaten, scarred, and muck-covered Ash proves that he as earned his hard body in that he has not only survived but is ready and able to continue fighting. More over, Ash's hard body is made all the more evident as it is put on display for the camera. The homoerotic spectacle of Campbell's oiled muscles through his torn clothing is a prominent feature of these scenes, and like other idealized 1980's heroes, these images also raise questions about the masculine control they supposedly reinforce (Neale 53-54).

Another recurring theme is that of Ash making to "harden" his body, as Officer Murphy (Peter Weller) is hardened through his cybernetic transformation in *Robocop*. Ash recounts his own transformation in the film's flashback sequence, as the evil spirits had "…got into my hand, and it went bad. So I lopped it off at the wrist." His body's weakness had to be eliminated, and in that film is replaced with a chainsaw. In *Army of Darkness*, the generic significance of the chainsaw is lessened by the period-action-adventure context and so a new hand is made. This hand resembles an armored gauntlet, and its mechanical strength is demonstrated by crushing a metal cup.

The fast and loose combinations of cinematic references, specifically references to typically male oriented genres such as the action-adventure, gives the film the feeling of boys playing out their heroic fantasies in the backyard. Ash plays out these masculine characters from film history, and his adoring fans share his victories, especially those resulting from violent action. Joan Mellen has pointed out "…this violence also expresses and releases the rage twentieth-century men feel over the diminution of masculinity that they suffer in their present-day lives, a masculinity that seems to have flourished on the open plains" (Mellen 11). Indeed, Ash takes on the role of this "frontiersman," as Mellen calls it, and certainly he is able to live out this romantic fantasy because he is in another time. However, as the entire film, in fact the entire series, is channeled through such a strongly comedic filter, Ash's overtly masculine moments cannot be simply taken at face value.

In the first two films of the series, Ash's background was of no importance and was simply left out of the narrative. In the third film, where a more conscious relationship to other action films is being sought, Ash's backstory is introduced. Unlike John McClane (a policeman) or John Rambo (a U.S. Special Forces operative) Ash comes from the entirely un-heroic occupation of housewares department manager at a fictional retail store, "S-Mart." This fact is established immediately after the film's epic opening scene so as to foreshadow Ash's hesitation between cinema hero and "average guy." This conflict of character is further defined throughout the film.

Action heroes often exist on the fringe, or at least hesitate on the border, as in the case of the classic western figure. These characters are often, as James Neibaur states, presented as "losers from society's perspective who prove to the audience that they are

indeed winners within the context of the film's narrative"(Neibaur 1). Ash can certainly be seen as a "loser," but so can almost any member of the film's presumed cult audience. While his fantastic surroundings are uncharacteristic of the cult viewer's day to day life, Ash's background as a wisecracking social outsider with a dead-end job is much closer to home.

Ash is an example of someone like them who has an active fantasy life that is mitigated through the history of cinema. The "story of how he could have been king," which he shares with his co-workers. In the film, Ash's fantasy life is interchangeable with his real one, as he easily moves from pricing toasters to battling zombies in the theatrically released ending. He symbolically combines a perceived real world self-image of the presumed cult-spectator with a heroically idealized version. This affinity for the film's protagonist again secures a bond of shared knowledge and experience between the filmmakers and their audience.

Ash's similarity to the perceived self-image of the film's audience allows him to be used as a tool for self-distinction. Telotte has pointed out how cult films often encapsulate a longing to express one's difference from the norm, and in *Army of Darkness* the figure of the main character allows the viewer to do so (Telotte 12). Ash is in many ways a ready-made construction of, as Corrigan would say, "public images." However, the magic of this film is the obvious and "built in" connection that set of images has to the "personal space" of its targeted programmatic audience. Essentially combining a cinematic fantasy with just enough of a connection to the "private" lives of the perceived audience to create an almost perfect cult object for that group.

Ultimately, *Army of Darkness* is just as preposterous as any *Lethal Weapon* or *Die Hard*, but the film (as well as its audience) is willing to accept this in ways that conventional action films do not. *Army* knows it's a fantasy, and labors to make itself as fantastic and fun as possible, thereby more solidly aligning with the tenets of paracinema. The film also uses the figure of Ash as a go-between for the audience's relationship to these genre films and a self-depreciating examination of their personal identities. Ash allows the audience to vicariously play along as a hyperbolic action hero melding fantasy with an acknowledgement of the genre's role *as* fantasy. The relationship between the programmatic cult film and its audience allows for this sense of fun and play. Both the filmmakers and the film's fans can both laugh at the ridiculous side of the genre, and earnestly enjoy every minute of the action and spectacle.

Chapter 3.2: *Titanic* and the Non-Cult Cult Film

The *Evil Dead* films present a case of a programmatic cult genre film that has succeeded in attracting and holding a cult audience. While this synthesis is an interesting and perhaps more concrete example of what is commonly understood to be a cult film, film cultism is a much larger and more common phenomenon. If one were to take the elements of cult-like audience practice and separate them from the perception of the "cult film," such practices would become apparent in all manner of other films. Where this is interesting is in the case of films which conform to common definitions of "mainstream cinema," a type of film that is most often seen as the antithesis of cult film.

In the minds of most self-styled cult fans, few films would be further removed from the genre than James Cameron's 1997 blockbuster, *Titanic*. *Titanic* starred then teen idol Leonardo Di Caprio and up and coming actress Kate Winslet, as well as a number of well known character actors including Kathy Bates, Billy Zane and Bill Paxton. This film set records for both budget and box office returns, and also managed to sweep that year's Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Director. Any one of these factors would surely qualify this film as "mainstream," and thereby remove it from consideration for the cult fan. However, the film most definitely has attracted a body of fans that engage with the text in ways that are decidedly cult like.

The film *Titanic* is essentially a teenage romance/coming of age story in a period setting which awkwardly segues into a disaster/adventure film climax. These two distinct parts are told as a flashback from characters in a modern sunken treasure narrative, which mark the beginning, middle, and end of the film. These three modes of generic discourse allow for a variety of potential pleasures and can account for some of the film's

mainstream success. However, it is the romantic fantasy portion of the film that has proved to be the most popular. *Titanic* is a case where approximately half of a film is the most interesting to its fans, who have taken to cult-like reading strategies in order to elaborate and re-appropriate the film for their own uses.

In spite of *Titanic*'s conventional mainstream status, it nonetheless attracted an audience that used the film in markedly cult-like ways. *Titanic* made the list of top-grossing films which implies an appeal to a general demographic, however, as Melanie Nash and Martti Lahti have pointed out, the film's audience was "both young (63 percent under twenty-five) and female (60 percent)"(Nash 64). The other significant factor relating to this special audience is the high occurrence of repeated theatrical screenings. Twenty percent of the people who saw the film saw it more than once (as opposed to a two percent average), and two months after *Titanic*'s release seventy-six percent of repeat viewers still planned to see the film again (Nash 64). This repeated viewing of the film became a foundation for further ritualistic practice.

Much of the phenomenon of the repeat viewings is tied up in the established fan base for the film's star, Leonardo Di Caprio. At the time of *Titanic*'s release, Di Caprio was at the height of his popularity as a teen heartthrob. Di Caprio's appeal to young women and girls was certainly used to attract the audience for the film, just as is case with any attractive star. What makes *Titanic* different, however, is the way that Di Caprio was extensively discussed and promoted in numerous publications directed at female teens well before the film's release. The fascination with Di Caprio began with his introduction on the television program "Growing Pains", and was identified early on by various teen magazines (Nash 67). As Di Caprio's career progressed, his star image

began to take a stronger shape though his rolls, most notably (for the female fan) that of Romeo in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. *Romeo + Juliet* was released in 1996, and from that point up until the release of *Titanic* at the end of 1997, the star image of Di Caprio had been firmly set as that of a "romantic hero" and an object of erotic spectacle. Following Di Caprio's development as a star, Nash and Lahti arrived at the conclusion that *Titanic*'s popularity was owing almost entirely to the fact that it "provided an additional context (character/narrative) for girls' ongoing articulation of their Di Caprio fantasies,"(Nash 68).

At first, *Titanic* and *The Army of Darkness* may seem worlds apart. However, the development of *Titanic* as an outlet for fantasies based on Leonardo Di Caprio's star image is very much like the evolution of the *Evil Dead* series to accommodate the growing cult-star power of Bruce Campbell. In each case the stars' images were introduced in familiar contexts (family sit-com and cult horror), and were developed through other rolls and fan oriented materials and publications. While the specifics of each fantasy may differ (a romantic dream of a relationship with the star as opposed to a projection of a heroic ideal), the fan behaviors are quite similar. With both films, the respective fan communities conflate the characters with the actors, using the films to help define and re-affirm their understanding of their idols. Also, each case clearly shows an active use of the target films' imagery in the fans' private lives.

Only part of the whole of *Titanic* deals exclusively with teenage romance, but that part has been expanded on in great detail by fan communities. *Titanic* fans have taken desired portions of the "official" narrative and remade them according to their own desires. Poaching the text as a projection of their own fantasy of being part of the

romance, many fan writers elaborate on the female lead character of Rose. Either

expanding on the conflicts she encounters with "adult authority" or speculating on her

life after surviving the Titanic disaster (Nash 66). Still other writers so aggressively re-

use the text so as to take the love story entirely out of the historical and cinematic

context. Usually allowing the young lovers to not only survive and live "happily ever

after," but often also letting the ship remain intact as well. As Nash and Lahti have stated,

"The centrality of this coming-of-age story to girls' pleasure…is accentuated by the fact

that the authors of many of these stories can even ignore what is, for them, irrelevant: the

ship's collision with the iceberg. They alter both history and the movie's narrative in

favor of a happy ending…"(Nash 66).

　　　Titanic was possibly as mainstream of a Hollywood production as is possible, and

the film text itself is equally conventional. In spite of these typically un-cult-like factors,

a specialized audience has none the less engaged the text on an active and ritualistic level.

However the question remains as to whether the cult audience makes *Titanic* a "cult

film"? The answer is wrapped in the semantic conundrum that motivated this project. As

audience practice is not universal, it is not particularly helpful to categorize films

according to the existence (or historical instance) of a specialized fan or cult following. If

a film does or does not have such an active audience, that does not limit the potential for

other kinds of audience engagement. That is to say, a cult film is not necessarily *only* a

cult film, or for that matter a "mainstream" film is not locked into being read in only a

mainstream fashion.

　　　It is up to the individual audience members to determine their own level of

commitment or activity with any given film. However, as has been demonstrated, some

films very consciously, and perhaps more consciously than most films, seek to invite a

particular kind of spectator by addressing them through a peculiar set of cinematic

conventions and stylistic modes. Texts that operate in this way and achieve a successful

bond of communication with their target audience are perhaps the most deserving of the

generic moniker "cult film."

Conclusion

Cult practice is not limited to the cult film genre. Paracinema fans are interesting group who have also adopted a very colorful body of films. Their use of the cult film genre serves as a fascinating example of how an audience can interact with motion pictures. However, the behavior of contemporary paracinema fans, while perhaps a more obvious or familiar instance, is not the only form of film cultism. As much as the cult fan community would like to think this is the case, it is simply not so. Conflating the modern cult genre with specialized audience interaction is allowing oneself to be blocked out by boundaries made by a fan culture which thrives on exclusivity. This imagined difference is also supported by non-cult film audiences who retain cultural memories of the oppositional positions that historical exhibition modes, such as the midnight movie, placed on the "cult film."

It serves no good purpose to continue to imagine that the modern paracinematic fan community's use of the cult genre is a radical activity. That is not to say that it is not worthy of study, or an interesting case of appropriating mass culture for personal ends. Rather, that it is not only through the "counter-aesthetic" of the cult genre fan that one might rework the "public images" of motion pictures into one's own "private space." The paracinematic community is perhaps more visibly at work towards these ends, and the entertainment industry continues to exploit the historical resonance of the cult film and the midnight movie designing more products to be consumed by this group. Because of this particular high profile market relationship, it becomes harder and harder to distinguish the genre from the mode of reception.

Regardless of how difficult this task may be at times, by separating the two meanings of "cult," and understanding the potential for active audience practice with a popular text, opportunities for further study become apparent. What is potentially the most interesting of these is the ways in which contemporary film consumers are selectively resistant of commercial narratives. This kind of textual poaching has been actively discussed, but examples like the *Evil Dead* films, the development of new communication technologies like the Internet, and the importance of niche video markets suggest that Hollywood may begin to have a more two-way dialogue with its audiences. Recent trends in mainstream cinema appear to offer potential for more specialized, fan-oriented texts to be made through "official" channels. Films such as *Hellboy*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Romeo + Juliet* all lean towards this conclusion. Perhaps, one day the active reading strategies of the film cultist will one day become the mainstream mode of Hollywood story telling.

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The Adventures of Robin Hood. Dir. Michael Curtiz, William Keighley. Perf. Errol Flynn. 1938.

Army of Darkness. Dir. Sam Raimi. Perf. Bruce Campbell. 1993.

Audition. Dir. Takashi Miike. 2000.

Being John Malkovich. Dir. Spike Jonze. Screenplay by Chalie Kaufman. 1999.

Bio Zombie. Dir. Wilson Yip. 1998.

Dawn of the Dead. Dir. George Romero. 1978.

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Die Hard. Dir. John McTiernan. Perf. Bruce Willis. 1988.

Eraserhead. Dir. David Lynch. Perf. Jack Nance.1977.

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Evil Dead 2. Dir. Sam Raimi. Perf. Bruce Campbell.1987.

Heavy Metal. Dir.Gerald Potterton. 1981.

Hellboy. Dir. Guillermo del Toro. Perf. Ron Perlman. 2004.

Ichi the Killer. Dir. Takashi Miike. 2001.

Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark. Dir. Steven Spielburg. Perf. Harrison Ford. 1981.

Infra-Man. Dir. Shan Hua. 1975.

Jason and the Argonauts. Dir. Don Chaffey. Special Effects by Ray Harryhausen. 1963.

Lethal Weapon. Dir. Richard Donner. Perf. Mel Gibson. 1987.

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Dir. Peter Jackson. 2001.

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers. Dir. Peter Jackson. 2002.

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Night of the Living Dead. Dir. George Romero. 1968.

Pink Flamingos. Dir. John Waters. Perf. Divine. 1972.

Pink Floyd: The Wall. Dir. Alan Parker. Screenplay by Roger Waters. 1982.

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