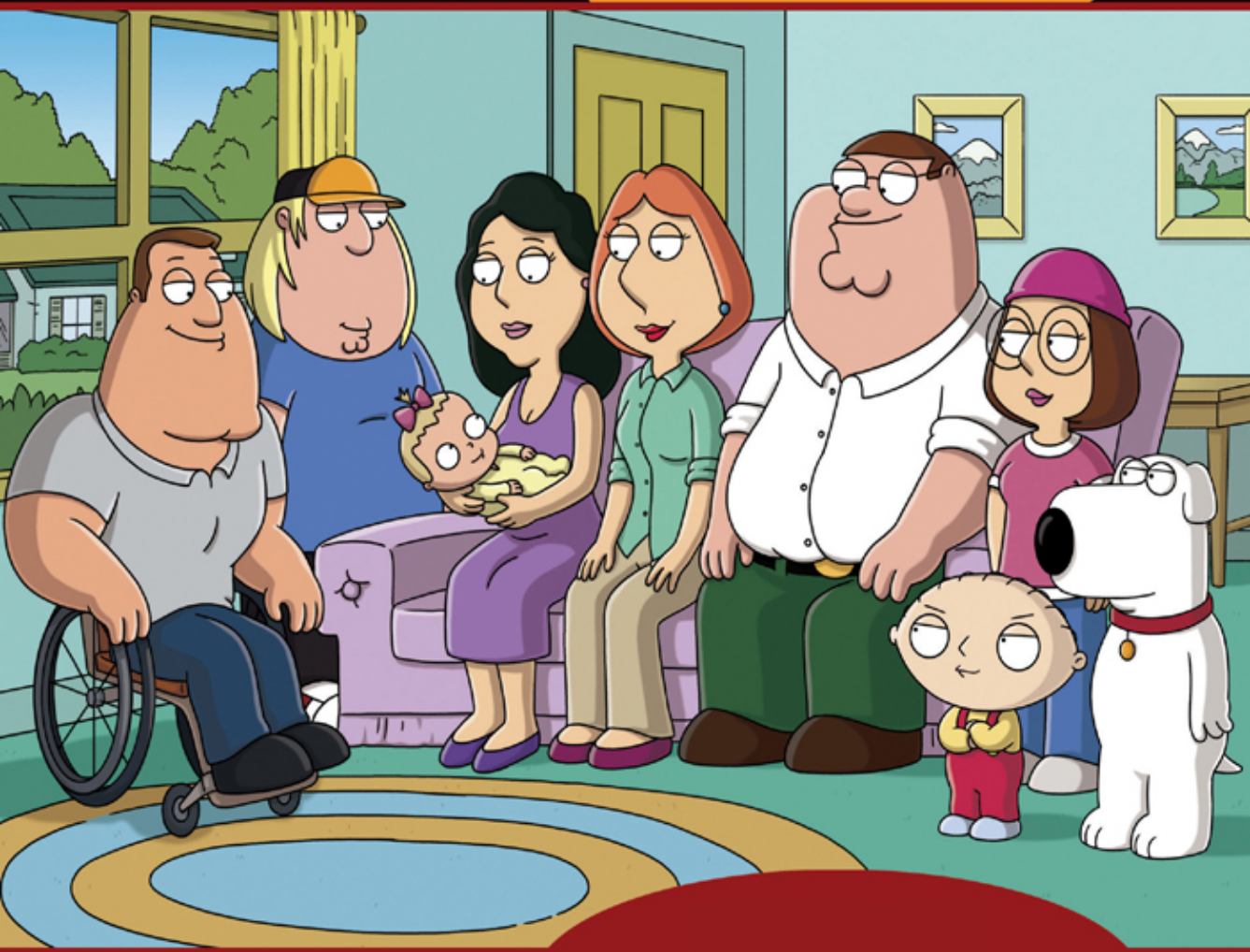
Cult Pop Culture

How the Fringe Became Mainstream

Bob Batchelor



Film and Television

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Volume 1: Film and Television

Bob Batchelor, Editor

PRAEGER

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To Ray B. Browne, a mentor and guiding spirit for all popular culture enthusiasts, and with all my love to my wife Kathy and our daughter, Kassandra Dylan. Without them, nothing is possible.

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Contents

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Introduction

Bob Batchelor

The word *cult* carries two distinct meanings in the United States. The first is destructive, most often associated with extreme religious groups and messianic individuals, such as Charles Manson or Jim Jones. A mere mention of the word in this context and one's mind immediately conjures up grainy television footage of some psychotic and often includes extreme violence. Given that many cult movements have ended in total destruction, perhaps television, movie, or documentary images of that person or clan pop into view. I would bet, for example, that the image of Powers Boothe playing Jim Jones in the 1980s miniseries *Guyana Tragedy* is more recognizable than actual photos of Jones.

Thankfully, however, the second definition is less scary. When one refers to cults under this guise, the word means that a topic or individual possesses a kind of compulsive, rampant, or enduring popularity, usually slightly or overtly outside the mainstream. We see this when a figure or object is said to have a "cult of personality," or a "cult following."

What the two meanings of *cult* have in common is the idea that in each case, followers hold belief in the person or object deep in their souls, in most cases, willing to do battle to defend those thoughts or perhaps even die for them. Examining the dark form of cult based on fear, hatred, domination, and obsession, we see that the differences with the second definition are much greater. As a matter of fact, cult

pop culture is built on ideas at the opposite end of the spectrum from the evil version: humor, charisma, mystery, and love.

In contemporary America, the Internet Age and sophisticated technological innovations are spinning the notion of cult and cult popular culture on its head. Due to the spread of mass communication channels, the definition and subsequent use of *cult* is changing significantly. For example, the widespread use of the word is in some ways clouding its meaning. One finds that anything, anyone, or any group that is slightly off kilter is dubbed a cult, just as is an item in these categories that gains quick or unexplained popularity.

Some products and corporate leaders are given the "cult of" label. Apple and its late charismatic chief executive Steve Jobs are a case study here. Although there are untold millions of Apple users (this essay is, in fact, being written and copyedited on a MacBook Pro), which might lead one to dismiss it as a cult phenomenon, there are also intensely devoted Apple consumers—the kind that will wait outside its retail stores for days on end to be the first to possess a new product, such as the iPad or latest iteration of the iPhone. Indeed, Jobs himself was said to be a kind of cult leader, maybe based on his Svengali-like ability to lead the company through the introduction of so many now-essential consumer goods. Jobs's success, despite the ongoing health challenges that eventually took his life and the gloomy economic picture, add to the cult-like implications. As the word has transformed over time, Jobs's version of it seemed to also entail traits such as secrecy, success, admiration, jealousy, and the general impression that someone so powerful must be doing something nefarious to achieve such heights.

Another interesting change occurring is that for the first time in history, any boundaries that walled off cult topics based on access or control over content are now virtually nonexistent. The Web, YouTube, file sharing, and global electronic communities have destroyed the demarcation between cult and noncult entities. The ability to access information on just about any topic under the sun is only a few keystrokes away. Perhaps most dramatically, there are images and video on niche subjects of every variety. The 2003 film *The Room*, for example, is now considered part of the cult industry, inspiring zany devotees to obsess about the movie in any number of ways. However, the notion of *The Room* as a cult topic must include that typing "The Room movie" into Google produces 381 million hits. In this way, the idea of cult popular culture has been put through the democratic mass media

wringer, emerging on the other side outside the fringes that made it a cult topic in the first place.

With Google and YouTube, in particular, the amount of material one can now find on any cult topic both exemplifies and defies the label itself. On one hand, many (possibly millions) of search results reveal how deeply loved or obsessed over a cult topic might be. Its fans create new meaning by erecting virtual altars to it on the Web. Yet, on the other hand, the watering-down factor must by definition pull it toward the mainstream.

For example, if one's cult fetish happened to be the original Speed Racer cartoons that originally aired in the United States in 1967 and 1968, then in reruns over various later periods, it would have been difficult (if not impossible) and costly to find videotapes of the series or even a great deal of information about the show. Fast-forward to 2011, however, and a simple Google search returns more than 2.1 million hits, websites devoted to the series, places to buy all the episodes on DVD, and all the minute details that would set the cultist's heart aflutter.

This collection, then, examines and interrogates the idea of what makes a cult topic in contemporary America. A word of caution, though, is that in no way is it meant to be exhaustive or all encompassing. If one accepts my idea about the democratization of cult popular culture outlined above, then it is clear that no collection, regardless of rigor, could keep up with the number of new cult topics emerging quietly or blared from the faux news desk of a nightly celebutainment program.

Fittingly, the first volume in the *Cult Pop Culture* collection focuses on cult topics related to film and television. People are quick to tack the label on movies and television shows. The second volume travels through cult topics in literature and music. These essays reveal the profound attachment listeners and readers feel for their favorite artists, particularly when discovered prior to mainstream acceptance. This volume also addresses how fans (often with the help/promotion of the media) generate cult icons. The third set of essays grapples with cult topics across a series of interesting areas, including particular industries, events, places, sports, and the Internet. While this volume purposely offers snapshots of many topics that comprise contemporary cult pop culture, readers will find numerous threads that run through the sections. For example, Volume 3 examines several topics that are not based on a single person, group, or entity but instead take

on broad subjects that engage larger numbers of people, such as poker/gambling, car collectors, and online virtual environments.

I did not force the *Cult Pop Culture* contributors to abide by a specific definition of what is or is not cult. Actually, I deliberately chose to not force my notions of cult popular culture on them so they would have the intellectual freedom to roam widely over the idea. What I think readers will enjoy about this collection is the ability to read it in a nonlinear fashion. As a matter of fact, each book, similar to the way people surf the Web, begs to be tackled based on interest. If Russ Meyer is your cult thing, feel free to start in the film section and see where the journey takes you.

The beauty and value of popular culture is its ability to let people explore the ideas, topics, people, and influences that matter to them most. This exercise actually forces people to engage in higher-order critical thinking skills involved in the formation of new ideas and impulses. As we wrestle with our own thoughts, dreams, and aspirations through popular culture exploration, we obtain, strengthen, and evolve our personal worldviews or core guiding ideologies.

Cult pop culture, then, opens up and allows others into the darker recesses of our obsessions. It swirls somewhere in our minds and comes alive at the intersection of the mass communication industries that developed to support and disseminate culture. And, just like noncult popular culture, its cult cousin requires a nearly endless supply of fact, fiction, gossip, illusion, and misinformation. Based on the amount of information available, we are actually training ourselves to think amid this cacophony. The result of these countless pop culture impressions over the course of a lifetime is a permanently heightened sense of sensationalism, chased with healthy doses of societal angst.

The technology foundation is blurring the lines between cult and noncult, actually drawing the former into the mainstream. It is not possible to distinguish where one or the other stops or starts. At what point, for instance, does a film or person magically transform from something interesting to a phenomenon that creates obsessive, loving followers? A simple definition does not exist, so people are forced to draw their own conclusions.

What is clear, however, is that the ability to covet a cult topic individually is both shrinking and expanding as technology becomes more omnipresent. These contrasting forces enable one to be as completely obsessive as he or she wishes while simultaneously allowing that person to be fully public or private about it. A person can build an online shrine to his or her cult icons, potentially drawing an audience of many

millions, or ferret out information alone with nothing but the ideas and a glowing computer screen in front of him or her.

Connections

The power of cult popular culture is in the way it connects people. One could reasonably argue, as a matter of fact, that it is in the connections with and between objects and people that the definition of broader popular culture resides. In essence, then, popular culture is not a kind of thing, as most definitions attempt to explain, like the antithesis of high art or culture. Rather, popular culture resides in the various impulses that draw members of the global community to a person, thing, topic, or issue that arise out of the juncture of mass communications, technology, political systems, and economic institutions.

In other words, I am proposing that we view popular culture not as an object, say Andy Warhol's famous Campbell's Soup can painting, but as the interface itself that draws viewers to or repels them from that artwork. Examining Warhol's piece, it is not that I say to myself, "wow, that is popular culture." Instead, it is the confluence of seeing that paining; interacting with it based on my life experiences; adding context, history, experience, and personality; and then creating a new meaning of it for me personally that defines popular culture.

The late Ray B. Browne explained popular culture, saying, "It is the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainments, diversions, heroes, icons, rituals, psychology, religion—our total life picture." In addition, my definition asks that the consumer recognize that it is more than just the world around us; it also includes the exchange between a popular culture object and one's assimilation of the thing—the thoughts, emotions, and manner in which one consumes it. For me, the meaning of popular culture exists in that absorption rather than in attempting to define a tangible object as low-, high-, or middlebrow on a fabricated scale of hierarchies. In this respect, *popular culture* is a verb, not a noun, the total mental and physical interaction with a topic and the new synthesis or creation that occurs as a result of that fusion.[1]

It is no wonder that film and television are central facets when discussing cult topics. They define our national dialogue, essentially providing Americans with basic talking points across race, political ties, gender differences, or any other demographic features that separate people. The narratives, regardless of the reason they attract or repel us, give context and a way of interpreting society and culture.

As millions of Americans interact with mass media, whether watching the same movies and television shows or listening to radio programs, a common language develops that opens new lines of communications. The downside, however, is that the fascination with popular culture diverts attention from important challenges the nation confronts. In this light, popular culture serves as a kind of placebo. The obsessive, loving nature of cult objects intensifies this diversion critique of popular culture because the focus on a specific cult influence distracts people and, at the same time, enables them to feel good about the world without really forcing them to directly confront critical issues.

In terms of cult topics, the connection between people may be deeper and stronger, based on a sense that enthusiasts share some tightly held meaning or feeling of ownership regarding the object. In some cases, such as fan fiction or cover bands, people are so intricately wrapped up in the meaning of a cult topic that they will participate in the creation of new or alternative meanings.

How the Fringe Became Mainstream

Perhaps in an earlier era—one not so media saturated—cult popular culture objects could remain small, special, or maybe even hidden away. Looking back, individuals appeared to have greater control over their interaction with popular culture. A person could wade in and out of mass communication channels at will. More importantly, people possessed the ability and power to turn off the culture clatter.

In contemporary America, however, popular culture is omnipresent. This fundamental transformation has broad consequences because of its complete totality. Today, like Neo when he decides to enter the Matrix, there is no escape or turning back. As a result, the fringiest subcultures and most "out there" parts of the pop culture universe are within easy reach—often no further than a mouse click away.

At the heart of this transformation is our collective wanderlust regarding technology. The nation is in the midst of a technology mania, which is used as an excuse and tool to map out every inch of our cultural beings, from cravings and fascinations to depravities and fears. Now, entire industries are created on the whims and secret longings of people simultaneously tethered to their computers and set free to roam the broad infinity of the Internet. In an environment where most people accept the idea that popular culture is as pervasive as the air around us, the distance between cult and mainstream is stripped away.

At its heart, cult popular culture is not outside America or conventional society—it *is* America. Cult topics and objects are now part of mainstream culture, pretty much as accessible as any other cultural influence. In an earlier era, one's dedication to a cult notion might have served as a way of differentiating from traditional norms or values. This is no longer the case due to the ease in accessing information across mass media channels. By definition, when a person searches out information and finds it on a website, for example, he or she is interacting with others, since the searcher realizes that someone or group created the site itself. The Internet serves as a tether between cult enthusiasts, whether it is actively monitoring a Wikipedia entry on given object or watching a YouTube clip.

More importantly, perhaps, is that the enthusiast's commitment to a cult topic embodies the general fascination with popular culture in contemporary society. Given the way I have redefined popular culture as an action rather than an object, my view is that popular culture is not only central to what people believe but also crucial in how they understand and interpret the world. The challenge, whether dealing with a topic within or outside traditional culture, is that many people willingly allow themselves to be distracted by popular culture to the detriment of other critical aspects of contemporary life.

If a person is consumed by the latest film, television, or celebrity gossip, it is easier to put off thoughts of war, economic disparity, and melancholy. Thus, popular culture—literally the study of what influences people as they conduct their daily lives—can be a force for reinterpreting and changing the world. Or it can mask reality in favor of a Hollywood version of life that emphasizes happy endings and rainbows. Wake up or tune out—the choice is yours.

***

Creating a collection like *Cult Pop Culture* might seem like a solitary task, but actually this series would not exist without a strong team behind it. First, I would like to thank and congratulate the contributors, a group of scholars, professional writers, enthusiasts, and graduate students whose analysis and insight illuminated the idea of cult popular culture in new and engaging ways. I am really pleased that we were able to pull together such a phenomenal group of contributors drawn not only from several nations around the world but also from some of the finest popular culture scholars working today. In addition, young scholars and graduate students from some of America's finest schools, including Penn State University, Kent State University, Michigan State

University, and the University of South Florida, brought energy and enthusiasm to the project. I hope this brief note will accentuate how much I truly appreciate this group's work.

Cult Pop Culture would not have seen the light of day without the steady, enthusiastic support of our editor Dan Harmon. Dan and I have enjoyed a long history of work together across many projects. He is a true professional and good friend. Other friends offered support and help along the way, including Chris Burtch, Larry Z. Leslie, Kelli Burns, Tom Heinrich, Brian Cogan, and Tom and Kristine Brown. I have been lucky to have many fantastic mentors, including Lawrence S. Kaplan, James A. Kehl, Sydney Snyder, Richard Immerman, Peter Magnani, and Anne Beirne. A special note of thanks goes to Phillip Sipiora, who taught me so much at the University of South Florida and continues to be a role model for my own work as a scholar. So much of my career success resulted from my relationship with Ray B. Browne (1922–2009). This collection is dedicated to him, not only out of respect for his guidance, but also for all of us who are deeply interested in popular culture.

In addition, I would like to thank my colleagues at Kent State University for their support and encouragement, particularly Stanley T. Wearden, Dean of the College of Communication and Information, and Jeff Fruit, Director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Their vision and leadership have been inspirational. Bill Sledzik, Danielle Coombs, Tim Smith, and Gene Sasso helped guide me as well. Financial support from JMC also enabled me to have two fine graduate research assistants and editors on the project: Sonali Kudva and Jodee Hammond. Both improved the collection immeasurably.

On a personal note, nothing I do is possible without the support of my family. Kathy and Kassie brought immeasurable joy into my life on a moment-by-moment basis. I cherish every instant we spend together—thank you.

Note

1. Ray B. Browne, "Popular Culture as the New Humanities," in *Popular Culture Theory and Methodology: A Basic Introduction*, edited by Harold E. Hinds, Jr., et al. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 75.

Timeline

1900 to Present

1900 November 3–10, The Automobile Club of America sponsors the first automobile show in Madison Square Garden.

Kodak introduces the $1.00 Brownie Box Camera.

The College Entrance Examination Board is established by representatives from 13 colleges and preparatory schools.

"A Bird in a Gilded Cage," written by Arthur J. Lamb and Harry Von Tilzer, becomes a hit song.

1901 President Theodore Roosevelt causes a national controversy when he dines with Black leader Booker T. Washington at the White House.

General Electric develops the first corporate research laboratory.

United States Steel is formed and is the nation's first billion-dollar corporation.

The United States declares the war in the Philippines is over.

1902 Owen Wister publishes *The Virginian.*

Dr. Charles Wardell Stiles discovers hookworm, a parasite affecting countless poor Whites in the South.

Michigan defeats Stanford 49–0 in the first Tournament of Roses Association football game.

1903 May 23–July 26, Dr. Horatio Nelson Jackson and Sewall K. Crocker complete the first cross-country automobile trip.

The Boston Red Sox defeat the Pittsburgh Pirates in the inaugural baseball World Series.

The 23-story, steel-framed Fuller Building is completed in New York City; because of its unique shape, it becomes known as the Flatiron Building.

The Great Train Robbery, directed by Edwin S. Porter, is the nation's first action movie.

1904 The first organized automobile race, dubbed the Vanderbilt Cup race after William K. Vanderbilt, a wealthy auto enthusiast, takes place on Long Island.

The first Olympic Games held in the United States take place as part of the St. Louis World's Fair.

The first segment of the New York City subway, from the Brooklyn Bridge to 145th Street, opens.

1905 First nickelodeon (nickel theater) opens in Pittsburgh.

May G. Sutton becomes the first U.S. player to win a Wimbledon singles title.

The Rotary Club, the first business-oriented service organization, is founded in Chicago.

1906 Upton Sinclair publishes *The Jungle*, a novel that reveals impure food-processing standards in Chicago.

Devil's Tower in Wyoming is declared the first national monument by Theodore Roosevelt.

1907 As a result of the Immigration Act of 1907, Japanese laborers are excluded from immigrating to the continental United States by presidential order.

Ziegfeld's Follies opens on Broadway.

The *Lusitania*, the world's largest steamship, sets a new speed record, crossing the Atlantic from Ireland to New York in five days.

1908 Henry Ford introduces the first Model T, which sells for $850.

New York City passes the Sullivan Ordinance, which bans women from smoking cigarettes in public.

The first airplane fatality occurs when Lieutenant Thomas W. Selfridge dies in the crash of a plane piloted by Orville Wright, who is also seriously injured.

1909 George Bellows paints *Both Members of the Club.*

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is established.

Football is banned from the New York City public schools due to its injury and even death rate.

Alice Huyler Ramsey is the first woman to drive across the United States—from New York to San Francisco.

Scribner's pays former president Theodore Roosevelt $500,000 for an account of his hunting trip to Africa.

The Pittsburgh Pirates win the World Series by beating the Detroit Tigers four games to three.

1910 Jack Johnson becomes the first Black heavyweight champion of the modern era with a fifteenth-round knockout of Jim Jeffries.

The Boy Scouts of America is chartered by William D. Boyce.

The Camp Fire Girls is chartered by Dr. & Mrs. L. H. Gulick.

Florence Lawrence is declared the first genuine movie star as the "Vitagraph Girl."

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright completes work on the Robie House, Chicago, Illinois.

The National City Planning Association is founded to help designers better coordinate architectural and landscape designs into American cities.

Morris and Rose Michtom found the Ideal Novelty & Toy Company.

1911 Edith Wharton publishes *Ethan Frome.*

The magazine *Masses* is rechristened with Max Eastman as editor.

Walter Dill Scott publishes *Influencing Men in Business*, which defines the methods of modern advertising.

Irving Berlin publishes hit song "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

The Kewpie doll, created by Rose O'Neill, appears.

Frank Lloyd Wright completes Taliesin, his home, studio, and retreat, near Spring Green, Wisconsin.

The Gideon Organization of Christian Commercial Travelers begins placing more than 60,000 Bibles in hotel rooms.

1912 The ocean liner *Titanic* strikes an iceberg and sinks (April 14–15), killing 1,523 passengers and crew.

The Girl Scouts of America is founded by Daisy Gordon.

Maria Montessori publishes *The Montessori Childhood Education Method*, describing new techniques in preschool education.

Mack Sennett founds the Keystone Company to produce comedy motion pictures.

Carl Laemmle forms Universal Pictures.

Novella *Tarzan of the Apes* is published by Edgar Rice Burroughs.

1913 The Armory Show of Modern Art is staged in New York City.

Congress designates the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day (May 10).

Horace Fletcher creates a national sensation through his "cure" for obesity and stomach ailment, called Fletcherism, which advocates chewing one's food at least 100 times before swallowing.

The Oreo cookie is introduced.

James Reese Europe becomes one of the first African Americans to secure a record deal, with Victor Records.

Clarence Crane introduces a hard candy called the Life Saver. His first flavor is Pep-O-Mint.

A. C. Gilbert begins marketing the Erector set.

George Herriman's cartoon strip "Krazy Kat" premieres in the *New York Journal*.

The Woolworth Building is completed in New York City.

1914 Tin Pan Alley songwriters organize the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) to protect their financial interests through royalty payments.

First transcontinental telephone service between New York City and San Francisco is successful.

Charlie Chaplin becomes a national star after the release of *Kid Auto Races at Venice*; "Charliemania" sweeps the country.

Tinkertoys are introduced.

W. C. Handy introduces America to the blues with the publication of the *St. Louis Blues*.

Construction begins on the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.

Mary Pickford becomes a national sensation after starring in D. W. Griffith's *Tess of Storm County*.

Margaret Sanger publishes *Family Limitation*, introducing many to the values of birth control.

The Harrison Drug Act is passed to restrict access to narcotics in the United States. The federal government estimates that 4.5 percent of the American public is addicted to drugs.

Gold is discovered in Alaska, leading to the last gold rush in American history.

1915 D. W. Griffith releases his landmark film *The Birth of a Nation.*

Carl Sandburg publishes *Chicago Poems.*

"Jelly Roll" Morton publishes the *Jelly Roll Blues.*

R. J. Reynolds creates one of the most successful brand-name advertising campaigns in modern history by introducing Camel cigarettes.

The Victor Talking Machine Company begins selling phonographs to the public.

Ford Motor Company produces its one-millionth Model T.

The state of Nevada passes the first no-fault divorce law, which requires six months of residency in the state.

1916 First permanent annual Rose Bowl football game is played.

Piggly-Wiggly, the first self-service grocery store, is founded by Clarence Saunders in Memphis, Tennessee.

D. W. Griffith films and releases the motion picture *Intolerance.*

Georgia O'Keeffe premieres at Alfred Stieglitz's New York Gallery, known as 291.

The Provincetown Players move from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to Greenwich Village, New York, and become the most influential Little Theatre of the decade.

Norman Rockwell illustrates his first cover for the *Saturday Evening Post.*

Fortune cookies are introduced to the world by David Jung, a Los Angeles noodle maker.

1917 Ragtime pioneer Scott Joplin dies (April 1).

The Constitutional amendment prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and use of alcohol passes Congress and is sent to the states for ratification (December 18).

The National Birth Control League, later Planned Parenthood, is created by Margaret Sanger.

1918 The first installment of Irish writer James Joyce's *Ulysses* is banned by the U.S. Post Office.

The Raggedy Ann doll, created by Johnny Gruelle, is introduced.

1919 The Eighteenth Amendment, prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcohol, is ratified.

United Artists is founded by Charlie Chaplin, D. W. Griffith, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford.

John Reed publishes *Ten Days That Shook the World.*

George "Babe" Ruth hits 29 home runs, shattering the old record. The next year Ruth will hit 54 homers, more than any other single *team* previously.

D. W. Griffith releases the movie *Broken Blossoms*.

Peter Paul Halajian of the Peter Paul Candy Company introduces the Konabar.

Lincoln Logs, a toy building set, are introduced.

1920 The Eighteenth Amendment, prohibiting the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcohol, goes into effect (January 16).

The Negro National Baseball League is founded (February 12).

Grand Canyon National Park is dedicated (April 20).

The Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote, is ratified (August 26).

The American Professional Football Association (renamed the National Football League in 1922) is founded (September 17).

Station KDKA, East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, inaugurates regular radio broadcasting (November 2).

The Baby Ruth candy bar is introduced.

1921 Charlie Chaplin's first feature-length film, *The Kid*, premieres (February 6).

The first White Castle hamburger restaurant opens in Wichita, Kansas (March 10).

Margaret Gorman wins the first Miss American Pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey (September 8).

The Sheik, starring Rudolph Valentino, premieres (October 31).

The Washburn-Crosby Company of Minneapolis creates Betty Crocker, a fictional model homemaker, to promote its Gold Medal brand flour.

Wonder Bread is introduced.

The Eskimo Pie ice cream bar sells more than one million units during its first year on the market.

1922 *Reader's Diges*t publishes its first issue (February 5).

French fashion designer Coco Chanel introduces her signature perfume, Chanel No. 5 (May 5).

Abie's Irish Rose, the longest running Broadway play of the 1920s, opens (May 23).

The Lincoln Memorial is dedicated in Washington, D.C. (May 30).

Archaeologist Howard Carter and his excavation team discover King Tutankhamen's tomb in the Valley of the Kings near Luxor, Egypt (November 4).

Fruit, Garden and Home begins publication (renamed *Better Homes and Gardens* in 1924).

George Squier invents Muzak, first developed in order to calm anxious elevator riders.

Emily Post publishes *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home*, which becomes a national best seller.

The Chinese tile game of mahjong becomes a fad in the United States.

The first A&W Root Beer stand opens in Sacramento, California.

The Klondike Bar is introduced.

1923 *Time*, the nation's first weekly news magazine, publishes its first issue.

Alma Cummings wins the first American dance marathon, held at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City.

Yankee Stadium opens (April 18).

Cecil B. DeMille's epic biblical film *The Ten Commandments* premieres on December 4.

Neon advertising signs are introduced.

Mars Candies markets its first candy bar, the Milky Way.

Jacob Schick receives a patent for the first electric razor.

Reese's Peanut Butter Cups are introduced.

The nonsensical "Yes! We Have No Bananas" becomes a major hit song, to the annoyance of countless Americans.

The Bell and Howell Company introduces a 16-mm camera, marking the advent of home movies.

1924 *Little Orphan Annie* comic strip debuts in the *New York Daily News* (August 5).

Macy's department store sponsors its first Thanksgiving Day parade.

The Kimberly-Clark Company introduces Kleenex, the first disposable facial tissue.

Flagpole sitting becomes a national fad.

Richard Simon and Max Schuster publish *The Cross Word Puzzle Book*, launching a major fad.

Wheaties breakfast cereal is introduced.

The Popsicle is invented.

1925 *The New Yorker* begins publication (February 21).

The Gold Rush, starring Charlie Chaplin, premieres (June 26).

Walter Chrysler incorporates the Maxwell Motor Car Company as the Chrysler Corporation (June 26).

The *WSM Barn Dance* (renamed *The Grand Ole Opry* in 1927) begins its Saturday night broadcasts in Nashville, Tennessee (November 28).

Bruce Barton publishes *The Man Nobody Knows*, a pseudo-biography of Jesus that becomes a national best seller.

The Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company launches its first advertising blimp, *The Pilgrim*.

F. Scott Fitzgerald publishes his most acclaimed novel, *The Great Gatsby*.

1926 Western Air Express, later renamed Trans-World Airlines (TWA), begins passenger service (May 23).

Magician and escape artist Harry Houdini dies at the age of 52 (October 31).

The National Broadcasting Company (NBC), the nation's first radio network, premieres (November 15).

The Book-of-the-Month Club is founded.

The Butterfinger candy bar is introduced.

Ernest Hemingway publishes *The Sun Also Rises*.

1927 The first demonstration of long-range television transmission, from a signal in Washington, D.C., to a receiver in New York City, occurs (April 7).

Aviator Charles Lindbergh completes the first solo, nonstop flight across the Atlantic Ocean (May 21).

The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) begins broadcasting (September 18).

New York Yankees slugger Babe Ruth hits his 60th home run of the regular season, a major league record that will stand until 1961 (September 30).

Warner Brothers' *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature-length motion picture with synchronized speech and music, premieres (October 6).

The Ford Motor Company introduces its new Model A automobile (December 2).

Kool-Aid (originally spelled Kool-Ade) is introduced.

1928 *Steamboat Willie*, Walt Disney's black-and-white animated cartoon featuring Mickey Mouse and synchronized sound, premieres (November 18).

Peter Pan peanut butter is introduced.

Gerber baby food is introduced.

Dubble Bubble, the nation's first bubble gum, is introduced.

Kraft introduces Velveeta, a processed cheese food.

1929 The first science-fiction comic strip, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century A.D.*, debuts (January 7).

Cartoonist Elzie C. Segar introduces a sailor character named Popeye in his *Thimble Theatre* comic strip (January 17).

The first Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences Awards ceremony is held in Hollywood, honoring films for the years 1927 and 1928 (May 16).

The comedy radio series *Amos 'n Andy* premieres on the NBC network (August 19).

The Museum of Modern Art opens in New York.

1930 The Chrysler Building opens on May 27 in New York City; it is briefly the world's tallest skyscraper.

Miniature golf becomes a fad, and dance marathons regain popularity.

Commercial air travel between New York and Los Angeles is initiated in October. United Airlines hires the first stewardesses.

The impact of the movies is felt in fashion: the cool, sophisticated looks of Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, and Marlene Dietrich gain popularity.

1931 On May 1, the Empire State Building opens in New York City; it is the world's tallest skyscraper.

In October, Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy* makes its debut in newspaper comic strips.

Birds Eye frozen vegetables appear, along with Hostess Twinkies and Snickers candy bars.

Two new afternoon radio serials, based on popular comic strips, come on the air: *Buck Rogers* and *Little Orphan Annie.*

The movie *Dracula* reflects the growing popularity of horror films and makes Bela Lugosi a star. It is followed by *Frankenstein*, which establishes the fame of Boris Karloff.

1932 In February, the first Winter Olympics are held at Lake Placid, New York, sparking an interest in skiing.

In March, the infant son of Charles and Anne Lindbergh is kidnapped, setting off sensational press coverage. His body is found in May.

Despite the Depression, Radio City Music Hall, part of the unfinished Rockefeller Center, opens in New York City at Christmastime.

The Jack Benny Program and *The Fred Allen Show* premiere on network radio.

The first Big Little Book comes out; it features *Dick Tracy*.

Shirley Temple makes her film debut at three years old.

Walt Disney receives a special Academy Award for his creation of Mickey Mouse.

1933 In February, Congress votes to repeal Prohibition. By early December, enough states approve the measure, and the Twenty-first Amendment (Repeal) is passed.

In May, the Century of Progress Exposition opens in Chicago; architecturally, it features a mix of Modernism and traditional revival styles.

Bridge becomes the most popular card game; the sales of expert Ely Culbertson's *Contract Bridge Blue Book*, first published in 1931, soar.

42nd Street and *Gold Diggers of 1933* are the definitive Depression musicals; *King Kong* and *The Invisible Man* demonstrate how movie special effects can create great entertainment.

1934 On May 28, the Dionne quintuplets are born in Ontario; the event attracts unprecedented press coverage and public interest.

On September 18, Bruno Hauptmann is arrested for kidnapping Charles Lindbergh's infant son.

In December, Benny Goodman's *Let's Dance* show brings big-band swing to radio nightly.

John Dillinger, "Baby Face" Nelson, "Pretty Boy" Floyd, and Bonnie and Clyde are shot and killed by law officers, effectively ending the reign of colorful gangsters.

1935 On January 1, the trial of Bruno Hauptmann begins for the kidnapping and murder of the Lindbergh baby. He is convicted of all charges by mid-February.

In April, *Your Hit Parade* begins on NBC radio, tracking the most popular records of the week, and a new comedy series, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, also debuts on the network.

Bingo is allowed in movie theaters and becomes a craze, as do chain letters.

The board game Monopoly becomes an overnight sensation.

The Marx Brothers challenge high culture in *A Night at the Opera*.

1936 Girl Scouts inaugurate annual cookie sales.

On April 3, Bruno Hauptmann is executed for kidnapping and killing the infant son of Charles Lindbergh, ending one of the most sensational investigations and trials in U.S. history.

The Douglas DC-3 begins production in June. The airplane quickly sets the standards for luxury and safety in air travel.

Famed director Cecil B. DeMille begins hosting *Lux Radio Theater* in June; it becomes a major dramatic show, with scripts based on popular movies of the time.

Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* sells more than a million copies by December and eclipses all competition.

More than 5,000 artists paint thousands of murals in post offices, train stations, courthouses, and other buildings across the country as part of the Federal Arts Program.

1937 In March, teenagers jitterbug in the aisles of New York's Paramount Theater to the swing of Benny Goodman.

On May 9, *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* introduces ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy on NBC radio.

Aviatrix Amelia Earhart disappears over the Pacific Ocean on July 2.

Beginning in November, Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra bring classical music to a large radio audience.

Howard Johnson begins franchising restaurants, opening the market to chain eateries and fast food.

Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, all color and all animated, opens.

1938 The growing popularity of jazz and swing gives rise to a concert by Benny Goodman's band in New York's Carnegie Hall on January 16.

The June issue of *Action Comics* features the adventures of a brand-new character, Superman.

Orson Welles, as a Halloween prank, frightens many Americans with his radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*.

Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* enters its second year as a leader among nonfiction books.

Singer Frank Sinatra makes his radio debut on small stations in the New York area.

1939 Swallowing goldfish becomes a campus fad in March.

On April 30, the New York World's Fair opens, despite depressing international news. Germany is excluded. The extravaganza is billed as

"The World of Tomorrow." The opening ceremonies are televised, and TV monitors are a big hit at the fairgrounds.

After a year of promotion, the film version of *Gone with the Wind* opens on December 15, overshadowing all other movie events.

Nylon stockings go on sale in the face of a silk shortage.

1940 Rockefeller Center opens in New York City.

The Pennsylvania Turnpike officially opens (October 1).

The Chicago Bears beat the Washington Redskins 73–0 in the NFL championship game, the first professional football game broadcast nationally on radio (December 8).

Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald dies of a heart attack (December 21).

The first Dairy Queen opens in Joliet, Illinois.

The first McDonald's drive-in restaurant opens in San Bernardino, California.

John Ford's movie adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* is released.

Jukeboxes appear everywhere, including stores, bars, and gas stations. A nickel buys one song.

Eighty million people per week attend the movies.

Bugs Bunny debuts in the Warner Brothers cartoon *O'Hare*.

1941 M&M's, Cheerios, aerosol cans, and La Choy Canned Chinese Food are introduced.

Famed producer Hal Roach's *All American Co-Ed* released (directed by LeRoy Prinz), featuring hit songs in a comedic romp that promised "Three Cheers for the College where Everybody Majors in Fun!"

Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* is released.

The phrases "Kilroy was here" and "Rosie the Riveter" first appear.

"Uncle Sam Wants You" posters appear everywhere.

Mount Rushmore is completed.

At a folk music festival in Seattle, the term "hootenanny" is coined.

1942 The U.S. Government War Production Board enacts Regulation L-85, which regulates all aspects of clothing production and inhibits the use of natural fibers.

The U.S. government orders production of all civilian autos halted (February 22).

President Roosevelt creates the Office of War Information and the War Advertising Council.

Janette Lowrey's *The Poky Little Puppy*, which goes on to become one of the best-selling children's hardcover books of all time, is published.

Dannon Yogurt and Kellogg's Raisin Bran are introduced.

Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* is released.

Bing Crosby sings "White Christmas" in the film *Holiday Inn.*

1943 The term "pin-up girl" originates in the April 30, 1943, issue of *Yank*, an armed forces newspaper.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and Bernstein, Comden, and Green's *On the Town* debut.

The Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., is completed.

1944 The Federal-Aid Interstate and Defense Highway Act is passed, creating the National System of Interstate Highways.

Frank Sinatra's concert appearances at the Paramount Theater in New York City cause bedlam.

Seventeen magazine debuts.

1945 In November, the Slinky is first sold in Philadelphia for $1.00 each.

1946 Tupperware is introduced.

Minute Maid Frozen Orange Juice, Maxwell House Instant Coffee, Ragu Spaghetti Sauce, Tide, and French's Instant Mashed Potatoes are introduced.

The first homes are sold in Levittown, New York.

The first televised soap opera (*Faraway Hill*, DuMont Network) debuts.

1947 Jackie Robinson debuts with the Brooklyn Dodgers, breaking baseball's color line.

Reynolds Wrap Aluminum Foil, Elmer's Glue, Redi Whip, and Ajax are introduced.

B. F. Goodrich introduces tubeless tires.

The term *Cold War* is first used.

CBS unveils the 33 1/3 rpm record (June 21).

President Truman becomes the first president to address the nation on television.

Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* debuts on Broadway.

The Central Intelligence Agency is created.

The seven-game Dodgers versus Yankees World Series is the first to be televised.

The Howdy Doody Show debuts on NBC (December 27).

1948 The first Baskin-Robbins ice cream store opens; Cheetos, Nestlé's Quik, and V8 Juice are introduced.

The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) is founded by Bill France Sr. The family retains control over the sport as it grows into a multiseries sanctioning body and gradually becomes one of the most popular sports in the United States.

Milton Berle's Texaco Star Theater debuts (June 8).

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* is published.

The transistor is invented.

1949 General Mills and Pillsbury begin selling instant cake mix.

KitchenAid introduces consumer electric dishwashers.

Gene Autry records "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

Silly Putty, Legos, Scrabble, Candyland, and Clue all debut.

These Are My Children, the first daytime TV soap opera, debuts on NBC.

The Goldbergs, the first TV sitcom, debuts on CBS.

1950 Sixty million Americans go to the movies each week.

The Colgate Comedy Hour, *Your Show of Shows*, and *The Steve Allen Show* all premiere on network television, and Bob Hope makes the jump from radio to television, one of the first major radio comedians to do so. Soon after, most other radio stars follow suit.

In a clever marketing move, Earl Tupper decides to sell his plastic kitchen containers directly to consumers by way of "Tupperware Parties."

DuPont introduces Orlon, a new miracle fiber, and Xerox produces its first copying machine.

1951 *The Catcher in the Rye* is published. Written by J. D. Salinger, the novel centers on the angst, teen rebellion, and confusion of its protagonist Holden Caulfield. Reportedly, the book has sold more than 65 million copies.

Remington Rand begins to manufacture the UNIVAC I, the first commercial business computer.

In June, CBS presents the first commercial color telecast.

Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now* premieres on TV, as does a new comedy series titled *I Love Lucy*.

The comedy team of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis becomes a box office favorite.

Singers like Tony Bennett, Rosemary Clooney, Nat "King" Cole, Perry Como, Bing Crosby, Doris Day, and Frank Sinatra dominate record sales, effectively ending the reign of the big bands.

DuPont introduces Dacron, another new artificial fiber.

1952 The conservative "man in the gray flannel suit" comes to epitomize both the fashions and lifestyles of the era.

Fiberglass is introduced.

Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* debuts in January on Philadelphia television (it will become an ABC network offering in 1956). *Dragnet* premieres on TV after a successful radio run, and comedians Jackie Gleason and Ernie Kovacs introduce new shows.

RCA introduces tiny transistors that can replace bulky vacuum tubes; soon thereafter, the Sony Corporation brings out the first transistorized radios.

On college campuses across the nation, the first "panty raids" occur.

1953 In a bow to the new medium's success, the Academy Awards presentation is televised for the first time, with Bob Hope serving as host.

Starring Marlon Brando as gang leader Johnny Strabler, *The Wild One* is released. László Benedek directed the film and Stanley Kramer produced.

More than 300 television stations schedule regular broadcasting, triple the number from 1950.

CinemaScope, a projection technique employing a wider screen and stereophonic sound, is introduced; *The Robe*, a religious epic starring Richard Burton, becomes the first offering using the new system.

Big, string-filled orchestras have a momentary burst of popularity among music fans. Percy Faith, Hugo Winterhalter, Frank Chacksfield, and Mantovani are among the leaders.

IBM introduces its first computer, the Model 701.

1954 Elvis Presley's first commercial recordings are released by Sun Records.

"Serious" pictures, like *On the Waterfront*, *Rear Window*, *The Country Girl*, and *A Star is Born*, dominate the movies as producers search for films that will lure audiences away from television.

1955 In July, the first Disneyland opens in Anaheim, California.

"The Pill," an oral contraceptive for women in capsule form, is introduced. More effective than previous birth-control devices, it will help change sexual behavior throughout the country.

Smog, a combination of smoke and fog, enters the language as a means of describing polluted air. The condition becomes particularly noticeable in Los Angeles, where the exhausts from large numbers of vehicles mix with damp air and cause a thick haze over the city.

Rock 'n roll begins to attract a mass audience. The August release and success of Chuck Berry's "Maybelline" draws attention, and RCA Victor purchases Elvis Presley's contract with Sun Records.

In September, actor James Dean dies in an auto accident. A cult almost immediately forms around his memory.

1956 Grace Kelly, a popular movie actress, marries Prince Rainier of Monaco in April.

Billed as a "hillbilly singer," Elvis Presley makes his TV debut on a show called *Stage Door*. Noting the publicity the vocalist's appearance inspires, Ed Sullivan books him for his *Toast of the Town*. In the meantime, Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" proves a tremendous hit.

Country singer Johnny Cash crosses over to the pop charts with "I Walk the Line" in October. The lines dividing popular music genres continue to blur.

Disposable diapers are invented.

1957 The Ford Motor Company introduces the much-heralded Edsel.

Popular music follows several avenues: traditional (Debbie Reynolds, Johnny Mathis), rock 'n roll (Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and His Comets), country (Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers), rhythm and blues (The Platters, Sam Cooke), and mixtures of all of the above.

In September, *West Side Story* opens on Broadway.

1958 In October, the Boeing 707 jetliner begins regular New York–Paris flights.

Elvis Presley enters the U.S. Army in March.

In April, a young American pianist named Van Cliburn wins the International Tchaikovsky Competition held in Moscow, becoming a star overnight.

A love triangle involving singer Eddie Fisher and two women, his wife Debbie Reynolds and "homewrecker" Elizabeth Taylor, titillates the public for months and results in the divorce of Reynolds and Fisher.

Groups like Danny and the Juniors ("At the Hop"), the McGuire Sisters ("Sugartime"), the Silhouettes ("Get a Job"), and the Champs ("Tequila") begin to hold sway over individual vocalists.

Beatnik enters the language; it refers to people who do not conform to perceived proper behaviors. The *-nik* suffix comes from the publicity surrounding Russian successes with space satellites called Sputniks.

1959 The science fiction/horror cult classic *Plan 9 from Outer Space* hits film screens. Written and directed by Edward D. Wood, Jr., the low-budget movie is loved by audiences for its campiness and silly special effects.

The rush to build home bomb shelters accelerates.

The Immoral Mr. Teas is released. The film becomes Russ Meyer's first successful commercial movie and launches the career of "The King of the Nudies."

Congressional investigations into television quiz show scandals commence in November.

In November, Ford Motor Company ceases producing the Edsel, the costliest failure in automobile history.

1960 Elvis Presley is discharged from the U.S. Army on March 5.

Joan Baez and Pete Seeger play at the Newport Folk Festival in May.

John Kennedy and Richard Nixon engage in the first of their televised presidential debates on September 26.

Martin Milner and George Maharis take their first ride in their Corvette on the television series *Route 66*.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy is elected president, the first Roman Catholic and the youngest man (43) to hold the office.

1961 Bob Dylan begins to perform in Greenwich Village clubs.

Jacqueline Kennedy wears a pillbox hat to the presidential inauguration, setting off a pillbox craze among American women.

The first Hardee's fast-food restaurant opens, specializing in charcoal-broiled hamburgers and cheeseburgers.

Newton Minow labels television a "vast wasteland" before a gathering of the National Association of Broadcasters on May 9.

Ernest Hemingway kills himself in his Ketchum, Idaho, home on July 2.

Roger Maris of the New York Yankees breaks Babe Ruth's single-season home-run record by hitting his 61st on October 1.

1962 John Glenn becomes the first American to orbit Earth on February 20.

Wilt Chamberlain scores 100 points in a game, a National Basketball Association (NBA) record.

Jack Paar concludes his run as host of *The Tonight Show* (actually called *The Jack Paar Show* during his tenure); substitute hosts preside until Johnny Carson takes over on October 1.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) releases its Port Huron Statement.

Actress Marilyn Monroe dies after apparently taking a drug overdose on July 22.

The Beverly Hillbillies strike oil on television as one of the most popular television series ever.

Federal legislation is approved in October declaring LSD a hallucinogenic drug that must be regulated by law.

1963 Schlitz sells beer in new tab-opening aluminum cans.

Julia Child demonstrates on television how to prepare *bœuf bourguignon*, the first of a series of cooking lessons on educational television stations.

Sylvia Plath, author of *The Bell Jar*, commits suicide on February 11.

Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, and other artists perform at the first nonprofit Newport Folk Festival.

Little Stevie Wonder becomes the first performer to simultaneously top the American pop singles, pop albums, and rhythm and blues singles charts on August 24.

1964 The Beatles perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on February 9.

Cassius Clay (later Muhammad Ali) becomes heavyweight boxing champion by knocking out Sonny Liston on February 25.

Twelve Beatles records are on the top one hundred list in April.

Jim Ryun, a high school student, runs the mile in less than four minutes on June 5.

A San Francisco bar features topless go-go girls.

The first Arby's fast-food restaurant, specializing in roast beef sandwiches, opens on July 23.

Students initiate the Free Speech Movement in October at the University of California, Berkeley.

ABC, CBS, and NBC simultaneously broadcast in color for the first time on December 20.

1965 A teach-in to oppose the Vietnam War occurs at the University of Michigan March 2, beginning a new antiwar tactic.

The restaurant T.G.I. Friday's, which caters to young singles, opens in New York City in March.

The Astrodome, an indoor domed sports facility, opens in Houston on April 9.

In a rematch May 25, Muhammad Ali knocks out Sonny Liston in the first round with the famous "phantom punch."

Bob Dylan switches to an electric guitar at the Newport Folk Festival on July 25 and is roundly booed.

The Highway Beautification Act is enacted October 22 to improve the appearance of the nation's highways.

1966 Beginning January 1, cigarette packages contain a warning that "Cigarette smoking may be hazardous to your health."

Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sounds of Silence" is number one in *Billboard* for the week of January 1.

Truman Capote's novel *In Cold Blood* is published on January 17.

The Starship *USS Enterprise* makes its first flight as *Star Trek* launches on NBC. The short-lived show later becomes a stalwart of the cult industry, launching countless TV and film spin-offs, fan zines, fan fiction, and conventions, in addition to turning William Shatner ("Captain Kirk") and Leonard Nimoy ("Mr. Spock") into cult icons.

1967 The Rolling Stones perform the song "Let's Spend the Night Together" on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, but Sullivan requires them to revise it to "Let's Spend Some Time Together."

The Green Bay Packers defeat the Kansas City Chiefs 35–21 in the first Super Bowl on January 15.

Johnny Carson wears a Nehru jacket on *The Tonight Show* in February, creating an instant fashion craze.

The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour premieres on CBS.

Muhammad Ali refuses induction into the Armed Services and is subsequently stripped of his championship and convicted on April 28 of violating Selective Service laws.

The Monterey International Pop Festival occurs in Monterey, California June 16–18, beginning "The Summer of Love."

The rock musical *Hair* opens on Broadway in December.

1968 On January 16, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin found the Youth International Party, a radical group better known as the Yippies.

In April, students for a Democratic Society (SDS) members occupy buildings at Columbia University to protest the Vietnam War.

The science-fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey* opens in New York City.

The documentary *Hunger in America* airs on CBS.

Valerie Solanas shoots and seriously wounds pop artist Andy Warhol on June 3.

Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* appears from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, describing the 1964 LSD trip across the country by Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters.

Television viewers watch massive antiwar demonstrations at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago August 26–29.

Tommie Smith and John Carlos protest U.S. racial injustice and South African apartheid with a black-glove salute after winning medals at the Olympic Games in Mexico City October 16.

Elvis Presley returns from films to concert performances December 3 with a televised performance popularly known as "The 68 Comeback."

1969 The New York Jets deliver on quarterback Joe Namath's promise of victory by defeating the favored Baltimore Colts, 16–7, in Super Bowl III on January 12.

The first commercial Boeing 747 flight lands successfully on February 8.

The Doors' Jim Morrison is arrested and charged with obscene actions while performing in Miami.

The *Concorde* supersonic airliner makes its first flight on March 2.

The film *Midnight Cowboy* opens on May 25.

The play *Oh, Calcutta!*, featuring total nudity, opens Off-Broadway on June 17.

The film *Easy Rider*, starring Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, opens in July.

Members of Charles Manson's "family" commit multiple murders, including the murder of actress Sharon Tate in August.

Almost half a million people watch many of the country's most famous singers and musicians perform at a festival in Woodstock, New York, August 15–17.

Jack Kerouac, author of *On the Road*, dies of alcoholism on October 21.

1970 Two prominent rock singers—Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix—die of drug overdoses.

El Topo (The Mole), a 1970 Spanish-language cult western and underground film, is released. Alejandro Jodorowsky directed and starred in the movie.

Monday Night Football premieres on ABC.

Childproof safety caps are introduced.

California becomes the first no-fault divorce state.

Big Bird of *Sesame Street* appears on the cover of *Time* magazine.

1971 Stanley Kubrick directs *A Clockwork Orange*, a film adaptation of the 1962 novel by Anthony Burgess. A satire of modern youth culture, the movie stars Malcolm McDowell as a gang leader who leads a crew of "droogs" on a violent rampage.

Jim Morrison of the Doors dies of heart failure; drug overdose widely speculated.

Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, debuts on Broadway.

The first word processor, the Wang 1200, is invented.

Cigarette advertising is banned on radio and television.

All in the Family, starring Carroll O'Connor as Archie Bunker, debuts on television, changing the direction of programming dramatically.

Charles Manson and three female followers are convicted of murdering Sharon Tate and sentenced to death.

Congress passes the 26th Amendment, which lowers the voting age to 18.

1972 David Bowie's album, *Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*, ushers in the era of glam rock.

Five burglars are arrested after breaking into the Democratic National Headquarters; this becomes known as the Watergate break-in.

The Godfather, starring Marlon Brando, receives 10 Academy Award nominations; it wins Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay.

Nike shoes debut.

The Supreme Court declares the death penalty cruel and unusual punishment; sentences of Charles Manson, his followers, and others convicted are commuted to life in prison.

Atari's Pong begins the video game craze.

HBO launches its cable subscription service in New York.

1973 The Supreme Court hears *Roe v. Wade*; it overturns prohibitions on first-trimester abortions and eases restrictions on second-trimester ones.

The Exorcist, a horror film, receives five major Academy Award nominations.

1974 President Richard Nixon resigns because of the Watergate scandal and an impeachment threat; Gerald Ford becomes president and pardons Nixon for any Watergate crimes.

Hank Aaron hits his 715th home run, breaking Babe Ruth's record.

The first programmable pocket calculators become available for sale.

Eight former White House aides are indicted for conspiring in Watergate cover-up.

1975 The precursor to the home computer, the Altair, debuts; assembly required.

Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, a Charles Manson follower, attempts to assassinate Gerald Ford.

The FBI captures Patty Hearst, who now goes by the name of Tania.

Joshua Reynolds invents and begins marketing the mood ring, a fad that sold millions.

Gary Dahl packages the pet rock and becomes a millionaire within a year.

After scoring a perfect 800 on his math SATs, William Gates drops out of Harvard University to write software programs for a small computer company, Micro-Soft.

Saturday Night Live debuts on late-night television and satirizes politicians and other social phenomena.

1976 On April Fool's Day, Apple Computer launches its first product, selling it for $666.66.

4.8 million people apply for a CB license; it is estimated that only half of CB users actually apply for licenses.

The first stand-alone Betamax VCRs are put on the market.

The United States celebrates its bicentennial; the U.S. Mint issues commemorative coins and President Gerald Ford gives a nationally televised speech.

Journalist Tom Wolfe gives the decade the nickname that sticks: "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening."

1977 King of Rock and Roll Elvis Presley dies at age 42; heart disease is named as the cause.

John Travolta stars in *Saturday Night Fever*, furthering the popularity of disco.

Star Wars also debuts in theaters, with its phrase "May the force be with you."

ABC airs the hugely successful television miniseries, *Roots*, based on a book written by Alex Haley.

1978 American cult leader Jim Jones of the People's Temple persuades hundreds of his followers to commit suicide in Guyana, most by drinking poisoned Kool-Aid.

The first arcade game, Space Invaders, premieres in Japan.

Dallas, an evening soap opera starring Larry Hagman as J. R. Ewing, first airs on CBS.

1979 The Sony Walkman is introduced in Japan.

Francis Ford Coppola's movie about the Vietnam War, *Apocalypse Now*, wins the Academy Award for Best Picture.

1980 United States hockey team beats the U.S.S.R. at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, NY.

The "Who Shot J. R.?" episode of prime-time soap *Dallas* draws 83 million viewers.

John Lennon is murdered in front of his apartment building in Manhattan; a disturbed fan, Mark David Chapman, is tried for his murder.

Bruce Springsteen's *The River* is the number one album of the year.

The Empire Strikes Back opens in movie theaters, shattering box-office records.

On the best seller list: *The Official Preppy Handbook* edited by Lisa Birnbach.

On Television: *The Cable News Network* (CNN), ABC's *Nightline*, *Magnum, P. I.*, *Too Close for Comfort*, and *Bosom Buddies*.

In stores: 3M's Post-It Notes, cordless telephones, and Rollerblades.

1981 The *Columbia*, America's first space shuttle, makes its maiden voyage.

The Centers for Disease Control publishes a report naming a new disease Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

Prince Charles, heir to the British throne, marries Lady Diana Spencer on July 29.

On television: *Music Television* (MTV), *Dynasty*, and *Hill Street Blues*.

In stores: IBM personal computers; Nutra-Sweet; Pac-Man.

1982 Disney's EPCOT Center opens in Orlando, Florida.

Pink Floyd The Wall, a hypnotic live action/animated film, is released. Based on the 1979 Pink Floyd album *The Wall*, it stars Bob Geldof as Pink and is directed by Alan Parker.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed by 21-year-old Yale student Maya Lin, is opened and dedicated in Washington, D.C.

Director Ridley Scott releases *Blade Runner*, a science fiction thriller starring Harrison Ford. Critically panned and earning less-than-stellar revenues, the movie ultimately grew into a cult classic and won acclaim as a work of art.

1983 Karen Carpenter, 32, dies of a heart attack, calling attention to eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Star Wars—the network news's term for the Strategic Defense Initiative—is unveiled by President Regan.

Sally K. Ride becomes the first woman in space when she blasts off with four crewmates aboard the space shuttle *Challenger*.

"Just Say No" drug campaign is launched by First Lady Nancy Reagan.

In stores: *Trivial Pursuit*; the compact disc; the contraceptive sponge.

1984 "Where's the Beef?" becomes the latest catch phrase when 83-year-old Clara Peller begins appearing in television spots for Wendy's restaurants.

William Gibson's science fiction thriller *Neuromancer* appears. The award-winning, dystopian novel about a computer hacker introduces the terms *virtual reality* and *cyberspace* into modern vernacular.

Alec Jeffreys develops "genetic fingerprinting," the ability to link an individual to a crime by tracing his or her DNA.

1985 "We Are The World" becomes an instant number one single after 45 rock stars get together to cut the record to raise money for famine victims in Africa.

New Coke is introduced, the first altering of the soft drink in its 99-year history; ten weeks later, the old Coke, now termed Coca-Cola Classic, is brought back in response to the millions of complaints against the new product.

Pete Rose makes hit number 4,192, breaking Ty Cobb's 57-year record for most hits during a career.

Willie Nelson organizes the first Farm Aid concert in Urbana, Illinois, to benefit farmers at risk of foreclosure.

A hole in the ozone layer is discovered in the atmosphere over Antarctica.

Rock Hudson dies of AIDS on October 2 at age 59—the first public figure to acknowledge that he was dying of the disease.

In stores: Microsoft Windows software; Nintendo entertainment systems; the Ford Taurus.

1986 The space shuttle *Challenger* explodes on January 29, 73 seconds after liftoff, killing all seven crewmembers, including Christa McAuliffe, the first teacher in space.

Microsoft, co-founded by Bill Gates, goes public.

1987 The California Raisins appear on television singing "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" to plug the raisin industry.

Featuring a title matchup between the popular Hulk Hogan and bad guy, 520-pound Andre the Giant, WrestleMania III too place at the Pontiac Silverdome in Pontiac, Michigan. The show scored the largest attendance for a live indoor sporting event in North America, reaching 93,173. Millions more watched via closed circuit TV or pay-per-view, the latter generating $10 million. WrestleMania III is considered the apex of professional wrestling's 1980s popularity.

1988 Theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking publishes *A Brief History of Time*, which becomes a bestselling book and launches a craze for space topics and issues.

Rain Man, directed by Barry Levinson, stars Dustin Hoffman as Raymond Babbitt, a man with autism who is led on a cross-country trek with his brother Charlie (Tom Cruise). The film introduces many people to autism and increases autism awareness nationwide. *Rain Man* later won Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Actor in a Leading Role (Hoffman), Best Director, and Best Writing, Original Screenplay.

Rap group Public Enemy releases its second studio album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam Recordings). The album later went platinum, selling more than 1 million units in the United States. Critics consider it one of the most important and influential rap albums in music history.

1989 Starring Patrick Swayze as an undersized bouncer battling corruption in small town Missouri, *Road House* hits the big screen. Directed by Rowdy Herrington, the film is not a box office hit, but becomes a cult classic when it becomes a staple of cable television.

Featuring the theme song "Bad Boys" by reggae group Inner Circle, the reality television show *COPS* premieres on Fox. The documentary-style program follows police and other law enforcement officers as they capture criminals by embedding camera crews with them on patrol. *COPS* began its 24th season in 2011 and is broadly reshown via syndication. The show is one of the inspirations for the reality TV boom that would later take place on world airwaves.

1990 On TV, *Seinfeld*, and *Twin Peaks* debut.

Henry and June becomes the first film released with the new NC-17 rating.

Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, and José Carreras, as the Three Tenors, release the most successful classical recording in decades (43 on the pop music charts).

Science fiction flick *Total Recall*, starring movie superhero and future California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, is released. The intricate plot—based on a Philip K. Dick short story—and striking visual effects make it a cult favorite.

1991 Nirvana's *Nevermind* is released.

The Silence of the Lambs released. Introduces audiences to debonair serial killer Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) and FBI Agent Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) and launches a franchise based on the Thomas Harris novel.

Street Fighter II arcade video game is introduced.

Coca-Cola advertising uses deceased stars resurrected through digital technology.

Written by Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* is published. The novel popularizes the term *Generation X*, which generally refers to people born between 1965 and 1980.

1992 Art Spiegelman's *Maus* becomes the first comic book to win a Pulitzer Prize.

America's largest shopping center, the Mall of America, opens in Minnesota.

Johnny Carson retires from *The Tonight Show.*

Fubu (which stands for "For Us, By Us") line of hip-hop clothing begins.

Image Comics begins publishing creator-owned books.

Superman dies and is reborn.

Id Software, creators of video games *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*, begins business.

Entertainment Weekly begins publication.

The Real World debuts on MTV.

1993 The ATF (U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms) and FBI conduct raids on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas; more than 80 members of the church group die.

The *X-Files* debuts on TV. The series finale of *Cheers* airs.

Chicago Bulls basketball player Michael Jordan announces his retirement but returns to the sport the next year.

Stereograms come to the United States with the publication *Magic Eye.*

Barnes and Noble booksellers forge an agreement to serve Starbucks coffee in their stores.

The first 32-bit video game console, 3DO Interactive Multiplayer, is introduced by Panasonic.

1994 *The Crow* is released and becomes an instant cult classic based on the accidental shooting death of star Brandon Lee, son of martial arts movie superhero Bruce Lee.

Kurt Cobain of Nirvana commits suicide.

O. J. Simpson is arrested on two counts of first-degree murder.

Friends debuts on TV.

Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* is released in theaters.

1995 In July, online book retailer Amazon.com begins operations.

Cal Ripken breaks Lou Gehrig's record for most consecutive games played in Major League Baseball (September 6).

The O. J. Simpson trial ends with a verdict of not guilty for both murders for which Simpson was charged.

ESPN creates the Extreme Games (later called the X Games).

Toy Story, the first fully computer-animated feature film, is released.

eBay online auction house is founded.

1996 Directed by actor/comedian Ben Stiller, the black comedy *The Cable Guy* is released. It stars Jim Carrey and Matthew Broderick. Rather than his usual slapstick, Carrey plays cable television installer Chip Douglas with maniacal sadism.

Oprah Winfrey begins an on-air book club (September).

The NAMES Project Foundation's AIDS Quilt is exhibited in its entirety for the final time in Washington, D.C.'s National Mall.

Marvel Comics files for bankruptcy.

Tickle Me Elmo is introduced.

McDonald's restaurants and Walt Disney forge a 10-year licensing agreement.

The Daily Show premieres, with Craig Kilborn as host.

1997 An antitrust suit is brought against Microsoft.

Maxim men's magazine debuts in the United States.

Tiger Woods wins the Masters Golf Tournament.

Camel cigarettes retires its mascot, Joe Camel, in response to increasing public and political pressure.

The Volkswagen Beetle is reintroduced.

Heaven's Gate cult commits mass suicide (38 people die) on the event of the passing of the Hale-Bopp comet.

Child beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey is found murdered.

World chess champion Gary Kasparov is defeated by IBM's computer opponent, Deep Blue.

1998 The scandal involving Bill Clinton's affair with intern Monica Lewinsky erupts.

J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is published in the United States. (September).

The 5,000th episode of the TV game show *The Price is Right* airs.

Eminem's *The Slim Shady LP* is released.

Seinfeld series finale is the most watched single episode of a television series.

Titanic becomes the most successful motion picture ever made.

Viagra sexual stimulant is marketed.

The Furby toy is introduced.

America Online buys out Netscape.

1999 *Fight Club* hits movie screens. Directed by David Fincher, the film stars Brad Pitt and Edward Norton. The violent, existential movie is adapted from Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel. The success of the film, particularly after its DVD release, propels the author's fame, while the film becomes a cult classic. Allegedly, real-life fight clubs sprout up around the world . . . but we can't talk about that.

The women's U.S. soccer team wins the World Cup.

John F. Kennedy Jr. dies in a plane crash.

Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace is released in theaters.

The Blair Witch Project, filmed on a budget of $35,000, becomes a box office smash hit.

Woodstock '99 music festival is marred by violence.

Comedy *Office Space* is released. Written and directed by Mike Judge, the creator of iconic animated characters Beavis and Butt-Head, the film is a satire on work life. Basically a box office flop, *Office Space*'s popularity grew on its DVD release and fans' word of mouth.

2000 The historical epic *Gladiator*, directed by Ridley Scott and starring Russell Crowe, opens with a $35 million weekend and surpasses $100 million within two weeks. The film's success launches a series of imitators and others hoping to cash in on the historical epic fad.

Stock market jitters turn more widespread, signaling the end of the dot.com boom.

Computers around the world are infected with the "I love you" virus attached to spam e-mail.

Boy band extraordinaire *NSYNC sells 2.4 million copies of its CD *No Strings Attached*, which sets the record for highest first-week sales. The CD went on to become the best-selling album of the decade and top-selling album of the year.

2001 *The Royal Tenenbaums*, written by director Wes Anderson and actor Owen Wilson, is released. The film features the lives of the Tenenbaum family, particularly the children, as they cope with severe dysfunction after achieving fame as child prodigies.

The award-winning television series *Six Feet Under*, created and produced by Alan Ball, debuts on HBO. The Fisher family and friends are at the heart of the show, a quirky group that runs a funeral home in Los Angeles.

Featuring an all-star cast, the odd thriller/comedy *Donnie Darko* is released. The independent film received praise from critics and developed a cult following, which increased after the director's cut DVD appeared in 2004.

24 debuts on the Fox Network. The series stars Kiefer Sutherland as superspy, counter-terrorist agent Jack Bauer. Each episode covers a 24-hour period in Bauer's life. Noted for its gritty style and over-the-top violence, the show gains a cult following and widespread notoriety.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, as well as the thwarted effort resulting in a downed plane in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, launches the nation into a patriotic fervor. The event captures the world's attention, later developing cult-like aspects, including conspiracy theories and alternative histories.

2002 Former president Jimmy Carter wins the Nobel Peace Prize.

Dave Thomas, founder of the fast food chain Wendy's, dies. He had gained widespread fame from starring in the company's television commercials.

The Homeland Security Advisory System is introduced in March. The color-coded scale links the threat against the United States based on a five-point range, from red ("severe") to green ("low"). In early 2011, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano announced that the system would be replaced by a new two-level National Terrorism Advisory System in April.

At the 74th Academy Awards, actress Halle Berry becomes the first African American female to win the Best Actress award.

Baseball great Ted Williams dies. After his death, his family battles over his remains, with his son eventually having the body placed in cryonic suspension.

2003 Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines sets off a national controversy when at a London concert she exclaims that the group members feel "ashamed" that President George W. Bush is a fellow Texan.

The DaVinci Code, a novel by Dan Brown, reaches the top of the best-selling fiction lists and stays there for three years. (The movie version is released in 2006, starring Tom Hanks.)

Allied forces rescue Army Pfc. Jessica Lynch, a prisoner of war held at an Iraqi hospital, who becomes a patriotic symbol.

Federal and local authorities raid the BALCO offices owned by Victor Conte. The raid sets in motion the investigation of professional athletes with ties to BALCO.

2004 *Napoleon Dynamite* is released. Co-written and directed by Jared Hess and Jerusha Hess, the film stars Jon Heder. Similar to the John Hughes films of the 1980s, the movie depicts quirky high schoolers and the antics that fill their lives.

Former president Ronald Reagan dies in his Bel-Air, California, home at the age of 93.

The Boston Red Sox win the World Series. The victory breaks the supposed "Curse of the Bambino," said to haunt the franchise since it last won a title and then later sold the rights to Babe Ruth in 1918 to the New York Yankees.

After a long investigation and trial, a jury finds Scott Peterson guilty of the murder of his wife Laci and unborn son Conner. The case dominated the news after Peterson reported his wife missing on Christmas Eve in 2002.

2005 Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt announce their separation, setting off an entertainment news media frenzy.

The Office debuts on NBC as a midseason replacement.

Lifestyle celebrity Martha Stewart is released from a West Virginia prison after serving a five-month sentence for lying to federal investigators about the questionable sale of stocks.

The House Government Reform Committee holds hearings to investigate steroid use in baseball. Ten players, including Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa, testify.

Pfc. Lynndie England pleads guilty to seven criminal counts related to her role in torturing Iraqi prisoners of war held in Abu Ghraib.

May, W. Mark Felt reveals that he is the famous "deep throat" informant who leaked information to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein regarding Watergate.

Pop singer Michael Jackson is acquitted of 10 charges, including molesting a child, conspiracy, and providing alcohol to minors, in a California courtroom.

Musicians in nine countries hold Live 8 concerts in July to raise money and awareness in the global fight against poverty in Africa.

The Colbert Report, a mock news show, debuts, satirizing right-wing news shows and general pomposity. It is a spin-off from another satirical

news show, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and both are critical and popular successes, especially with young people.

Serenity, a space western written and directed by Joss Whedon, hits screens. The film continues the story of the cancelled television series *Firefly* that went off the air in 2002. Like many Whedon projects, the movie was critically acclaimed and won several awards.

2006 *Hannah Montana* debuts on the Disney Channel. The show is about a teenage girl (Miley Stewart) who lives a double life as a famous pop singer (Hannah Montana). Miley Cyrus (daughter of country singer Billy Ray Cyrus, who also stars on the show) plays both parts. Millions of girls around the world soon idolize Hannah Montana, a strange twist of fate for Cyrus, who soon leads a real double life with her TV persona.

MTV celebrates its 25th anniversary.

Bob Dylan's *Modern Times* album debuts at number one on the Billboard chart, his first work to hit the top spot since 1976's *Desire*.

Technorati, the first blog search engine, estimates that there are 28.4 million blogs online.

Directed by James McTeigue from a screenplay written by the Wachowski brothers (*The Matrix* trilogy), *V for Vendetta* opens. The dystopian thriller is adapted from the Alan Moore/David Lloyd comic book series and stars Natalie Portman and Hugo Weaving.

2007 Former vice president and senator Al Gore wins the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on global climate change.

The final episode of the HBO hit drama series *The Sopranos* airs. Fans and critics debate the open-ended finale.

Price Is Right host Bob Barker retires from the show at age 83 after 35 years of helming the show. Barker is replaced by comedian Drew Carey.

Apple Computer launches the iPhone, a high-tech cell phone with a sleek black design and virtual keyboard that enables users to easily surf the Web and download music as well as actually make a telephone call.

"I Got a Crush . . . on Obama," a YouTube video posted by "Obama Girl" Amber Lee Ettinger, gains wide popularity. Although Barack Obama criticizes the video, it gets more than 3 million viewings by the fall.

2008 Neil Diamond, age 67, becomes the oldest performer to reach number one on the *Billboard* album chart with *Home Before Dark*, produced by music impresario Rick Rubin.

The Office begins cable network syndication on TBS and Fox-owned stations in the United States.

Lady Gaga (Stefani Germanotta) releases her debut studio album *The Fame*. The disc propels her to national and international fame with hit singles, including "Just Dance" and "Poker Face."

The Hunger Games, the first book of the Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne Collins, is published. It is a young-adult science fiction novel about a post-apocalyptic world featuring 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen.

2009 The longest-running drama in media history, the soap opera *Guiding Light*, is cancelled. In total, the show had been broadcast since 1937.

Celebrity pitchman Billy Mays (born 1958) dies. Mays gained fame as a home shopping and commercial spokesman for a variety of products including OxiClean and Mighty Putty.

The television series *Glee* debuts on Fox. Created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, it is a musical comedy-drama television series that centers on the exploits of an Ohio high school glee club, teachers, and their families.

2010 *Lost* (ABC) ends after six seasons on the air. The show inspired a dedicated fan following, sometimes dubbed "Losties," who supported the show, despite often-mediocre ratings. They created a separate Web-based universe for the show, ranging from a *Lost* encyclopedia to fan fiction.

Apple begins selling the iPad, a sleek computer tablet. In its first year, more than 15 million units are sold.

Comedians/talk show hosts Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert of Comedy Central hold a "Rally for Sanity" movement in Washington, D.C., that attracts more than 200,000 people.

2011 Reality television personality Nicole (Snooki) Polizzi is paid $32,000 by Rutgers University to give a talk at the New Jersey college, which is $2,000 more than what it paid Nobel laureate Toni Morrison to speak at spring commencement.

The Hollywood Reporter's fourth annual Reality Power List concludes that producer, radio personality, and *American Idol* host Ryan Seacrest is the most powerful reality personality in the world.

After 11 years, the *Scream* franchise returns with the release of *Scream 4*. Also returning are the stars that turned the original *Scream* (1996) into a cult classic, including Courtney Cox, Neve Campbell, and David Arquette.

Market research firm comScore releases figures on online video engagement revealing that 176 million United States Internet users watched online video content in May (an average of 15.9 hours per viewer). The

total audience had more than 5.6 billion viewing sessions during the month. In addition, some 83.3 percent of the United States Internet audience viewed online video.

Media company TechCrunch reports that Facebook has approximately 750 million regular users who log on to the social-networking site at least once per month.

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FILM

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CHAPTER 1

Sexploitation Cinema and the Rise and Fall of Russ Meyer

Adam G. Capitanio

> Russ Meyer is the Eisenstein of sex films.
>
> —John Waters[1]

Among the exploitation and independent filmmakers of his period, Russ Meyer remains a singular figure, someone who still commands serious critical attention and who has maintained a devoted following 30 years after the release of his last film. Although many of his contemporaries in the American exploitation film industry—Doris Wishman, Roger Corman, Herschell Gordon Lewis, Ted V. Mikels, and Radley Metzger, among others—are well known among cineastes, and especially cult film enthusiasts, none matches Meyer's continued success in both those circles and in mainstream recognition. Today, his best-known film, *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* enjoys greater name recognition than any of the films produced or directed by the filmmakers mentioned above.[2] His name became more or less synonymous with the sexploitation feature in the 1960s and 1970s, and his career has been called a "virtual history of the development and maturation" of that subgenre.

Socially, Meyer's films were a driving force in the visual culture front of the sexual revolution.[3] His first narrative film, *The Immoral Mr. Teas*, was released in 1959, less than a year before the FDA approved the birth control pill; his final film, *Beneath the Valley of the Ultravixens*, a film that satirizes fundamentalist Christianity (among many other things), was released in 1979, a year before Ronald Reagan would be elected

president due to his popular support among the religious right, a conservative coalition formed partly in response to loosening moral strictures regarding sexuality. During his 20-year career (and long afterward), Meyer has been singled out for the emphasis in his films on strong, active female characters and his thematic concern with the problem of female sexual fulfillment. However, these progressive claims about Meyer's films should be taken with a grain of salt, as they were usually coupled with a fair share of regressive attitudes embodied by what Meyer became famous for: a visual style that existed largely to display the naked, voluptuous female form.

Meyer's films mirrored the tensions and negotiations of the cultural moment and its tendency to reinscribe normativity just as often as it was liberatory. And even as Meyer contributed to a shift in the terms of culturally acceptable sexual expression, they just as soon passed him by as well. It is that tension in his films, a tension still with us today in the era post–sexual revolution, as well as the fact that they represent a bygone era in the sex film, that account for continued interest in his films today.

The Exploitation Film and Meyer's Early Career

Born in 1922, in Oakland, California, Meyer took an interest in photography at an early age, becoming accomplished enough as an amateur that he was assigned to the Signal Corps during World War II, shooting footage of combat operations that would later appear in newsreels. After the war ended, Meyer tried to get a job as a cameraman in Hollywood but failed because of the glut of union photographers returning from the front. He ended up working on industrial films, eventually shooting pictorials for *Playboy*, and helped make a burlesque film, *The French Peep Show*, in 1950.[4] As Meyer himself put it, "it was the marriage of industrial movies and shooting tits for magazines that brought all of this about."[5] Even in his early career, Meyer was part of a sex industry that was slowly becoming part of the mainstream during the early years of the sexual revolution. *Playboy*'s part in this process, for better or worse, is well documented (by Beth Bailey, among others),[6] and Meyer's contact with the world of the burlesque theater, the forerunner of the strip club, later helped him find actresses for his films, as most of them were in "the show-business world—premiere strippers."[7]

In 1959, Meyer made a narrative film, and the result was *The Immoral Mr. Teas*. As Roger Ebert describes it:

> The premise of *The Immoral Mr. Teas* is simple: Teas is a harassed city man, cut off from the solace of nature and burdened by the pressures of modern life. He can find no rest, alas, because he has been cursed by a peculiar ability to undress girls mentally. At the most unsettling times (in a soda fountain, in a dentist's office) women suddenly appear nude. What's worse, Teas cannot control his strange power . . . as plots go, *Teas* was not terrifically subtle.[8]

As adolescent as *Teas* was, it ushered in an entirely new genre of filmmaking, the "nudie-cutie" that would become part of the sexploitation subgenre.

These films were qualitatively different from the earlier forms of exploitation filmmaking that had existed for decades to the chagrin of Hollywood and censorship boards across the country. As Meyer bibliographer David K. Frasier put it, "[i]n the late fifties, the narrow subgenre of sexploitation had degenerated from films exploiting social ills like teen pregnancy, prostitution, and incest to badly made nudist colony sagas."[9] Earlier exploitation films, explored in Eric Schaefer's excellent book-length study *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!,"* appealed to "prurient" interest in sex and violence while at the same time (hypocritically) justifying such representations with a "square-up" that claimed the film was made for the sake of education or improving public morality. This was the only way such films could bypass local censorship boards and avoid charges of indecency.[10] Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, however, exploitation filmmakers no longer needed to include such moralizing to thinly justify their "prurience." *The Immoral Mr. Teas* "didn't pretend to be educational . . . it was about naked women. And it was about looking at naked women."[11] For some audience members, that alone may have been a learning experience.

Such a film could be exhibited widely, meaning it could be played in a greater number of movie houses than earlier exploitation films, for several reasons. With the sharp postwar decline in movie attendance—often attributed to some combination of television and suburbanization—theaters needed to coax audiences back into the seats. Many independent movie houses turned to films with taboo topics to generate interest. The famous 1948 antitrust decision in *U.S. v. Paramount Pictures et al.* forced the major film studios to divest themselves of the theaters they owned, enabling theater owners to book whatever films, studio produced or not, they wanted. This created a perfect situation for independent producers: the majors, faced with dwindling profits, closed down their B-units (the sections of the studios that produced cheap, quickly made genre films to turn rapid, though modest, profits), creating a vacuum in

the industry that independents could step into. Theaters, in turn, could book those independently made films as a result of the *Paramount* decision.

In addition to those independent productions, theaters also filled their screens with imports from Europe, where films with nudity and sexual themes were being made in growing numbers during the 1950s. Audiences in urban areas were already becoming accustomed to films featuring unclothed European sex symbols such as Brigitte Bardot. Finally, court cases such as the 1952 decision in *Burstyn v. Wilson*, which protected films under the First Amendment, led to a decrease in the legal power of both national and local obscenity/decency boards.[12] These factors paved the way for films that openly displayed "nudity, sexual situations, and simulated (i.e., nonexplicit) sex acts, designed for titillation and entertainment" rather than mired in the mixed messages generated by the juxtaposition of visual sensation and sensuality with a moralistic, "redemptive" educational motivation as in the "classic" exploitation film.[13]

The integration of female nudity and sexual play into a comic narrative film in *Teas*—without the guilt trip—helped make Meyer's film a great (if relative) success. The comedy, in particular, helped eliminate feelings of "embarrassment or self-consciousness" for audiences seeing the film, many of whom might have been seeing nudity in a cinema for the first time.[14] However, the film was still rather juvenile, with a flimsy premise and largely nonexistent plot that operated mostly as pretexts for the nudity, which was largely for male viewing pleasure. In this sense, it anticipated hardcore pornographic features like *Deep Throat*, where sexually explicit spectacles were integrated into an unconvincing, (often unintentionally) comedic plot.

Major Themes and Periods

Roger Ebert, one of Meyer's collaborators[15] and his earliest critical defender, suggests that as Meyer's career progressed, his view of sexuality became more nuanced, particularly as it pertained to women. *Mondo Topless*, to use Ebert's example, is a film that mostly consists of San Francisco strippers performing in a series of unusual settings. However, the titillation of the visuals is in tension with the soundtrack, where the women being visually objectified gain subjectivity through audio interviews where they discuss the advantages and, significantly, the disadvantages, of having a prominent bust.[16] That tension, produced by contrasting the film's visual and audio tracks, plays out

in different ways in the three periods of Meyer's career Ebert identifies: the "early voyeuristic comedies, always in color and with voice-over," which include *The Immoral Mr. Teas* and *Mondo Topless*; the "black and white, synch-sound, Gothic-sadomasochistic melodramas," including *Lorna* and his best-known film, *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*; and the "color, synch-sound sexual dramas," the best of which is *Vixen*.[17] To those three, David K. Frasier adds a fourth: "the parody-satires," among which are Meyer's sole successful studio film, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, and his final film, *Beneath the Valley of the Ultravixens*.[18]

Despite the differences in format and tone between Meyer's films, his characterizations, settings, and style have remained surprisingly consistent. Frasier has suggested that this consistency marks Meyer as an *auteur* as worthy of study as a Hitchcock or Ford, while Jonathan L. Crane argues that the technical and thematic strength of Meyer's films raises them to cult status above other sexploitation films that are "typically bereft of even the unintentional charms that knowing audiences find in the hapless enterprises of earnest but technically challenged film makers."[19] Both scholars agree on the elements of the films that mark them as unmistakably Meyer's.

The first and most obvious, of course, are the big-breasted, hourglass-figured women who populate Meyer's films and whose bodies are matched with "gargantuan appetites for all liminal desires."[20] Meyer's female characters are sexually aggressive and promiscuous—often unapologetically so. Meanwhile, the men in Meyer's films are often working-class squares: conventionally handsome and strong, but also traditional and mentally thick. As Crane notes, unlike the women, whose bodies are a "truthful and transparent signifier" in the films, the men, "however well-proportioned and muscularly defined, are not correlated with any set of innate virtues or intrinsic powers."[21] These characters usually find themselves in rural or at least decidedly nonurban settings. In part, shooting in such areas was a cost-cutting measure on Meyer's part, but the forests, bayous, meadows, farms, and cabins that appear in his films also suggest the copulation and nudity in his films as natural, an expression of the "fecundity of nature."[22]

Finally, Meyer's films might be termed fantasies grounded in a form of realism, produced through the use of, among other things, editing and color in his films. Frasier claims that the women in Meyer's films are essentially "pinups come to life" through

> lighting, photography, and editing . . . Firmly believing that editing is the single most important contribution a director can make to a film,

> Meyer evolved an editing style that animated his pinups, and masked, as much as possible, the acting deficiencies of performers . . . the actresses, already anatomical exaggerations of "normally" constructed women, are photographed from extreme angles that further accentuate their outrageous dimensions.[23]

Editing and camera angles produce idealized fantasy women out of the bodies and performances of regular women, but the tension between reality and fantasy is also present in Meyer's cinematography. Crane notes how Meyer's use of color and tone "give these films a hallucinatory air . . . [an opposition] between exquisite materiality and appearing too good to be true, [which] gives Meyer's erotic fantasies an extra charge that is not to be found in any other softcore film."[24] So another way to understand Meyer's career is as a negotiation between lively sex fantasies and their grounding in versions of reality: to crib Ebert's periodization, moving from fantasy in *The Immoral Mr. Teas* to the black-and-white aspirations to social realism in *Lorna* and naturalistic color films like *Vixen*, and finally back to almost total fantasy with a film like *Supervixens*. I would suggest that this friction is key to understanding the continued popularity of Meyer's filmmaking, something that will be returned to below. Now, it may be instructive to turn to one of Meyer's films in an effort at understanding his importance to the shifting cultural mores concerning sexuality.

Lorna

Lorna is one of the films Meyer made, in Kristen Hatch's words, "parallel to the nascence of second-wave feminism" that exhibited a "dramatic shift in the popular understanding of normative sexuality for women."[25] It serves as an example of the tensions around sexuality, particularly female sexuality, that focus the plot and much of Meyer's work in general. The film opens with Luther and Jonah, manual laborers in a small Southern town, encountering a drunken woman on their way home from a bar. After she refuses Luther's propositioning, they follow her. As they trail her, the editing alternates between close-up, tracking shots of the duo's leering faces and the woman's backside. This shot/reverse-shot suggests rather obviously where Luther and Jonah's interest lies, even while implicating the audience in the uneven exchange of lustful glances through their own desire to gaze at the woman's parts. This sequence of shots can be likened to a "rapist's gaze" as Luther breaks into the woman's home and attempts to force himself on her. She resists him and the attempted rape turns

into a beating. It's a complex moment, as the objectification of a woman results in an act of violence, while at the same time the film implicates the audience through its enjoyment of the earlier shots of her rear.

The main plot focuses on Jim's inability to please Lorna, his voluptuous and sexually dissatisfied wife, and this conflict is signaled in two contrasting scenes. The first is early in the film, where Jim and Lorna make love, and the second later on, when an escaped convict ravishes Lorna. In the first scene, the camera pans from the bed to the curtains by the window, a knowing play on the cliché representational substitution for an act of coitus. Off screen, Lorna asks, "Jim, could you, would you?" a clear entreaty for him to please her, but after he has finished, he asks, "what were you gonna say?" and she responds, "too late now." Her dissatisfaction is reemphasized the next morning, when she refuses to awaken before Jim leaves for work, forcing him to make his own lunch. Jim's failure to fulfill his conjugal duty (pleasing his wife sexually) is matched with Lorna's refusal to fulfill hers (the preparation of food for her husband). While the film acknowledges female sexual desire and the importance of female sexual satisfaction, it is figured in terms of a traditional marriage with typical gender roles.

Unlike the earlier scene between Luther and the unnamed woman, the interruption of Lorna's morning idyll by the convict turns into the ecstasy of ravishment. This sequence features a stylistic parallel with shots from the point of view of the convict, objectifying Lorna, manifesting once more the "rapist's gaze" and aligning the audience with the ravisher's perspective. However, it seems that in the film's logic, rape will become ravishment if the participants are sexually starved enough, and if the assailant is traditionally desirable—the convict is young, handsome, blond, and muscular, whereas Luther is middle-aged, haggard, dark, and thin. In this moment of profound contradiction, the film not only reveals its own confused concept of female sexual desire but also reinforces predominant beauty standards for men, as it has already done for women by demonstrating the desirability of the youthful, busty, and blonde Lorna. Seemingly made stupid by the pleasure the convict has given her, Lorna takes him back to her home, where she offers him food and drink, doting and beaming at him, even going as far as to make the bed when he wants to rest. The "womanly" duties she refused to perform for Jim now come as a joy to her in light of having found a satisfactory sexual partner.

The film concludes with Jim heading home after settling his differences with Luther, who has insinuated that Lorna is cheating on him,

only to find the convict still at his home. Both Lorna and the convict die in the ensuing melee. The film's preacher appears at the conclusion with fire and brimstone rhetoric: "woe to the libertine . . . as ye sow, so shall ye reap," a condemnation of Lorna's adultery, although her "comeuppance" should be taken as much a result of her husband's weakness as it is her infidelity.

Although female desire is recognized in the film, it is still carefully circumscribed as "improper" and punishable if it disrupts the bonds of marriage. The gender roles in the film remain traditional as well, with Jim expected to labor while Lorna cooks and shops, and it is only the sexual tension between them that disrupts this order—as if the growing questions surrounding women's place in the social order would be solved if their mates could only learn to bring them to orgasm. This moralism is striking as it seems a strange backpedaling from the "no-strings" sexuality of *The Immoral Mr. Teas* and a resurrection to the "bad old days" of exploitation films justifying their content through claims of moral instruction.

Meyer's Middle Career and the Response to Hardcore

As Meyer's career continued, the mainstreaming of hardcore pornography had a profound effect on his filmmaking. In 1968, Meyer made *Vixen!*, which starred Erica Gavin as a sexually voracious woman whose behavior included incest, group sex, and lesbianism but who refused to engage in miscegenation. *Vixen!* became the first sexploitation film to play in mainstream theaters, and Meyer believed it was the first film of its kind to be viewed by couples together.[26] This comment was part of Meyer's attempt to construct his own persona as a sexual revolutionary, which is also apparent when, in an interview, he compared *The Immoral Mr. Teas* to *Deep Throat* on a continuum of increasingly permissive (and by implication, liberatory) possibilities for the visual representation of sexuality.[27] In some respects, this success as a sexploitation filmmaker produced the conditions that would undo Meyer's career. After making *Vixen!*, Meyer had a series of confrontations with antiporn feminists,[28] and Gavin later disassociated herself from Meyer's films,[29] condemning them (and Meyer) in no uncertain terms:

> *Vixen!* is really a put-down of women. It says that all women want is sex, that they're never satisfied and they'll go anywhere to find it. It shows that women have no loyalty, no sensitivity in sexual relationships . . . I think that some woman really fucked Russ up. He doesn't like women. He does but he doesn't . . . he portrays women as freaks. They're plastic.[30]

Despite the mutual animosity, Meyer would say years later, "I have gotten so little static from the feminists," and restate the argument (one that many of his critics have uncritically repeated as a defense) that in his films "women are the smart ones. The men are klutzy and muscular and willing, but the women call the shots."[31] I would suggest that, rather than being impressed by the characterization of women in Meyer's films, by the time feminists had turned their attention toward films, the rising visibility of hardcore pornography grabbed their interest as an easier and more controversial target.

Meyer's films were essentially seen as the least objectionable manifestations of an industry that degraded and exploited the image and labor of women. For Meyer, however, the situation was complex, as the emergence of hardcore pornography into the (relative) mainstream posed a threat to the brand of filmmaking he was engaged in. The rapidly growing hardcore industry, which affected the range of acceptable representations of sexuality in mainstream cinema, would lead to the increasing marginalization of his films.

The difference between Meyer's films and the most sexually explicit material available to audiences was already noticeable in 1969, when *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby asked "is Russ Meyer archaic?" and observed that "the rapidly changing patterns of sexual behavior in conventional films are making decently intended, soft-core pornographic films increasingly difficult to achieve."[32] Canby's remark is also revealing in that Meyer's films were considered "pornography," albeit "decently intended." Meyer would spend much of his later career trying to dispel that misconception.

Hardcore reached a new plateau of visibility and profitability with the release of *Deep Throat* in 1972, from which the pornography industry has never looked back. Simultaneously, Meyer was engaged in a brief foray into mainstream respectability, making two films for 20th Century Fox, both of which bombed: *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and *The Seven Minutes*. Returning to independent filmmaking, he found his niche in jeopardy, stating, "I think that the majors on one side have hacked away at the sexual freedom that I was able to express in my early films; and the porno bunch, the hardcore people, have chipped away at the audience from the other side."[33] In a filmmaking climate with *Deep Throat* on one side and *Last Tango in Paris* on the other, where would Meyer find himself?

One place he would not find himself would be in hardcore. Meyer's reasons were numerous: he claimed that the women he worked with wouldn't do it, he prided himself on his films playing in "first-class

theaters," the comedy in his films wouldn't work in an explicit context, and he had a personal disinterest in hardcore films.[34] Ebert made a similar claim about his friend, claiming, "Meyer feels that complete explicitness is the enemy of erotic fantasy."[35] He continues by arguing that the women in Meyer's films are "often caricatures, broadly drawn, and their common denominator was insatiable sexual hunger."[36] Ebert essentially argues that the women in Meyer's films are part of a male pornographic imaginary, but the explicitness of hardcore would actually break down the pleasure gained from that imaginary. There is fetishistic desire at work, where the complete, explicit visualization afforded by hardcore pornography would destroy the fantasy engendered by a visualization that is never total, always left curtailed.

Despite the dime-store psychoanalytic reasoning employed by Meyer, Ebert, and myself, the reality of the situation was that sexploitation filmmakers did feel their livelihood was being threatened. Eric Schaefer reports that the *Technical Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* in 1969 determined there were approximately 600 venues that regularly played sexploitation films, but this was soon to change. Sexploitation was also being shown in mainstream theaters, but in 1970, MPAA chief Jack Valenti launched a campaign to discourage exhibitors from booking the (often independently made) films; at the same time, many of the theaters that specialized in showing exploitation films were looking for a cheaper product, and many eventually became porno theaters.[37] As film industry scholar Justin Wyatt straightforwardly states, "the hard core market did erode the soft core audience," to the point where, in 1969, soft-core filmmakers such as Radley Metzger and Jay Feinberg formed the Adult Film Association of America, designed to help protect sexploitation filmmakers from laws and censorship aimed at hardcore films.[38]

What, ultimately, was Meyer's response? His films could no longer sustain their success by being merely good-natured sexual comedies or "Gothic, sadomasochistic melodramas" like *Lorna*.[39] Instead, the films of the final phase of Meyer's career were more like sexual cartoons:[40] colorful, rapidly paced, often episodic films that thrived on comedy and ridiculous scenarios. They were also, however, often a good deal more explicit than his earlier films: for example, 1975's *Supervixens* contains simulated sex, as well as a few brief shots of male genitalia.

Meyer's final film, *Beneath the Valley of the Ultravixens*, betrayed the influence of hardcore pornography even more than *Supervixens*. A small town in Texas is the setting for the film, which centers around the

sexual relationship of voracious Lavonia, played by Kitten Natividad, who would later become a pornographic actress, and dim-witted Lamar. The primary narrative problem of the film is not, as one might expect, Lavonia's rampant adultery, but rather Lamar's fixation on anal sex. While Lavonia seduces men all around town and takes a job at the local strip club, the film never condemns her for her actions—the film's narrator never suggests that she should be derided for her sexual appetite, she is not punished by the narrative for her transgressions, and Lamar does not seem bothered her actions. Lamar's "perversion," his "inability to look a good fuck in the eyes," as his buxom boss Sal puts it, is the main issue of the film. In a move typical of Meyer's filmmaking, the film reinforces a particular normative type of sexuality (heterosexual, nonsodomotical), even while deconstructing another (taboos against adultery and multiple sexual partners).

Aside from being the most explicit of Meyer's films—in addition to shots of male genitalia and endless simulated sex, one is surprised to see the trademark Meyer shot, a close-up of breasts shot from a low angle to accentuated their size, has largely been replaced by a waist-high shot of the female pubic area—*Beneath the Valley of the Ultravixens* is also structured like a hardcore feature. Like *Deep Throat* (among others), the film centers on the protagonist's bizarre sexual problem, which can only be solved through repeated intercourse. The sex problem, in the narrative equivalent of a self-fulfilling prophecy, creates a loose, episodic framework that acts as an excuse for the copious representation of sexual acts that follow.

Meyer's Retirement

Beneath the Valley of the Ultravixens would be Meyer's last film, assaulted as he was on both sides by the increasing popularity of hardcore pornography and the growing permissiveness toward nudity and simulated sex in mainstream films. He couldn't get much closer to the former than in *Beneath*, nor did he have a desire to, and he was refused access to the latter by the gatekeepers of culture. As if sensing that it would be his last film, Meyer appears in person at the film's finale to give a summation of the film's themes and those of his career. Once the film was released, Meyer took the chance in *Variety* to summarize his career as well. In the pages of the publication, he "claims never to have lost a dollar on any of the 23 feature films he has made."[41] He also took the opportunity to differentiate himself from hardcore pornographers:

> I am really working in the movie mainstream . . . my principal competition is Streisand and Redford and others of that sort . . . I attract a cross-section of the population . . . rednecks, college students, middle-aged couples and a lot of film buffs. Thirty percent of the audiences at my films are women and that isn't the case with most hardcore films. My films have played opposite such product as "101 Dalmatians" in suburban multiplexes.[42]

It is difficult to take Meyer at his word here, as it is doubtful that star-driven Hollywood films were ever his real competition. But the fact that Meyer felt he needed to distance himself from hardcore is telling. As his career was ending, the political assault on pornography had only gotten worse, and Meyer did not have the respectability or clout that the mainstream film industry had to protect his films from attack and cultural disapproval. Perhaps sensing his cultural moment was over, with the rise of the religious right, hardcore replacing sexploitation, and the mainstreaming of the feminist critique of sexual explicitness in the media, Meyer chose to retire after *Beneath the Valley of the Ultravixens* was released.

Meyer as a Cult Filmmaker

Meyer's critical reputation has improved greatly since his last film was made. Critics, perhaps hyperbolically, have written that "until *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch*, no American filmmaker equaled Meyer's dexterity in creating exhilarating montage"[43] and, contrary to the heyday of his career, that "today, his films are enthusiastically embraced by feminists."[44] His film *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, centering on the murder and mayhem caused by an unapologetic girl gang, has become a favorite with contemporary cult audiences. John Waters, who called *Faster Pussycat!* the "best movie ever made," claims that the appeal of Meyer's films lies in the fantasies they provide:

> He is single-handedly responsible for more hard-ons in movie audiences than any other director, despite the fact that he has refused ever to make a hard-core feature. Married couples have flocked to his films for twenty years because they know Russ delivers and feel that the erotic images he is so famous for give them fodder for fantasies and actually add a little zing to their dull sex lives.[45]

According to Waters and others who have since written about Meyer, his continued appeal rests largely on the fundamental difference between his and contemporary sex films. *Faster Pussycat!* in particular,

features very little nudity and no sex, yet still carries a substantial erotic charge due to the performances of its three "bad girl" leads. The film has fascinated both male and female audiences, as have Meyer's films in general.

In *Faster Pussycat!* the three leads are all attractive and sexually desirable women, but the narrative that encompasses them is driven by their actions and emphasizes both their physical and sexual power over men. In other words, the film complicates gendered stereotypes while playing on fantasies of dominance and submission, all through a tone that contemporary audiences interpret and enjoy as camp. And while the gang is punished with death at the end of the film, that punishment feels tacked on—like the classic gangster films of the 1930s, or the early exploitation films Schaefer writes about—the reassertion of moral authority at the end of *Faster Pussycat!* rings hollow, as if the audience is supposed to suddenly disavow its previous delight in watching Varla, Billie, and Rosie behaving badly.

Meyer's films not only paved the way for the increasing visualization of the naked (usually female) form in films, but his films were a site where new social ideas about sexuality were being negotiated during the 1960s and 1970s. The paradox of his films and the secret to their continued appeal lie in the fact that they combine progressive and retrograde ideas about acceptable sexuality. Ultimately, in a contemporary era where hardcore has taken over as the predominant filmic expression of sexuality, the tension in Meyer's films reminds us of the cultural anxieties that sparked the sexual revolution and are still with us today, as well as the paradoxical, sometimes politically problematic, nature of sexual fantasy itself.

Notes

1. John Waters, "Russ Meyer: Master," in *The Very Breast of Russ Meyer*, ed. Paul A. Woods (London: Plexus Publishing, 2004), 42.

2. An exception to this might be Corman's *Little Shop of Horrors*, but only because of Frank Oz's popular 1986 musical remake of the same name.

3. David K. Frasier, *Russ Meyer: The Life and Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1990), 1. The first section of this book, a brief biography of the filmmaker, occasionally discusses how Meyer's films contributed to the loosening of acceptable depictions of sexuality.

4. Legs McNeil and Jennifer Osborne, *The Other Hollywood: The Uncensored Oral History of the Porn Film Industry* (New York: Regan Books, 2005), 7–8.

5. Russ Meyer, "Interview," by Tom Teicholz. *Interview*, 16.1 (Jan. 1986): 71.

6. See Beth Bailey, "Sexual Revolution(s)," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 235–62.

7. Russ Meyer, "Interview," by Jim Morton. *Re/Search* 10 (1986): 78.

8. Roger Ebert, "Russ Meyer: King of the Nudies," *Film Comment* 9.1 (Jan/Feb 1973): 36.

9. Frasier, 4.

10. Eric Schaefer. *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Film, 1919–1959.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 69–72.

11. Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris, *Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of "Adults Only" Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), 82.

12. Schaefer, 327–37.

13. Ibid., 338.

14. Ebert, 36.

15. Ebert co-wrote *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and, under a pseudonym, *Up!* and *Beneath the Valley of the Ultravixens.*

16. Ibid., 40.

17. Ibid., 37.

18. Frasier, 4.

19. Jonathan L. Crane, "A Lust for Life: the Cult Films of Russ Meyer," in *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and Its Critics*, ed. Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper (Surrey, UK: FAB Press, 2000), 90.

20. Ibid., 91.

21. Ibid., 92.

22. Ibid., 98.

23. Frasier, 12, 19.

24. Crane, 98.

25. Kristen Hatch, "The Sweeter the Kitten, the Sharper the Claws: Russ Meyer's Bad Girls," in *Bad: Infamy, Darkness, Evil and Slime on Screen*, ed. Murray Pomerance (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 149–50.

26. Ebert, 41.

27. Meyer, Interview with Morton, 83.

28. See, for example, "Meyer and 2 Feminists Exchange Barbs at Yale," *The New York Times* (Mar. 4, 1970): 38, or "Debate Whether Women Exploited by Russ Meyer," *Variety* (Oct. 20, 1976): 6.

29. Meyer, Interview with Teicholz, 72.

30. Erica Gavin, "From Vixen to Vindication: Interview," by Dannis Peary, *The Velvet Light Trap* 16 (Fall 1976): 24.

31. Meyer, Interview with Teicholz, 72.

32. Vincent Canby. "Screen: by Russ Meyer," *The New York Times* (Sept. 6, 1969): 21.

33. Russ Meyer. "Sex, Violence and Drugs, All in Good Fun: Interview," by Stan Berkowitz, *Film Comment* 9.1 (Jan/Feb 1973): 48.

34. Meyer, Interview with Teicholz, 71–72.

35. Ebert, 36.
36. Ibid., 37
37. Eric Schaefer, "Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature," *Cinema Journal* 41.3 (Spring 2002): 5–7.
38. Justin Wyatt, "Selling 'Atrocious Sexual Behavior': Revising Sexualities in the Marketplace for Adult Films of the 1960s," in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, ed. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 121.
39. Ebert, 37.
40. Muller and Faris, 129.
41. Lewis Lazare, "Russ Meyer Analyzes His Own Films, 'No Losers'." *Variety* (Sept. 26, 1979): 22.
42. Ibid., 22.
43. Muller and Faris, 100.
44. Hatch, 144.
45. Waters, 42.

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CHAPTER 2

Swayze Is America: *Road House*, *Point Break*, and the Cult/Camp Movie of the 1980s and 1990s

Bob Batchelor

Watching *Road House* now, into the second decade of the twenty-first century, is an exercise in 1980s nostalgia—a critical component of contemporary popular culture, given the seemingly permanent popularity of the decade's actors, films, music, and fashions. The movie's opening scene is a virtual highlight reel of 1980s excesses: blazing neon, a hot red Lamborghini, strikingly high heels, short skirts, and packed crowds.

When Patrick Swayze finally appears on the screen—after a montage of $100 bills, poofy 1980s perms, and *Miami Vice*-inspired leisurewear—the first thing the viewer notices is Swayze's mane. Perfectly feathered and seemingly cemented into place, Swayze's hair is a central character in *Road House*; kind of like Superman's cape, it is a representation of his power and vitality. The viewer can gauge sequences in the film by simply looking at Swayze's locks: Flawless hair equals Dalton at the top of his game, while messy indicates either impending danger or emotion. When he first shows up at the Double Deuce, the rundown nightclub he is hired to clean up, his cowlick is particularly superhero-like.

A little later, after he endures his second knifing in the first 38 minutes of the movie, he emerges from the battle with plenty of blood spilled and a wild mane. Luckily, by the time he arrives at the hospital (for nine staples to sew up the slashing) to flirt with leggy, blond "Doc" (Kelly Lynch), his hair reverts to perfection; thus, the viewer knows Dalton is okay.

Road House also symbolizes the decade by reflecting the extremes of American life. On one hand, Dalton is educated at NYU and reflects the glitz and glamour of the "big city." However, he leaves all that behind for the wonders of the small town in Reagan's America (plus a $5,000 retainer and a $500 per week salary). The battle between big and small is a consistent theme in *Road House*. While Dalton represents the small business owners and townspeople who just want a safe place to drink, Brad Wesley (Ben Gazzara) typifies the evil of big-box invasion by the likes of JC Penney and other machinations that turn little towns into big, impersonal monoliths.

Reminiscent of Boss Hogg in the popular television show *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979–1985), Gazzara's Wesley is strangely out of place in the little town. There are similarities: the quest for money, strange clothing (he wears an ascot for most of the flick), and bumbling henchmen. The idea that the evil villain has so many foibles is a mainstay in 1980s and 1990s movies, as if moviegoers expected as much but still felt that the battle between good and evil stood in question. Yet in the campy *Dukes*, small-town sheriff Roscoe P. Coltrane did not assault the boys, commit arson, or murder anyone. Certainly, 1980s films thrived on such simpleminded violence and gore. Over-the-top violence confronted the decade's filmgoers, whether in purposely aggressive films, such as the Steven Seagal vehicle *Hard to Kill*, or in critically acclaimed movies, like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* or Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Another interesting character in *Road House* is Dalton's landlord, Emmet (Sunshine Parker), who looks like Santa Claus in overalls. A personification of a small town's interaction with new ideas, Emmet scratches his head often, gazing in wonder at the collision between old and new society and culture. The character reeks of the word *newfangled*, itself a coded symbol of earlier (better) times. Everything about him represents a nostalgic vision of small-town America: the kindly old man, the rustic horse farm overlooking a pond, and a worldview built around fairness. Emmet's compassion and love for Dalton as a kind of father figure compels the younger man to stand up against Wesley and his henchmen, even though his better judgment reveals that it is a losing proposition.

When Wesley has Emmet's house blown up, Dalton pulls him out in his head-to-foot red pajamas. The anger is too much for Dalton, which results in the film's most famous scene—Dalton and Jimmy fighting, karate-style, to the death. Dalton wins the battle—pulling his foe's trachea out of his throat with his bare hands—but proves Doc's point

that if Dalton doesn't change, the town will need to be saved from him. Battered, beaten, and bloody, Dalton floats the body across the pond toward Wesley's mansion.

"I Thought You'd Be Bigger"

Adding to Dalton's Superman persona is the running theme that his current and past actions will inevitably lead to his later demise. As they sit on the roof/balcony naked, Doc tells him that he will face a lot of pain later in life if he doesn't quit, yet Dalton faces the thought with a glib remark and a sigh. The viewer knows the remark sinks in, however, because Dalton's hair is out of place, thus revealing an existential crisis in the works. Doc tells him that he can stay (so they can be together), yet Dalton knows that his only commitment is to the next battle. All the while, Wesley watches from his darkened room, contemplating his next malicious plot.

Perhaps the most intriguing character in *Road House* (and a perennial fan favorite) is Wade Garrett (Sam Elliott), a legendary cooler and Dalton's mentor. Elliott, as fine a character actor as America has produced, plays Garrett as a crusty yet loveable character who spouts wisdom, such as "that gal has entirely too many brains to have an ass like that"[1] about Dalton's love interest.

Like Dalton, or perhaps a glimpse of the character's future, Garrett seems too small to be so tough, a virtual Jedi warrior in the heart of small-town America. When Dalton loses his cool and throws a wild, roundhouse punch at Garrett, the mentor catches the punch midair, serenely declaring, "No, we don't want to do this."[2]

After Dalton's death match with Jimmy, his hair is a dripping, sweaty mess, which reveals the depths of his newfound crisis. As a result, Wesley gives Dalton an ultimatum: choose between Doc and Garrett. When Dalton hesitates, Garrett finds himself on the Double Deuce bar with a knife sticking out of his chest.

Returning to another heroic trope of 1980s action films, Dalton seeks revenge. He invades Wesley's compound, despite being outnumbered and outgunned. A killing spree erupts in the palatial estate, and only the bumbling, 400-plus-pound henchman, Tinker, lives on, incapacitated when a life-size, stuffed polar bear falls on him. Wesley and Dalton battle with a variety of weapons, including an African spear, with Wesley actually holding his own (helped along since he shot Dalton in the shoulder earlier in the scene). Until, that is, Wesley thinks of shooting him while his back is turned.

Spurred on by Dalton's destruction of Wesley, the town elders finally have the guts to challenge him, each one shooting him up with a rifle. Detectives arrive on the scene and do nothing, leaving viewers to wonder where the police were for the most part during the film's timeline. Interestingly, the audience might also ask why it takes four men to kill Wesley off, each firing from about eight feet away, declaring, "This is our town. Don't you forget it!"[3]

The climatic, final death of Wesley symbolizes the victory of small-town America over the encroaching power of big-box stores and despots like Wesley who want to force the contemporary world onto areas where they are not wanted. Even though it is a violent, gory death, the viewer is asked to recognize the deeper moral necessity of guarding small towns against such invading forces, even if it calls for lethal force.

Bodhi and Johnny Utah: The Bromance

Jumping into the 1990s, arguably one of the world's top box office draws after the success of the romance *Ghost* with Demi Moore and Whoopi Goldberg, Swayze returned to the action genre in *Point Break*, playing bad guy bank robber Bodhi, up against Keanu Reeves's FBI Agent Johnny Utah. Similar to *Road House*, *Point Break* enjoyed initial success at the box office, taking in about $83 million on a $24 million budget. The revenues paled in comparison, however, with *Ghost*, which brought in a stunning $505 million. Surprisingly, though, while *Ghost* has been essentially forgotten among Swayze's films, *Point Break* also attained cult status.

Drawing some inferences from this juxtaposition, it seems as if Swayze's broad appeal in the 1980s and 1990s as a romantic lead actor enabled him to gain superstar status. However, the long-term popularity of his cult films—propelled by cable-watching male audiences—creates his lasting reputation. In his 2009 autobiography *The Time of My Life*, written with his wife Lisa Niemi, Swayze acknowledges his cult status, explaining, "*Road House* created a cult following for me among men. With its multiple bar-fight scenes and macho, tough-shit antagonists, it was a classic guys' film."[4] Yet cult status did not seem enough for him. Like other actors known for action-flick prowess and good looks, Swayze constantly wanted to be judged as an actor and writer rather than just a pretty face. Teaming with Keanu Reeves, another Hollywood pinup, however, would do more to solidify Swayze's cult hero standing.

Released in 1991, *Point Break* has a much different vibe than *Road House*. While the latter symbolized the battle between nostalgia and consumer culture, *Point Break* contains political overtones that ask the viewer to reconsider the sanctity of traditional institutions, particularly the presidency and banks. From a less academic perspective, though, the aspect of the film that jumps out at the viewer is the relationship between Bodhi and Johnny, a kind of boy meets boy, boy loses boy, boy gets boy in the end battle. The "bromance" overtones are quite evident, particularly in the loaded, double-entendre dialogue. Certainly the film's producers did not envision *Point Break* as a gay male love story, but it foreshadows that conclusion.

Although there is the typical 1980s/1990s gratuitous female nudity in *Point Break*, the amount of male skin is staggering. Like the rumors regarding Tom Cruise's sexual preferences during the release of *Top Gun* (1986), similar questions swirling about Reeves fueled further examination and interest. In addition, there is little or no chemistry between Reeves and the female lead Lori Petty, while Swayze and Reeves exhibit a strong bond.

For example, in the midst of one action scene, Bodhi tells Johnny, "You want me so bad, it's like acid in your mouth,"[5] right before he leaps from a plane. Later, after Bodhi escapes and Johnny chases him down in Australia, the FBI agent says, "You gotta go down. It's gotta be that way."[6] Such coded language runs rampant through the film.

Both in its initial release and the countless times the film has been on cable television, audiences were well aware of the plethora of sun-soaked male bodies and physicality of its actors, who are often aggressively touching one another. The movie's publicity poster, as a matter of fact, features Swayze with a full, blond mane, while Reeves sports slick, dark hair. A quick glance at the poster and the viewer might assume that *Point Break* is a love story . . . and in many respects it can be viewed that way.

Hair, Muscles, and Football

Before Bodhi realizes that Johnny is famous former Ohio State quarterback Johnny Utah, the surfing gang and various cronies play full-contact football on the beach at night, with headlights to light the way. The game results in an alpha-male battle between the surfer and FBI agent, each quarterbacking his respective team. The players—all heavily muscled and with antiestablishment long hair—take turns manhandling each other, but the ultimate fight takes place between the two protagonists.

At the moment of truth, Johnny tackles Bodhi into the water (even though no one else has gone anywhere near the drink in the game), forcing them to eye each other warily. As the gang assembles, assuming there will be a fight, Bodhi announces who it is and they all bond over Utah's exploits in the college ranks. The homage to football adds to the movie's cult following. Male viewers are attracted to films featuring sports or sports heroes like moths to fire. The added note that Utah had to leave the game due to a knee injury makes the character even more likable.

Later, when Johnny mistakenly targets a competing surfing gang (who knew, by the way, that there were so many surfing gangs in early 1990s America?), Bodhi comes to his rescue. Although they are outnumbered two to one, the Zen surfer (shirtless) and undercover agent break out martial arts moves to win the fight. Bodhi's Buddha personality is revealed after the fight, when he tells Johnny how the "Nazi" gang is "wired wrong," unable to "get the spiritual side of it [surfing/ocean]."[7] After joking about the meaning of surfing, Bodhi and Johnny swap loving looks and a firm handshake, and then the older man invites him to a party at his house.

According to Swayze, Bodhi represented a "once-in-a-blue-moon character, the bad guy who you love because you believe in what he believes in—until he believes in it too far and breaks the law and kills someone. I loved Bodhi because I identified with his quest for perfection and the ultimate adrenaline high."[8] As an actor, playing Bodhi enabled Swayze to again break out of the traditional romance stereotype.

Amidst the hard bodies and surfing scenes, some of *Point Break*'s most startling images come from the exploits of the Ex-Presidents, a gang of bank robbers who wear masks portraying former commanders-in-chief: Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon. Swayze wears the Reagan guise and leads the crew through 27 heists over three years, ironically without shooting anyone. While a viewer could look at the choices of masks as simply the most popular ones available, it is also an indictment of those presidents—ones who have robbed the nation in a variety of ways. As the leader of the gang, Bodhi/Reagan casts derision on the Reagan/Bush years simply by being antirules and by being against traditional institutions. Nonconformist elements exist even in some of the cheesiest dialogue, such as when Bodhi asks Johnny as they prepare to rob their last bank, "Why be a servant to the law, when you can be its master?"[9]

At the end of the film, Bodhi and Johnny have largely switched places. Bodhi is clean cut, while Johnny sports long hair and denim.

In other words, the character that represents authority has been transformed by his experiences with the would-be villain, now repentant because his friends are all dead. The cat-and-mouse game ends after they nearly beat each other to death, but Johnny handcuffs himself to Bodhi, finally achieving his goal of capturing his prey. Rather than force the Zen master to rot in a jail cell, Johnny allows him to surf to his death among the 50-foot waves. As Johnny walks away, he tosses his badge into the surf—the ultimate way to disrespect the authority position he represents.

Swayze Is America

As big as the myth that symbolizes his Texas roots, Patrick Swayze represented a new breed of American hero in the 1980s and early 1990s. Now, closing in on a couple decades later, his brand of cult hero standing forces the conclusion that these ideas still resonate with viewers. In *Road House*, he is the nostalgic avenger, thwarting the twin evils of consumerism and tyranny. *Point Break*, on the other hand, enables Swayze to portray a villain, but one who embodies beliefs that the audience holds. Bodhi is a kind of modern-day Robin Hood, at least until the end of the movie, when seeking the ultimate thrill clouds his judgment and he is forced to kill an innocent bystander. Until that time, his carefree surfer mentality stands in opposition to his bank robber/gang leader persona but somehow sparks a note with viewers. At least the money is used to fund the Zen master's quest for the perfect wave.

At the heart of Swayze's appeal, which carries through to today's audiences, is a central reservoir of vulnerability despite the tough-guy characters he played. As it turns out, this feeling mimicked the actor's real-life emotions. He explained, "No matter how confidently I projected myself onstage and in everyday life, inside I was still a scared boy—afraid of rejection and willing to do whatever was necessary to stave it off."[10] Swayze's duality—portraying strength and grit with basic emotional openness—provides male viewers with a model that fulfills their need for toughness while at the same time nodding to the vulnerability that women admire.

At this point, *Road House* occupies a central role in cult circles versus *Point Break*, fueled by repeated showings on basic cable television stations. Sadly, while he recognized the film's following, Swayze did not seem to take much pleasure in its standing, only devoting about three pages of his autobiography to *Road House*. Perhaps if Swayze

lived into old age (he was tragically struck down by pancreatic cancer in 2009), he might have appreciated his cult status more fully. Despite its campy moments, Swayze's performance reveals the power of image making. He embodies the role so well that one is at a loss to imagine an actor who could have done a better job in the movie.

Propelled by *Road House* and *Point Break*, Swayze transcended mere box office stardom to transform into a cult figure, thus remaining relevant long after more celebrated actors of his day drooped from the spotlight. According to writer Joe Queenan, "Somewhere along the line, much like John Wayne, Swayze became one of those stars whose acting skill ultimately became irrelevant to his appeal . . . like Wayne, he made a lot of movies that no one remembers and a handful of movies no one will ever forget."[11] The evolution from movie star to legend is a difficult one to undertake and often has a great deal to do with qualities an actor carries deep within his or her true self. Film audiences recognize this pull in Swayze and his portrayals of Dalton and Bodhi. The results are quintessentially American movie figures mixing action, romance, and (often unintentional) comedy that will continue to captivate and entertain viewers hoping to escape into the world of film.

Notes

1. *Road House*, DVD, directed by Rowdy Herrington (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Patrick Swayze and Lisa Niemi, *The Time of My Life* (New York: Atria, 2010), 155.
5. *Point Break*, DVD, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000).
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Swayze and Niemi, 173–74.
9. *Point Break*
10. Swayze and Niemi, *The Time of My Life*, 49.
11. Joe Queenan, "The Film that Made Patrick Swayze an Action Hero," *The Guardian* (London), September 16, 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/sep/16/patrick-swayze-joe-queenan (accessed 18 August 2010).

CHAPTER 3

Midnight Movies and the Phenomenon of the Cult Film

Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli

The phenomenon of the midnight movie took Hollywood by surprise. A small number of low-budget independent films caught the interest of counterculture hipsters who began to form long lines in New York to see heretical films such as George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970). Jodorowsky, Mexican in origin, lived in Paris, where he was part of a surrealist theater group.[1] Theater owners and distributors promptly realized that a niche market stood ready for exploitation and quickly searched for other films that might have similar appeal.

However, there is some indication that cult films date back to the earliest days of movies. Cult film historians Karl French and Philip French argue that characteristics of cult films appear in early silent films, the most notable being *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and *Nosferatu (Eine Symphonie Des Garuens)* (1922).[2] That said, I argue that the cult film is mostly a phenomenon of the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which film going combined with recreational drug use for many.[3] The United States was the epicenter of spread of the midnight movie circuit, but soon other countries followed, such as Japan, Spain, and Germany.

A number of factors, both social and technical, contributed to the development of the midnight movie phenomenon in the 1960s and 1970s. The United States was creeping out of the fear of nuclear obliteration and launching a bloody war against its communist foes in Korea

and Vietnam. Hollywood studios had a series of blockbusters underway which "recycled ideas and plots from B movies, and serials . . . "[4]

As a reaction to political and cultural conservatism, a small group of filmmakers broke onto the scene with movies that subverted film traditions and cultural mores. Cult directors felt that part of America's decadence was due to Hollywood's despotic influence on the evolution of cinema and, as a consequence, on the national character.[5] The cult films that kids began lining up to see in New York and Chicago in the 1960s introduced a set of characters, narrative strategies, and cinematography tactics that slowly grew into a staple of contemporary films. Although it is often surprising to see what film falls within the category of cult film or midnight movie, there is an undeniable consensus of what constitutes an example of the genre.

One of the most frequently quoted definitions of a cult movie comes from Italian cultural critic and semiologist Umberto Eco:

> The work . . . must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world, a world about which one can make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the sect recognize through each other a shared expertise.[6]

Taking Eco's definition even further, one finds that foremost, a cult film or a midnight movie blockbuster is defined by the fanaticism it generates among audiences. Traditionally, viewers may watch their favorite movies dozens of times, but with cult films, fans will get together to act out scenes, interject their own lines, and sometime even dress up as their favorite stars.

For many critics, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) conjures the definition of a cult film. Most film directors would kill for a pinch of director Jim Sharman's success in involving audiences during screenings of the film. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which began as a musical in England, blends glam rock's aesthetics with the B-horror flick. Scott Michaels recalls the days when he discovered the film:

> I grew up in Detroit, in a very blue-collar neighborhood. It never is cool to be different, but it was especially uncool in Detroit. Around 1978, well after *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* "cult" began elsewhere in the country, it finally hit my town. I never heard a word about this piece of celluloid until one evening it was used as a human-interest story on the local news station. I saw. I wanted. That was for me. The report showed scenes of mayhem in the movie house, with hundreds of people throwing food, dancing and singing in the aisles—it was something I wanted to belong to.[7]

As Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik note in the introduction to their anthology on cult films, the most revealing research about cult films mixes qualitative analysis with ethnographic episodes, such as interviews, confessions, personal anecdotes, and behind-the-scenes gossip.[8] As interesting as these adventures may be, they also reveal the challenges cult producers and directors face when making independent films (most midnight movies and cult films fall within this category). Lloyd Kaufman and James Gunn, producers of the *Troma* cult favorite *The Toxic Avenger* (1984), have this to say about the cult movie's commitment to establishing an intimate relationship with audiences:

> By letting the audience see the seams on our makeshift latex-and-syrup, we are, in fact, allowing them to become a part of the imaginative process it takes in creating the film. I have long said that *Troma* movies were one of the first interactive mediums. Our intention is not to dazzle, but to create a true spiritual connection between the audience and the film . . . we have faith in the imagination and humanity of the audience.[9]

These films, then, are more than mere representations of a fictional world. They allow viewers to create new cultures within the confines of likeminded enthusiasts that extend the meaning of the film itself.

There is an implicit commitment with most cult films to turn the classic passive spectator into an active spectator, and with any luck, into a devotee for life. Directors employ narrative strategies that call for audiences to participate in the performance of the film. Of course, there are different degrees with which filmmakers are successful in breaking through the confines of the mundane life of spectators and the melodramatic reality of movies. According to Gillo Dorfles, the development of industrial societies, and particularly the omnipresent media, has contributed to the numbing of people's ability to create personal bonds with belongings.

> Unfortunately, mass-culture, being as it is at the root of the new distribution of time, has killed all ability to distinguish between art and life; all trace of a "rite" in the handing out of cultural and aesthetic nourishment by the mass media (radio, TV magazines, cinema) has been lost, and this lack of the ritual element has brought about an indifference in the onlooker when he is faced with the different kinds of transmissions and manifestations which are forced upon him.[10]

Dorfles is right to point out the ephemeral existence of cultural objects, more true today with our reliance on online realities, but cult films have been at the forefront of struggle to do away with the

"indifference" of spectators who, if seduced, will cheerfully embrace the satirical versions of life often represented in midnight movies. The most representative characterization of Dorfles's "onlooker" in the 1970s was the zombie, a walking corpse who has been deprived of rationality by an overdose of commercialism, but who, like film spectators, longs to feel like a member of some sort of brotherhood. Always looking for creative ways to conquer new audiences and make a buck, filmmakers searched for creative ways to turn passive spectators into active ones, drawing from dramatic traditions such as Brechtian theater and anticipating some of the interactivity created in the video and electronic gaming industry.

In *Midnight Movies*, J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum mentioned how important it is for a midnight movie theater to be located in a neighborhood with after-hours restaurants and bars. In his review of Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970), *Village Voice* critic Glenn O'Brien described such an urban atmosphere:

> It's midnight mass at the Elgin. Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet* has just ended, and the wait for *El Topo* is a brief grope for comfort before sinking back into fantastic stillness. The audience is young. They applauded Cocteau's sanguine dream as though he were in the theater, but as credits appear on the screen, they settle again into rapt attention. They've come to see the light—and the screen before them is illumined by an abstract landscape of desert and sky—and the ritual begins again.[11]

The type of ritualistic camaraderie that O'Brien describes was something that Americans craved during the dark years of the Vietnam War. A whole generation of young filmmakers came of age in this milieu, watching the carnage of war on TV.

The Transformation of Film to Cult Film

The reason a film becomes a cult phenomenon is left to the unpredictable tastes of audiences. Actually, some "serious" filmmakers are dismayed when their work becomes a sardonic treasure of cult enthusiasts. This mainly is because many cult films walk a fine line between counterculture subversion and bad taste.

In some cases, like John Waters's *Pink Flamingos* (1973), for instance, directors are resolved to turn mass-produced, low-quality cultural objects into objects of artistic contemplation (the modern sofa cover in plastic, polyester leisure suits, etc.). Generally, cult films tend to poke fun at suburban middle-class values that display cheap replicas of

luxury objects connected with the elites. Some films go to the extreme of vindicating bad taste and the illicit. This is why some actions in cult films flirt with the grotesque and the surreal. A classic example of this can be found in an infamous scene in *Pink Flamingos* in which cult icon Divine eats dog excrement. The drag actor had this to say about the experience: "It was strictly done for shock value. I threw up afterward, and then I used mouth-wash and brushed my teeth. There was no aftertaste of anything. I just forgot about it as quickly as I could."[12] One fan's surrealism is another's bad taste. However, it is the individual audience members that determine which, a kind of power that cult filmgoers grasp in the extended creative process.

Audiences are generally aware that when they buy a ticket to a low-budget film, they can anticipate that some of the Hollywood norms will be overhauled. In spite of this, cult films can shock and upset even the cultish insider. For example, David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) established a conventional horror film mood, but spectators were unable to protect themselves from the uncanny revelations in this shocker.[13] In *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird and the Wonderful*, Danny Peary begins his review of Lynch's first feature by invoking the revolting sensations that the film evoked in him:

> Ever had a dream while sleeping face down, with your mouth and nose buried in your pillow? In your discomfort you might have conjured up, something that approximates *Eraserhead*; but it seems to me that the only way you can expect to duplicate this nightmare is by somehow entering the dark, uneasy dream/subconscious world of the most paranoid, depressed individual in the universe on the day he or she will either commit suicide or roam the streets wearing a doomsday placard.[14]

Most cult films tend to be rewarding forms of entertainment. They are memorable in a way that a debauched party gets out of hand but stays in the mind long past a natural expiration date. A few directors, such as Lynch, are inducted into the cult hall of fame at the beginning of their careers. Their films are strangely familiar but horribly unsettling. Lynch seems to have his finger on American sensibilities or his fingers in an open wound, as he always seems to be able to shock and disturb but also to set off critics and the Hollywood establishment. In his review of Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), Guy Maddin said that: "... [Lynch's] surrealism seems more intuitive than programmatic. For him, the normal is a defense against the irrational rather than vice versa."[15] Allan Havis hits the nail on the head when describes *Blue Velvet*

as a sort of grenade to be thrown at "Ronald Reagan's nostalgic reinvention of America and at the Republican Party's idealization of small towns and exurbia."[16]

The success of Lynch's films as midnight blockbusters persuaded many filmmakers that achieving cult status could guarantee successful distribution. Because cult films are perceived as being antiestablishment, they are often competitors for a smaller size of the consumer pie. That said, cult film directors' disdain for the commercialism of mainstream films has more to do with a scornful look at their parents' possession and ambitions than a revolutionary mission to undermine the structure of capitalism.

Cult Films and Technology

As it is difficult to assess the cultural value of a present-day film, it is also difficult to gauge a film's cult potential. Not all critics can ascertain the pulse of what a national audience wants to watch. When Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* was released, film critic Annette Michelson wanted to prove stilted critics wrong when she praised the monumentality of the film, saying, " . . . here is a film like any other, like all others, only more so . . . If one were concerned with an 'ontology' of cinema, this film would be a place in which to look for it."[17]

Technology also plays a role in how a film is perceived. As a result, midnight films shown on big screens remind viewers attuned to watching at home or on a computer of the power of cinema. For example, many viewers first saw *2001* on a TV screen in DVD format. A few years ago, it had a limited release on 70 mm. The experience of watching Kubrick's tour de force on the big screen complete with primates achieving consciousness as they come to blows over a bone, Technicolor landscapes, spaceships waltzing, a computer that believes humans are morons, and so forth can only be compared to watching a psychedelic circus act. Recent 3-D films, such as the off-the-wall *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (2009), have come close to Kubrick's achievement. James Cameron, director of cultish hits like *The Terminator* (1984) and *Avatar* (2009), foresees that technical innovations will increase audience involvement: "You feel like you're bearing witness, and that makes the journey more real."[18] Despite Cameron's enthusiasm for high-tech feats—as cult films have demonstrated since the 1970s—a movie's success continues to be its capacity to represent not so much the fantastic but the commonly strange and the oddly familiar.

Shock and Awe

It is no surprise that horror movies hold a special place in the pantheon of cult films. The genre has always flirted with the subversive and its allegorical apparatus has always aimed at unmasking the grotesque hypocrisy of bourgeois culture. The chainsaw slayer in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) stands for more than the manifestation of psychopathic behavior. He embodies the return of the repressed, the uncontrolled eruption of resentment of an underclass.

The audience cringes when he appears on screen and they should, since they could just as easily be the target of this cult killer's raving madness. Despite the possible rejection that horror films might arouse in mainstream audiences, there is something undeniably gratifying in witnessing a director bring cultural junk to the surface for all to see. Wes Craven, director of such chillers as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and *Scream* (1996), refers to this particular act of directorial liberation as follows:

> . . . gore stood for everything that was hidden in society. Guts stood for issues that were being repressed, so the sight of a body being eviscerated was exhilarating to the audience because they felt: "Thank god it's finally out in the open and slopping around on the floor."[19]

The American Nightmare (2000), an essential documentary on the origins of contemporary horror film, attests to the fact that the key figures of the horror genre had been soldiers in Vietnam, affected by their memories of the surreal forms of disemboweled bodies. In 1971, George Romero's low-budget zombie chiller *Night of the Living Dead* opened at the Waverly in New York to sold-out audiences. Peary argues that the film's success was due to people recommending it to each other.[20] According to Ben Hervey, the film set a new box office standard for cult films.[21] The zombies, despite their gruesome appearances and cannibalistic tendencies, awakened audiences' sympathies. They seemed desperate, animalistic in their desire to satisfy a hunger for body parts and entrails (actual entrails were provided by one of the film's producers, who was a butcher). Dressed like suburbanites, for the young audiences that packed the movie houses, the zombies probably acted a lot like their own parents and neighbors.

Due to budgetary reasons, Romero filmed *Night of the Living Dead* with an old Arriflex camera, which gives the film a grainy black-and-white look. The hand-held camera shots gave his work a newsreel feel.

The wide angles and deep focus distorted the spatial relationship between the characters and the objects that surrounded them.

Film historians have dwelled on Romero's decision to cast a Black actor as the heroic lead. Romero denies having cast Duane Jones to make a statement about the civil rights movement or racial politics.[22] Nevertheless, Jones's presence in the film challenges audiences' expectations about the role of heroes in classic horror films (normally White men fervent about saving their families, girlfriends, and communities). Despite its powerful political allegories, *Night of the Living Dead* is undeniably a campy, funny film. One of Romero's major accomplishments was to subvert some of the tropes of the classic Universal and Hammer studio films.

Antiheroes and Cult Icons

In order to establish the intellectual origins of the cult film, it is important to discuss the definition of *camp*. In her influential essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" cultural critic Susan Sontag argues that "the essence of Camp is its love—of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques."[23] Although Sontag is not particularly interested in establishing the difference between camp and cult, she associates the most salient characteristics of cult films with camp. As mentioned before, the most salient characteristic of cult films is their open invitation to spectators to construct a private code around the secret meanings found in the films.

Visibly, the difference between camp and cult, as Sontag cleverly observes, is that "the pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious."[24] Camp, we can conclude, in its naiveté takes itself very seriously, while cult is ironical and comical, intended for those that get the joke. One of the reasons fans come back to watch the same cult movie again and again is to be able to laugh at the obscure humor lost on most audiences.

Cult films have to find their constituency, which sometimes entails having a successful run in an art theater. Cameron Mitchell's instant cult classic, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), is a case in point. A bustling line curved around the block in the Castro District on the day of its San Francisco premier. For the first time in years, the upper balcony of this historic theater was packed with people in drag, hipsters, and local luminaries, all waiting for Mitchell to introduce the film that

was based on his popular off-Broadway musical (itself based upon his drag performances in night clubs).

Traditionally, the narrative arc of a classic Hollywood film centers on the journey and trials of a hero. The hero typically undergoes a transformation, and in the end, either triumphs or fails, but not without teaching the audience an important moral lesson. Unlike this classic model, the cult film hero is, in reality, an antihero. Instead of displaying qualities to be emulated or being representative of the national character, cult heroes poke fun at our own weaknesses. Cult heroes, like Mitchell's fame-starved, intersex drag artist Hedwig, reflect our shortcomings and secret desires, which is why we feel sympathy for their tribulations.

These days, the quintessential cult hero *par excellence* is Jeffrey Lebowski, aka The Dude, from the Ethan and Joel Coen's *The Big Lebowski* (1998). *New York Times* critic Dwight Garner named *The Big Lebowski* the most established cult film of the 1990s. "It's got that elusive and addictive quality that a great midnight movie has to have: it blissfully widens and expands in your mind upon repeat viewings," he explains.[25] The film has spawned a subculture of urbanites who celebrate "Lebowski Fest: A Celebration of All Things Lebowski," organized by cult historians Will Russell and Scott Schuffitt, authors of *I'm a Lebowski, You're a Lebowski: Life—The Big Lebowski and What-Have-You.* At Lebowski Fest, devotees of the film gather in bars wearing the Dude's signature uniform of jellies sandals, Mexican sweaters, and Limpie pants.

Lebowski, an unemployed, urban beach bum, struggles to comprehend what his life is really about. The ultimate representative of the California loser, the Dude has only a few ambitions in life: to enjoy his white Russian cocktails, to perfect his bowling technique, and to raise enough dough to stay unemployed and buy weed. There are several legendary scenes in *The Big Lebowski*, like the scene in which the Dude drops a roach onto his lap while rocking out to a Credence song and slams his 1973 Ford Torino against a trash container.

Perhaps the Dude's appeal has something to do with the fact that he represents everything that the entrepreneurial ideology of his day does not promote. As in the case of the Dude, humor in cult films is frequently based on the naiveté of the protagonists. They seem to have faith in the most obviously corrupt institutions.

Although Jeff Bridges's impersonation of The Dude brought him critical acclaim, an actor's career can be ruined by the often dubious

achievement of entering the cult pantheon with a midnight feature. One of the most notorious cases is that of David Carradine, who himself has admitted to struggling to find the working environment to be able to display his acting skills. He enjoyed his run as a cult hero when he played martial arts expert and peace activist Kwai Chang Caine in the series *Kung Fu* (Bruce Lee had conjured the character for himself, but ABC did not allow Asians to be lead actors on its television shows).[26]

There are a few soft-porn and fully pornographic films that have achieved cult status, have enjoyed wide distribution, and have been shown as midnight movie attractions in art house cinemas. For example, the notorious nudie club owners the Mitchell Brothers produced and directed a porno film that was shown at the Cannes Film Festival. In the last two decades, with the advent of video technology, the DVD format, and Internet sites, porn films have moved from the specialty theaters to the home. Most specialty theaters are now closed, and only a few titles from the 1970s, the golden days of midnight movies, have retained their cult status. *Behind the Green Door* (1972), *Deep Throat* (1972), and *Caligula* (1980) have seen short revivals in art house theaters.

Midnight movies and cult film flirt with mainstream Hollywood films. They are the black sheep of the family, the rebellious siblings, always looking for ways to deceive and make fun of familial authorities. Cult film directors are pranksters who are clearly infatuated by classic genre films but always searching for ways to undermine their visual and narrative stereotypical structures.

Notes

1. Allan Havis, *Cult Films: Taboo and Transgression* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 58.

2. Karl French and Philip French, *Cult Movies* (New York: Billboard Books, 2000), 6.

3. Havis, *Cult Films*, 3.

4. Michael Weldon, *The Psychotronic Video Guide* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), viii.

5. Danny Peary, *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird, and the Wonderful* (New York: A Delta Book, 1981), 9.

6. Paul Simpson, Helen Rodiss and Michaela Bushell, eds., *The Rough Guide to Cult Movies* (London: Rough Guides, 2004), 6.

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