The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema

Edited by Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO CULT CINEMA

The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema offers an overview of the field of cult cinema – films at the margin of popular culture and art that have received exceptional cultural visibility and status mostly because they break rules, offend, and challenge understandings of achievement (some are so bad they're good, others so good they remain inaccessible).

Cult cinema is no longer only comprised of the midnight movie or the extreme genre film. Its range has widened and the issues it broaches have become battlegrounds in cultural debates that typify the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Sections are introduced with the major theoretical frameworks, philosophical inspirations, and methodologies for studying cult films, with individual chapters excavating the most salient criticism of how the field impacts cultural discourse at large. Case studies include the worst films ever; exploitation films; genre cinema; multiple media formats cult cinema is expressed through; issues of cultural, national, and gender representations; elements of the production culture of cult cinema; and, throughout, aspects of the aesthetics of cult cinema – its genre, style, look, impact, and ability to yank viewers out of their comfort zones.

The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema goes beyond the traditional scope of Anglophone and North American cinema by including case studies of East and South Asia, continental Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America, making it an innovative and important resource for researchers and students alike.

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INTRODUCTION

The cult cinema studies experience

Jamie Sexton and Ernest Mathijs

The cover of this book explains its subject. Pam Grier is determinedly pointing a gun at the reader. Is it in desperation; or with dedication? Determination, desperation and dedication are words often used to describe the public presence of cult cinema. They also command this book. Ours is an attempt to further the examination of an area in the study of culture at large that has persistently been side-lined yet whose traces are more than ever before prevalent across cultures – and evidenced by their consumptions, celebrations, and the anxieties that surround them. True to the word's heritage in the study of spiritual followings of dedication, and equally true to the word's adoption in studies of feasts, carnival, festivities, and cultural expressions of 'shaking it up', cult cinema is an experiential test tube for culture, where diverse formations and collections of people experiment with what can work, what doesn't, and what shouldn't to give meaning to the world through off-centre multitudes of cultural practices and considerations. Scholars such as Roland Barthes (1957), Mary Douglas (1966), René Girard (1972), Dick Hebdige (1979), Umberto Eco (1991) and Barbara Ehrenreich (2006) have, in their examinations of rituals, taboos, and trangressive expressions in photography, writing, fashion, religion, rock music, and cultural celebrations and commemorations put cultural 'maladjustment' front and centre. This book does, too.

It is not just Pam Grier's image. If subject of books on cult film can insist on having transperformative Divine in a red dress on the cover, pointing a gun, or exploitation actress turned journalist Christina Lindberg with an eye-patch (the shotgun hidden from view), or spiritual filmmaker annex guru Alejandro Jodorowsky on a throne, surrounded by goats, or a bowling Viking woman, or frightening trance-stares of Jack Nance (*Eraserhead*) and Martin Sheen (*Apocalypse Now*)[1], an overload of cultural signs and indexes is presented that, at best, sums up what cult cinema is and what we should know about it, and, more likely, guides a reader's interest into understanding what cult cinema stands for and what kind of experience it entails. Culture under arrest; or culture liberated? Above all, it is culture as experience, wide-eyed, lived, and peering for meaning.

A short history of cult film (studies)

Let us track back a little. While the word 'cult' itself had been used within film culture as far back as the 1920s, it is generally assumed that the concept of the 'cult film' is a category that gained

currency in the 1970s. During its initial phase cult cinema indicated the reception of films by a largely countercultural audience. As the intellectual interest in cinema increased in the 1960s, particularly amongst college students, the production and screening of films diversified: cheap, underground movies were made and new clubs and societies emerged to screen such films alongside international and repertory content; campus screenings flourished; and screenings at late hours, particularly midnight, became more common. Out of this context, the phenomenon of 'midnight movies' became notable in the 1970s, constituting an alternative to the more mainstream cinematic programme.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, when the first academic pieces on cult film were published, the concept of cult film or cult cinema was far from straightforward. It was, unusually at the time, a category that denoted types of audiences and ways of watching more than the aesthetic dimensions of the films themselves. Broadly, it referred to films which appealed to countercultural audiences, particularly films that had long runs on the midnight circuit. These could be revivals of older Hollywood films, screenings of exploitation films that would have played outside of mainstream theatres (e.g. grindhouses and drive-ins), international art-house films, or low-budget, independent films that were targeted towards the countercultural audience and launched on the midnight circuit (such as *El Topo* [1970] or *Pink Flamingos* [1972]). Yet analyses and discussions of cult cinema would also take into account factors such as its perceived anti-mainstream nature, as well as the typical filmic ingredients that commonly featured in popular midnight films.

Even though cult cinema tended to refer to reception processes more than the qualities of the films themselves, attempts have nevertheless been made to define typical properties of the cult film, though the sheer variety of films that have been considered cult have hindered any straightforward textual definitions of a 'typical cult film'. Features of films that have been considered important cult factors include: strange and weird aesthetics; transgressive content; heightened intertextual self-awareness. Many of these elements distance films from the norms of filmmaking and from the mainstream on the whole, though it is arguable that intertextual self-awareness has now itself become a typical mainstream component of filmmaking, thus drawing attention to how changing social contexts can impact upon what is considered mainstream. While these aesthetic factors are important, they certainly don't fully demarcate a cult from a non-cult text: it may be that the existence of such features may heighten the possibility of a film becoming cultified, but this is far from certain. Broader generic elements and subcultural appeal also have been considered important and can combine with more specific features. For example, in generic terms, science fiction and horror have often been associated with cult followings, though once again not all examples of these genres have become cult films. While these factors may feed into how a film is received, ultimately processes of reception can override such textual qualities in designating whether a film is cult: these include, for example, a particularly notable, devoted following and an appeal to specific niches and subcultures.

Society, culture and technology

The complexities of cult cinema are evident in the variable processes that feed into the idea of a cult film, as well as additional dimensions that have been considered important to cult status since the 1970s, including social, cultural, and technological factors. They are further heightened by regional differences relating to cult film, as studies of the phenomenon have now grown beyond looking at cult film reception in the United States. As such, it might be more convenient in the contemporary era to be aware that cult cinema is not a single phenomenon, and that it is more appropriate to think of different types of cult *cinemas*.

This collection is an attempt to do justice to the various concepts, genres, figures, contexts and cultures that have been commonly associated with cult cinema. As there are so many different aspects to consider, collecting together a range of scholars with diverse expertise is needed to do justice to the complexity of the subject. Even still, we had to be selective in terms of inclusions and exclusions, and there are various filmmaking modes, filmmakers or concepts that could have been included but which are not. We have, though, attempted to provide extensive coverage through including a number of sections which provide separate routes into a multidimensional study of cult cinema.

This collection aims to cover notable concepts, figures and processes that have informed cult film research since its beginnings to the current day, which includes coverage of longstanding issues and analyses of newer cult formations. The latter includes work on how new technological and cultural factors intertwine to reshape ideas of cultism, as well as fresh new perspectives on the notion of cult cinema. As mentioned, research on cult cinema has been dominated by a US-perspective, with other Anglo-speaking territories also being privileged to a lesser extent. This is understandable considering the phenomenon is rooted in developments in US post-war culture, but it is also the case that the idea of cult cinema today informs film cultures internationally, though not always to the same degree. This collection therefore includes a number of chapters on cult cinema in non-Western regions, from the more well-known (East Asian cult cinema) to the lesser acknowledged (Iranian cult cinema). In addition to regional limitations, both cult cinema as a phenomenon and elements of its study have been critiqued for being gendered as primarily male: that is, cult tastes – and those who have traditionally had the cultural capital to inform such tastes – have been seen as largely reflecting male preferences and prejudices of presentation and representation. Looks matter and being seen matters more. As such, gender politics inform a number of chapters: both cult film and gender, and fandom and gender, are engaged with in this collection, while the auteur section makes a point to present female figures despite the prevalence of male directors frequenting this category. The underlying point here is one that cult cinema is good at making: calling, shouting, and demanding attention for that what hegemonic culture (capitalist, patriarchal, Orientalist, …) tries to shuffle under the rug. Or, put differently, these figures were always there and now the means have been taken to call them to the front.

Overall, we have striven to provide a broad collection of chapters that range from overviews of key topics and figures, to fresh research on established topics, to less cared for areas of cult cinema. *The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema* will be of use to students reasonably new to studying this area, as well as existing cult researchers who want to discover more about different aspects of cult cinema. One final aspect to note is that this collection is focused on *cult cinema* even though the study of other cult media – including television, for example – has also been growing in recent times. We wanted to focus mainly on cult cinema in order to adequately address the magnitude of the subject. Nevertheless, cult cinema is not a subject that can be fully demarcated from other areas, and it overlaps with other media on many occasions. As such, we have included some work on the intermedial relations between other cult cinema and other cult media (in the chapters looking at cult film and television, and cult film and literature), while other connections between media – most notably in the section on cult film and music – are addressed within various chapters. As such, this book is acknowledging the status quo of research but also, urgently, pushing for the recognition of new areas of attention – recalibrating the aim of cult cinema studies.

The cult cinema experience

Given the fugitive nature of cult cinema, efforts to study it are bound to attract criticism. Much like the unsettled status of cult films themselves, the critical and scholarly study of cult cinema

is somewhat of a battlefield. Even if one looks at the ways in which the arena has been set, with pressing points such as gender, identity, heritage, region, popularity (marginal or hidden within the mainstream), or sensitivity (moral, political, policy, or otherwise) very much dominating new initiatives of research, there remains a tone of contestation when cult cinema is approached. Part of that comes from areas of the study that maintain that what is marginal in culture cannot remain so and should either be brought into 'conventional' studies, through methods commonly used and taught in psychology, sociology, or art criticism. As we have pointed out earlier (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 13–25), cult cinema is an experience, and the reception of that experience, and equally the production and distribution contexts of that experience (such as advertising buzzwords), not to mention the philosophies, intentions and limitations involved, will always already create a field of contestation – something to be disagreed upon. There seems no way around that but to accept that contestation as a core characteristic of the field. When Jonathan Rosenbaum, a figure crucially important in outlining midnight movies as an exemplar of cult cinema, writes that 'if old terms continue to be used, but with new meanings, it becomes the responsibility of those who continue to use the term to explain what the new meanings are' in *Cineaste* (Rosenbaum 2008), it is a recognition of the fluidity and volatility of the films' diversity and the demands it poses for its students. That's settled then, cult cinema is unsettled.

There is a larger contestation at stake. Cult cinema studies questions how we come to find meaning in experiences that often resist containment. If one considers the examples of films used by Robin Wood (2018) and Robert B. Ray (2001) in their efforts to ask for attention for methods of research 'outside the box' (by proxy, by heart, by stance, for instance), one can detect that the study of cult cinema is also a study of cultural taste. Is it telling that their lamentations occurred side-by-side in a journal called *Film Criticism*, in a 1993 issue dedicated to a book called *Making Meaning*? Wood fought hard for the inclusion of the horror genre as a 'serious subject'. Ray railed against the virtual exclusion of figures such as Louis August Le Prince from the historiography of early cinema and used surrealism as a method of inquiry. Wood and Ray's examples make clear that ownership over taste is at stake here.

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) has called attention to how tastes are cemented through social forces built on robust routines and practices of 'normalcy' in the construction of aesthetic judgment, and it can be inferred from his later work that he disagreed with that. Jerome Stolnitz made a similar claim, advocating for passionate disinterestedness from the perspective of literary criticism (Stolnitz, 1960; also see Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 13–25), as did Susan Sontag (1966) in her call 'against interpretation', for popular culture (including camp). For film criticism, Noel Carroll has made several similar efforts, calling for textual readings of the films of *King Kong* (1933), Kenneth Anger, Werner Herzog and 1970s horror (De Palma, for instance) based on strategies of exception (Carroll 1998) – concentrating on what gave these films a *different* taste. After masterful analyses of the strategies we use for interpreting films, David Bordwell (1989) avoided the judgement of taste; it was left untouched in his otherwise powerful and ambitious book inspiringly called *Making Meaning*. Janet Staiger (1992, 2000) shifted the focus of discussions about taste and taste-making to the margins by considering the receptions of *A Star Is Born* (the 1954 Judy Garland version), American underground cinema, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and the representations of gender in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and in doing so uncovered mechanisms for the construction of taste that are oppositional and 'perverse' (her words) all the while pushing the centre of cultural meaning making to acknowledge the liminal existences of some of its subjects. Pierre Bourdieu called his studies of taste a revisiting of Kantian ideals and practices of taste in the second half of the twentieth century. Miriam Hansen (2012), in her re-reading of Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Theodor Adorno, similarly argues that their target was an understanding of taste in the face of modernity. Likewise,

Sianne Ngai (2003, 2012) has taken on a re-examination of Kantian aesthetics and forwarded affective categories of taste hitherto unexcavated such as 'ugly feelings', 'cute', and 'zany', all of which apply to what J.P. Telotte called, in his collection on cult film (Telotte 1991), the cult film experience.

Looking for the cult film experience, then, as both a core compass, and a contested term, equals a study of taste, approached sideways. And that entails sensitivity for the modes of expression that are not usually used in academic studies of taste (and that even theories of affect have difficulty identifying – Linda Williams 1991 and Joan Hawkins 2000 are strong efforts). It is important that the study of cult cinema does not abandon its respect for and use of solid tactics of investigation: if one wants to make claims about a film's public status one better does the groundwork of carefully studying the films, and the elements these films consist of (nut and bolts, props and excesses), collecting data, interviewing producers and patrons, and collecting collections of memories, documents from archives, poster and lobby displays, notices of platform existence – in other words, evidence. Next to that, cult cinema studies also needs to acknowledge that the language through which its subject is studied needs to reflect, respect, and pay tribute to the kinds of languages that the films themselves court: that is why words such as 'wild' and 'weird', 'mad' and 'mystical' appear so often. They should be operationalized instead of avoided. In sum, this book hopes to contribute to debates that see cult cinema, and discussions about taste and film culture as living, breeding organisms, to paraphrase *Freaks*.

Note

1 The references are, respectively, Mathijs and Mendik (2011), Mathijs and Mendik (eds) (2008), Mathijs and Sexton (2011), Rosenbaum and Hoberman (1983), and French and French (1999).

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PART I

Genres and cycles

Genres, cycles, and modes

As noted in the introduction to this collection, cult cinema (or cult film) is not easy to define in a straightforward manner, partly because cult film can be considered a kind of meta-genre, a category that encompasses a number of other film types. Discussing the ways that cult cannot be considered a genre in the traditional sense, Telotte has argued – drawing on Cawelti – that unlike many genres, it has no clear 'supertext', a term Cawelti uses to describe 'an abstract of the most significant characteristics or family resemblances among many particular texts' (Cawelti quoted in Telotte 1991: 6). The lack of any clear cult film supertext is related to how cult cinema indicates both reception contexts and audience responses as much as it does textual characteristics but also to the multiplicity of film modes, genres and subgenres that the category incorporates. This section contains chapters on a number of film categories that prominently feature within cult discussions and lists.

The first chapter in this section by Ernest Mathijs focuses on exploitation filmmaking. Exploitation is more of a mode than a genre, a specific type of production which has historically been demarcated from the mainstream of the film industry and which spans different genres. In particular, the exploitation film emerged in the 1920s as a mode of practice differentiated from Hollywood filmmaking: these films were low budget, tending to deal with topics considered taboo within Hollywood, and often screened in low end cinemas (particularly in grindhouse theatres). The term 'exploitation' related to the ways in which these films often exploited their sensational elements in an appeal to potential customers. (Schaefer 1999: 3–4). It is partly because of the exploitation film's marginal position within the broader film industry that it became attractive to cultists. By the 1970s, many exploitation films were being screened on the midnight circuit and gained cult reputations; since this point, the cult reputation of exploitation films has intensified, with a number of exploitation films from a broad historical range being issued on home video.

Glyn Davis explores underground film, another broad mode of filmmaking that also significantly influenced cult cinema, though not quite as markedly as exploitation film. Like exploitation films, underground film – which emerged around the late 1950s – was also often challenging in terms of presenting taboo imagery. It was, though, more artisanal and specialist than exploitation filmmaking, more linked to the world of the artist and often personal in

nature, as opposed to the small-scale industrial nature of most exploitation films, which were geared towards making financial profit. Yet, as Davis explains, many aspects of underground filmmaking overlap with cult cinema, including the importance of midnight screenings, transgressive aesthetics, gender politics, and stardom.

David Andrews explores a very different, and more recently coined, mode of cinema: 'art-cult'. In contrast to exploitation filmmaking, this is a form of cinema which blends elements of art cinema and cult film. As a combination of modes which are themselves difficult to define in any straightforward manner, it is no surprise that 'art-cult' is itself a somewhat slippery concept. Nevertheless, it is a concept that has gained traction. Andrews contends that, while these forms of filmmaking are often opposed – in that art cinema has mostly been linked to high art status and cultural legitimacy, whilst many forms of cult film have challenged such ideas of legitimacy – there are also overlaps between them, including how they are often distinguished from the mainstream. The cult-art film, Andrews argues, is often a type of film that falls between legitimate and illegitimate modes of cinema.

Andrews refers in passing to the 'badfilm', which is a cultist category explored in this section by Rebecca Bartlett, who outlines some of the knotty philosophical issues around intention and the ways in which badfilm is embraced in ostensibly contradictory ways. Whilst exploitation and underground cinema are modal categories which pre-dated the emergence of cult cinema, and art-cult is a mode that combines a pre-existing mode *with* cult, badfilm is arguably a category of filmmaking which specifically emerges out of cultism, and is influenced by cultist audience reading strategies such as ironic readings.

The next two chapters cover horror and science fiction filmmaking, which are arguably the two most represented genres within cult film discourse. Both of these genres are linked to cult cinema, largely through their historical background as lowbrow genres (linking again to Andrews' notion of illegitimate films) and because they have both been associated with dedicated fan followings. Horror has also been linked to cult via its transgressive aesthetics, which has led to many horror films being subject to controversy and censorship, heightening for some cultists their dangerous aura. Both of these genres have, however, undergone shifting reputations and arguably have moved further into legitimate cultural positions. Yet within these genres there can be arguments amongst fans over which examples are more 'authentic' and worthwhile; as Hantke notes in his chapter, horror films which are considered mainstream are less likely to gain cult status than more marginal examples. Within science fiction this also can be the case, though there are a number of larger budgeted science fiction films that have arguably attained the status of cult classics, such as *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), while many contemporary mainstream science fiction films are subject to intensely dedicated fan followings. More relevant factors feeding into the cult status of science fiction films, as Bould outlines in his chapter, are gaps and fissures in certain films, which encourage fans to actively speculate about the films and the worlds they portray; such speculation is particularly encouraged in the 'puzzle film' (and while these are not confined to the science fiction genre, they are many sf puzzle films).

Comedy can exist as a mode or a genre, but while it is a particularly well-known and loved genre, Seth Soulstein highlights how it has been little discussed in cult cinema literature. This is quite surprising considering the number of comedic films that appear in cult film lists and discourse. Soulstein explores – via a detour into high and low distinctions and the Surrealists' fascination with slapstick – reasons as to why comedy has been overlooked in many studies of cult cinema, and links this partly to the ways that the comedic mode can inform other genres that might not be studied primarily as comedy. As he argues, many films which might be assigned to different generic categories nevertheless feature comedic 'kinks'.

The final chapter in this section concerns a cycle, or subgenre, in the form of the Italian giallo film. The giallo film refers to particular mode of violent crime cinema, often dating from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, which was often noted for its stylistic bravura. Alexia Kannas looks at the features of this cycle and explores its gradual cult following, which was spurred by the rise of home video throughout the 1980s and which has become even more subject to cult followings internationally. Through this process – and particularly by becoming embroiled within controversies about extreme material being released on video – it also became considered a subset of the horror film, and as such its fandoms increasingly overlapped with that of horror more broadly.

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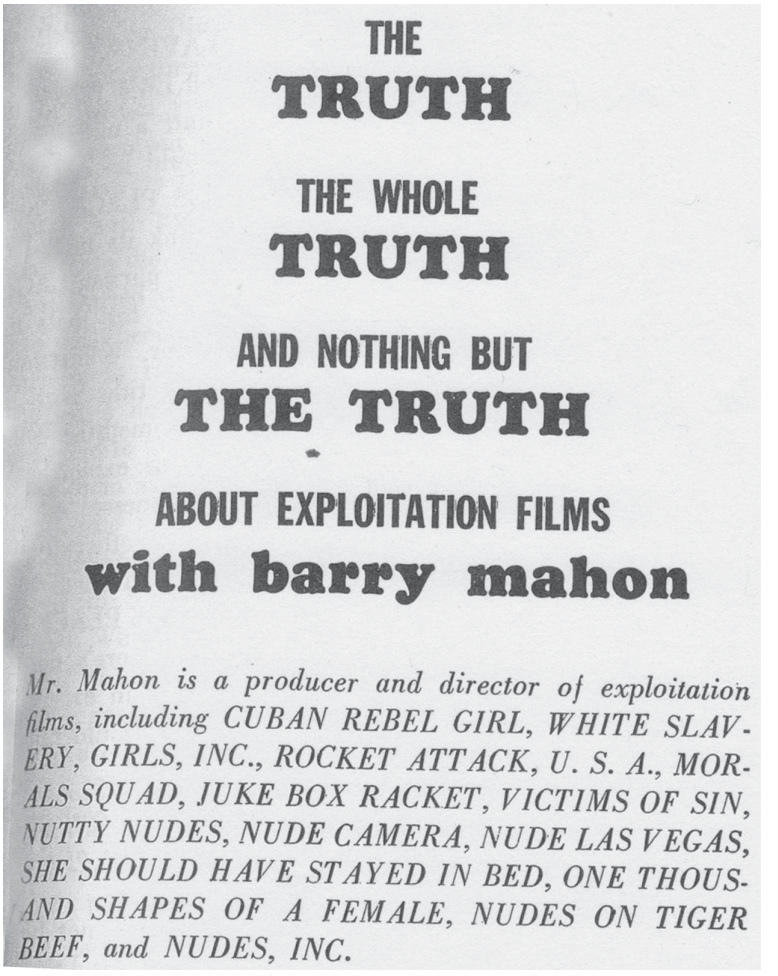
1
‘NAUGHTY,’ ‘NASTY,’ ‘CULTY’
Exploitation film

Ernest Mathijs


THE
TRUTH
THE WHOLE
TRUTH
AND NOTHING BUT
THE TRUTH
ABOUT EXPLOITATION FILMS
with barry mahon
Mr. Mahon is a producer and director of exploitation films, including CUBAN REBEL GIRL, WHITE SLAVERY, GIRLS, INC., ROCKET ATTACK, U. S. A., MORALS SQUAD, JUKE BOX RACKET, VICTIMS OF SIN, NUTTY NUDES, NUDE CAMERA, NUDE LAS VEGAS, SHE SHOULD HAVE STAYED IN BED, ONE THOUSAND SHAPES OF A FEMALE, NUDES ON TIGER BEEF, and NUDES, INC.

Early discussions of exploitation film in *Film Comment*. Used with permission from *Film Comment* magazine and Film at Lincoln Center. © 1963

Introduction: From *Film Comment* to *Matinee*

In 1963, the magazine *Film Comment*, then one year old, devoted an article to exploitation film.[1] The short essay by Frank Ferrer was an eccentric account of a film circuit shunned by the mainstream media that was nonetheless a popular albeit offbeat part of the film industry. Equally a manual-of-sorts and a warning for investors, the essay is valuable because it is one of the earliest attempts to define exploitation film while it was at a crossroads – in between classical 'moral danger' film and modern risqué film, and because it highlights core industry practices. 'It is obvious that everyone exploits one another,' Ferrer writes, yet 'everyone [makes] a contribution, artistically or technically.' 'The distributor' he quickly adds, 'is a parasite. […] the man who ultimately realizes the biggest profit from the suckers who patronize this kind of film trash' (33).

In 1964, *Film Comment* returned to the topic, this time with an interview entitled 'The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth About Exploitation Films,' with director, producer and distributor Barry Mahon, of *Morals Squad* (1960), *The Love Cult* (1965) and *Nudes on Tiger Reef* (1965). Mahon refuted most of what Ferrer had claimed. Exploitation films, he said, were not an attempt at aesthetics but instead an industry necessity – a technique of salesmanship, not a craft. As a 'sexual attraction type of film' they center around the manufacturing of professional yet mediocre content with 'advertising generally overselling what you see when you get inside.' He did agree exploitation films were cheap, had a high return on investment, and that they sought out titillating subjects in order to provoke the 'hangover of religious and moral feelings' (4). Mahon identified Hershell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963), together with Roger Corman's and American International Pictures' Edgar Allan Poe stories, as the pinnacle of exploitation film because it added 'sadism as an offbeat form of sexuality' to the exploitation mix. Mahon thus referred to a typical motive in exploitation film: that of the sensual but monstrous woman and her ever-changing body. The move from 'naughty' to 'nasty,' and the tension between the two, would be one that typified exploitation film since – and has brought forward a lot of criticism. *Film Comment* would return to exploitation film again at several points in subsequent decades, not least when it started championing, via critic Robin Wood, horror films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974). It is perhaps symptomatic that the magazine that first highlighted exploitation film would grow to become one of the most esteemed in the world: an unofficial totem for global cinema taste and its critics. Like *Film Comment*, exploitation film too has grown, and it now occupies a more central spot in debates about film at large.

In 1993, Joe Dante – a filmmaker who had grown up as a fan of exploitation films and had become a film reviewer (for *Castle of Frankenstein*), one of Roger Corman's apprentices (including editing trailers to help sell films), and a successful director (*Piranha* 1978, *The Howling* 1981, *Gremlins* 1984) – directed *Matinee*, a film in which Lawrence Woolsey (John Goodman), a huckster showman and producer of B-movies, attempts to exploit the anxieties surrounding the Cuban missile crisis to sell a horror film about an Ant-Man, called *Mant*. Featuring numerous winks and nudges to exploitation films from the 1950s and 1960s, Dante's film, with its nostalgia for B-movies and genre cinema, 'matineed' exploitation film, mainstreamed it while keeping intact its cult appeal. *Matinee* showcased Mahon and Ferrer's assertions that exploitation films were primarily a product of showmen and producers, but it also paid attention to the skills of those who directed them and starred in them. In doing so, *Matinee* reflected a change in how exploitation films had been regarded since the 1970s, when Dante himself, together with John Sayles, Jonathan Demme and Stephanie Rothman (and Jean Rollin and Jess Franco in Europe) had emerged as intrepid filmmakers active in the exploitation category. *Matinee*, and Joe Dante, gave exploitation film the recognition Mahon and Ferrer had aimed at: it acknowledged and

Figure 1.1 Lawrence Woolsey (John Goodman) as an exploitation showman in Joe Dante's *Matinee* (Dante, USA, 1993). Universal Pictures/Renfield Productions

celebrated its achievements and it highlighted the films' competence (both naughty and nasty), as well as its salesmanship (both opportunistic and culturally sensitive), as professional components of a matured industry. In doing so, *Matinee* also helped put forward the understanding that the accreditation of exploitation films' success lay with its cult appeal – with the eagerness and curiosity of audiences, always ready for a new thrill, *even if* they were oversold on a promise that 'what you see when you get inside' was going to be 'something weird' (to use the name of a company specialized in distributing exploitation films). *Matinee* came at a time when repeat home viewing of films was fast becoming a staple component of enjoying them, and that repetition cemented the fandom for exploitation films (true to form, Dante has offered numerous audio commentary tracks for exploitation films released on home viewing formats, from *The Wasp Woman* [1959] to *Candy Stripe Nurses* [1974] and beyond).

Film Comment and *Matinee*, when taken in combination, are beacons for the cult trajectory of exploitation film, from a curiosity that was in need of commentary in order to 'place' it to an over-the-top self-reflection on an afternoon binge rush.

How to study this subject?

The nomenclature of cult cinema and exploitation film is often used in tandem, and there are historical and theoretical reasons to do so. For the purposes of this chapter, exploitation cinema will be regarded as a set of prime, defining elements of cult cinema. In that sense, it means that the characteristics that make up cult cinema will be highlighted in discussing exploitation cinema as a 'type' of cult cinema. That said, this chapter recognizes that exploitation film can be discussed outside the perspective of cult cinema, although, I argue, it would be near impossible to shake that perspective altogether (see Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, for an extensive overview). Whatever the angle, complete inclusiveness covering both the term 'exploitation' and 'cult' is impossible to obtain. Some sources outright refuse to handle the term and they frequently resist calling films exploitation by preferring more mobile and reception-dependent

terms such as 'sleaze' or 'trash,' 'grindhouse,' or 'cinéma bis' (in French). The term 'cult' figures prominently in these corners too. To further complicate matters, within the use of exploitation film numerous small and sub-genres operate, many of which are highly formulaic, and labeled as such. 'Naughty' films and 'nasty' cinema have been mentioned already. From 'head film' to 'mockbuster', exploitation terminology further crosses over with genre terms in use in other areas of film study.

Most authoritatively defined by Eric Schaefer (1999), exploitation film is a type of cinema, often cheaply produced, that tries to create a fast profit by referring to, or exploiting, contemporary cultural anxieties. In 1963, Ferrer described it like this: 'The film industry defines an exploitation film in this manner: a low budget film that deals with sex, rape, murder, corruption, drug addiction, perversion, and any other distorted emotion' (1963: 31). For Schaefer, examples include films about drug use, nudity and striptease, sexual deviance, rebellious youths or gangs, violence in society, xenophobia, and fear of terrorism or alien invasions. Ostensibly, exploitation films claim to warn for the consequences of these problems, but in most cases their style, narrative, and inferences celebrate (or 'exploit') the problem as much as critiquing it. The low costs of production allow for quick turnarounds, enabling the exploitation film to address issues of high topicality. It also gives the films a ragged and rickety look that often fits the marginality of their topics.

Overall, the history of exploitation film is divided into a 'classical' period, that runs roughly until the 1960s, and a 'modern' period. The classical period is characterized by production routines that mimic those of Hollywood – with the key figure that of the showman/producer – and by provocative marketing and advertising, renegade distribution, and scattershot reception patterns. The modern period is distinguished by a higher degree of explicit material in the films, and a larger sense of self-awareness in its presentation to viewers, meaning that exploitation films knowingly place themselves in an existing tradition, commenting on the very notion of 'exploitation' and catering to audiences who know what they will be accessing. This self-awareness has led scholars to observe that the viewing tactics audiences employ for exploitation films simultaneously celebrate and ridicule the films, thus upsetting distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow culture. In the modern period the key figure is that of the auteur-director. The classical period of exploitation film is largely studied through a historical lens, whereas the modern period has led to extensive theorization of viewing practices. This focus on viewing practices is partly the result of the increased visibility of exploitation fandom, and of the wide variety of forms of exhibition (such as drive-ins, video, festivals, cable television, DVD, online platforms) through which modern exploitation film can be consumed. Because of this focus on viewing practices it can sometimes be argued that exploitation film is now no longer a type of film but a kind of film viewing.

Because of the low reputation of the exploitation film, scholarship has long remained scarce. Since the 1990s, however, there has been a steady increase in attention, much of it propelled by fan-scholarship from outside the academic world. Today, there is a balance between academic writings and fan-scholarship. John McCarty (1995), Jack Hunter (2002) and Harvey Fenton (2003) represent the fan-scholar perspective, and offer detailed histories and discussions of films academics often shy away from. Deborah Cartmell et al. (1997), Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper (2000) and Mark Jancovich et al. (2003) have been important in pushing exploitation cinema onto the academy's agenda (not without obstruction). These works employ the term 'cult,' but the majority of the essays in these volumes discuss exploitation films in one form or another. Jeffrey Sconce's work (2007) is significant for the way in which it interrogates the very foundation of 'trash.' As a phenomenon on the periphery of the cinematic mainstream,

exploitation film resists easy categorization and definition, and as a result its scholarly study often finds itself on the defensive, arguing for even a reason to be considered a legitimate object of research.

The very struggle for a definition has led to a situation whereby overviews of exploitation film have had to devote a lot of energy discussing meta-definitions (definitions of definitions) and try to connect the study of exploitation to that of other areas of film studies deemed more legitimate and functionalist, such as gender studies, censorship, or pedagogy (see the authoritative work of Cook, 1985). Alternatively, this separation from the mainstream of film studies has led to overly celebratory overviews from – predominantly – fan-scholars. Their importance and influence on the study of exploitation film cannot be underestimated. If nothing else, their efforts have given research into exploitation film a grassroots base, a constituency of readers and commentators with whom academics find themselves in continued debate. Some of this debate centers around the necessity (or refusal of it) for theorizing exploitation film, and it is for this reason that most overviews of the field are theory-light. Another common interest of overviews of exploitation film is a historical framework – a desire to help write the history of the subject. Because of the historical tendency to present North American exploitation film as the exemplar, or even the model, for the genre, sources that present a wide overview of that region have are generally considered 'general overviews' (see Schaefer 1999 for arguably the most commanding study of this kind).

Mostly, overviews of exploitation film tend to be 'guides': eclectic collections of reviews and commentary. Largely this is due to the fact that there have been little or no institutional initiatives to catalogue exploitation films, a result of their marginal and contested position in culture as lowbrow, 'dangerous' or 'sleazy.' Since the 1980s, however, some efforts have been made to construct encyclopedia of exploitation film. Often, these efforts have been user-generated: video technology allowed viewers to start collecting and sharing films and out of this grew the first encyclopedic catalogues, compiled by fan-scholars. Among the most notable early examples are Michael Weldon (1996) and Tim Lucas (1990), all of which started in the early 1980s as serial publications. Landis and Clifford (2002) are rooted in another user-based experience, that of New York's grindhouse theatres (the 42nd Street that both Ferrer and Mahon mention). Increasingly, websites and online catalogues and collections are taking over the function of the print encyclopedia. As a testament to the commercial origin of much exploitation film cataloguing, several of these sites are set up as online stores. Such connotations do much to help make the study of exploitation film more respectable.

Reception and fan studies are important, too, because they have acted in unison when studying exploitation film (in other areas their differences may be big enough to separate them, but not here). The philosophical backbone of reception and fan studies is phenomenology, and this has had repercussions for how exploitation film is identified: a film is an exploitation film when it is seen, or shows itself, as such. When fans talk of a film as an exploitation film, when the 'exploitation' tag is a factor of significance in a film's negotiation of its public status, and when 'exploitation' is a salient marker in a film's reception trajectory (its marketing, distribution, long-term sedimentation into culture), it is an exploitation film. This philosophy has influenced most profoundly studies of the modern period of exploitation film. Since the 1990s, reception and fan studies of exploitation film have been increasingly influential, as is evidenced by the book series Global Exploitation Cinemas (Fisher and Walker 2016).

Finally, historically, American exploitation film has dominated the scholarship in this field, for the simple reason that for many scholars it is largely a phenomenon of the American marketplace. (Clark 1995 is an excellent indication of how vast a research terrain American exploitation film is.) With regard to the classical era, studies of films from the United States cover the

vast majority of the research to the point where overviews of the classical period can with reason pose for global overviews (see Schaefer 1999). Here are included studies of the classical era that concentrate on two of the pressure moments: the early 1930s and the mid- to late 1950s (Doherty 1999, 2002). Doherty (1984) offers a good analysis of American exploitation film at a crossroads in 1968. With regard to the modern era, American exploitation film takes up less of a majority in the field, and much of the scholarship is fragmented across studies of particular auteurs and regions. Overviews of American exploitation film in the modern era also tend to specify particular contexts of reception, such as the drive-in theatre or the underground scene (Mendik and Schneider 2002), although there is a vast overlap between these categories and they are used as mobile parameters rather than fixed templates. These considerations do have great pedagogical mileage as is shown by Sconce (2003), who offers a self-reflective consideration of the pedagogical challenges of teaching classical American exploitation film through the case study of Dwain Esper's *Maniac* (1934). It is worth noting that several chapters in this Companion make efforts to balance the overly U.S.-heavy emphasis that remains dominant in the study of exploitation film.

Where to look?

As previously mentioned, exploitation film is often presented as a predominantly American phenomenon. At the same time, its connection with (mostly) European arthouse and risqué cinema is frequently emphasized. Ferrer and Mahon acknowledge the influence of, for instance, Swedish and Danish films with more daring female presentations, and Dante mentions French and Italian subversive cinema in similar terms (Klein 2000). These mentions are 'cover mentions': they stand in for attitudes towards cinema, for approaches to filmmaking, and for conditions and opportunities of film consumption that do not intend to be representative of a nation, region, culture, or continent. Yet, at the same time, these regional markers have come to define how the origins of exploitation film have been studied.

There are three main reasons to study exploitation film through the perspective of national or regional cinema and to treat it as a kind of cinema specific to a country or continent. The first reason is that many exploitation films are small in scale. They are produced cheaply and distributed to a circuit limited in exposure. It is likely that, for a while at least, exploitation films might not make it out of the region in which they were first produced and screened. That said, there is a significant difference between classical exploitation film, which most definitely saw its visibility restricted to mostly regional exhibition (especially in the case of American exploitation film), and the modern period, which benefited from the development of portable exhibition platforms such as VHS and DVD, and of an accelerated circuit of distribution that, in many cases, obliterates the distinction between national and international releases. The second reason to use a national cinema perspective for exploitation film is that the desire of exploitation filmmakers to insert sensationalist topical themes into their films meant that the films latched onto local and regional sensitivities and controversies. Put bluntly, a Mexican exploitation film might have more meaning if one considers it in the context of the cultural sensitivities of Mexico. The third reason is that in several high-profile cases specific generic templates seem to develop in tandem with (or because of) unique production contexts typical to a nation's or continent's film culture and economy.

Since the modern period, there is no limit on exploitation films from all corners of the world. Italosploitation, Britsploitation and Eurotrash, for example, have attracted firm scholarship, and in more recent years Latsploitation and Asian exploitation film (often known as Asia Extreme in reference to a once dominant DVD imprint) have received a lot of attention too. There is a curious distinction between regional exploitation film's narrowly defined site-specificity and its

over-generalizations informed by an Orientalist lens. Take exploitation film from the United Kingdom, Britsploitation, which has developed as a quite unique type of film, because it 'traveled quite badly' (as Upton 2001 observes). Unconcerned with aesthetics and realism from other regions and not bothered by marketplace anxieties that dominate American exploitation, it is also often seen as more muted in its imagery because of the historically tight censorship regulations. Among the unique characteristics are a fascination with vulgar comedy and science-fiction (and their combination), and an exclusive brand of horror (of which Hammer horror is the most visible exponent). Much of the terminology of Britsploitation references the emotive mobility of the spectator's position through a self-mocking deprecation (see Hunt 1998; Sheridan 2001). If pushed, one can consider this hyper-focus a form of navel-gazing. In contrast, discussions of exploitation film under a nation's or continent's banner can also contain gross generalizations on the different cultures it captures. 'Asia Extreme' and 'Eurotrash' therefore often offer a taste judgment on the aesthetics used in exploitation film from those regions. The term 'Asia Extreme' was introduced in the 1990s as a colloquial term (and also as the tag of a distribution label to denote a wave of films from Asia that caused furor on the North American and European markets). As such, there is an inference of Orientalism to its use by viewers and critics. Since then, the term has been used increasingly by scholars looking to identify a commonality in the receptions of Asian films as exploitation. Gradually, the term has enveloped most of Asian exploitation film, bringing under its umbrella the monster movie (usually arranged around Godzilla), the martial arts film (where Bruce Lee remains the centripetal figure), and anime (with tentaclesploitation and cyberpunk as pivotal sub-genres). Historically, the regions of Japan and Hong Kong have received the most attention; South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, and Indonesia started to receive attention as well (also see the chapters by Vibhushan Subba, Rayna Denison and Robyn Citizen in this volume).

European exploitation film is often nicknamed Eurotrash. Perhaps a rationale for the radical and dismissive tone of this label lies in the contrast it provides with the kind of film with which Europe is traditionally associated: state-subsidized art and auteur cinema. Even to this day, the dichotomy influences debate on European exploitation. This is acutely the case in writings on contemporary French film, as Sue Harris's 2011 study of the 1970s' most successful exploitation franchise, *Emmanuelle*, testifies, and on German film scholarship (see Hantke 2007). Most scholarship on Eurotrash covers the modern period (Mathijs and Mendik 2004 emphasize central Europe). Unlike American exploitation, the focus in Eurotrash scholarship is less on routines and practices of production and distribution (European producers remain acutely under-researched), and more on the social positioning of film as lowbrow, the textual aesthetics of realism, and on auteurist oeuvres. As an articulation of Eurotrash, Italosploitation has received quite a lot of attention, primarily because of its prolific presence in academic scholarship (especially with regard to directors active in the Spaghetti Western and Giallo sub-genres, such as Sergio Leone, Sergio Corbucci, Dario Argento and Mario Bava – see the chapter on Giallo in this volume). As these examples demonstrate, hybridity is typical for Italosploitation, The most notable items of Italosploitation are the peplum (especially the Maciste and Hercules films), nunsploitation film (sexploitation in the context of the religious orders of the Catholic Church; see Nakahara 2004), poliziottesschi (crime films with rogue cops), and cannibal and zombie films, but there are many more. Sensual aesthetics, exoticism, religious overtones, crime, mystery, and surrealism are combined in ways that have made exploitation films from Italy very successful in overseas markets. The majority of these cycles come from the 1970s (and Italy's 'years of lead' of political turmoil), though some run deep into the 1980s and 1990s (Smith 1997 offers an exhaustive guide). Mendik (2010) discusses the unique figure of Joe D'Amato, active in nearly all of these cycles, and hard-core pornography on top of it.

Compared to this, research on the exploitation film of Latin America is fairly new. Before the twenty-first century, most if not all discussion was centered around a few key figures, especially Alejandro Jodorowsky (Chilean, but mostly active in Mexico), José Mojica Marins (aka Coffin Joe, from Brazil), and Luis Buñuel (his Mexican films). Jodorowsky and Buñuel were usually discussed as 'international' directors, laying claim to 'arthouse' labels. More recently, that 'art' tag has gradually been removed from some discussions (for an example concerning Jodorowsky, who remains the seminal figure of Latsploitation, see Santos 2017). In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the twenty-first century has seen a new direction in Latsploitation studies: conceptualizations of region and nation have become more important as they have become increasingly influenced by a postcolonial theoretical perspective. This perspective is most prominently advocated by Dolores Tierney (2004, also see her chapter in this book). It has enabled the re-assessment of exploitation film in most countries of Latin America (as evidenced in Syder and Tierney 2005, and Ruétalo and Tierney 2009). Overall, the dominant region in Latsploitation has been Mexico – or Mexploitation. Mexploitaton distinguishes itself through its emphasis on generic markers (wrestling and stunt narratives, franchise horror characters such as vampires or werewolves). To this day, Mexico dominates scholarly attention for Latsploitation.

Next to that, Andes-sploitation (the Andes mountain range), Canuxploitation (Canada), Ozploitation (Australia), Nordic exploitation (propelled by the popularity of Scandinavian noir thrillers), and Turkish exploitation have received some scholarly consideration. Attention for African exploitation remains rare, with Nollywood's exploitation films (from Nigeria) and Ugandan exploitation film (called Wakaliwood; see Brown 2017) as exceptions. Historically, however, American exploitation film has dominated the research in this field, for the simple reason that for many scholars it remains largely a phenomenon of the American marketplace, if not in terms of production then at least in terms of the size of consumption and the amount of money circulating. This is especially the case with studies of the classical era that concentrate on two of the pressure moments: the early 1930s, and the mid- to late 1950s. Thomas Doherty (1999), for instance, offers excellent studies of the brief period in between the introduction of sound and the installation of Hollywood's strict self-censorship (the Hays code), in which Hollywood and exploitation were almost synonymous. Doherty's case studies include *Freaks* (Browning, 1932), the first two Tarzan films, and *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933). Doherty (1984, 2002) also offers a good analysis of American exploitation film at a crossroads in 1968. Overviews of American exploitation film in the modern era tend to specify particular contexts of reception, such as the drive-in theatre or the underground scene.

Who to look for?

The challenge with exploitation film auteurs is that there is often hardly any cohesion in their career. Several filmmakers whose careers are not at all associated with exploitation film, have had exploitation trajectories. The 'apprenticeship narrative' that was mentioned in relation to Joe Dante also applies to David Cronenberg, Wes Craven, Francis Coppola, Jonathan Demme, Peter Jackson, and many filmmakers considered superb artists of cinema. At the same time, there is a lack of theoretical perspective – it is almost as if theory fails when faced with the forthrightness, brashness, and industriousness of many exploitation auteurs. This chapter's range is too small to do justice to many of the most exciting auteurs in exploitation cinema. Dario Argento, Roger Corman, Jess Franco, John Waters, William Castle, Russ Meyer, Lucio Fulci, Hershell Gordon Lewis, Radley Metzger, Paul Verhoeven, and Ed Wood Jr. have received considerable academic scrutiny (Mathijs 2011). But if a haphazard list of 'exploitation auteurs worthy of separate study' can consist of José Benazeraf, Tinto Brass, Jorg Buttgereit, Larry Cohen, Joe D'Amato, Ruggero

Deodato, Dwain Esper, Abel Ferrara, David Friedman, Lloyd Kaufman, Antonio Margheriti, Ted V. Mikels, Gary Graver, or Fred Olen Ray (to name only the ones that a five-minute Facebook request turned up), then it should be clear that there is a lot of work to be done.

Here, I will only discuss two filmmakers at some length, because of the totemic cult status they hold, and because their careers are symptomatic for how exploitation auteurs are usually studied: Roger Corman, the King of the B's, and Radley Metzger, the unsung hero of the sex film. Roger Corman has received several coronations as the most significant filmmaker in exploitation – someone whose image spans both the classical period (as a producer/showman) and the modern period (as a self-conscious auteur). With a career that runs from the 1950s onto the twenty-first century, and with more than 100 films to show as producer and/or director, there is certainly a quantitative wealth of material available. Scholarly consideration for Corman grew in the early 1970s, when his production companies were given extra attention through the mainstream success of directors he'd been the first to give a chance in the craft (see Dixon 1976). Since then, there has been a steady stream of studies. The first kind focuses on his oeuvre, from an auteurist perspective. While there is a certain degree of auteur-celebration in these studies, they are also characterized by an unusual attention for logistics of filmmaking (instead of aesthetics). The second kind concentrates on Corman's efforts as a producer, with A.I.P., New World Pictures, Aries Films (in Latin America), and others (see Osgerby 2003, on A.I.P.'s biker films, and Falicov 2004, on Aries Films). The emphasis in these studies lies on the political economy, topicality, and reception of the films. In spite of the global recognition for Corman's contribution to American film in general, it is still indicative of the status of exploitation film that the majority of studies on Corman openly celebrate his achievements as a businessperson and mentor, yet remain underwhelmed when discussing the aesthetics and values of the films. The name of Metzger is often coupled to that of the better-known Russ Meyer: both have had parallel careers, starting in the late 1950s with nudie pictures, and gradually moving into bigger-budget R-rated softcore extravaganzas by the late 1960s. Like Meyer, Metzger also received some respect from the critical establishment in the early 1970s (see Corliss 1973 – in *Film Comment*!). Unlike Meyer, however, Metzger has been unable to sustain that reception. That is at least partly due to the move towards hardcore pornography. Under the pseudonym Henri Paris Metzger directed a handful of the most elaborately designed and narratively sophisticated hardcore porn films (see Servois 2009 on one of Metzger's most famous hardcore films, *The Opening of Misty Beethoven*). Metzger's career is also widely diverse. He was first and foremost a distributor, next a producer, and then a director. This has made scholars more reluctant to study his oeuvre through the lens of auteurism. Alternative lenses, such as camp, kitsch, and 'taste' have been used more frequently (see Gorfinkel 2002), often leading to a consideration of Metzger's aesthetics as 'Euro-chic'). Together, the perspectives of the iconoclastic art-rebel, the showman, and the pornographer with attitude, make up the composite image of the 'ideal' exploitation filmmaker.

That image also appears to be very male. Often rightfully derided as a masculinist enterprise, exploitation film nevertheless has some notable female auteurs. Scholarship on these filmmakers has been scarce, but since the 2000s there has been an increase in attention. As with other studies of exploitation film auteurs, much of the argument centers on the quest for a redeemable quality of an oeuvre. In the case of female exploitation filmmakers this ambiguity is compounded by several other factors. Often, it seems, discussions of women exploitation filmmakers suffer from short spans of attention, and from being pressed into frameworks that sees their work as symptomatic of political developments in cinema – thus denying them a specific identity within exploitation film. In addition, the comparatively short careers of women exploitation directors have made the adoption of auteurist approaches difficult. It has impacted, for instance, on the

scholarship on Stephanie Rothman's work (see Cook 1985). Probably the most visible and consistently referenced female exploitation filmmaker is Doris Wishman, whose films with Chesty Morgan are frequently touted as exemplary of the ambiguities involved in women filming the exploitation of women (see Luckett 2003 and Modleski 2007). Other female auteurs who have more recently been put under academic scrutiny include Roberta Findlay (see Peary 1978, and discussed in this volume), Anna Biller (discussed separately later in this book), and Jen and Sylvia Soska (who are not only openly courting horror exploitation but also sports exploitation through their episodic work on wrestling and the WWE). Overall, however, female auteurs remain an under-investigated and fugitive subject in the study of exploitation film.

Exploitation sub-genres

One of the most effective ways of discussing exploitation film is by distinguishing various sub-genres.[2] Traditionally, this occurs through methods of textual analysis: the salient forms, styles, and themes of films are analyzed, and those films that share many components are grouped together and labeled as a genre. Often, contextual information, such as the film's place in history, its production history, and its director (and their intentions) are also used to arrive at such groupings. In the case of the exploitation film, where labeling a film as a certain kind of experience is important for marketing campaigns, and as a function of controversies and censorship, a myriad number of genre labels exist. Many of them overlap. In fact, for some genres (or sub-genres) there exist so many different names that a categorical overview is near impossible. This complexity is further complicated by the fact that several genres, of which the label continues to be used actually only exist(ed) as cycles or waves – in other words, they only occupied a place as a genre for a limited period. Several of the genres on which exist a high degree of consensus (both on their name and on their template) are surveyed elsewhere in this book because they supersede the limitations of exploitation film. Blaxploitation, horror, and Kung Fu or Martial Arts films of Asian heritage are amongst those. Sexploitation films are covered in the sections on gender and cult film. Next to these, labels exist such as Nazisploitation (covered valiantly by Magilow, Vander Lught, and Bridges 2012), the 'erotic thriller' (mostly following the templates set out by Gregory Dark, Zalman King, and the *Red Shoe Diaries* series, see Eberwein 1998; Andrews 2006), the 'sick film' (for which Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salo*, 1975 became a template, see Church 2009), and the mondo and snuff film (pioneered by *Mondo Cane* of 1963 and immortalized by *Cannibal Holocaust*, by Ruggero Deodato 1979; see Brottman 2004 and Goodall 2006).

The majority of these sub-genres are the result of textual analysis. Blaxploitation, Nazisploitation, torture porn, and Mondo and Snuff Film, for instance, are the result of a grouping of modes of representation. So is the yo-yo cycle of films around women in prisons, a combination of naughty and nasty that received respectability thanks to the television series *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–). As this example shows, occasionally, contextual factors such as a sub-genre's cultural impact on female issues of representation have made a significant difference in the usage of a label. In the case of the Video Nasties (a grouping of films banned from video release in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s; see Egan 2007), context has virtually been the only factor in labeling. Additional complications arise when the terminology to denote exploitation genres is overused. 'Horror', for instance, contains so many films (strictly quantitatively speaking) and has been used so indiscriminately as a tag for exploitation that subdivisions have been designed to speak more specifically about the kind of exploitation these labels cover ('slasher,' 'softcore,' 'hardcore' or 'zombedy', for instance). The same applies to waves of exploitation films about monstrous animals, from rabbits (Bunny-sploitation, of which *Night of the Lepus* is an example) to sharks (*Sharknado*). As can be surmised from this last

example, exploitation films that aim for these tropes are often produced as highly self-reflexive and tongue-in-cheek mockeries of mainstream films – in much the same way *Matinee* does.

Conclusion

'Exploitation,' like 'cult,' is a mobile carrier of meanings; both aim for provocation and do so in ways that refuse easy categorization. *Because* they explore, and exploit, morally contentious subjects through a mixture of hyperbolic and excessive aesthetics (that are sometimes intentional and sometimes accidental), they receive receptions that put them aside from mainstream circuits of culture, often relegated to niches in terms of distribution and exhibition – from which they attempt to escape by drawing undue attention to themselves (undue, that is, in the minds and eyes of guardians of moral decency and moderation). As this chapter has observed, there has been a gradual move, interrupted and complicated by ever-oscillating swings of 'coolness' and fashionable 'appropriation', of exploitation cinema towards a position where its place in commercial circuits of culture, and the film industry in particular, is earned, and respected, and where its existence is, most of the time, reluctantly tolerated.

While, ultimately, this gradual recognition has not neutered exploitation film, the fact that thanks to efforts by critics, curators, fans, filmmakers, and scholars exploitation film now has a history, an official narrative with heroes and survivors upon which it can reflect nostalgically, has legitimized it. The cult reception of many exploitation films, from the drugged teens warning film *Reefer Madness* to the drunk women in prison and Hans and Gretel hallucination *Freeway II: Confessions of a Trickbaby* (Bright, 1999), is testimony to that. Speaking of which: *Freeway II* is a sequel to *Freeway* (Bright, 1999). With John Landis in a cameo role as a judge, and Natasha Lyonne and Vincent Gallo as White Girl (a 'crazy serial killer girl') and Sister Gomez (a 'cult lord') respectively, running amok in rundown neighborhoods in Mexico, it is an unruly summary of the modern exploitation film. Given Landis' pedigree as a director, Gallo's reputation as a provocateur, and Lyonne's subsequent rise to mainstream stardom thanks to her roles in Netflix' women in prison drama *Orange is the New Black* and supernatural time-travel spiritual mystery *Russian Doll* (Netflix, 2019–), *Freeway II* is a pivotal film for illustrating where exploitation film sits as a type of cult cinema. After all, when Lyonne's *Russian Doll* character Nadia needs a secret password to unlock life's mysteries it is revealed as 'Jodorowsky's *Dune*.'

Notes

1 This chapter contains large sections that first appeared in Ernest Mathijs (2011), 'Exploitation Film' Oxford Bibliographies Online (www.oxfordbibliographies.com/) accessed 19 January 2019. We thank Oxford University Press and Dana Linken and Krin Gabbard for their generous permission to use these arguments in this context.

2 I wish to thank the hundreds of students of the University of British Columbia's long-running course Cult Cinema (FIST 300) for their contributions to exploring exploitation sub-genres as part of their assignments. Their ability to come up with sub-genres such as 'Nicholas Spark–sploitation' and 'Sharksploitation' (from *The Notebook* to *Sharknado*) is testament to the fertile ground of exploitation cinema. I also want to thank Vince D'Amato for his contribution to these sessions.

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2

UNDERGROUND FILM AND CULT CINEMA

Glyn Davis

Ron Rice's film *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963/1982) was planned as a lengthy epic but was left incomplete at the time of Rice's death. Rice, born in 1935, made only a few films during his lifetime, his career prematurely cut short by bronchial pneumonia in 1964. Taylor Mead, one of *The Queen of Sheba*'s lead actors, eventually edited it into a final form and added a soundtrack of classical, country, pop and rock music in 1982. Mead plays an impish innocent who wanders around a number of New York locations; Winifred Bryan stars as an often-naked odalisque with a penchant for alcohol. The film exhibits many of the markers of cult cinema. First, although low-resolution bootlegs of the film can be found online, *The Queen of Sheba* is difficult to source in a high-quality format; limited availability and scarcity can often contribute to a film's cult status. Second, as with the foci of various forms of cult practice and behaviour, Rice's film has a small but passionate and devoted audience (mainly scholars of experimental film and fans of 1960s avant-garde cinema). Third, as a film that was left unfinished and which was only forged into one possible edit years later, *The Queen of Sheba* displays the 'organic imperfections' and 'glorious ricketiness' that Umberto Eco identifies as core characteristics of the cult object (Eco 1987: 198). Fourth, Rice's premature death adds to the film's potential cult value, its role as a marker of lost opportunities: cult appreciation has a tendency to flower around actors and directors who die young. Other factors could be added here: even the film's title makes it sound like an example of cult cinema, a trashy piece of exploitation fare in which actors in rubber suits battle each other in a generic Midwestern town.

However, *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (and, indeed, Rice's career more broadly) is rarely, if ever, discussed in accounts of cult cinema. Rather, it is most often framed as an example of underground cinema. Rice made his first film *The Flower Thief* (1960) – also starring Taylor Mead – on the west coast of the United States. That film was a key contribution to the flourishing of 'Beat cinema', a movement that was, for some film historians, the first phase of underground cinema history. By the time of *The Queen of Sheba* Rice had moved to New York and was socializing with pivotal underground film figures such as Jack Smith, who makes a cameo appearance in the film. Rice and *The Queen of Sheba* both feature in seminal texts on underground film, including books by Sheldon Renan (1967), Parker Tyler (1974) and P. Adams Sitney (2002).

Does the lack of attention to Ron Rice and *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* in texts on cult cinema reveal some sort of cleft – categorical, conceptual, definitive – between cult film and underground cinema? This chapter will argue the opposite: it will examine the landscape of underground cinema as a distinct field, identify a number of key connections and overlaps with cult film, and reveal ways in which the categories sometimes blur together.

A map of the underground

Like cult cinema, definitions of underground film are complex, multifaceted, and contested. The contestation arises from differing uses of the term: it is sometimes deployed as a synonym for experimental or avant-garde film of any hue; at times it is used to refer to films that test the limits of sex, violence, morality or taste; it is also employed more specifically in relation to a particular period in the history of avant-garde American filmmaking. The latter is the main form in which underground film tends to be identified, historicized and analysed, and therefore the understanding that this chapter will adopt. Underground cinema briefly flourished in the United States in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. As a movement, it is often identified as having specific antecedents, particular historical moments when creative experimentation with the moving image blossomed productively: the proliferation of films made in the 1920s by artists associated with the Dada and surrealist movements including Luis Buñuel, René Clair, and Man Ray; 1940s experimental works by filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, Curtis Harrington, and Gregory Markopoulos who used the moving image to shape oneiric expressions of subjective experience. However, underground cinema had its own distinctive contours.

One of the earliest uses of the term 'underground' in relation to cinema was by the critic Manny Farber in 1957, although he used it to refer to low-budget adventure films by directors such as Raoul Walsh and William Wellman (Farber 1998). Sheldon Renan notes uses of the term in 1959 by journalist Lewis Jacobs and filmmaker Stan Vanderbeek, with the latter claiming that he coined the term 'to describe his films and those like them' (Renan 1967: 22). Jonas Mekas, in a 1976 catalogue essay for Paris's Centre Georges Pompidou, attributed the notion of an artistic underground to a 1961 speech given by Marcel Duchamp (see Suárez 1996: 81). Whatever the original source, the notion of a filmic underground gained currency and a notable level of cultural visibility throughout the 1960s.

Not only is the origin of the phrase 'underground cinema' open to question, but the chronological limits of the movement itself are debated. For David E. James in his book *Allegories of Cinema*, the history of underground cinema begins in 1959, with the release of Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's Beat film *Pull My Daisy*, and ends in 1966 with screenings of Andy Warhol's *The Chelsea Girls* (James 1989: 94). Other authors do not include Beat cinema in their accounts and understandings of underground cinema and concentrate more centrally on the mushrooming of avant-garde filmmaking and film culture that took place in New York during the 1960s. For Juan Suárez, for instance, underground cinema starts in 1961, with the weekend midnight screenings of avant-garde films at the Charles Theatre in Manhattan, and ends in 1966 with *The Chelsea Girls* – and with Tony Conrad's *The Flicker*, which heralds the beginning of a new, formalist approach to making experimental cinema (Suárez 1996: 55). Dominique Noguez (1985) offers alternate boundaries: 1962 serves as an origin, as it was when Jonas Mekas first used the phrase 'underground cinema' in his writings, and 1968 as an end-point, as the year that Warhol directed his last films before handing the reins to Paul Morrissey.

However it is temporally framed, the realm of underground cinema reveals itself to be heterogeneous, lacking the cohesion of some film movements. The stasis of Andy Warhol's

Empire (1964), for instance, an eight-hour-and-five-minutes-long film of the Empire State Building, seems to have little in common with the campy, trashy tenor of Mike Kuchar's *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965). As Suárez writes, the underground 'constituted an anarchic, motley growth composed of many sensibilities, styles, and modes of production' (Suárez 1996: 55). Underground cinema is associated with a loose group of filmmakers that included Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Baillie, Bruce Conner, Ken Jacobs, George and Mike Kuchar, Marie Menken, Barbara Rubin, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol. These filmmakers were never formally affiliated as a collective, and connections between them varied widely in form and valence. One central figure of notable significance to the field of underground cinema, however, was Jonas Mekas – poet, critic, agitator, distributor, promoter, filmmaker. Born in Lithuania in 1922, Mekas arrived in New York in 1949. Inspired by his viewing experiences at Amos and Marcia Vogel's Cinema 16 film society, Mekas began to curate screenings of avant-garde films and to write about cinema. He launched the journal *Film Culture* in 1955 – a publication identified by Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker as 'an early indication of Mekas's ambitious vision for cultivating new forums for the discussion and promotion of the understanding of film as an art form in the United States' (2016: xv). Mekas also started to write a column, 'Movie Journal', for the *Village Voice* in 1958, which he regularly used to discuss, draw attention to, and proselytize about avant-garde cinema. Mekas' advocacy for avant-garde film led to his involvement in distribution and exhibition: he collaborated in the 1962 establishment of the Film-Makers' Cooperative, an organization devoted to the distribution of cinema by avant-garde filmmakers, and was the founder of the Filmmakers' Cinematheque, an itinerant exhibition practice which eventually transformed into the more stable Anthology Film Archives in 1970. He was also a prolific filmmaker, with a predilection for making diary films such as *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)* (1968) and *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1971–1972).

Mekas was a pivotal figure in underground film history, as he provided the movement's directors with forms of institutional support, however short-lived: mechanisms for distribution, spaces for screenings, a film column raising awareness of their work. These all helped to nurture a sense of community and provide opportunities for underground directors to come into contact with each other's work. Andy Warhol, for instance, was a regular attendee of underground film screenings at the Bleecker Street Cinema and Gramercy Arts Theatre in 1963 (see Davis and Needham 2013: 14). Aside from these spaces or organizational contexts that afforded some degree of cohesion to the underground film scene, other connections between its disparate forms and instances can be identified – connections which are not easily separated from each other. First, as Sheldon Renan noted, these films were 'made for very little money, frequently under a thousand dollars' (Renan 1967: 17). Jonas Mekas for instance, writing in June 1963 in the *Village Voice*, revealed that Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) cost just $300 (Mekas 2016: 93). Production costs – on elements such as set design, costumes, lighting, film stock, cameras, and cast – had to be reduced to the bare necessities. Low budgets segregated underground filmmakers from commercial forms of cinema; scarcity of means afforded them a degree of creative freedom and inspired innovation. Second, underground cinema was a form of counter-cinema, purposefully setting itself against mainstream, commercial film. Its directors conceived of film as an art form. As Jared Rapfogel writes, underground filmmakers' 'methods were often radically different, but the goal they sought, both aesthetically and culturally, was a new freedom of expression liberated from inherited, conventional mores and forms' (Rapfogel 2012: 268–269). Although the aesthetics of underground films differed widely, the films were connected through their attempts to present audio-visual alternatives to the neat, glossy polish of mainstream studio product. Third, many underground films of the 1960s had political aims, intentions or messages. Juan Suárez highlights that the metaphor of 'the

underground' connected avant-garde cinema of the 1960s 'to the culture of dissent in postwar America' (Suárez 1996: 82). Commentary about mainstream politics appeared, for instance, in underground films such as Andy Warhol's *Since* (1966), which re-staged the Kennedy assassination; Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963), meanwhile, linked motorcycle gang behaviour to fascist belief systems; and *Flaming Creatures* challenged calcified norms relating to gender and sexuality, as well as censorship strictures.

For all of its diversity, then, underground cinema cohered around particular factors: low budgets and a related economy of means; an attempt to offer alternative aesthetic options to those of mainstream cinema; political impulses and intentions; and common opportunities for exhibition and distribution. Having outlined the specific contours of underground cinema as an identifiable phenomenon, the remainder of this chapter will move to examine potential bridges and links between the realms of underground cinema and cult film.

Mind the gap

In the chapter on underground and avant-garde cinema in their 2011 book on cult cinema, the editors of this volume point out that, despite the seeming gap between underground cinema and cult film, 'these two spheres commonly intersect' (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 155). They point out, in particular, that 'a number of key films belong to both domains', and that certain viewing contexts associated with underground cinema 'became important sites in which some cult films established their reputations' (ibid.); they also trace a number of other vital links. Taking Mathijs and Sexton's observations as a starting point, I want to identify and briefly discuss four ways in which cult film and underground cinema can be identified as formally or conceptually connected to each other. The account presented here is far from exhaustive but serves to highlight some vital links.

One: Exhibition

The Charles Theatre, located at 12th Street and Avenue B in New York, began hosting midnight screenings of films late in 1961 and continued to do so throughout much of 1962. Although the Charles screened a variety of films in this slot, underground films were part of the ongoing programme. Mainly, the screenings focused on the work of one director: on 29 and 30 December 1961, for instance, there was a Marie Menken retrospective. Jonas Mekas, who was involved in organizing some screenings at the Charles, often reviewed the midnight shows in his *Village Voice* column. In January 1963, Mekas began organizing Monday night midnight screenings at the Bleecker Street Cinema, but these came to an abrupt end after several months. 'The truth is', Mekas wrote in his 'Movie Journal' column in June 1963, 'we have been thrown out. The Bleecker Cinema people did not like our movies. They thought the independent cinema was ruining the "reputation of the theatre"' (Mekas 2016: 93).

Midnight screenings were not new in 1961, but they became a more prominent part of the cinema landscape throughout the 1960s – and especially into the 1970s, when a number of New York cinemas began programming material in midnight slots. As Mathijs and Mendik note, the midnight movie phenomenon enabled the showing of films 'unsuitable to be programmed at other times (too risky for regular evenings, too shocking for matinées)' (2008: 167–168); midnight screenings thus became 'an eclectic network for audiences craving unusual, subversive films, and anything daylight shun' (ibid.: 168). In terms of the history of cult cinema, this reached its peak in the 1970s with showings of particular films that generated devoted repeat-viewing fan audiences, including *El Topo* (Jodorowsky, 1970), *Pink Flamingos* (Waters,

1972), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975), and *Eraserhead* (Lynch, 1977). A screening format that had associations with underground cinema in the 1960s, then, became a key component of cult film exhibition and consumption in the following decade. A further link can be made through the notion of political dissent. Hoberman and Rosenbaum note in their book *Midnight Movies* that there was an anti-establishment aspect to many of the 1970s cult films screened in midnight slots: their explicit content and examinations of dissident morality seemed to square with the political turmoil affecting the United States at the time (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 112). As already noted, the same could be said of some of the underground films screening in similar timeslots in the 1960s.

Aside from midnight screenings, across the 1960s venues that showed underground films would often simultaneously programme other types of cinema. Art cinema, exploitation movies and underground films would be advertised alongside each other in the press; instances of all three challenged what could be legally shown on screen, further eroding the lines between them. As Mark Betz writes, 'these films at times shared not only the same representational codes of marketing and the same police lockup shelves, but also the same exhibition space and quite heterogeneous audiences' (Betz 2003: 219). Due to their risqué content and flouting of principles of decency, as well as their resistance to Hollywood standards of quality and finish, a significant number of these films have acquired cult standing. The exhibition spaces in which these films were encountered, then, facilitated the acquisition of cult status by some underground films, and smudged any pencilled-in boundaries between underground cinema and other forms of independent, experimental and risky work.

Two: Transgression

Underground films are often associated with transgression, at the level of aesthetics, form and depicted content. Their low budgets often conferred on them an appearance of amateurism. Sound and image quality could be rough: one reel of Warhol's film *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1965), for instance, was recorded out of focus. Acting styles often ran counter to mainstream norms; improvisation was regularly favoured over careful scripting and rehearsal. Edits might be jarring. Soundtracks could be dubbed on later, as with Rice's *The Queen of Sheba*. Jonas Mekas was a supporter of such amateur stylistics: as Paul Arthur notes, Mekas linked 'the excitement of new cinematic forms with a repudiation of "professionalism" and economic domination' (Arthur 2005: 18). The transgression of the underground also manifested in other ways, challenging dominant film form: some films pared back content to a minimum, as with Warhol's early minimalist works such as *Sleep* (1963); some of the films were extraordinarily long, unbearable to sit all the way through, such as *Empire*; there were experiments with superimposed projection like Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth* (1963) or dual-screen projection such as *The Chelsea Girls*.

Underground film's transgression also incorporated taboo-breaking content. Casual drug use was depicted, and language that could offend was not avoided. Nudity regularly featured, as did sex. The sex was explicit, non-idealized, and took various forms, including but not limited to heteronormative couplings. This occasionally landed some of the films in trouble. *Scorpio Rising* was accused of obscenity and tried in a Los Angeles court due to its inclusion of a few frames of an erect penis. *Flaming Creatures* features a number of characters whose gender and sexuality is ambiguous; the film includes a rape/orgy sequence. In March 1964, a screening of the film at the New Bowery Theatre organized by Jonas Mekas and the filmmakers Ken Jacobs and Florence Karpf was raided by police; all three organizers were arrested. Following legal wrangles, the film was eventually banned in the State of New York and subjected to a Senate investigation. Throughout the 1960s, screenings of *Flaming Creatures* across the United States

were repeatedly cancelled or raided. Juan Suárez argues that *Flaming Creatures* was deemed especially troubling and transgressive due to its 'collapse of sexual distinctions': 'all characters behave in blissful oblivion of traditional alignments of anatomy and gender roles' (Suárez 1996: 185).

Cult cinema is, similarly, regularly associated with transgression. This may take the form of extreme violence or gore, such as with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974) or *The Evil Dead* (Raimi, 1981). It might involve a level of erotic or sexual content that would not usually be permitted by mainstream cinema, as in Doris Wishman or Russ Meyer films. It may transgress moral boundaries by depicting acts and behaviours deemed objectionable – as with Divine's consumption of a dog's freshly deposited faeces in *Pink Flamingos*. Like underground cinema, the transgression can also be aesthetic: a film's failure to adhere to norms of mainstream quality and skill may facilitate its embrace as a cult object. Tommy Wiseau's film *The Room* (2003) is clumsily assembled on its meagre budget, and the sets, acting, and editing of Edward D. Wood Jr's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959) are notably sloppy, but both have notable cult followings. Cult audiences and underground film audiences, then, may relish amateurishness, or at least welcome an alternative to the limited vocabulary of mainstream, commercial film.

There are limits to the transgression of underground film and cult cinema, of course. The underground of the 1960s did not entirely reject the mainstream; indeed, it often displayed a willing engagement with elements of popular culture. The Kuchar brothers paid tribute to Hollywood melodrama and science-fiction with their campy, Pop-inflected pastiches. Jack Smith wrote of his adoration of the Hollywood actress Maria Montez and fabricated his own low-budget version of cinematic glamour in his mouldy fables. Warhol was infatuated with Hollywood and its stars, and organized his studio, the Factory, to operate like a mechanical, industrial production-line. For all of underground cinema's political dissidence, then, many of its filmmakers remained captivated by the lure of the silver screen (a captivation that often took the form of cult-like obsession). As David E. James writes, 'The form of underground film as subcultural production is … determined by its functions as "protest" film and as intertextual dialogues with Hollywood; even at its most liberated, these functions are found' (James 1989: 99–100). There are similar limitations with cult cinema. Barry K. Grant has noted the ability of cult films 'to be at once transgressive and recuperative, in other words, to reclaim that which they violate' (Grant 2008: 78). Despite their marginal cultural position, away from the conventional, normative mainstream, the politics of many cult films are conservative, their content serving to shore up racist, colonialist, sexist and homophobic attitudes. Many sit comfortably within existing generic formations, rather than offering radical shake-up. For Grant, even those cult films which feature transgressive elements – his example is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – tend to recuperate them through a process of Othering, positioning those components as the monstrous, to be rejected and dismissed. Cult and underground cinema, then, are far from being utopian playgrounds for the liberal, or free zones of expression offering correction or alternative to the oppressive norm.

Three: Gender

The history of underground cinema is largely one of men making films. The occasional female filmmaker such as Marie Menken or Barbara Rubin managed to make space for themselves within the movement, but they were exceptions. The small number of such women reveals the extent to which female artists wanting to work with film in the 1960s had a more complex relationship to the means of production than men, or were relegated to marginalized positions, even as the fight for women's rights gathered a new force and visibility throughout the decade. Historical accounts of this era are also limited and partial: women's contributions

to underground cinema have, on the whole, only received slight attention from critics, theorists and curators. Ara Osterweil has written, for instance, of the difficulties of tracking down detailed accounts of Rubin's life: she 'exists only in fragments', brief references or glimpses (Osterweil 2014: 26).

These sexist and misogynist forces of omission, occlusion and erasure are marginally countered by the fact that a notable number of underground directors were queer, and committed to filming dissident forms of sexuality; and by the opportunities in front of the camera afforded for women by some underground directors. Richard Dyer notes that the underground 'provided a space and an opportunity for gay men and… lesbians to represent themselves in films in a way that mainstream filmmaking (where many covert lesbians and gay men worked) did not' (Dyer 1990: 104). Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, the Kuchar brothers and Andy Warhol all created films in which queer bodies or subjectivities appeared on screen, or which exuded a queer sensibility through the promotion of a camp register or trash aesthetic (the lesbians that Dyer mentions are a little more elusive). Women were regularly given prominent or lead roles in underground films; their directors worked to upend or transform normative ideals of glamour and beauty. Warhol, in his book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, compared two types of people, 'Beauties' and 'Talkers', expressing a preference for the latter: 'To me, good talkers are beautiful because good talk is what I love' (Warhol 1977: 62). For Warhol, the most attractive and magnetic stars were those with the ability to converse, to declaim, to control a space or interaction with their words. Several of Warhol's most memorable performers were women who could talk at great length when the camera was turned on them: Viva, Ingrid Superstar, Brigid Berlin.

Cult cinema is also often seen as a predominantly male field. Many of the spaces associated with cult cinema, such as the midnight movie theatre auditorium, the video or DVD collector's store, or the fan convention, are predominantly gendered as masculine. The genres most often linked with cult cinema – science fiction, horror, sexploitation, erotica, fantasy, martial arts – are seen as mainly male preserves. Publications focused on cult cinema may exclude women through their sexist and misogynist imagery as well as their obsession with trivia; the collecting culture that circulates around cult film is notably masculine in form. In an essay on 'the masculinity of cult', Joanne Hollows has highlighted that mainstream mass culture is often culturally and discursively constructed as feminine, with the realm of the cult positioned as its heroic masculine antithesis. Within this gendered positioning of the mass against the marginal, 'cult would seem to reproduce existing power structures rather than simply challenge them' (Hollows 2003: 37). Female fans of cult cinema do of course exist, and specific films have significant female cult followings. These phenomena remain on the periphery of cult film culture, however, and have only recently begun to attract sustained academic attention.

Four: Stardom

A further key connection between cult cinema and underground film is that both have fostered their own circuits and instances of stardom that operate counter to the mainstream's nurturing and promotion of a particular roster of highly paid mass-appeal actors. Indeed, cult stars will often reject, or work against, characteristics associated with the mainstream film star: the embodiment of normative ideals of beauty, expressions of naturalistic or realistic acting ability, an association with heroic and sympathetic characters. With cult cinema, these actors may make their contributions in low-to-medium-budget genre cinema, accruing a fanbase through their commitment to the lowbrow and a consistent screen persona with recognizable quirks: Robert Englund, Michael Ironside, Sylvia Kristel, Christopher Lambert, Ingrid Pitt. Alternatively, their

cult status may come from long-term collaborations with directors of cult cinema: John Waters' regular troupe of actors for instance, known as the 'Dreamlanders', included Divine, David Lochary, Edith Massey, Cookie Mueller, and Mink Stole. Cult stars may also build a reputation and devoted audience via performances in more mainstream cinema, performances marked by a dissonant register that makes them stand out from the rest of the cast: Martin Donovan, Crispin Glover, Udo Keir.

In the 1960s, underground film directors fostered their own stables of performers. Jonas Mekas, writing in 1964, noted that underground cinema 'is developing a new set of stars and is, in great part, a star cinema' (Mekas 2016: 128). These performers were identified as 'all talented, intense, obsessed and possessed, each one with a completely different world which they impose upon the films in which they appear' (ibid.: 129). Mekas provided a list of these performers, which included Taylor Mead, Beverly Grant, Winifred Bryan, Naomi Levine, and John Giorno. He singled out the contribution that Mead made to *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, comparing Mead's performance to 'the best work of Chaplin, Keaton, or Langdon' (ibid.: 128). Perhaps the clearest attempt by an underground filmmaker to construct their own roster of stars was Andy Warhol's assemblage of performers at the Factory. Warhol understood the cult adoration of film stars: he collected autographed photographs of stars as a child and had a particular fascination with Shirley Temple; his early 1960s screenprints of stars including Troy Donahue and Liz Taylor commented on the power of the mechanically reproduced portrait as an object of seduction and infatuation. Despite this fan's understanding, Warhol's attempts to manufacture stardom with his films were only partially successful. He tried to fabricate a following for Edie Sedgwick, for instance, casting her as the lead in a number of films in 1965 and 1966, but her cult stardom only began to seriously bloom after her early death at the age of 28 in 1971.

Cult cinema stars and underground stars are connected through their lack of mobility. Carving out a space for themselves within their particular fields of practice, they very rarely achieve circulation and recognition beyond those spheres. Divine, despite a wider level of cultural recognition through his music, stage performances, and chat-show appearances, made films almost exclusively with John Waters, ignored by mainstream cinema; Edie Sedgwick did not move beyond the underground. There are exceptions: Mary Woronov began her career as an actress at Warhol's Factory, before moving into independent, exploitation and genre cinema, whereas Joe Dallesandro transitioned from modelling to making films with Warhol, after which he moved into starring in generic fare for European and American directors, with the occasional appearance in an art-house movie. In general, however, the limited movement of cult and underground stars serves to reveal the boundaries of specific film cultures which, in other ways, are often permeable.

Taking into consideration all of the connections between cult film and underground cinema that this chapter has raised, the conundrum with which it began remains. Why is Ron Rice's *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* not a cult film? Ultimately, of course, any particular film's status as a cult object is dependent on an audience embracing it, transforming it through their adulation and devotion. Rice's film is known predominantly by scholars of experimental and underground cinema, some of whom (myself included) have a marked passion for its rich performances and an appreciation of its ramshackle form. A broader cult following has failed to materialize, however; perhaps the film is not transgressive enough in its content or remains too esoteric. For all of the links between cult and underground cinema, the two remain distinct formations.

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