
100
Cult
Films
BFI
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BFI Screen Guides

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Foreword

Only a book devoted to the phenomenon of so-called cult films[1] could feature a list of titles that includes both *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Two Thousand Maniacs!*.

I guess the usual idea is that all the essays offered here are about movies that certain niche followers love but that remain obscure or unappreciated by the culture at large.

You could therefore question the inclusion of popular, even beloved titles like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Wizard of Oz* or *Casablanca*. It's certainly true that these arguably great movies have engendered their own devoted following, but their fans are as much mainstream as niche. Whereas devotees of *Café Flesh* and *Don't Torture a Duckling* can be secure in the knowledge that their obsessions are pretty much defined, even enhanced, by the general unfamiliarity of the public at large with such films. So what makes a cult film? Does it have to be obscure, or commercially unsuccessful or critically dismissed?

Obviously not. But it helps.

Many of the films discussed herein fit one of the above descriptions, but others can be simply very extreme (*Bad Taste*, *Man Bites Dog*, *Cannibal Holocaust*), in terrible taste (*Nekromantik*, *Pink Flamingos*), artily impenetrable (*El Topo*) or just plain terrible *(Manos, the Hands of Fate*, *Deadly Weapons*). Some are all of these, and others are among the most interesting movies ever made. It's all pretty subjective. Otherwise, why include the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and not the second? Why *Suspiria* and not *Kill Baby Kill*? Why *Fight Club* and not *Blue Velvet*?

Chances are you may be able to answer these questions yourself after plowing through these fascinating remembrances, observations and ruminations on the ever-changing, ever-evolving phenomenon of cult film.

You may even join the cult yourself.

Joe Dante, June 2011

1. As opposed to *Psychotronic* films, which are a similar, but nonetheless specific offshoot.

Introduction

In recent years, cult cinema has moved from the pulp periphery to the centre of critical debate. From initially being celebrated in fanzines and journalistic essays, the study of cult has now become a key part of film criticism and media/cultural studies theory. Numerous essays, collections and conferences have been devoted to the cult movie and the specifics of its viewing experience. Thanks to a number of significant studies (many of them listed in our 'Key Reading' section) cult films now constitute an established part of film studies. However, while these crucial studies have identified the aesthetics, theories and audiences of cult cinema, this has often occurred at the expense of a consideration of the movies themselves. This book offers an overview of some of the most influential cult movies of the last century. Unlike previous critical/journalistic approaches to cult (where film titles are often namechecked but left underexplored) *100 Cult Films* offers detailed analyses of 100 films and their unique receptions that we believe to be instrumental to the canon of cult cinema.

In essence, cult cinema depends on an uneasy ambiguity between audience celebration and filmic achievement (or occasionally, underachievement). Put philosophically, a cult-film experience relies on a drive, a search with a strong sense of involvement, without real aim, for some pure insight into a profound form of truth. Since that truth is hardly ever found, much of the search itself (its endless circularity, its level of expertise, its connectedness, its sharedness) becomes the focal point. The cult film experience is thus 'wasteful': a collective sentiment of shared emotions in the absence of purpose. Formulated a bit more practically, a cult film is a movie with a devoted following, but that following is inspired by a number of salient elements in the films. *100 Cult Films* reflects that ambiguity. Among the elements of a cult film usually cited as significant in triggering that devotion (or in provoking debate around which followings can situate themselves) are well-travelled theoretical concepts such as transgression, abjection, freakery, utopia, exotica, 'badness', intertextuality and irony – most of which refer to some sort of clash or transfer between otherwise incommensurable forms of representation: beautiful *and* ugly, good *and* bad, common *and* unusual, close *and* far, serious *and* insincere. Each of these concepts upsets notions of normality and taste. Among the most visible articulations of these concepts are fractured representations of time (especially time travel, imaginings of the 'end of time' or the 'wasting' of time), a preoccupation with 'little people' (any kind of band of misfits or have-nots, really), controversial depictions of sex and violence (and very often sexual violence, especially rape), substance abuse (preferably with visual hallucinatory effects), critiques of capitalism (often disguised as critiques of 'efficiency') and, of course, depictions of religious cultism. If one looks at what is often presented as the canon of cult cinema it is remarkable (remarkable because it seems so redundant) that many of its films are actually about forms of religious sectarianism. But the elements that instigate a cult following can also be much more modest in scope and ramshackle in meaning – details such as rabbits, pigeons or bees, or slippages in acting performances or poor cinematography. Any combination of hammy acting, a full

moon and a poorly executed depiction of a 'bad drug trip' (is this a description of a certain Vincent Price movie? Or *The Big Lebowski*, 1998?) can lead to a highly committed fan following. Often, these followings attain subcultural status: the links between Goth girls, otaku, metalheads, stoners, hippies, anarchists, slackers, sweders, drag queens, steampunks, cyberpunks, fanboys, Riot Grrls, 'Dudes' and rogues of any sort are abundant, and several of them have earned high-profile case studies. One important aspect this points to is that cultism is a form of connectedness, a way of engaging with culture in which links between kinds of marginal taste offer a path, or meaning, for life. It also means that the notion of cult cinema is closely linked to that of idiosyncratic, partisan and oppositional taste. This then has made objective and impartial definitions of cult cinema virtually impossible – though we acknowledge several brave attempts, including our own.

In this book we would first of all like to let the films and their aggregate speak for themselves, and through our discussions of them we hope our own voice – sometimes of both of us, sometimes a single voice – becomes clear as well. Let us briefly overview the whole 100 films. To some extent, our selection reflects a consensus on what the core films in the canon of cult cinema are (*Casablanca*, 1942, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, 1975, *El Topo*, 1970, etc). This consensus canon mostly contains films that have been discussed as cults *both* through their peculiar receptions and through their textual characteristics, and that can be regarded as *both* trendsetting and as exemplaric. Next to that, we have made an attempt to bring into view some of the presumptions underpinning that canon by including films from outside the Anglophone or Western spheres, films reflecting female and feminist approaches or films from outside centres of production and exhibition usually associated with cult cinema (such as experimental film, comedy, the musical, non-theatrical cinema). A handful of films was selected to provide a reflection on how personal tastes can clash with widely held views on cult cinema (*Begotten*, 1991, *The Vanishing*, 1988, *Don't Torture a Duckling*, 1972, and some others we hope you will want to discover for yourself).

Our selection makes every attempt to cover the global presence of cult cinema. We present films from eighteen countries. We have been careful not to give too much dominance to American cinema in our list – 55 of the 100 films hail from the United States. There are good reasons why so many cults have American antecedents: the authority of genres such as science fiction and horror, the long-lasting appeal of some classical Hollywood films, the eagerness of financial backers to 'make it big', the ready availability of trained crews in the fringes of the established industry and the purchasing commitment of American audiences (especially in college environments) are some of them. Wherever possible however, we have attempted to look beyond the US-centric scope of much of cult-cinema studies. Outside the US, several countries have developed national cult traditions of their own. Italy has become known for the *giallo*, mondo film and Spaghetti Western. Hong Kong has received recognition for martial arts (kung-fu) films, and heroic bloodshed crime thrillers. Japan has acquired a reputation for its erotic niche cinema, anime and horror (especially the wave of so-called Japanese horror or J-horror from the late 1990s onwards). The films of Dario Argento, Bruce Lee and Takashi Miike are among the most visible exponents of these cults. *Giallo* fans, martial-arts aficionados and 'otaku' have come to typify cult fans. Beyond these core nations, this screen guide also wants to call attention to the cult followings for films worldwide. The often unpredictable nature of cult receptions has seen countries not usually associated with the canon deliver great cult films: Belgium,

Canada, Indonesia, Jamaica, Mexico, New Zealand and the Netherlands, to name a few. We are delighted our book contains a smattering of films from these countries.

Several critics have argued that cult cinema is a form of genre cinema and/or consists solely of films that belong to particular genres. There is some truth in that. Its recent proliferation has given cult cinema the reputation of a genre. Critics, producers and distributors have started treating it as one. Within this process of genre creation, some traditional genres, such as horror, science fiction and fantasy seem well represented. Though perhaps fewer scholars would admit it, pornography too is a core component of cult as genre. And of course the marginalisation of the consumption of pornography sets it up as a cult – as a pathology of culture. But other genres (and genre-type categories of film) such as sexploitation, surrealism, anime, Spaghetti Westerns, road movies, *gialli*, martial-arts films and underground films, are also present. Our selection reflects this diversity. We have tried to balance films from genres traditionally associated with cult devotion, such as horror, science fiction or fantasy, with examples from types less often associated with cultism. For horror, quantitatively the most prominent genre, we have attempted to weigh entries across regions, decades and subgenres (Gothic, slasher, body-horror, rape-revenge …). It is also worth mentioning that we have tried to balance representations of generic reading strategies, such as camp, kitsch, hype, 'coolness', etc. Furthermore, we have made an effort to include films that defy genre classification altogether (*Begotten*, *Eraserhead*, 1977, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1988), and some that even though they belong to a genre are so poorly executed they refuse to be contained by it (*Manos*, *the Hands of Fate*, 1966). A few areas of cult cinema are only represented in skeleton fashion, namely classical Hollywood, blockbusters and musicals. For each of these formats, we have decided to only include those that were absolutely pivotal to our personal positions. The reason is that we believe these genres are represented in plenty of other books, writings, and indeed BFI Screen Guides that will more than honour their cultist aspects as well.

The wide diversity of directors *100 Cult Films* displays is another point worth noting. While some film-makers have achieved notoriety and fame as cult directors, the majority of cult classics come from directors whose careers are not universally lauded. Cults develop incidentally, often against mainstream tastes. They are definitely unplanned, and some films become cult in spite of a lack of directorial skill. For a long time, 'cult' meant the kiss of death in business terms. And some cult directors have had such eccentric careers they made no more than a few films. All this meant that very few directors are represented by multiple films. Only six directors feature twice: Dario Argento, David Cronenberg, Peter Jackson, Terry Gilliam, Alejandro Jodorowsky and George A. Romero. They form the core of the cult auteur canon. The majority of these auteurs are male. It has been argued that cult films are 'masculine', partly because they often contain exploitation elements that can be said to 'objectify' women, but also that most of cult fandom carries a masculine 'tone'. Indeed most cult-film overviews contain no films made by women at all. We made a conscious effort to rectify this – and we found it was actually not that difficult to do. Our book contains five films directed by women that we immediately felt qualified for inclusion: *Deadly Weapons* (Doris Wishman, 1974), *Freak Orlando* (Ulrike Ottinger, 1981), *Near Dark* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1987), *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995), and *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes, Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000). This is still a very small representation. It excludes films from Stephanie Rothman (*Velvet Vampire*, 1971), Chantal Akerman (*Jeanne Dielman*, 1975), Catherine Breillat (*Romance*, 1999), Ida Lupino (*The Hitch-Hiker*, 1953), Dorothy Arzner (*The Wild Party*,

1929) or Catherine Hardwicke (*Twilight*, 2008), each of which could easily have made it into the selection. Because of cult cinema's flirtations with, and challenges to, the margins of conformity, several of the films in our selection are by directors who have been embraced as creators of camp and queer cinema, thereby calling into question their 'masculinity'. The presence of Kenneth Anger, Jean Cocteau, Harry Kümel, Pier Paolo Pasolini, John Waters and James Whale testifies to this. Indeed 'queer readings' of films are an integral part of the cult viewing experience. Furthermore, a few films in our list, while directed by males, are equally the work of other creative personnel, and are sometimes identified as feminist through actresses and/or screenwriters. That is certainly the case for films such as *Ginger Snaps* (2000) or *Daughters of Darkness* (1971). Some films also problematise the representation of gender in spite of their exploitational aspirations (*Showgirls*, 1995, *Coffy*, 1973, *Angel of Vengeance*, 1981, *Lady Terminator*, 1988). Finally, some films in our list have become known as 'women' cult films because of their female following (such as *Dirty Dancing*, 1987).

We have tried to present a view of cult cinema that is balanced across the decades, but readers will discover in this book an emphasis on the 1970s and 80s – an emphasis *100 Cult Films* shares with most other overviews (Danny Peary's seminal collection is a notable exception). The reasons for the dominance of the 70s and 80s are numerous. Among them are the midnight-movie phenomenon, which flourished in the 1970s, the booms in genre fandom of those decades and the establishment of fringe film festivals. The introduction of the VCR changed repeat-viewing protocols in the 1980s, and it constitutes another reason why there is an emphasis on cult films from that decade. Another, more subjective reason for the dominance of the 70s and 80s lies in the age of the authors – it fully explains why 1987 is the single most prominent year in our selection.

We are well aware that our rationales for selection will not please every cult fan or critic. Where are the films of Mario Bava, Werner Herzog, Jean Rollin or Nick Zedd? Why are there no films from Eastern Europe? Surely, films such as *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972), *Danger: Diabolik* (1968), *Rape of the Vampire* (1968), *Of Freaks and Men* (1998) or *The Saragossa Manuscript* (1965) deserve a place in this book? Where are British classics *The Dam Busters* (1955), *Peeping Tom* (1960) or any (any!) Hammer horror movie? And how is it possible that *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and *Titanic* (1997) are not included? Such challenges are valid. Our only defence against them is that all of these films were seriously considered (and indeed all appeared in draft versions of the selection). If the format had allowed it, we would have squeezed these titles in and pretended there were still only 100 entries. We'd squeeze a few more in too. After all, a form of cinema that challenges the very notion of rationality should be able to also challenge that oh so Roman *century* limit, not? Danny Peary aforementioned overview gives an appendix list of several hundred more cult films, and in the Screen Guide to *100 Film Noirs*, the authors end the book with 'another 100 film noirs'. We decided to stick to just 100 and open a forum for comments online, on the website <www.cultsurvey.org>. On that site, we welcome feedback and invite readers to post their comments, and their ideas on which films they feel deserve a place in the *100 Cult Films*. We look forward to hearing from you.

The <www.cultsurvey.org> website brings us to the last point of this introduction. We had some difficulty choosing the 100th film. Relatively speaking, the first decade of the 2000s is underrepresented in our selection. Because cults often take a long time to appear on the cultural radar, many cult followings from

that decade have not yet gained wide visibility. *The Room*, for instance, was originally released in 2003, and only in the last few years has it become a veritable cult around the world. For our book to address the most recent cults we designed an online poll. This poll launched on the website in March 2011 and ran for two months. It presented a selection of twenty-five films from the years 2004–10, all of which have some existing cult presence (some more than others). It asked respondents three questions: (1) their top-three choices; (2) an explanation for their choice; and (3) and their choice for the film in our list they felt was *least likely* to become a cult film (if one follows a certain oppositional logic one could argue that the winner in this category should be the 100th film in our selection!). The winner was determined through a combination of quantitative and qualitative results (i.e. the number of votes and the weight of arguments for or against a film). A full outline of the poll, the methods and the detailed, contextualised results, can be found on <www.cultsurvey.org>. After a photo finish, the winner of the poll was *In Bruges* (2008). It became our 100th cult film.

2001: A Space Odyssey

US, 1968 – 148 mins

Stanley Kubrick

DIRECTOR Stanley Kubrick
PRODUCER Stanley Kubrick
WRITER Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke (story: Arthur C. Clarke)
CINEMATOGRAPHY Geoffrey Unsworth
SPECIAL EFFECTS Stanley Kubrick, Douglas Trumbull, Wally Veevers, Tom Howard
EDITING Ray Lovejoy
MUSIC Richard Strauss, Johann Strauss, Jr, Aram Khatchaturian, György Ligeti
PRINCIPAL CAST Keir Dullea, Gary Lockwood, William Sylvester, Daniel Richter, Leonard Rossiter

Fan devotion for Stanley Kubrick, and for *2001* in particular, is incredibly robust. It might as well be called a church or an ideology instead of a cult. *2001*'s fans will defend their object of adoration with a fierceness and imperviousness few films enjoy. A large measure of that commitment is the result of *2001*'s uncompromising vision and visual genius.

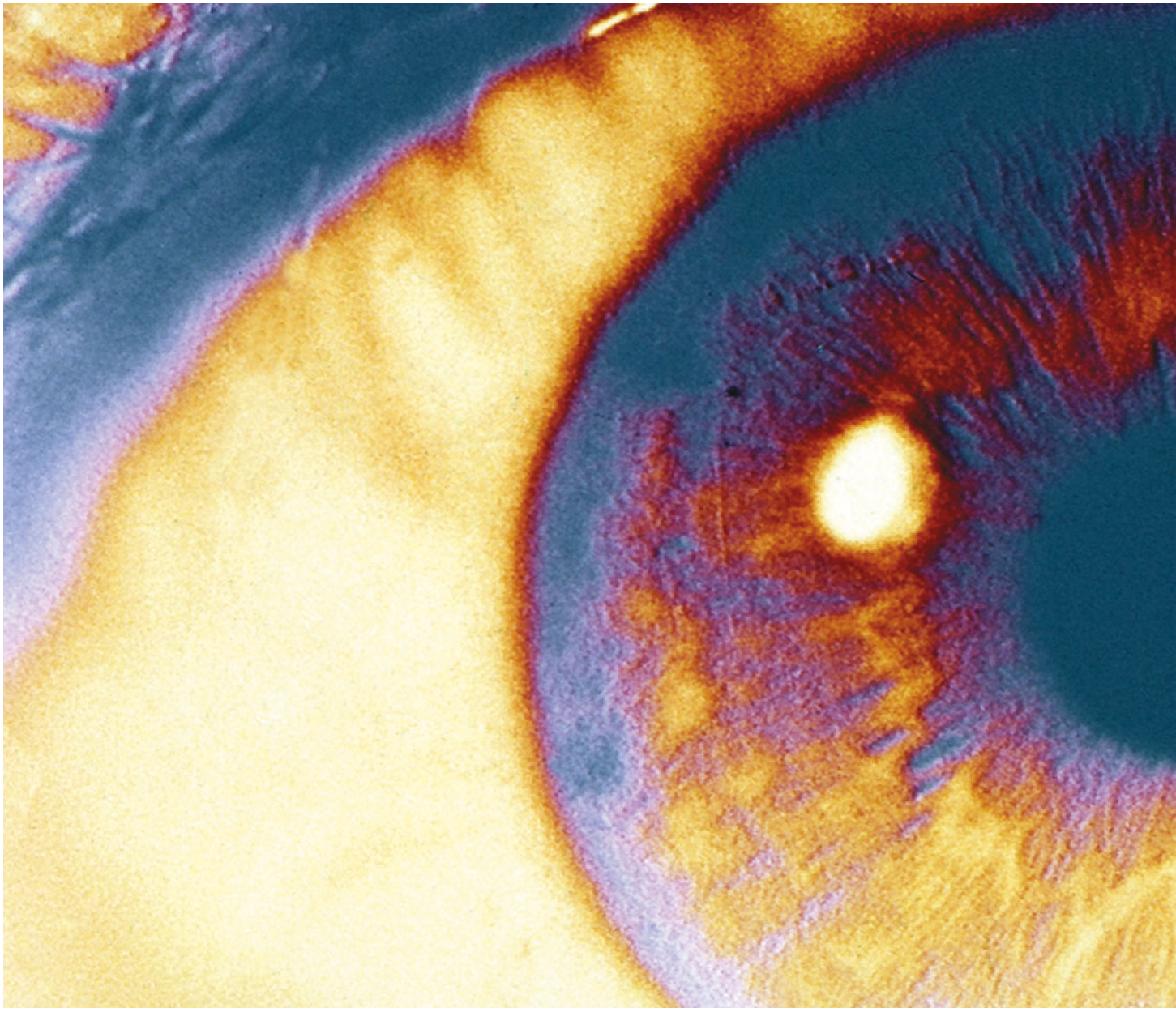
Of all of Kubrick's films, *2001* is the most ambitious, and the most mysterious. Its subject is no less than the history and destiny of humankind, from 'the dawn of man' (the first segment's title) all the way to 'beyond the infinite' (the final segment). During prehistory a black monolith appears to a tribe of humanoid apes. Immediately afterwards they discover how to use tools and – subsequently – warfare. Flashforward to the year 2001. The black monolith has appeared again, near the planet Jupiter this time, and a team of astronauts is dispatched. Their mission is sabotaged by onboard computer HAL 9000 (voiced by Douglas Rain), who kills the astronauts. Only Dave (Keir Dullea) remains alive. He disables HAL and steer his craft into the monolith. A twenty-minute sequence of hallucinatory, near-abstract imagery ensues that is, simultaneously, a fertilisation scene, an intergalactic trip, a Mandelbrot sequence on acid, a travelogue before the dawn of time, a super-saturated hallucination and the surface of an eye – of perception itself. Dave finally finds himself in a baroque room. He has aged. As he sees his future self die, the monolith is there again. A star child is born. To the triumphant tones of Richard Strauss's 'Also Sprach Zarathustra', the child approaches the planet earth. In the last image it looks us straight in the eye.

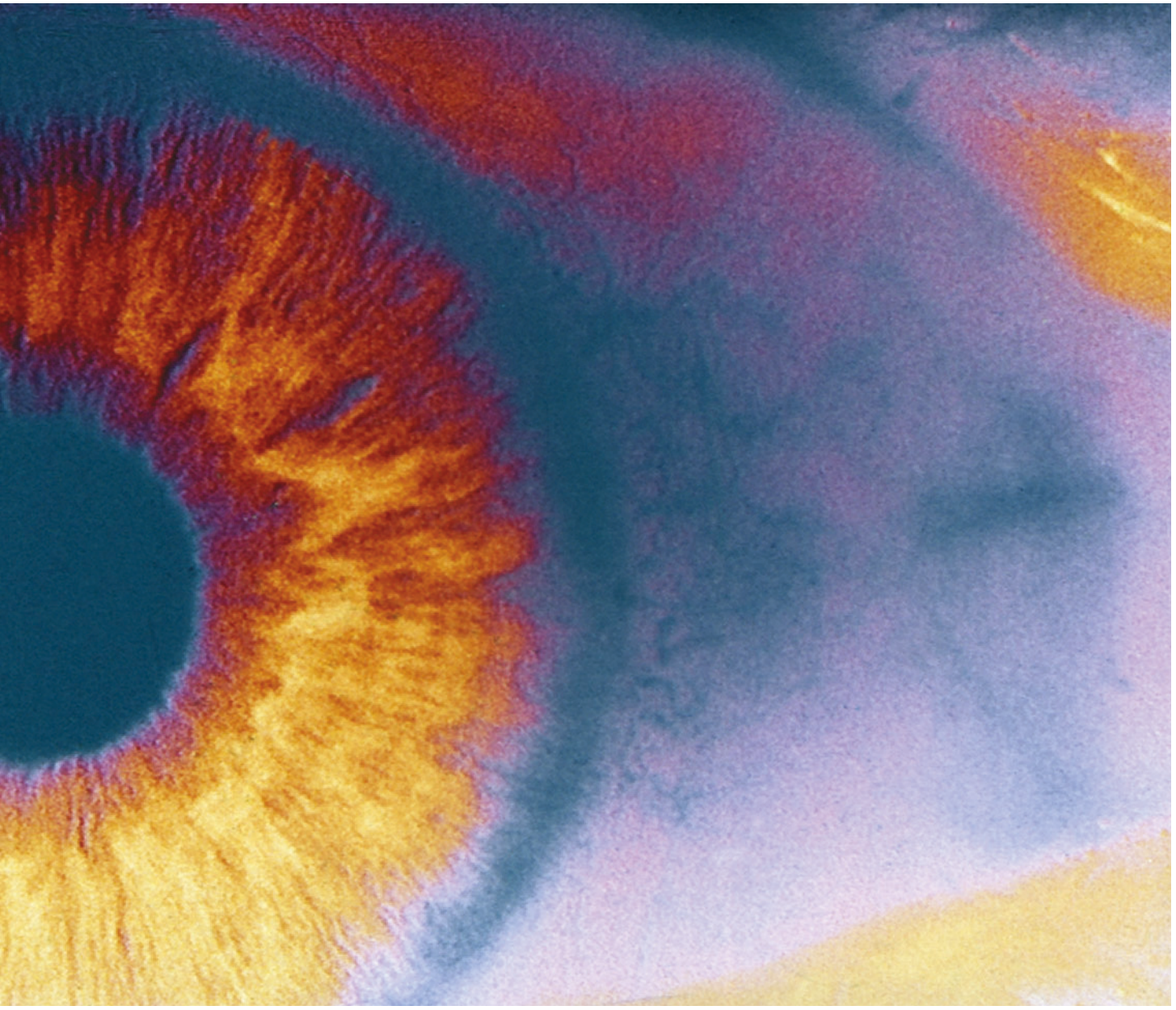
2001's highly speculative imagery spawned considerable debate. Cosmic in its scope, the film touches on everything from human evolution to artificial intelligence. The black monolith may be a god, or nature at its most tremendous – the film certainly suggests, however obliquely, that people's fates are bound up with forces in the universe that we do not fully grasp. There is also the motif of the battle of man-versus-machine: in order to survive, Dave has to eliminate HAL (the name is a pun on IBM, taking the preceding letters in the alphabet). Yet such speculation is almost pushed aside by the experience of the aesthetic achievement of *2001* as a 'trip'. The film presents a fully furnished, hyper-detailed world, of which we get a highly distorted view. The revolutionary use of models to visualise the galaxy gives the story an overwhelming, epic scale. Camera angles are daring and, often, disorienting. The lighting is sharp and the film makes abundant use of highly saturated colours. The tempo is deliberately slow. This style makes watching *2001* a demanding, immersive exercise of endurance that – gradually – takes on the characteristics of a drug trip. As Mathijs and Sexton (2011) observe, for many *2001* 'proved pleasurable to watch in a drugged state'.

Almost as crucial as the visuals is *2001*'s musical soundtrack. Kubrick ignored a specially commissioned track by Alex North (his composer for *Spartacus*, 1960), and instead opted for an eclectic selection of classical music. According to Kevin Donnelly, the role of non-diegetic music, especially of adagios and ethereal pieces

'can physically affect viewers'. That is certainly true for the frightening, otherworldly excerpt from György Ligeti's 'Atmospheres' that opens the film. Ligeti's ghostly soundscapes reappear at crucial moments during *2001*, as do long, punctuated silences and prolonged sounds (alarm beeps, computers' drones, whirs and buzzes, pronounced breathing) – all creating a sense of vastness unparalleled in cinema. Kubrick's employment of music supersedes functionality; rather than merely supporting the visuals, it carries them, and dictates their duration.

2001's release at the height of the momentum of 1960s counterculture was ambiguous. As a trip with a philosophical undertone, it drew praise, but for many the film was not radical enough to become totemic for its generation. Over the years, however, its following grew steadily. As the science-fiction genre became more popular, *2001* became known as its 'big bang moment', a status it received not just from fanzine bibles such as *Cinéfantastique* and *Starlog* but also from a new generation of film-makers, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas prominent among them. Rewatching *2001* today is unsettling. The visuals and sounds are as strong and suggestive as before. With regard to one of its messages (don't trust machines), one cannot escape the impression that what Kubrick warned for has happened: we have become incapable of turning the machines off. EM





Akira

Japan, 1988 – 124 mins

Katsuhiro Otomo

DIRECTOR Katsuhiro Otomo
PRODUCER Haruyo Kanesaku, Shunzo Kato, Yutaka Maseba, Ryohei Suzuki, Hiroe Tsukamoto
WRITER Katsuhiro Otomo, Izo Hashimoto (manga: Katsuhiro Otomo)
EDITING Takeshi Seyama
ORIGINAL MUSIC Shoji Yamashiro
PRINCIPAL CAST (ORIGINAL VOICES) Mitsuo Iwata, Nozomu Sasaki, Mami Koyama, Tetsusho Genda, Hiroshi Otake

The 1980s saw an acceleration of popular entertainment from East Asia, spearheaded by *Akira*, an apocalyptic epic anime based on a thirty-two-volume manga written by director Katsuhiro Otomo. It introduced a new kind of audience experience of deep immersion into a virtual, tentacled storyworld where not the narrative or plot, but the meandering asides, the detailed backgrounds, religious and philosophical speculations on the impact of technology on humans and the hyper-reflexive associations with other media texts create a dense network of possible meanings in which fans loved to get lost. This experience was exemplified by the term 'otaku' – basically fanboy 2.0.

There is much to get lost in in *Akira*. The story's post-nuclear neo-Tokyo is a complex maze of interconnected areas – it looks a bit like the inside of a body. The narrative of a cynical youth biker gang led by Kaneda and his protégé Tetsuo (who becomes tangled up in an experiment that gives him superpowers with which he can destroy the entire world), is one of brutal confrontation: state forces, revolutionary anarchic terrorists and lone, insecure teen rebels face off amid a set-up littered with casual moments of hyper-detailed violence. One example: when a gang member is run over by a motorcycle his arm twitches awkwardly as it passes underneath the machine. Police brutality is rampant, and there is cruelty everywhere (animals are killed, protesters executed, children bullied). Woven through this are references to all of cult cinema: biker gang leader Kaneda models himself on James Dean (red leather jacket and all); there are frequent nods to samurai and martial-arts films, to fairytales and superhero movies, to film noir and cyborg science fiction, especially when Tetsuo loses an arm and constructs an inorganic new one. There is even a cameo appearance of that most cultist of motives: a giant rabbit. Over all this rolls a pulsating soundtrack of drums, organs and choirs – there is no time for pauses or comfort in *Akira*; everyone is always on the edge.

Akira's reception at the time was mixed. There was admiration for the aesthetic innovations and the 'urban', 'networked' and 'subtextured' stream of details and interconnections. There were also concerns. *Akira* paints a bleak picture of a generation of 'hedonistic fools' in a futureless world of corruption, chaos, terror and eternal pain. This despair is reflected in cynical techno-philosophies, in anxieties over the abuses of 'divine' authority like the one that Tetsuo acquires, and which refer to Japan's history of nuclear devastation. For many reviewers, *Akira* was part of the cyberpunk movement of dystopic and techno-driven science fiction, exemplified by William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*. But *Akira* transcends that generic tag. Its supernatural moments reveal a metaphysical reflection on the beginnings of space and time, the shared memories of humanity and the origins of knowledge (much of this is embodied by Kei, a girl medium fighting with the terrorists). It is an interrogation of spirituality in the face of science and destruction – two manifestations of the mystical life-force Akira, a boy whose childhood was destroyed. And it is above all a meditation on the right to have a future, a right that is hesitantly encapsulated in the unfinished phrase that

ends the film 'but someday we ought to be able to … because it has already begun'. Critics struggled with such themes, dismissing them as Zen babble. But otaku fans seized on them, as elements that enabled a never-ending debate, the flow of which is more important than any resolutions it might reach. As Hiroki Azuma (2009) observes, for the otaku fan the blips and links in the database are endlessly more fascinating than the results these yield (results that are open to abuse). Aren't gods uninterpreted data-in-capsules? This split between critical discourse and otaku discourse has helped *Akira* achieve a firm cult reputation. It made otaku relevant as a force for gaining insights into cultural phenomena.

Today, *Akira* has become a classic, the film that 'brought the anime into the mainstream'. It has itself become part of a network of references, from *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) to *The Matrix* (1999) and *Batman* (1989). Actually, in the now widespread otaku fandom of anime, and in its function as exemplar of transnational cultism, *Akira* has become a sort of Akira – a boy whose childhood has been destroyed. EM

Angel of Vengeance (aka *Ms. 45*)

US, 1981 – 80 mins

Abel Ferrara

With his debut movie *The Driller Killer* (1979), New York-based indie icon Abel Ferrara offered a powerful study of how the desolate cityscape leads to mental decline. In that movie, a young artist named Reno (played by Ferrara himself under the pseudonym Jimmy Laine) struggles with a fear of being submerged into the urban squalor that surrounds him. From its opening sequence, *The Driller Killer* is clearly established as a tale of *urban* psychosis. What ultimately haunts this character is the terror of being absorbed into the filth and debris of his city environment. This paranoia is evidenced early in the film, when a disgusted Reno discovers that his long absent father is actually one of the many vagrants who litter the city. It is to these spaces of filth and despair that Ferrara's character is drawn, as he embarks on a murderous campaign against the dispossessed, who remind him of this wayward parent.

It is a similar preoccupation with the abject cityscape that dominates Ferrara's next movie *Angel of Vengeance*, which begins with the shocking image of the mute seamstress Thana (played by screenwriter Zoë Lund, under her birth name of Tamerlis) being dragged into the garbage-strewn alleyways and assaulted by a masked attacker (played once again by Ferrara). This opening violation is made all the more shocking by the fact that it is followed by a second sexual assault, perpetrated by an opportunist burglar lying in wait in Thana's apartment. When the felon realises that the dishevelled young woman is unable to verbalise her distress, he also attempts to assault her before being overpowered by the heroine, who bludgeons him to death with the steam press she uses in her work.

Rather than report the homicide to the police, Thana dismembers the corpse and distributes it across the decaying urban sprawl, before appropriating her former attacker's handgun and enacting a campaign of execution against the male rapists, killers and peddlers who occupy the walkways of this unstable urban sphere. This campaign of vengeance climaxes at a standout carnivalesque party scene, when Lund's character goes on a killing spree targeting all the males assembled at the fancy-dress bash (momentarily pausing at one potential victim dressed in a bridal gown, before his glistening moustache reveals his gender … and his fate). It is only when one of Thana's female co-workers stabs her from behind, that the doomed heroine is able to utter her only dialogue in the movie: whispering the word 'sister' before she expires.

As with *The Driller Killer* before it, Ferrara's second feature stands in stark contrast to standard representations of Hollywood horror in circulation at the time, with both movies focusing on potential male, rather than female victims. In this respect, it is little surprise that *Angel of Vengeance* is one of the few male-authored, independent rape-and-revenge movies from the 70s to gain a feminist reappraisal for its representation of women. It is also certainly true that Ferrara's low-budget trailblazer provided a fruitful template for later mainstream representations of female vengeance/friendship such as Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991).

DIRECTOR Abel Ferrara
PRODUCER Richard Howorth, Mary Kane, Rochelle Weisberg
WRITER Nicholas St John
CINEMATOGRAPHY James Momel
EDITING Christopher Andrews
ORIGINAL MUSIC Joe Delia
PRINCIPAL CAST Zoë Lund, Albert Sinkys, Darlene Stuto, Helen McGara, Nike Zachmanoglou, Abel Ferrara

However, what makes Ferrara's vision of female revolt so powerful is not just Lund's magnetic performance, but also the highly stylised format in which her quest occurs. Using Thana's inability to communicate verbally as a structuring narrative device, *Angel of Vengeance* is a movie where duration is foregrounded, with long passages devoid of discourse and drawing attention to the pro-filmic features in their own right. Added to this, the film's soundtrack (composed by longtime Ferrara collaborator Joe Delia) enlists a variety of experimental audio effects to emphasise the heroine's isolation within the male-dominated sphere of communication. These distorted speech effects are particularly marked in the film's climactic disco slaughter scene, with the reverbed soundtrack and slow-motion images of Thana executing all the assembled males while dressed in a nun's outfit constituting one of the most iconic sequences in the cult-film canon.

Following the release of the movie, Abel Ferrara and Zoë Lund continued their electrifying collaborations on a range of other gritty urban thrillers including *Bad Lieutenant* (1992). Lund's untimely death from a drugs overdose in 1999 curtailed possibly the pair's most interesting project, a biopic of porn's classic burn-out male John Holmes, which was scheduled to be played by Ferrara regular Christopher Walken. XM

Bad Taste

New Zealand, 1987 – 91 mins

Peter Jackson

DIRECTOR Peter Jackson
PRODUCER Peter Jackson
WRITER Peter Jackson, Ken Hammon, Tony Hiles
CINEMATOGRAPHY Peter Jackson
SPECIAL EFFECTS Peter Jackson
EDITING Peter Jackson, Jamie Selkirk
ORIGINAL MUSIC Michelle Scullion, Jay Snowfield
PRINCIPAL CAST Terry Potter, Pete O'Herne, Craig Smith, Mike Minnett, Peter Jackson, Doug Wren

In 1986, Australian musician and critic Philip Brophy published a groundbreaking article on the appreciation of cult horror films. Under the banner of 'horrality', Brophy claimed that the 1980s were seeing a turn towards the exhibition of gore and monstrosity as a goal in itself, and that horror film's point of reference became other horror – a single-minded emphasis on gore through relentless intertextuality that, when used well, generated comedic as well as horrific results. One year after Brophy's article the best possible instance of 'horrality' originated just around the corner: New Zealand's *Bad Taste*.

The title itself is a stroke of genius. It refers not only to the story and its meaning, but also to its affect. *Bad Taste* is in very bad taste indeed. The story concerns a bunch of very rude aliens who descend upon a town to harvest its humans as food for their intergalactic fast-food chain. Four alien hunters from a defence service foil this plan. In the process numerous aliens are slaughtered and maimed in inventive fashion. The hunters too suffer injuries (one of them has his brain 'leaking' out of his head during much of the film). *Bad Taste* gets its *schwung* from a unique combination of gore and gags. In one scene, a hunter called Derek (played by director Peter Jackson, who also plays an alien) is chased by an alien. When Derek runs out of ammunition he mimics the sound of a machine gun. The alien stops, grabs its chest and stumbles, only to realise it is not actually hurt and resume the chase. Derek reloads and shoots the alien as it falls upon his gun – the gun impaling the alien. When another alien approaches, Derek pushes his gun all the way into the body of the first alien and shoots the second alien (and a third) *through* the body his gun is stuck in. Needless to say, the yuk factor of *Bad Taste* is high. How could it not be in a film that connects cannibalism and fast food? Sheep dung, intestines, blood and other transgressive fluids also abound. This gore is offset with a lot of situation humour (skidding, slipping, stumbling) and intertextual references (to which the music and numerous props – a chainsaw among them – contribute).

Bad Taste is not the first, and certainly not the best, film that mixes gore and gags. But whereas earlier splatter films such as *The Evil Dead** or *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) still adhered to the basic rule of grounding its evil in some sort of lore, *Bad Taste* heralded a new direction: splatter for splatter's sake without even a hint of allegorical hoopla. The result is that the politics of *Bad Taste* (if one can call it that) are all over the place. The film is partially offensive and reactionary. The name of the organisation employing the hunters, Astro Investigation Defense Service, abbreviates to a crude, blunt acronym, and the apology for torture raised more than one eyebrow (but then again the Reaganite 1980s had seen worse). Progressive stances are also evident: the idea that aliens see humans as food is a clever comment on the agro industry's conflation of the edible and the abject, a point that is pressed by the prominent display of vomit on screen.

Four years in the making, *Bad Taste* was for the longest time just an amateur hobby-job of a devoted horror geek (Jackson). After funding was received to complete the film, it entered a professional market,

where it made quite an impact. Sold at Cannes, and censored and cut in various regions, it gradually became, as Jim Barratt (2008) notes, a VHS dare-you-see cult hit. At least some of that fame was due to its poster, which featured an armed alien giving the audience (humanity) the finger – a big, fat, fast-food finger. By the time Jackson started the even more gross *Braindead* (1992), critics were hailing *Bad Taste* as a cult phenomenon, and late-night TV slots were devoted to screening it in double bill with the curious documentary of its production: 'Good Taste Making Bad Taste'. Its reputation has only been enhanced since then and, after Jackson made it really big with *The Lord of the Rings**, *Bad Taste* became a totemic reminder of his streetwise roots as a card-carrying member of the hardcore clan of cult splatter. EM