

## **Abstract**

Cult movies are a collection of movies so poorly defined that it is uncertain whether we can speak of cult movies as a genre. This essay uses Jonathan Haidt's theory on morality to explore how the characteristics of cult films have attracted a disproportionate response from thinkers who are open to experience and have low sensitivity to disgust. Those thinkers are, on average, to be found on the left side of the political spectrum, and the philosophies associated with liberal politics have resulted in a problematic definition of the movies. Those philosophies (Marxism and postmodernism) have failed to properly demarcate the borders around cult movies, making it unclear what movies belong to said category. This problem is in large part analogous to the problem that Thomas Szasz identifies as the problem of defining mental illness. That in failing to give due empirical evidence for a phenomena, one is at liberty to invent phenomena. Conservative thinkers who are, by definition, better at putting borders around concepts have written little on the subject. The latter part of the essay uses Camille Paglia's theory of the chthonic to situate cult movies in the category of Dionysian literature, as opposed to Apollonian literature. This accounts for why an Apollonian movie, such as *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*, is a dubious contestant for cult film status, while *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a prototypical cult movie, even though the two films have similar story structures. Lastly, the essay disentangles people's interest in cult movies from politics using Eric Neumann's theory of consciousness and his variation on the hero principle to explain said interest. This is in line with the Dionysian nature of the films as the films embody the symbolic role of the great mother from whom novelty can be extracted.

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## Introduction

Cult movies do not appeal to everyone. Like all art, they appeal primarily to those who are “open to experience”, the psychological metric for being drawn to novel art and ideas. But being obscure artefacts they seem to draw a disproportionate response from academics and connoisseurs who are not in the habit of clearly demarcating borders. This would apply to thinkers on the left side of the political spectrum, for example postmodernists and Marxists. The primarily postmodern analysis of cult movies has led to a loose and problematic definition of the term that needs to be constricted if one is to speak about cult movies at all. The shortcomings of the definition is discussed in part one. Following that is a detailed explanation of cult movies’ postmodern origins and an outline of current interpretations of cult movies. The last part is an attempt to integrate cult movies into the category of Dionysian literature.

Cult movies are notoriously poorly defined. This could be a testament to how the very act of defining a work of art is a troublesome practice, as the problem isn’t exclusive to cult movies.<sup>1</sup> But while no piece of art falls neatly into a category, cult movies have the additional problem of the category itself having no clear parameters. Thus while a Western is roughly defined as a movie set within the American west, or exhibiting the mannerisms of that place and time, the category of cult movies is dependent on so many disparate criteria that almost anyone can claim a film to be a cult movie or disavow one. Consider this definition from *the cult film reader*:

A cult film is a film with an active and lively communal following. Highly committed and rebellious is in its appreciation its audience regularly finds itself at odds with the prevailing cultural mores, displaying a preference for strange topics and allegorical themes that rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics. Cult films transgress notions of good and bad taste, and they challenge genre conventions and coherent storytelling, often using intertextual references, gore, leaving loose ends or creating a sense of nostalgia. They frequently have troublesome production histories, coloured by accidents, failures, legends and mysteries that involve their stars and directors, and in spite of often-limited accessibility, they have a continuous market value and long-lasting public presence (Mathijs and Mendik, p.11).

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this and its relation to cult cinema see Grant.

The first comment is about the audience. Notwithstanding that no other genre is defined in this way, it makes every single movie a candidate to be a cult movie as long as its audience behaves in a certain way. Besides, if one uses this statement about the audience to describe the films, then saying that a work of art “[displays] strange topics and allegorical themes that rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics”, (Mathijs and Mendik, p.11) could mean they are strange anti-mainstream artefacts, but it could also be used to describe the best works of art in existence; certainly it is the role of art to challenge our view of the world in novel ways. The second part of the description, concerning their transgressive nature, is only saying that the movies all make use of postmodern mannerisms, which is not surprising in a postmodern age. The third part is getting farther away from a definition. It is as if the authors are mentioning things that characterize some cult movies and are trying to work their way backwards. While that might work as a strategy, these characteristics hardly narrow down the options for cult movies. Needless to say, some cult movies exhibit many of these characteristics while others may exhibit just one or even none.

But what if the intention is not to clearly define cult movies? It has often been said of them that they defy definition. It certainly seems as if the artists were not trying to create an easily categorized work of art. Rather it seems they were following a creative vision to its strange conclusion. Which is typical of artists, who use genre for the sake of the audience, because it makes their creative vision more accessible to them. It could be that cult movies are a joint collaboration of artists, audience, and critics to do away with borders around art. And if everyone is more or less in agreement on a borderless indefinable art, then that leaves the question of whether there is a need for a category of cult movies at all, or whether it is possible to have such a category. A number of them can be easily put into other categories. A great deal of them are horror movies, and there are fairly well defined sub-categories of cult movies, such as the “so bad they’re good” movies, or the midnight movies. Despite the insistence that cult movies do not fall neatly into categories, or that categories are oppressive impositions, my stance is to show that they are in fact necessary and possible.

## **I. Inherent problems**

It is a fact that categories can be exclusive and restrictive. Categories can also be pragmatic and imposed on objects, on various phenomena, and in some of the most precarious cases, on people. However there are some issues that arise when not working with functional categories, the most problematic being the incapability to distinguish properly between what belongs to a category and what does not. Therefore it is necessary to better demarcate the borders around cult movies.

### **The Semantic issue**

The poor definition of cult movies could in large part be viewed as analogous to the poor definition of mental illness that Thomas Szasz identifies in his *The Myth of Mental Illness*. He contrasts the definition of physical illness, which involves an alteration of the structure of the body, and mental illness, which involves an alteration of the function of the body. Since Szasz's definitions we have gained increasingly sophisticated means of identifying mental illness, using the prior method by observing detrimental changes in the brain of people with mental illnesses. However, the semantic issue remains. Szasz notes that when one defines an illness as a behaviour, without giving due empirical evidence for the cause of said behaviour, one is at liberty to invent diseases. This most notably led to the inclusion of malingering as a mental disease, meaning that the falsifying of a disease is also a disease, which, as Szasz notes, is absurd (Introduction, "The Invention of Mental Illness"). The definition of cult movies shares the issue of being largely defined by behaviour, or rather reception, and thus also raise the issue of malingering. Susan Sontag has a number of criteria for something being camp, one of which is the naivety of its creator; that is to say for it to be "pure camp" (Sontag, 46). As Troma Entertainment seems set on making only B-movies, the question inevitably rises as to whether this makes them malingerers. The production company produced *Toxic Avenger*, which is a prototypical cult movie. There are six *Sharknado* films. Are they all cult or is the first one cult and the rest only cleverly devised replicas? It seems not to matter. Even Sontag herself only makes a distinction between degrees of "satisfaction" between deliberate camp and naïve camp.

If a category cannot distinguish between a replica and the real thing, then it is not a functional category. Szasz mentions that one cannot have a "clear and meaningful concept of illness" if we do not recognize both that there are phenomena which do not

belong to that particular class and that there are phenomena which are counterfeit versions of said class (Chapter 2, On the Notion of Real and False). This is true of cult movies as well. Arguably, genres are more artificial than mental diseases. Whether one categorizes mental diseases as bodily illness or behavioural illness, and whether one includes malingering or not, there is still some phenomena that may or may not be deriving from nature. In the case of genre we are clearly describing man-made objects using man-made terms.<sup>2</sup> To illustrate that in identifying things we create them, Szasz uses the case of an expert identifying a forgery, but in the process identifying it as better work of art than the original. The forgery was not a masterpiece of art before the expert identified it as such, therefore we need to be aware of categories (Chapter 2, “Changes in the Rules of Conduct and the Reclassification of Behavior”). In the case of other genres, we clearly recognize a parody. Such as in the case of *Blazing Saddles*, where the director Mel Brooks clearly set out to make a parody of a Hollywood western. Interestingly, in the case of cult movies we do not. It is impossible to make a parody of a cult movie, because it would either be recognized as a cult movie in its own right, or be discounted on some entirely different grounds. The movies then lack clear demarcation because of our inability to apply a coherent theory to them. I posit that this is because we have been using the wrong lens to analyse these particular movies.

### **The inability to create functional postmodernists categories**

Cult movies have mainly been analysed by liberal thinkers, through a postmodern lens.<sup>3</sup> This has greatly shaped the movies’ conception as postmodernism is not capable of creating solid categories. One tenet of postmodernism is an antagonism to Meta-narratives, a tenet proposed by Jean-François Lyotard. Meta-narratives refer to our means to explain reality on a grand scale, e.g. Christianity, Marxism or scientific progress, the sort of narratives that one might use to explain just about anything, or to structure one’s worldview. Lyotard suggests a series of “mini-narratives” in their stead. These are subject to time and place and circumstance (Barry, 83). In a way they do not impose meaning on their subjects, but rather attempt to describe them provisionally. This may account for why there is no clear definition for cult movies as such, but there

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<sup>2</sup> It is by no means obvious how much our man-made phenomena is dependent on our human nature, but that is a whole other question.

<sup>3</sup> More on this in part II.

are fairly clear definitions for their sub-categories, and, why the cult cannon shifts so readily. It is not difficult to understand what constitutes a movie that is “so good it is bad”. It generally involves a film so poorly made and severely lacking in professional production value that any relatively sane viewer would find it laughable. This may come about as a result of shifting cultural views as was the case with *Reefer Madness* (Gasnier. 1936, Motion Picture Ventures), but is equally likely to be the result of something as benign as a second-rate CGI, as found in *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* (Nguyen. 2010, Moviehead Pictures;) cult horror is a brand of horror which is excessively gruesome; and midnight movies are films shown at midnight.

Stephen Hicks identifies a post-modern world view as one that denies an objective reality. Having abstracted from various postmodern authors, he found that a postmodern worldview consistently deems reality to be constructed of our utterances, which are in turn based on our varying viewpoints and social circumstances. Those social circumstances are based in large part on the group to which one belongs in terms of one’s “sex, race, ethnicity, and wealth”. Interestingly, having decided on “social-linguistics” as the fundamental reality, postmodern epistemology denies this reality. It is characterized as subjective, based on conventions, and one person’s worldview is seen as incommensurable with anyone else’s, or else one group’s worldview is incomparable with any others. As such, groups are characterized as conflicting entities (Hicks, Chapter one, Modern and postmodern). Is it possible to create functional categories within these philosophical parameters? The first hurdle is that the category is not “real”. Categories are somehow constructed by various human beings for their specific benefit, appealing to their own nature. If there is no such thing as reality, and human beings construct themselves through their utterances, then there can be no such thing as human nature, much less a human nature that is common to everyone. Thus a category would mean something to one person and something entirely different to another person. Although, that goes against the very purpose of categories, which is to group together similar objects based on their traits. Solid categories and definitions are the tools by which we understand other people, no matter how different from us, even if such a task is momentous with the help of a clear worldview. In creating dysfunctional categories and blurring definitions based on the criteria that Hicks identified with postmodernism, we create a self-fulfilling prophesy, assuring that different people cannot understand one

another. If there is to be a functional category called cult movies we need to look at them through some different philosophical framework.

The issue of borders is also at work here. If one is highly liberal, one is on average greatly open to experience and greatly averse to borders and boundaries of any sort; whether that is national borders, physical borders, or even conceptual borders. This also applies to artists (Haidt, chapter 7). The most obscure works of art then are not only created to defy categorization, but are analysed by academics who have neither the desire nor the experience to categorize them. Genre and categorization are not there for the sake of the artist, but the audience. It is often a shorthand imposition to make art more accessible to the audience. It is the job of academics and critics to create (or impose) categories on art to make it accessible and understandable. Admittedly, there is some value in having a category of strange things that defy definition, because that sort of a category will attract exactly the sort of people who will enjoy cult movies. Such a category nevertheless breeds more problems than it solves and is more appropriately termed a marketing strategy. It is worth to note that postmodernists analyse more phenomena than cult movies. However, because of the movies' obscure nature they have almost exclusively been analysed by postmodern means.

## **II. The conception of cult movies**

Cult movies are primarily analysed by postmodern approaches because the people liable to be postmodernists are liable to watch and analyse cult movies. This has led to a political eco-chamber in the academic work surrounding cult movies.

### **Cult movies' postmodern origins**

Academic work on cult movies is predominantly written from points of view originating on the left side of the political spectrum. The approaches are postmodern or Marxist.<sup>4</sup> This is true of Jeffrey Sconce's essay on "paracinema". He identifies paracinema as an

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<sup>4</sup> Although postmodernism is not politically left in and of itself, Stephen Hicks has found the leading postmodern philosophers to be on the left side of the political spectrum (Chapter 1, Why Postmodernism). He has also found that Postmodernism and Marxism have become increasingly tangled together as Marxism adopted various postmodern ideas to compensate for its economic failures (Chapter 5). He also notes certain postmodernists' usage of rhetoric in the service of Marxism despite logical contradictions (Chapter 6, Machiavellian postmodernism).

aesthetic attitude found in cult cinema and the audience. It is an attitude that challenges the validity of taste hierarchies by being their opposite. Sconce's essay is identified by Mathijs and Xavier as significant to cult studies (Mathijs and Xavier, p.100). It is also true of Barry K. Grant's theory, that cult movies are a means by which one can identify with the *other*<sup>5</sup>. It is also true of Eco and Hollows and Sontag<sup>6</sup>. That academic work on cult movies takes a Marxist approach is stated outright in the *Cult Film Reader*, a collection of essays on cult movies: "Most approaches to cult cinema [take a Marxist perspective towards value]". It is evident from the canonical interpretation of cult movies, that they are an opposite of the mainstream, a champion of the *other*, and impossible to categorize, that they have not been largely analysed by conservative thinkers. As far as the history of cult movies is concerned, one of the first studies of cult movies was Bruce A. Austin's study of *Rocky Horror's* audience, which put the emphasis on the audience rather than the features of the movies. This is in keeping with the postmodern emphasis on group identities outlined above. Austin's study did, however, find that the audience was mostly composed of high school and college students, which is not a particular group identity (Austin 398). Another essay that shaped early academic work on cult movies was Umberto Eco's essay on *Casablanca*, which notes the intertextuality in that 1942 classic (Mathijs and Sexton, 3). Intertextuality, the degree to which a text references other texts, is notably a preoccupation of postmodernists, as is Eco's self-prescribed notion of visiting the past with irony (Barry 87-88). This ironic reinterpretation of movies is precisely how many cult movies come into being, e.g. *Reefer Madness*. It should be noted that Eco's essay on *Casablanca* has since been questioned by both J.P Telotte, who considers Eco to have overstated *Casablanca's* imperfections, and Barry Keith Grant, who considers the way in which *Casablanca* throws together disparate elements into a collage of sorts to be characteristic of all classical Hollywood genre films (Mathijs and Sexton, 3). This would suggest that *Casablanca's* status as a cult movie is questionable. The theory outlined later in this essay does not consider *Casablanca* to be a cult film; rather *Casablanca* belongs to the category of "Classics", which is another line of study. That

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5 The *other* is an opposite of the Self. That is to say, the *other* is anything you don't identify with yourself, or have incorporated into your being. This can range from modes of being, to the people associated with that mode of being, and is largely conceptual rather than based on objective phenomena.

6 Eco emphasises the intertextual nature of *Casablanca*. Hollows shares in Sconse's view of cult movies as an opposite of "the mainstream" and goes further to say that cult movies are something approximating patriarchal constructs. Sontag identified in camp a tendency to put things in quotation marks (44), and to "dethrone the serious" (50).

cult cinema is analysed by Marxist and postmodern perspectives is in part owing to the fact that modern universities tend to lean left on the political spectrum (Lukianoff, Chapter 5, Solidarity or Diversity), but also because of the nature of the subject. Cult movies are obscure artworks and obscure artworks appeal to open people.

Cult films tend to appeal to people with the character trait “openness to experience”, who, on average, lean left on the political spectrum. This quality also allows them to be more open and interested in art and ideas.<sup>7</sup> (Haidt, chapter 7). Cult movies are full of wild and original ideas e.g. Divine’s quest to be the filthiest person alive in *Pink Flamingos*, The implications of organ repossession in *Repo! The Genetic Opera* (Bousman. 2008, Twisted Pictures), and whatever Alejandro Jodorowsky was trying to relay when he called a Christ figure excrement with the potential to be gold in *Holy Mountain* (34:40). These movies are also intentionally disgusting. Liberals and libertarians<sup>8</sup> are on average less sensitive to disgusting phenomena than conservatives, particularly concerning matters such as sexual purity and the sanctity of the body. Disgust sensitivity is the reason conservatives are particular about borders and boundaries. Liberals score higher when it comes to the character trait “openness to experience”, which can be contrasted to experiments relating to disgust sensitivity in a person trying new foods. Jonathan Haidt argues that these underlying personality differences shape the political philosophies of people (Haidt, chapter 7). This is also why universities lean left, and have been predominantly liberal since the Baby Boomers, (the generation defined as those born after WW2 up until the year 1964) replaced the professors from the Greatest Generation, liberal professors constituting roughly eighty percent of faculty (Lukianoff, Chapter 5, Solidarity or Diversity). The study of cult movies has only recently been taken up seriously by academics, with their first international conference in the year 2000 (Mathijs and Mendik, 149) and the likelihood of the roughly ten percent of conservative professors in the humanities contributing to the field in its formative years is little. The result is a feedback loop of obscure art appealing to left-wing thinkers, who analyse the works through their lens, which in turn makes the works more appealing to left-wing thinkers. According to Jonathan Haidt’s theory, a hypothetical conservative thinker would be concerned with sacredness and

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<sup>7</sup> Haidt’s theory assumes that these traits are to some degree innate, although susceptible to change. He quotes neuroscientist Gary Marcus, who states that the brain is best seen as prewired, meaning it is “organized in advance of experience”. (Chapter 7).

<sup>8</sup> Libertarians are not so easily placed on the left right paradigm. Their primary political motivator seems to be a concern with liberty. For more on this see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* Chapter 12.

cleanliness, due to his sensitivity to disgust. One can only imagine the reaction of a highly conservative philosopher or art critic – presuming that such a person exists – to a movie such as *Pink Flamingos*, whose tagline “An exercise in poor taste”, is a gross understatement. Doubtlessly he would dismiss it as crass hedonism and be done with it. Cult films are a prime example of obscure art. Many are shown only at midnight, i.e. the midnight movies. Others have been outright banned, e.g. *Pink Flamingos*. *The Room*'s foremost piece of advertisement was a billboard with Tommy Wiseau's face and the bewildering tagline: “Can you really trust anyone?” (Sestero, 262). These strange characteristics speak volumes for liberals, who are by definition “open to experience”, but severely decrease the interest of someone who does not share the trait. The unfortunate result of this is that the movies are only analysed from one angle of the political spectrum.

### **One-sidedness**

Mathijs and Mendik say that cult movies “rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics”. It would be more accurate to say that cult movies rub against conservative politics; which is not always the dominant political force. While there is nothing wrong with a liberal viewpoint, nor is there anything inherently wrong with liberal thinkers being overrepresented in academia, as it is no doubt their temperament that brought them there; nevertheless the conception of cult movies needs to be tempered by a conservative point of view. Primarily as thinkers on the right side of the political spectrum are by definition better at demarcating borders and categories. The hope is that politically right leaning thinkers will narrow down the criteria for cult movies and better demarcate what is a cult movie and what is not. That is if they can see past their disgust. In a sense the current definition of cult movies is just as much owing to the political right's refusal to discuss them as it is the political left's unidimensional definition. Furthermore it is by no means obvious to what degree the political right's refusal to discuss cult movies has influenced the cult canon. Perhaps none of the movies conservatives are interested in have been eligible for cult status. I mentioned earlier that conservatives are low on the trait “openness to experience”, which in extreme cases makes them “blind” to art and ideas. This, and the degree to which people are sensitive to disgust, is connected to what Jonathan Haidt terms the *sanctity foundation*. However,

liberals are also “blind” to the moralistic concerns that Haidt terms the *loyalty foundation* and *authority foundation*. The loyalty foundation is roughly an appeal to our own group, or tribal, nature, and the authority foundation is roughly an appeal to competent authority. These also help shape political views and account for nationalism being primarily a conservative doctrine, and the liberal opposition to hierarchies (Haidt Chapter 7). Cult movies may not be exceedingly lacking in the loyalty foundation, although in the movies carrying an overtly Marxist tone there is often a single individual pitted against the ruling class, rather than a struggle between groups (*Mean Girls*, *They Live*, *The Toxic Avenger*). In contrast they are nowhere as themed around loyalty as, for example, the classic war film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. They are lacking in the authority foundation which I believe the statement by Mathijs and Mendik exemplifies. This lack also accounts for Barry K Grant’s theory on cult movies, which is that cult movies are a way to critique our culture while being protected by it at the same time (Grant). The fact that the movies are void of these concerns or even mock them, is usually read by academics as a critique of hierarchies in particular (Grant, Sconce). An easy counterpoint to this would be that hardly any of these movies attempt to show the viewer how best to live their life, and a plethora of them end on a sour note. Some of them were meant to have even more nihilistic endings, including *Clerks*, which was meant to end in the murder of the protagonist (Greene), or *The Little Shop of Horrors*, which was meant to end in annihilation of the planet (Gartler). So simply if the movies exemplify a nihilistic or an “anti-mainstream” attitude, that does not mean that they are condoning such sentiments, although, doubtless some of them are. The danger here lies in the fact that a broad range of human concerns are largely ignored. Another danger is insufficient criticism of current thought on cult movies.

The one sidedness of cult analysis is perhaps best illustrated by an essay by Joanne Hollows. She posits that cult movies are a masculine phenomenon, not in themselves, but in the fashion in which they are analysed and watched. She cites the sleazy theatres in which they were shown, noting that such places would feel unsafe, or else unwelcoming for women, and the conceptualizing of cult movies as an opposite to the feminized mainstream (Hollows). This is the same criticism usually levelled at the patriarchy, but directed at a phenomenon that is meant to be an opposite of the mainstream and therefore an opposite of the patriarchy. The mainstream cannot be both the terrible patriarchy that needs to be opposed with transgressional movies and a safe

feminized haven for misogynists to look down on. This is easy to overlook if one is liable to agree with both conceptions, which is why something approximating a conservative worldview is necessary. Moreover, if Hollows is correct, and the movies are equally patriarchal and equally owing to the male psyche as other movies, then that is another way in which cult movies are undermined as a genre. If cult movies were objectively more unwelcoming to women, there would be fewer women coming to see these movies than mainstream movies, but the gender ratio of cult audiences is roughly equal (Austin 397), as it is in the mainstream (Theatrical Market Statistics 2016, 15). Furthermore, while the sorts of theatres that Hollows describes had the most success showing cult movies, there were plenty of other theatres showing them. George A. Waller composed an overview of the 1216 midnight movie screenings in the town of Lexington, Kentucky, from 1980 through 1985. While more than half of the screenings belonged to one theatre, the Kentucky, which was in the downtown area and geared itself towards fringe entertainment, seven of the nine theatres in Lexington screened midnight movies. Waller mentions that the mall cinemas and multi-cinemas were advantageous as venues for cult films because of their vicinity to middle-class predominantly white residential areas, although not as advantageous as the Kentucky, precisely because of its “dangerous” image. The word dangerous here is not to be taken literally. As a number of conceptions about cult movies suggest, it is a fabrication made to distinguish cult movies from other movies.

### **Cult movies as an opposite of the mainstream**

Both the cult movies themselves and the audience are often contrasted to mainstream movies and their audiences, a tendency which is as poorly defined as cult movies themselves. The mainstream, in this circumstance, is an “imagined *other*” (Jancovich, 1). Once again, these are impositions. The intent is to distance oneself from whatever is perceived as the dominant culture, and to be a part of a certain group. The question is perhaps whether it is a helpful way of perceiving the world. The danger here, just as with the matter of the political eco-chamber surrounding cult movies, is that one side is perceived as dominant and one victimized. While it is noted that both the mainstream and cult movies are shifting entities, they are usually associated with certain politics. The mainstream is associated with conservative politics, and cult movies are associated

with liberal politics. This is largely because of the temperamental differences I outlined earlier and is independent of whether a left-wing party holds parliament, or whether liberal academics in the US generally outnumber conservative academics 1:5. Besides carrying with it political implications, the notion of cult movies as an opposite to the mainstream is a poor way to conceptualize the movies, primarily because one is using one fluctuating entity to define another, and vice versa.

Cult movies as an opposite of the mainstream is most clearly illustrated in the *Cult Film Reader*, where Mathijs and Mendik outline the theory of cult movies as an opposite of good taste. The idea of taste usually hypothesised in regard to cult cinema, posits that taste is an illusion. The notion that taste is in part a social construct is taken to mean that it is a tool of the bourgeois oppressor to “detect their own”. Cult movies, consequently, are thought of a counter-force, an opposition to good taste. The fact that cult movies themselves are sorted into hierarchies should indicate that there is an underlying reality to taste, although that seems not to be the conclusion drawn in the general field of cult studies (Mathijs and Mendik, 17). The notion of taste as an illusion is a Marxist notion that, if followed to its logical conclusion, deems all art to be propaganda; if art is a tool of the bourgeois then it serves a political purpose, and if it serves a political purpose it is propaganda. The fact that we make a distinction between art and propaganda means that taste is something more than a means by which to identify individuals belonging to your group. In fact, there are plenty of logical criterion by which art is created that has nothing to do with “oppressing the proletariat”. One need only read a “how to write”, book to become convinced of this. The basis of such books is not to let people know that they are reading a book written by someone belonging to a certain class, but to teach clear writing. Clear writing may be socially constructed and doubtlessly it can be demeaning – it is an incredibly frustrating task to learn the rules that dictate clear writing – but its purpose is to facilitate clear communication. Similarly, just because cult cinema does not appeal to a certain sensibility does not mean that they do not hold artistic merit, or are founded upon similar laws.

Transgressing should not pose a problem if one does not break certain fundamental rules, and this applies to cult movies as well. This is most clearly seen in their story structure, which is decidedly driven by the same forces that govern other movies, as they share in the same structure that Joseph Campbell outlines in his hero myth. Campbell’s hero myth is an attempt to describe the underlying structure of stories, so

not only is a story following the hero myth structure meant to be a good one, but the structure is inherent to any story, in varying complexity (Vogler, 3-4). As detailed, and slightly altered by Christopher Vogler, the structure divides stories into three parts, much like the three act structure, which is in turn sectioned as follows: The first Act: Ordinary world; Call to adventure; Refusal of the call; Meeting with the mentor; Crossing of the first threshold. The second Act: Test, Allies, Enemies; Approach to the inmost cave; Ordeal. Act Three: The road back; Resurrection; Return with the elixir (Vogler, 6). Disregarding the jargon, it is a simple structure that involves traveling to some unknown place, physically or psychologically, usually out of necessity, testing one's abilities through some difficult experiences, culminating in a life-changing ordeal, and returning as a different person. This structure regularly puts the hero in confrontation with the shadow. The shadow is a Jungian term that represents the darker aspect of something, or oneself, that often has some hidden value. It is the aspect of human nature that we associate with villains (Vogler, 65). I mention this, first and foremost, to remind the reader that we are dealing with stories, and that stories have to follow certain rules. This structure is inherent to *The Little Shop of Horrors*, in which Seymour Krelborn enters into a world of fame and success after feeding the shadowy figure of Audrey II and ultimately overcoming it and maturing as a result. Campbell's structure is also found in *Rocky Horror*, which will be discussed in detail in the next part. It is even to be found in *The Room*, although perhaps not fully fledged, where Johnny enters into a new state of existence after finding out about Mark and Lisa's love affair, attempts to regain Lisa's love and fails, culminating in his suicide. *The Room* may be the worst story ever written, but it is still a story of sorts. To say that a story is an opposite of good taste is to neglect that in order for a story to appeal to people it must appeal to our nature in some way. In theory, if a story were to truly go against our notions of taste, it would never be accompanied with the religious zeal that accompanies cult movies. Is there a way to understand cult movies as stories and without politics?

#### **IV. The Nature of cult movies**

Is the genre of cult films entirely arbitrary, temperamentally based, or politically motivated? While it is true that cult movies ultimately go through a certain selection process, most of them are a subgroup of a particular category of art: the Dionysian,

which has its ties to the realm of the artist. There is a strong tendency for movies to be shunned from cult status if they do not exhibit the Dionysian attitude, even if they attract a cult following. *Star Wars* is a perfect example of this. In the last segment I insisted that there was no difference between cult movies and “normal” movies, and structurally that is true. The Dionysian is first and foremost a matter of attitude and subject matter.

### **The Dionysian**

Camille Paglia’s theories about the inherent dichotomy between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, which she discusses in her *Sexual Personae* could be attributed to cult movies as well. The distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is not unlike the distinction between society and nature, or masculine and feminine; Apollo standing for the former and Dionysus the latter. The theory hinges on nature being cruel and dangerous, and society, along with its repression and flaws, being the remedy. The worst of our natures, e.g. murder and rape, are natural, rather than a by-product of society, as Rousseau would have it. (Paglia, chapter one). Such a theory of human cruelty places it at the feet of every person, regardless of colour or creed, and aptly names it their shadow. Therefore the theory lucidly accounts for why the people who consider themselves, or are considered part of the mainstream would concern themselves with these types of movies as much as any transgressors against the mainstream; it is because the Dionysian element concerns everyone. That being said, it is easy to make a case for it concerning the *other* to a greater degree. It is perfectly in line with common sense, and the social contract, to reject society if it is not working for you. If the positive aspects of society do not out-weight the repressive aspects of it, and one is a human animal that divides the world into society and nature, then it is reasonable to choose nature. The Apollonian is “the line drawn against nature”. This line also separates ideas and people, and as such symbolizes the order of society and clarity of concepts, but also oppression and separatism in the extreme. The Dionysian, on the other hand, is associated with nature and fluids. He is, after all, the wine god. The fluid nature of Dionysus symbolises stifling unity. His liberty from Apollonian oppression is one of consequences, as his revelry ended in bloodshed (Paglia, chapter three). He is a chthonic deity, which is to say that he is “of the earth’s bowels” (Paglia, chapter one). For all

intents and purposes, he is the Jungian shadow, or even the great mother.<sup>9</sup> Dionysus is what the Apollonian seeks to break away from and vice versa. Both Apollo and Dionysus are androgynous, although each's androgyny symbolizes something different. Apollo's androgyny is perhaps best exemplified in free standing ancient Greek nude *kouros* statues, which were generically named Apollo. Though shaped in an Apollonian manner the subject matters were young boys in between youth and masculine adulthood, whose femininity grew in proportion to the age of Greece, from the archaic period (800BC-480BC) to the Hellenistic period (323BC-31BC). In Ancient Greek pederasty, it was a way to embrace the feminine without any women being involved (Paglia, chapter four). Dionysus' androgyny, on the other hand, has to do with his motherly femininity, which is in turn associated with the chthonic forces of nature (Paglia, chapter three). Cult movies embody the Dionysian. Waters' infamous *Pink Flamingos* makes a point of being as Dionysian as possible, having the main character attempt to be "the filthiest person alive". Furthermore, the Dionysian is decidedly anti-order and society, as are cult movies in a number of respects. Cult movies are the Dionysian taking over the Apollonian. They mirror ancient Greece, whose plays started out as a refutation of the natural, a conquering over it, as is characteristic of the early Greek trilogy of plays, *Oresteia* (Aeschylus, 458BC), in which Apollo orders the protagonist, Orestes, to avenge his father's murder by murdering his mother. Orestes is then haunted by the three furies, but is aided by Apollo and Athena, and ultimately tried and exonerated. Towards the later stages of ancient Greece, however, there was a turn towards the Dionysian, as in the later play *Bacchae* (Euripides, 405BC), where Bacchus' overtaking of a city is detailed, along with his driving the city's current king to insanity and subsequent death. Paglia's observation is that when there is less faith in society, there is a turn to the Dionysian. In her words, "Greek tragedy is the Apollonian prayer, stifling nature's amoral appetite. It works only while society coheres. When the centre does not hold, tragedy disintegrates. Dionysus is the mist slipping through society's cracks". (Paglia, chapter four). I wish to stress that the movies' being of a Dionysian nature, does not necessarily mean that they are justifying the Dionysian, nor does it convey the disposition of the authors. Although, in certain cases it seems that the work of art tends to be on the side of the Dionysian. The difference between the

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<sup>9</sup> The great mother is an archetype associated with the collective unconscious. For more see Neumann.

Apollonian and the Dionysian is perhaps best exemplified in the difference between *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

### **Side by Side Comparison**

The lack of Dionysian themes accounts for why a movie such as *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* is a dubious contestant for cult movie status and why *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a prototypical cult movie. The two movies have a similar story structure, the Hero myth, which is often used to explain the success of the Star Wars franchise. *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* plants its protagonist Luke Skywalker on his home planet, leading a dull life in his ordinary world, where he receives a distress signal from Princess Leia, his call to adventure. He is reluctant to leave his home planet until after his meeting with his mentor, Obi Wan, and the destruction of his home. They cross the first threshold into Mos Eisley, where they meet their Allies, Han Solo and Chewbacca, and accidentally enter the Death Star, which serves as the story's inmost cave. Inside the Death Star they face a number of challenges culminating in the ordeal, and near death experience of being crushed in a garbage disposal, and in the death of Obi Wan. The entourage is chased out of the Death Star on their road back. Luke Skywalker has a symbolic resurrection and character change when he learns how to use the force, and they return as heroes. More importantly the subject matter of the first Star Wars trilogy is an optimistic take on the hero structure, highlighting the hero's ability to overcome the temptations of power and the shortcomings of the previous generation (Vogler, 286-287). The first Star Wars trilogy is an attempt to detail a way in which people can achieve positive growth. The protagonist's main antagonists are corrupt fathers and his main temptation is power. The Dionysian is not a main theme at all. It is worth noting that the Dionysian can be the subject of an apollonian work of art if the Dionysian is overcome.

In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* Brad and Janet are equally reluctant to answer a call to adventure, but are encouraged by Frank N. Furter, their mentor, to go to his lab, and meet his strange entourage. While Dr Everett Scott is the obvious candidate for a mentor, Frank N. Furter wins out by being in the story at the point where a mentor is needed. The couple then have their sexual ordeal in the boudoir of their unconventional mentor, gain their sexual liberty and learn the price of gaining it in seeing Eddie's dead

body. They have their resurrection on the stage and return having changed. The character progression of *Rocky Horror's* protagonist, Janet Weiss, is one that moves from the Apollonian towards the Dionysian; as is the case with many protagonists of cult movies. There are cases, such as in Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead*, where the protagonist's aspirations are Apollonian throughout. The genre of horror movies, however, is an anomaly in itself as the experience is a passive one and symbolically feminine (Paglia chapter 9). *The Evil Dead* trilogy is particularly Dionysian in its subject matter. It is no coincidence that Ash fights an obese, decaying woman and then an incarnation of nature at the end of the second film, but more importantly, he never wins; he is a failure of the Apollonian order. In *Rocky Horror*, although the first character we see is Brad Majors, Janet Weiss is the film's main protagonist. Brad is much too assertive at the onset of the story, which would be an unusual trajectory were he the protagonist; it is not until relatively late in the story that protagonists typically take matters into their own hands, notably in the "approaching the threshold", part of a story (Vogler 127-128), or after the character change, as is the case with Janet (55:00). She propels the story forward at the most important time, in her "confrontation" with Rocky, making her an active agent in her fate (Vogler, 31). Furthermore, it is not without reason that audiences grant Brad the epithet "asshole". People don't identify with Brad. He could be thought of as the Apollonian that is repressing Janet; and as Frank N. Furter corrupts Janet, he likewise corrupts Brad (47:00-52:00). Janet's actions then propel her character change from a prude non-participant, who faints at the onset of the time warp (19:30), to a fully-fledged creature of the night (1:15:00). The Dionysian takes over every main character and does not lose its hold on them when the credits roll. This is also true of other cult movies, such as *Harold and Maude* (Ashby. 1971, Paramount Pictures), in which Harold embraces nature, freedom from society and death in his love affair with Maude. It is also true of *The Thing* (Carpenter. 1982, Universal Pictures), in which a group of expeditioners merge together in a gelatinous blob where they cannot tell each other apart and their individual nature is lost.

### **Art for the sake of artists**

If cult movies are an embodiment of the Dionysian, and the Dionysian is the chaos threatening our society, then why would anyone watch them? Why do some people

watch them repeatedly, in full dress and makeup, imitating the dialogue, yelling at the screen, bringing their own plastic spoons and rice? They are genuinely interested in cult movies because of what they find at cult movie showings you won't find anywhere else. Due to their temperament they are open to new experience. An artist's job could be described as transforming the status quo, to delve into the collective unconscious, the underlying poorly understood structure of all human beings, and bring back something comprehensible (Neumann, part II, C, Compensation of the Separated...). This is often how a story plays out, but since a cult movie is a Dionysian work, it is more appropriate to think of it as a manifestation of the collective unconscious<sup>10</sup> that has not been fully articulated. Therefore it is a watering hole for artists, the artistically inclined and the more temperamentally suited for new experience. It is a well of inspiration waiting to be enjoyed. Artists, and people with an artistic temperament who set their sights on Dionysian artefacts are in fact re-enacting the hero principle as the following statement will demonstrate.

According to Eric Neumann artists have a different maturation process. He likens the creative individual to the hero, and emphasises his need to "conquer the ordinary". This is precisely because the ordinary can be defined as being the characteristics of the Apollonian, of being oppressive and restrictive. Artists must always fight the old structure in order to bring forth something new. And that entails an alienation from the very structures that regulate the lives of ordinary people. This is the hero's sacrifice that is mirrored in stories. This sacrifice does not entail an enduring antagonism between the collective and the hero, as the hero's creations are eventually incorporated into the canon. The collective will fend against the hero in order to preserve culture for much the same reason as it defends against the Dionysian, because the abolishment of a stable society is dangerous and a hero's creations have the potential to abolish the old culture (Neumann, part II, C, Compensation of the Separated...). It is appropriate to say that the hero exists on the border of our inner and outer existence, between chaos and order, and the Apollonian and Dionysian.<sup>11</sup>

I have attempted to draw a picture of an audience which relies on creativity and curiosity rather than on political conformism, and attempted to explain the somewhat

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<sup>10</sup> The collective unconscious is the part of the unconscious that is shared by all human beings and could be likened to human nature. As we have already discussed, it can be defined as largely chthonic.

<sup>11</sup> For different variations on this theory see Paglia, Neumann and Peterson.

inaccurate view of the audience as outsiders, using Neumann's theory. Bruce Austin's portrait of the audience seems to neither confirm nor deny the political picture I drew up in part one of this essay, of the audience considered to belong on the left side of the political spectrum. He found that the majority of the audience was "politically independent and middle-of-the-road relating to political issues". This could be explained by the majority of the audience (68.4%) being in the age range of 17-22, when political views are not necessarily fully formed. Austin did find a correlation between regular viewers of *Rocky Horror* and higher media usage, although the difference was only significant in one domain (magazine usage) (Austin, 398). This seems to confirm the correlation between "openness to experience" and repeated viewing of cult movies, although it is first and foremost a definitional issue: if one is liable to watch cult movies, then one tends to be open to new experience.

## **Conclusion**

It seems then that the most obscure works of art are in danger of being exactly what they were intended as: obscure works of art. Perhaps it is not so dangerous to have a category for art that is made to resist categorization. Perhaps the real issue lies in the eco-chamber that is created when people of a certain disposition band together to insist on a certain interpretation of reality without heeding the opinions of those belonging to the other side of the spectrum. Add to that the religious zeal that accompanies cult movies in particular and the subject becomes anything but conducive to academic thought. However, if not for the Marxist insistence of taste as a means to oppose the current power structure, or the insistence that the movies are in some way fundamentally different from other movies, there might never have been a category of cult movies. I belong to the audience group who greatly enjoys them. So while it is difficult to conceptualize these movies, especially if one does not believe in Marxist doctrines, or if one does believe that all stories share the same fundamental nature, they are still interesting and a fantastic source of novelty. And by definition, novelty should challenge one's pre-suppositions. Otherwise it would not be novel.

The question of whether the category of cult movies is justifiable has largely been unanswered in this essay. As I have already stated we create categories and to create good categories we need to have faith in them. If we insist that the artificial nature of

categories makes them impossible, then they will remain impossible. If we instead recognize the pragmatic nature of categories, that even though they may be heavily related to our human nature, or our western disposition, we can still use them as tools to structure our world. In order for that tool to be functional we need to demarcate the category of cult movies more clearly. In this essay I have suggested that they be a subcategory of Dionysian art. That would rule out some ambiguous contestants, such as the *Star Wars* franchise. This classification situates the movies in relation to other movies and does not contradict any notions of taste or their status as comprehensive works of art. It is not a perfect framework. For example it does little to explain neither the cult surrounding the classic film *Casablanca*, nor the so called “weepies”, and equally little to explain cults surrounding certain actors and actresses, such as Judy Garland. Since the actor/personality-cults are not directly connected to the movies themselves they may be considered as a different phenomenon. As for *Casablanca* and the weepies, their status as cult movies is tentative in cult film studies.<sup>12</sup> As of now, the category of cult movies may not only be poorly constructed, but entirely counter-productive to our understanding of these movies.

The categorization of Apollonian and Dionysian does carry with it the danger of polemical politics. It is not exceedingly difficult to associate the Apollonian with a conservative attitude and the Dionysian with a liberal attitude. That would, however, be a mistake. First of all, it would be cruel to left leaning thinkers to say that they are not routing for society. The political spectrum is a variant of theories of how best to maintain and better our society, in so far as we can modify and regulate our society. None but the most radical and nihilistic of us are truly against the notion of society. I have already hinted at the issues that arise when a topic becomes too politically unanimous and it is my sincere hope that cult movies can be viewed, not as a cynical counter force to our culture as Sconce would have it, but as an integral part of our being. As human beings we carry with us the principles of Apollo and Dionysius, the social and the natural, and in order to best understand our makeup and our creations we need to acknowledge that. In short, whatever these movies are, we should view them as a thing in their own right, regardless of our position to them.

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<sup>12</sup> See my discussion in part 2 about *Casablanca*. The status of weepies as cult movies has been discredited by Hollows, and although I disagree with her reasons for doing so, I believe she is right about weepies not belonging to the canon of cult cinema.

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