

# Why Call them "Cult Movies"? American Independent Filmmaking and the Counterculture in the 1960s

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## Preface

In response to the recent increased prominence of studies of "cult movies" in academic circles, this essay aims to question the critical usefulness of that term, indeed the very notion of "cult" as a way of talking about cultural practice in general. My intention is to inject a note of caution into that current discourse in Film Studies which valorizes and celebrates "cult movies" in particular, and "cult" in general, by arguing that "cult" is a negative symptom of, rather than a positive response to, the social, cultural, and cinematic conditions in which we live today. The essay consists of two parts: firstly, a general critique of recent "cult movies" criticism; and, secondly, a specific critique of the term "cult movies" as it is sometimes applied to 1960s American independent biker movies -- particularly films by Roger Corman such as *The Wild Angels* (1966) and *The Trip* (1967), by Richard Rush such as *Hell's Angels on Wheels* (1967), *The Savage Seven*, and *Psych-Out* (both 1968), and, most famously, *Easy Rider* (1969) directed by Dennis Hopper.

Of course, no-one would want to suggest that it is not acceptable to be a "fan" of movies which have attracted the label "cult". But this essay begins from a position which assumes that the business of Film Studies should be to view films of all types as profoundly and positively "political", in the sense in which Fredric Jameson uses that adjective in his argument that all culture and every cultural object is most fruitfully and meaningfully understood as an articulation of the "political unconscious" of the social and historical context in which it originates, an understanding achieved through "the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts" (Jameson, 1989: 20). Viewed from this perspective, the notion of "cult" stands out as a critically and politically weak concept, which relies too heavily on subjectivity and pleasure, and which, while it is good at allowing various diverse constituencies to appreciate and understand films in their own terms, is not so good at allowing us to develop a coherent, broad-based and inclusive understanding of film as a political thing.

The general popularity of "cult movies", "cult TV", and associated paraphernalia has, of course, been increasing for some time now, as noted by Joan Hawkins in her book *Cutting Edge* -- a development manifested in the proliferation of cult film and TV stores, mail order companies, magazines, and websites (Hawkins, 2000: 3-4). And the acceptability of "cult" as something worthy of serious study has also been growing, as demonstrated by a plethora of recent books, journals, and conference strands, and websites (Hawkins, 2000: 6-7). In all this, although no commonly accepted definition of "cult", as applied to film and television, has yet emerged, a working definition might run as follows: films and television programs, usually but not always from the past, usually but not always controversial or sensationalist in subject

matter, generally arising from low-budget production origins and/or with low production values, produced primarily for a narrow audience segment rather than the general public or (less often), if originally produced for the general public, now long since forgotten by it and remembered and valued today only by a limited but devoted group of fans.

Into the category of low-budget productions originally aimed at a relatively narrow audience we might place, for example, 1950s horror films such as *A Bucket of Blood* (Corman, 1959) and 1960s "teenpics" such as *Beach Party* (Asher, 1963); while into the category of forgotten-but-remembered originally-mainstream productions, we might place 1950s TV sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-57) or *Bonanza* (1959-73), or entire strings of now-dated Classical Hollywood musicals with kitsch appeal starring Deanna Durbin, Howard Keel, or Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy (see Appendix 1). More generally, however, the definition of "cult" must accommodate a diversity of film and television from a variety of industrial, formal and thematic contexts, past but also present: 1950s science fiction films such as *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *Them!* (1954), and *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman* (1958); 1970s TV cop shows such as *Cannon* (1971-1976), *Kojak* (1973-1978), *Beretta* (1975-1978), and *Barnaby Jones* (1973-1980); "slasher pics" such as *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and *Friday the 13th* (1980); martial arts films including all of the work of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan; 1990s supernatural TV shows such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997- ), *The X-Files* (1993-2002), *Angel* (1999- ), and *Hercules* (1995-1999); and occasional pseudo-indie big-screen successes such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

Although no two lists of "cult" movies and television are likely to look identical, what most of this material has in common is that it appears to contemporary viewers badly-made, dated, kitsch, and/or heavily ironic. For Joan Hawkins, for example, one of the key qualities of most of the films she defines as "trash cinema" -- a quality which, she points out, is precisely what endears such films to their fans -- is the fact that they are "so awful they're good" (Hawkins, 2000: 14). This is also what draws Jeffrey Sconce to what he describes as the championing of cinematic "trash" over the cinematic "canon", as part of his larger interest in the ability of certain types of cultural consumption to offend good taste, an ability which Sconce credits to "just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency to... pornography." (Sconce, 1995: 372) But in recent scholarly studies of cult movies and associated phenomena, such as those by Hawkins and Sconce, the line between fandom and critical thought has been dangerously ill-defined. The notion of "cult" movies, whether discussed using the term "cult" itself, or such terms as "trash" (Hawkins) or "paracinema" (Sconce), threatens to lead Film Studies into a critical and political dead-end co-habited only by *Forbidden Planet* and leased indefinitely to the disaffected by the economics and politics of free market consumerism.

But first we must understand the category of films described as "cult" movies, and the recent growth in popularity of "cult" in general, as a manifestation of some felt need on the part of certain film fans and scholars to carve out a space apart from the mainstream, in disaffection from and in defiance of it in the late-twentieth century and today. In this respect, the sentiment which underpins the term "cult" seems an understandable and sympathetic one. Relatively speaking, we do not live in politically or culturally radical times: we live in an era in which what Justin Wyatt characterizes powerfully as "high concept" cinema dominates; in which even "independent cinema" seems increasingly part of "the system"; in which every historical impulse towards substantial social, cultural, political and cinematic change seems inevitably prone to rapid incorporation and neutralization (Wyatt, 1994).

In this climate, admiration and championing of "cult" seems to offer a route away from, or a mode of cultural practice outside of, a banal and anaesthetized dominant culture. "Cult" movies are different from the mainstream, they speak to different audiences, they are consumed differently, their mode of production is different, the values they espouse and the formal strategies through which they articulate those values are different. "Cult" movies challenge, satirize, interrogate, and expose, though always ironically. "Cult" movies are valued because they are different -- those who advocate a "cult" movie culture, those who speak in praise of particular "cult" movies, do so out of a sense that "cult" is good and non-cult is bad or, if not bad, then at least boring (see, for example, Hunter and Kaye, 1997: 5; Hawkins, 2000: 7-8).

## **Cult movie criticism**

The deeper conditions of possibility behind the emergence of "cult", then, seem largely sympathetic. As Joan Hollows and Mark Jancovich explain in the introduction to their *Approaches to Popular Film*, one of the most positive developments in Film Studies since the 1980s has been the opening up of the study of popular film to critical approaches which do not condescend to it, unlike mass culture criticism (Hollows in Hollows and Jancovich, 1995: 15-36), and which do not condescend to the people who enjoy it, unlike the rigid passive-spectatorship model of *Screen* theory (Hollows, Hutchings, and Jancovich, 2000: 267). This opening up has come about under the particular influence of Cultural Studies (particularly of the Birmingham CCCS variety), with its admirable and stubborn streak of refusing to make judgments of quality between texts and types of text, and its resolute insistence upon the agency and activity of spectators/audiences in creating and giving meaning to the texts which they consume (see Budd et al, 1990).

But these characteristics of the intersection of Film Studies and Cultural Studies in recent years must be understood as both a source of strength and *a potential source of weakness* -- a weakness which is manifest in the present vogue of "cult" -- in which a reluctance to make judgments of quality between texts and types of text has led to a reluctance to make judgments of texts and types of text on ideological grounds, and in which a reluctance to condescend to spectators and audiences has led to a fear of criticizing them. The strength-and-weakness inherent in Cultural Studies is nowhere clearer than in David Morley's important essay "Texts, Readers, Subjects", one of the first to argue for an active model of spectatorship and consumption:

A text should... not be considered in isolation from the historical conditions of its production and consumption -- its insertion into a context of discourses in struggle, in discursive formations cohering into different strands of ideology and establishing new condensations between them; also its position in the field of articulation secured between the discursive and economic/political practices. Both the text and the subject are constituted in the space of the interdiscursive; and both are traversed and intersected by contradictory discourses -- contradictions which arise not only from the subject positions which these different discourses propose, but also from the conjuncture and institutional sites in which they are articulated and transformed.

The meaning(s) of a text will also be constructed differently depending on the discourses (knowledges, prejudices, resistances) brought to bear on the text by the reader. (Morley, in Hollows et al, 2000: 276, italics in original)

Morley attempts to achieve a balance between the ideological formation of the subject epitomized by the passive-spectator model of *Screen* theory, and the self-determination of the subject as proposed by Cultural Studies. But this balance is hard to maintain. For example, in their recent anthology, *The Film Studies Reader*, the editors, Hollows, Jancovich, and Peter Hutchings, gently load the concluding paragraph of their introduction in a manner which sets a tone for the book as a whole by putting political economy in its place while asserting the relative importance of audiences:

...despite the insistence on understanding the complex relations between production, distribution, the film text and consumption, political economy has only made a limited contribution to the understanding of consumption. While political economists deal with key questions about how audiences are created for films and questions about access to the products of the cultural industries, the activities of audiences themselves are seen as relatively insignificant. Certainly, audiences are relatively powerless in relation to the cultural industries in determining what gets produced and distributed. However, control over what is produced does not necessarily equate with control over how films are consumed and how their meanings might be transformed within the contexts of lived culture. (Hollows et al, 2000: 6)

Thus *The Film Studies Reader* tends to credit consumption with intrinsic value, meaning, and power. Indeed, in the work of Mark Jancovich, this loading is not merely confined to *The Film Studies Reader* but was a growing concern in Jancovich's book-length study of 1950s science fiction film, *Rational Fears*, a study of that genre which prided itself on revising the ideologically-judgmental claims of critics such as Robin Wood that 1950s horror was "essentially reactionary... conservative Cold War narratives" (Jancovich, 1996: 2). Jancovich's study too insisted upon the right and ability of "cult" fans, and thereby film scholars, in the present day to reinterpret 1950s sci-fi for its "contemporary significance". Indeed, in his conclusion, Jancovich suggested that, despite the historicist pretensions of his book, he was actually more interested in present day cult audiences and their peculiar appropriations of the genre:

...while this book has re-examined these films within the context of their original production, there is still a pressing need to study the ways in which they are read by contemporary audiences, and the ways in which the reading strategies of contemporary 'cult' audiences are the product of the differential distribution of cultural capital and the struggles between different taste formations. (Jancovich, 1996: 304)

More recently, Jancovich, in an interesting essay on the consumption of pornography, "Naked Ambitions: Pornography, Taste and the Problem of the Middlebrow", has matched the assertion of the ultimately-determining agency of the spectator in *The Film Studies Reader* and *Rational Fears* with a dubious assertion of the contingent relationship between history, form, and meaning:

The meaning of any text is not eternally inscribed within its form but changes, as it is positioned or repositioned in different categories, as they are consumed according to different competences and dispositions. (Jancovich, 2000)

Here Jancovich seems insufficiently attentive to the potential for ahistorical relativism in this line of argument: in truth, as Fredric Jameson has admirably explained in *The Political Unconscious*, the meaning of any text *is* eternally inscribed within its form and remains there to be discovered or recovered even as time and context change, through the reconstruction of the text's original historical, social, economic, and political "conditions of possibility" (see Jameson, 1989: 4, 73, 106). But the potential for ahistorical relativism in Jancovich's argument arises out of a conviction, shared by most advocates of "cult", that the consumption of a text by an individual now is ultimately more important and valid than any effort to understand how it was consumed by society then, when it was made. This conviction underpins the recent interest among Anglophone theorists of "cult" in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a body of work too extensive to examine in detail here but which has, particularly in France, come under regular attack for its limiting and fatalistic view of the determining importance of class, and for its preoccupation with taste -- for many an essentially bourgeois fascination -- in the first place (see Bourdieu, 1984; and, for a critique of Bourdieu, Beasley-Murray, 2000: 100-119).

But if, in *Rational Fears*, Jancovich's study of 1950s sci-fi is constituted by an ambivalent tension between an interest in socio-historical context and the here-and-now consumption of the "cult" movie fan, the work of other critics goes far further in its uncomplicated valorization of "cult", and in its somewhat formalist appropriation of Bourdieu's complex political thinking. Thus, Jeffrey Sconce's understandable desire to find and valorize cultural practices outside of the mainstream leads him, in his essay "Spectacles of Death", to side unquestioningly with the teenagers who form the main target audience for films such as the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, and to defend such films and their young audiences against the condescension with which they have been generally treated by film critics and cinephiles. Sconce takes the side of the teenager against grown-up film critics and audiences to whom he refers, with varying degrees of disparagement, as "the film cognoscenti", "the 'elite' audience of critics and cinephiles", "the 'elite' movie-goer", "middle-aged film commentators" who are on the wrong side of "horror's generation gap" (Sconce, 1993: 103, 104, 106, 117). His determination to champion "trash" over the mainstream leads him to an impatience with high-minded audiences and filmmakers, including the ideology critiques developed by modernist film theory as a means of political attack upon Classical Hollywood and as the basis of the anti-illusionist practices of the avant-garde. (Sconce, 1993: 109)

For although recognizing teenage horror as escapist fantasy, as a "domain" of "dream logic", Sconce refuses to condemn or critique it and shows no interest in questioning the consumer tastes of American teenagers which underpin its success (Sconce, 1993: 113, 119). Instead, Sconce simply responds to the success of teen horror as if it were a given, using teenagers against adults in a manner which juvenilizes and makes a mockery of all film and/or critical thinking which might see itself as something other than pure irony and visual spectacle:

What rattles the cage of adult film culture, as epitomized by the movie reviewers who continually deride these films, is that the *Nightmare* series is so unabashedly devoted to pure and seemingly pointless visual stimulation. These movies have little need or regard for qualities of narrative causality, probability, and complexity, textual features that this "sophisticated" community holds so dear. Consequently, these films become targets for abuse by a film community committed to more "sober" and "realistic" filmmaking. (Sconce, 1993: 114)

Although Sconce does ask "...why [do] teenagers flock to the cinema repeatedly to watch other teenagers get sliced and diced by a menagerie of seemingly immortal psychos?", his response is not to examine the social and historical contexts in which teen horror of the *Nightmare* type has risen to popularity among teen audiences since the 1980s: not to examine the largely white, middle-class backgrounds of its audience, the affluence and ideological values of suburban society, the authoritarianism and conservatism of the Reagan-Bush America in which Freddy Krueger first arose (Sconce, 1993: 104). Instead, his response is to conclude with the vague formalist supposition that "Perhaps Freddy has enjoyed such popularity in American youth culture over the past decade because his power to combine vicious wit and visual weirdness resonates with a generation more attuned to spectacle than narrative, who prefer the spectacular over the normative." (Sconce, 1993: 118)

Although Sconce is perfectly correct to note that the horror genre does complicate simplistic characterizations of passive spectatorship and identification in cinema, and that there is something peculiarly self-conscious about the process of watching horror, he is mistaken to valorize teen horror for its self-consciousness alone: for not all self-consciousness has value. Indeed, perhaps it has value and meaning only if it is, or contains, *political* self-consciousness. But Sconce is not, finally, interested in such considerations, falling back from serious critical evaluation of teen horror in favor of a non-judgmental quip when concluding with regard to the textual meaning of the *Nightmare* films:

Does this self-reflexive model of viewership (transfixed teen sucked into mindless spectacle) force the film's viewers to assess their ideological position as teenage consumers of visual narrative in the later 20th century? Probably not. Does this scene encourage teenage viewers to identify with Freddy, even as he dedicates himself to the eventual extermination of all living teens? Perversely, the answer would seem to be yes. (Sconce, 1993: 112)

The problem with this line of argument is that it seems to contain a quiet strain of anti-intellectualism or, more precisely, a hostility to all socially- and politically-engaged theory and practice in favor of a preferred preoccupation with the taste and pleasure of the individual viewer/consumer or with the taste and pleasures of minority audiences -- particularly those who are drawn to certain film and television texts for their sensational and sensationalist qualities. For if sensation underpins the experience of horror, and if sensationalism has always been part of the appeal of "cult" movies, this characteristic saturates certain scholarly studies of the subject -- for example, Joan Hawkins' examination of horror and the avant-garde in *Cutting Edge* in which the argument hinges on an unspoken opposition between "sensation", which Hawkins champions, and intellectualism, about which Hawkins is generally skeptical or disparaging (Hawkins, 2000: 7-9).

Thus Hawkins, like Sconce, notes the recent proliferation and success of horror and horror fan culture without questioning its origins or desirability (Hawkins, 2000: 4). Indeed, remarking upon the coexistence of art cinema and horror films in mail order catalogs of "cult" movies, her response is not to examine the political economy of film and video distribution in the United States, but to argue instead that the growth of horror and its interpenetration with art cinema in the marketplace requires that "cultural analysis" (i.e. Film Studies) rework its traditional opposition of "prestige cinema (European art and avant-garde/experimental films) and popular culture" (Hawkins, 2000: 3).

Hawkins' argument that in "trash cinema", "high" and "low" culture and "high" and "low" film intersect in interesting and subversive ways, however, depends upon a resurrection of the out-of-date opposition of "high" and "low" in film and culture in the first place, a mis-identification of modernism and the avant-garde as the enemy of subversion rather than a model for it, and a formalist equation of the shock tactics of the slasher movie with the shock tactics of Dada, Surrealism, Bruce Conner, and Stan Brakhage, to name but a few. Hawkins' work, like Sconce's, relies upon a formalist equation between "trash" and modernism and a related equation between the reading practices of "trash" cinema and art cinema audiences (Hawkins makes particular reference to postwar European art cinema). But this equation can only make sense at the level of form as it depends upon a willful disregard for the social and political conditions of what used to be called "political modernism" -- a modernism which had its heyday in Europe and the US from the late 1940s to the early 1970s and which was linked throughout that period to burgeoning anti-establishment sentiment and political action, and which took the form of a wholesale and calculated reworking of the motifs and icons of official and popular culture in order to question the fundamental principles of consumer capitalism, the military-industrial complex, and bourgeois domesticity. What Hawkins, borrowing Sconce's term, calls "paracinema", on the other hand, is a term which brings together a hugely diverse and disparate range of films from all over the world, from all sorts of production and distribution contexts, with all sorts of textual qualities, simply by virtue of their consumption as "cult" objects, with no sense of connection to any larger social base.

To be fair, Hawkins does acknowledge that "horror, porn, exploitation, horrific sci-fi, or thrillers", on the one hand, and art or experimental cinema such as Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (1965) or Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), on the other, "use sensational material differently": the former simply for visual gross-out effect and shock, the latter with higher artistic or intellectual intent (Hawkins, 2000: 6). But Hawkins, in a manner similar to Sconce, is careful to distance herself from such arguments as Linda Williams', which value the latter over the former (see Williams, 1995: 144). Instead, Hawkins explains that Watkins' and Brakhage's films are "deemed", though presumably not by Hawkins herself, "to have a higher cultural purpose, and certainly a different artistic intent from low-genre blood-and-gore fests" in much the same way that the works of the Marquis de Sade, which, though found in adult bookstores, are nonetheless viewed by "the intellectual elite" as "the masterful analyses of the mechanisms of power and economics" (Hawkins, 2000: 6).

Thus Hawkins shares with Sconce a hostility to the "cinema elite" and a preference for "paracinema fans" (Hawkins, 2000: 7, after Sconce, 1995: 381). But this preference for the fan is built upon an overestimation of consumption as a potential source of opposition in contemporary culture and society as in Sconce's idea of paracinema as "a particular reading protocol" (Sconce, 1995: 372). In the desire to be democratic, it thus tends to disarm any possible critique of, or attack upon, the "cult" movie fan, or upon the "cult" phenomenon as a social symptom, opening the way to a replacement of critique by market-led scholarship -- if the market does it, academic scholarship must follow and must take it seriously.

In this sense, although Hawkins is right to characterize much "paracinema" as different from the mainstream, as addressing a need for something outside Hollywood, and although her argument throughout purports to champion the marginal and the different, her interest in marginality and difference is of a specific kind: not, for example, the championing of marginality or difference which underpins David James' examination, in *Allegories of Cinema*, of oppressed social constituencies and their representation by, and role in, 1960s

American independent and underground film (James, 1989); nor the championing of marginality and difference which underpins Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's surveying, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, of the filmmaking of formerly- and still-oppressed postcolonial peoples (Shohat and Stam, 1994). Rather, Hawkins' notion of difference and marginality is based upon a misguided belief that "difference" can be constituted within Western popular culture today through consumption and that the difference constituted thereby can provide an "opposition" or "subversion" of that dominant culture.

But, of course, it can't. As David Harvey has persuasively argued, difference from dominant culture, in the context of the onward march and totalizing tendencies of postmodernity, is not the same as resistance to it:

Cultural production, both high and low, both supportive and critical of capitalist values, has now become so commodified that it is thoroughly implicated in systems of monetary evaluation and circulation. Under such conditions, the varieties of cultural output are no different from the varieties of Benetton's colors or the famous 57 varieties that Heinz long ago pioneered. Furthermore, all oppositional culture (and there is plenty of it) still has to be expressed in this commodified mode, thus limiting the powers of oppositional movements in important ways. (Harvey, 1990: 84; see also Shiel, 2001; McChesney, 1999)

In this somewhat bleak context, the contrast with the cinemas examined by James, Shohat, and Stam, highlights "cult" as a political and intellectual dead-end in which identity is constituted by consumption in the free market, rather than through production in defiance of it. No better metaphor for this dead-end could be wished for than that inadvertently provided by Hawkins herself in her equation of the peculiar, self-absorbed, obsessive, transgressive, appeal of "cult" to its devotees and the attraction of narcotics to the addict: "As with drug culture, the closer you get to the source... the purer and more unadulterated the goods, the better the high." (Hawkins, 2000: 49) As the analogy suggests, the valorization of difference provided through notions of "cult", "paracinema", or "trash", offers no real alternative social or cinematic model, only the illusion of difference from the mainstream. Far from destabilizing the bleak picture of postmodernity outlined by Harvey, the notion of "cult" speaks only of a film culture and academic tendency unable any longer to imagine real alternatives to the status quo. As such, it is a sign of a weak response to the cultural, political and cinematic challenges of our times, and is particularly significant of receding horizons of political possibility in postmodernity since the end of the 1960s.

## **Film culture in the 1960s**

In contrast to the situation today -- a situation of which the vogue for "cult" may be understood as a symptom -- much film culture in the 1960s was underpinned by two central recognitions. Firstly, it was widely recognized that film was a socially and politically meaningful and effective cultural form deeply involved -- through its production, distribution, exhibition, and reception -- in "real life", at a time of particularly acute social and political division and conflict in the United States, Europe, and most of the so-called "Third World", in relation to which, both the making and the watching of films were a matter not only of pleasure but of responsibility (Cohn et al, 1969; Newsweek, 1970; Ryan and Kellner, 1988: 17-48; Siegal, 2003). Secondly, it was widely recognized by those filmmakers, critics, and audiences who shared in the sense of crisis of the era that individual and collective power in a



time of great social change did not reside in consumption (for it was partly in reaction to the newly-ascendant consumer economy of the post-WWII period that dissent arose in the first place), but that power depended upon production, upon productive creativity, upon physical action. This valorization of production over consumption, characteristic of progressive and radical social, political, and cultural practice in the 1960s generally, was particularly clear in underground political or avant-gardist filmmaking, whose energy in the 1960s was driven by the conviction that in a consumer economy, and in a pleasure-oriented film economy, any sense of power conferred by consumption is little more than an illusion; that it is production which confers real power, not only because production generates profit where consumption does not, but because true ideological struggle or subversion can only take place where a social group -- David James discusses disaffected youth, urban black Americans, women, gays, Latino/as -- takes control, directly or indirectly, of production of its own films and filmic meanings (James, 1989: 174).

These two recognitions, though manifesting themselves in different ways and to different degrees here and there, informed a diverse range of film culture during the 1960s, including European art cinema, US underground film, Third World film, and even (eventually and in a milder form) industrial filmmaking in the US, of both the exploitation and mainstream Hollywood varieties. Unfortunately, however, in the prevailing social and political climate of the present-day, and as we become increasingly distant in time from the crucial historical moment of the 1960s, such a recognition is increasingly absent from the making and watching of motion pictures, and from academic discourse about them.

### **An alternative methodology**

In particular, "cult" movie criticism such as that by Sconce and Hawkins involves an implicit or explicit valorization of, or affection for, the status of "cult" in itself, which is directly opposed to the recognition which informed most film culture in the 1960s that filmmaking should aim to achieve some meaningful connection to an outward-looking wide social base (rather than a minority of inward-looking devotees) -- that is, that every good film should want to be seen, to reach the largest possible audience, to communicate to the greatest number, not to be "cult" but to be popular, widespread, even to affect and change mainstream culture -- and to possess some philosophical, social and political depth in the here-and-now.

The critical approach best equipped to appreciate cinema in this sense is a historical-materialist one which values movies in terms of their social and political meaning and effectivity first and foremost, relating them to their historically-specifiable conditions of possibility rather than divorcing them as objects of curiosity for the "cult" movie fan or critic. As Fredric Jameson has convincingly demonstrated in relation to all sorts of cultural production, this "political interpretation" of culture as part of an ongoing historical process provides "the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretation" (Jameson, 1989: 17). This is in contrast to the long-established school of film history scholarship in Film Studies represented by such key figures as Tino Balio, Douglas Gomery, Tom Doherty, Richard Maltby, and Thomas Schatz, which, though invaluable in seeking to recapture and understand the original circumstances in which films were produced, distributed, exhibited, and consumed, has not tended to be politically- or ideologically-oriented to a view of history as dialectical struggle (see, for example, Balio, 1976, 1985, 1990; Gomery, 1986; Doherty, 1988; Maltby, 1996; Schatz, 1988). Rather, in a historical-materialist mode of film study, all movies, including "cult" movies, exist within culture as "a whole way of life", to use Raymond Williams' celebrated phrase, "a whole way of life" encompassing a wide range of

activities and records of the past and present understood as material practices which articulate values and participate in the maintenance, modification, or subversion of systems of power (Williams, 1992: 57-70).

Williams, of course, insists on an understanding of culture as lived reality rather than passive reflection, and as the articulation of transcommunally-experienced "structures of feeling" (Williams, 1992: 128). His cultural analysis, like Jameson's though in different ways, emphasizes the dynamic inter-relatedness of all "walks of life" against the compartmentalizing and privatizing tendencies of late capitalism, and attempts to meaningfully relate culture -- including films -- to the rest of the whole social process of which it is but one constituent part. And it is in and through their participation and implication in the "whole and connected social material process" we call "culture", rather than apart or separate from it, that all movies, including "cult movies", find their true meaning (Williams, 1992: 140). It is in their participation in the broad, complex and dynamic processes and activities of culture that all movies reveal their true richness and value as texts deserving admiration and/or critical analysis.

This critical approach to films in terms of their political meaning and effectivity first and foremost, recognizes that the true value of any given motion picture, of motion pictures as a whole, and of the analysis of motion pictures as an intellectual pursuit (i.e. Film Studies) ought to lie in their connection to and engagement with films' historically-specifiable conditions of production, distribution and exhibition -- their connection to a social base, or to a full, overdetermined (in the structuralist sense) social, political, cultural and economic context -- rather than in their fetishistic separation or "reification" from their social base and these multiple contexts (see Althusser, 1990: 256; Jameson, 1992a: 212; Jameson, 1993: 413). This is surely one of the particular strengths of the examination of low-budget and underground American film in James' *Allegories of Cinema*, in which much supposedly "cult" film of the 1960s is situated in terms of the rich, varied, and large-scale social and political contexts of the period, thereby endowing these films and filmmakers with continued relevance and agency, but without using the term "cult" once (James, 1989).

## **1960s biker movies in social and political context**

If "cult" is not a particularly useful term in the analysis or description of movies in general, it is particularly unhelpful when used in relation to cultural production and consumption in such a socially, politically and culturally fractious and violent era as the 1960s. In that unusual decade, we can identify in remarkably clear ways an integral relationship between the social and political crises of the United States during the Vietnam era and the structural, ideological crisis of Hollywood cinema, which had been building to a peak since soon after World War Two and which would not settle down until the later 1970s with the consolidation of what Robin Wood has famously called "the Spielberg-Lucas syndrome" (Wood, 1986: 162-88). As studies of the political economy of Hollywood by Tino Balio and Janet Wasko have shown, what was at stake for Hollywood in that watershed period was its transformation from a centralized production-driven rigid oligopoly to a globalized distribution-driven flexible oligopoly, or what David Harvey or Fredric Jameson might describe as the transition of the Hollywood economy from a "modern" to a "post-modern" production regime (Balio, 1976, 1985, 1990; Wasko, 1982, 1994; Jameson, 1989: 85; Jameson, 1992b: 155-62; Harvey, 1990: 121-200).

As part of this crisis, one of the notable areas of opportunistic expansion which fed off the misfortune of the mainstream Hollywood industry at the time was in low-budget independent film culture -- particularly, the expansion of the so-called "exploitation" sector. This sector came to influence, and emerged into, the mainstream, as an extension in the commercial arena of the anti-hegemonic subversion of the institutions of the dominant capitalist order by the radical political, social, and cultural agendas of the day (New Left, counterculture, Black Power, feminism, gay rights, etc.). This process became particularly visible from the mid-1960s, when the "exploitation" sector shifted from the light-hearted fantasy of the beach party movie or the mild anxiety of the monster-horror, to the defiant and aggressive attitude of the biker movie. Biker movies -- for example, those by Roger Corman, such as *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip*, and by Richard Rush, such as *Hell's Angels on Wheels*, *The Savage Seven*, and *Psych-Out* -- were central to the infiltration of Hollywood's dominant thematic, formal, and industrial procedures by the new discourses and aesthetics of a mass population of radicalized youth (in the US and internationally), and signified a shift in the later 1960s towards a new sense of political self-importance and self-righteousness which is easily forgotten today.

Indeed, important filmmakers who played key roles in the independent, low-budget, supposedly "cult", cinema of the 1960s -- figures such as Roger Corman, Peter Fonda, and Laszlo Kovacs -- all viewed filmmaking as a serious business, particularly given the turbulent social and political changes and conflicts of the day. As they explained then, and as they have explained since, in numerous interviews (including interviews with the author carried out in 1996 and 1997), they made their films for what seemed to them then and still seem to them now important reasons -- as, according to Kovacs, "political statements" in an era far less comfortable than our own when the stakes, so to speak, in filmmaking as in other areas of culture and politics, seemed very high (see Appendix 2).

Corman, for example, moved further and further to the left politically through the 1960s, attempting to achieve in film after film, from *The Wild Angels* to *The Trip* to *Gas-s-s-s* (1970), the right balance of irony and humour, on the one hand, and political commitment and earnestness, on the other:

I place a very high value on earnestness and moral sincerity, but that does not mean that each film itself is necessarily very... morally obvious. You can do a satirical picture, you can do a comedy, you can do a musical. As a matter of fact, I think it's best that the film not be overly earnest on the surface.  
(Interview with the author, 1 December 1996)

Indeed, Corman, though now remembered primarily as a producer of "trash" cinema, had already used his success as an exploitation filmmaker to make occasional personal, politically-meaningful films such as the anti-racist *The Intruder* (1961) a tendency which continues to this day, as Andrew Wills has recently explained with reference to the political content of Corman-produced martial arts films such as *Forced to Fight* (1991) (Levy, 1967; Wills, 2000; Clarke, 1989; Corman, 1989). Corman was proud of the manner in which films such as *The Trip* and *The Wild Angels* managed to articulate a sense of foreboding darkness characteristic of the US in the late 1960s (Diehl, 1970: 29). In his career as a filmmaker, he had long been wary of the creative and ideological restrictions inherent in institutionalized, corporate working environments -- considerations which had prompted his move to the independent sector from 20th Century-Fox in the mid-1950s. Indeed, these considerations eventually prompted his departure from American International Pictures (AIP) to his own company, New World, in 1970, in part due to political disagreements with the company's

directors, Sam Arkoff and James Nicholson, brought to a head by the killing of four students by the National Guard at Kent State University in Ohio, and in part in reaction to AIP's turn to larger budgets and its stock-market flotation as a public company (interview with the author, 1 December 1996; see also Shiel, 1999: 64, 69). There he would also establish an important role as a distributor of European art cinema in the US (Davidson, 1975).

Thus, low budgets were not simply a neutral fact of the exploitation industry for Corman, but allowed him, and other exploitation filmmakers, to achieve a particular topicality and cutting-edge social relevance which the mainstream industry could not match (but which it soon tried to emulate). Corman articulated this logic at the time through a provocative comparison of the relationship between Hollywood and low-budget filmmaking to that between the US military and the Vietcong:

the independent filmmaker [in the 1960s] was a little bit like the guerrilla fighter -- he could move fast and flexibly and react immediately to the change in circumstances -- whereas a large army was like a large studio that had to have a bureaucracy to keep it all together and that would slow down its response time..... (interview with the author, 1 December 1996; also Diehl, 1970: 28)

The economic realities of the low-budget sector, which had their downside in the allegedly tacky production values of exploitation cinema, thus became a positive advantage to the socially-committed filmmaker in a time of social and political urgency.

For although the broad thrust of their politics was center-left reformism rather than Maoist revolution, Corman, Kovacs, and Fonda made films in the 1960s, as they recall it, for society -- films which, they hoped, might have some sort of positive social impact upon as wide a range of people as possible, even when they knew well that the films they made might not reach massive audiences due to the particular industrial and market constraints of the low-budget film sector, its restricted distribution circuit, and its low production values. Kovacs, who fled from Hungary when it was invaded by Soviet troops in 1956, spent ten years in LA working his way up in the low-budget film industry, always thinking of the Hollywood establishment as an apparently impenetrable "fort", the citadel of two concentric but separate film systems, which, he hoped, low-budget filmmakers might one day break into and change. This was precisely part of the special achievement of *Easy Rider* for Fonda and Kovacs, that it was a biker movie, a low-budget or marginal product which, now famously, managed to break free of its low-budget constraints, to reach a mass rather than a "cult" audience and, possibly, even to play some minor positive role in social change.

It was with this sense of radical hope that Dennis Hopper, in particular, saw himself as an antagonist outsider assaulting Hollywood through both *Easy Rider* and his subsequent feature *The Last Movie* (1971). Hopper recounted the early stages of the *Easy Rider* project for *Esquire* magazine in September 1970, remembering

...sitting with this civil rights activist who told us that Black Power is in, that's it all over for whitey, man... and driving out to the airport in LA. to start the trip and saying [to Peter Fonda], "We've gotta save the movie industry, man. We gotta save it, or it's all over for the movies!" Do you dig, man? For fifteen years, I had been telling the movie studios it was all over for them. "You are

dying, man!", I shouted, and they laughed at me! (Burke, 1970: 139; see also Nolan, 1970)

Indeed, it was this hope for an engaged countercultural cinema which fuelled the rise to prominence of the key independent production company BBS which flourished from 1968 to 1973, not only thanks to the success of *Easy Rider*, but with low budget films such as *Head* (1968), *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), and *Drive, He Said* (1971), all generally distinguished, according to one critic, by nothing so much as their "overall despair" with America in the Nixon era (Cohen, 1973: 21).

Of course, *Easy Rider*, while continuing the thematic and formal codes of the low budget biker movie, and indeed convincing mainstream Hollywood of the virtues of low budgets generally, immediately became emblematic of the acute cultural and social crisis of the day, appearing to strike the right note of grave concern for the future of the US as a nation, as Mitchell S. Cohen acknowledged in *Take One*:

*Easy Rider* takes the entire idea of America to task... the source of their Americanism is that the social temperament of the times and BBS films share a common pulse point... the creative minds are in contact with the spirit of the country; they feel the [Vietnam] War without, with scarce exception, making mention of it. The American Condition is under close scrutiny. Death comes unexpectedly or with cruel calculation, claustrophobia is ever present and the need to "get out" is pervasive. (Cohen, 1973: 20; see also Costello, 1972)

Even today, neither Laszlo Kovacs nor Peter Fonda can talk about the production of *Easy Rider* in the summer of 1968 without clearly remembering the assassination of liberal America's last great hope, Robert Kennedy, live on TV, while Fonda was smoking a joint in the bath in the room of his motel where cast and crew were staying for the night just outside of Wichita, Texas. Fonda recalls Dennis Hopper bursting into his room, exclaiming that Kennedy's death would turn out to be "the beginning of the end of the beginning", while Kovacs remembers the major emotional and philosophical effect of Kennedy's death on the cast and crew, even prompting some suggestions that they might stop altogether or take a break from filming.

In the light of these high stakes and the sense of urgency which dominated then, Kovacs and Fonda bemoan the relative social and political conservatism which has dominated since the 1960s. Fonda, for example, while still admiring the energy and dynamism of the New Left, Black Panther Party, and emerging environmental movement of that era, now acknowledges the frequent naïveté and self-indulgence of hippie escapism of which, he admits, *Easy Rider* was insufficiently critical in its representation of the hippie commune:

Even though I felt that the alternative lifestyle of dropping out and going into a commune was wrong, my feeling that it was wrong was not because of what they were up to -- in other words making their own soil and their own food and so forth -- but because I thought that there was so much to do that none of us could afford to drop out... [There was] so much that had to be done on the planet now -- even back in 1967 -- so much had to be done in order to just have this planet last a normal lifetime rather than get polluted out of existence by something that thinks it's civilized, that being society and humankind. (Fonda, interview with the author, 8 March 1997; Shiel, 1999: 125)

Having taken part in numerous antiwar marches and sit-ins in Washington, DC and LA, Fonda found the 1970s particularly disillusioning as the right became "more and more entrenched" in US politics, while he, like many other filmmakers in that reactionary era, became the subject of police and FBI harassment (Linderman, 1970: 278).

Today, Kovacs and Fonda lament the accompanying obscurity of most of the films they made in that era, and the degree to which even *Easy Rider* is now viewed mostly as dated, as a thing of the past. For Kovacs, the loss or relegation to relative obscurity of their low-budget, independent work of the 60s, its relative minority interest in the present, the difficulty even of finding video copies or prints, is a "tragedy", a sign of not altogether positive social and cultural change -- not something to be celebrated but something to lament (Kovacs, interview with the author, 20 November 1996). For Fonda it is a symptom of the fact that "the society that we were trying to change assimilated us, and that was the end of it." (Fonda, interview with the author, 8 March 1997)

As the politics-with-entertainment bargain at the heart of the biker movie suggests, then, whatever the intentions of the filmmakers, the intended politics of such films were to a certain extent "compromised" by the complex ways in which different audiences consumed them in the 1960s in the first place. Even in the 1960s, these films were consumed, no doubt, in various subtly different ways by different viewers -- with greater or lesser degrees of irony, mirth, or moral sincerity. No doubt some viewers focused on the biker movie's boisterous horseplay, fistfights, drinking, dope-smoking, and brash freeway-cruising, while others focused on its representation of the hostile police, the antipathy of "hardhat" workers, the emptiness of bourgeois domesticity, the repressiveness of "square" married life, and the superficiality of consumer capitalism. But in this, the politics of these films were not "compromised" as much as they were constituted in the first place by a pragmatic recognition (arguably a misguided logic, in retrospect, given the end of the 1960s in something less than all-out revolution) of the need to balance politics and entertainment. This need, to which Corman in particular has always been committed, did not always work out in favor of political integrity: Peter Fonda, for example, has readily acknowledged that, despite the political and artistic integrity of filmmakers in the low-budget sector, prior to *Easy Rider*, "I had just about had it with making American movies" (Linderman, 1970: 86), particularly after executives at AIP found the psychedelic experimentation of *The Trip* excessive and required it to be extensively re-edited with a view to popular appeal (Junker, 1971).

But to acknowledge this essential compromise at the heart of the biker movie is simply to recognize that the biker movie does not have the forthright political intent of New York Newsreel or Bruce Conner or Costa-Gavras -- it is not to admit that it has no intense and earnest political intent at all. In the event, the narrative closure of most biker movies was shot through with a strong sense of social malaise and despondency which copper-fastened the intended meaning of the text in the direction of deeper political and social resonance: certainly in the famous double-death of Wyatt and Billy which rounds off *Easy Rider*, but also in the anomie of the spiritually-desolate biker Dave (Bruce Dern) on the beach at the end of *Rebel Rousers* (1970) the tragic deaths of Steve (Dern) and Dave (Dean Stockwell) in a street full of flames at the end of *Psych-Out*, and the pointless death of Buddy (Adam Roarke) on his exploding motorcycle at the end of *Hell's Angels on Wheels*.

The downside of this equation, which we can see in retrospect now but which filmmakers cannot be expected to have foreseen then, is that to the extent to which they left any ambiguity in their characterization of politics and escapism, many 1960s movies left the route

open to their own misappropriation as "cult", their own limitation to "cult" status, in later years. Roger Corman has acknowledged as much in relation to *Gas-s-s-s* (1970), a film which he now regrets for its inappropriate spoof of Sixties political activism, while *Easy Rider* has to a certain extent been reduced by its own twentieth and thirtieth anniversaries from a politically-charged prediction of Armageddon to a universalist ode to the mythical freedom-loving renegade on the open road -- a development reinforced by Dennis Hopper's own appearance *à la Easy Rider* in commercials for the Ford Cougar (Barth and Ellis, 1989).

## Leaving behind the notion of "cult" movies

But this process of dehistoricization or misappropriation, which is entirely commensurate with the neoliberal desire to forget the 1960s, to erase them from history, is not something we should give in to -- it is something we should resist. And this resistance will never be effected through the category of "cult". To call these movies "cult" is to do an injustice to them, their filmmakers, and the real issues and audiences of their day (and *today*), and to the notion of a socially- and politically-meaningful Film Studies practice. For if the term "cult" arises out of a positive sense of the need to "lay claim to" or "reclaim" certain films by "cult" audiences for their contemporary relevance, this process typically involves an act of recontextualization of the film in terms of the subjective viewing pleasure of this or that constituency or micro-constituency in the "here and now" which is often dependent, in turn, upon a not so positive *decontextualization* of the film from the social and historical contexts in which it was originally conceived, produced and consumed "then and there". This dehistoricization is evident not only in the work of Sconce and Hawkins examined earlier in this essay. It can be found in Ian Hunter and Heidi Kaye's edited volume *Trash Aesthetics* which brings together a range of close readings of "cult" texts and audiences with little sense of historical context other than regular deployment of the notion of the "postmodern", and in certain contributions to that volume such as Roberta Pearson's intricate investigation of the less-than-socially-urgent issue of internet discussion groups devoted to Sherlock Holmes (Hunter and Kaye, 1997: 1-10; Pearson, 1997). Or, closer to the biker movie, it can be found in Andrew Caine's examination of the "cult" status of AIP beach party movies which, though admirably detailed in its understanding of their reception by British audiences in the 1960s, almost wholly evades discussion of the actual social, political, and economic history of what Mike Davis refers to as the "Endless Summer" enjoyed by Southern California in the late 1950s and early 1960s, an era defined by a peculiar level of white middle class youth privilege before the explosion of the Watts riots in 1965, and the collapse of US inner cities in an abyss of social deprivation and violence through the following two decades (Caine, 2001; Davis, 1992: 67).

Ian Hunter and Heidi Kaye, to their credit, do acknowledge the recent growth of scholarly interest in "cult" as, at least in part, a reaction to conservative criticism of the tolerance of popular culture which Cultural Studies and Media Studies have long displayed. In response to such criticism, as Hunter and Kaye explain, certain academics have moved defiantly to a more and more resolute focus upon culture as far from the mainstream as possible, and to a skepticism of academic knowledge *tout court*. But Hunter and Kaye stop well short of acknowledging the true meaning of this response as an over-reaction, guaranteed to produce a result entirely in keeping with the ideological agenda of conservative critics in the first place: that is, in the further privatization, political disengagement, and self-incrimination of academic discourse and popular culture itself.

A much better balance between the text and its contexts -- particularly the context of history - is provided by Jameson's insistence that to understand the social and political meaning of a

text to "them" in the "then-and-there" of its original circumstances is, simultaneously, to understand its meaning to "us" in the "here-and-now", today:

...only a genuine philosophy of history is capable of respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day. (Jameson, 1989: 18)

Thus, while perhaps understandable at a superficial level, one of the key signs and appeals of the "cult" movie for many of its admirers -- that is, its datedness, its belonging to another era -- may similarly tend to impoverish rather than enrich understanding of a film in the long run, to preclude recognition of its historically-specifiable meanings, its possible meanings and relevance in the present, and the connectedness of the past to the present. In this respect, the concept of "cult" appears as an accomplice in the commodification of entire historical periods by consumer culture from the rehashing of the 1960s as an era of depoliticized hedonistic craziness and psychedelic style (*The Brady Bunch Movie* [1995], *Austin Powers* [1997- ) to the rose-tinted re-imagining of the 1950s as an essentially happy era of grand autos, pop music and fast food (*American Graffiti* [1973], *Happy Days* [1974-1984], *Peggy Sue Got Married* [1986]) -- a regressive development Jameson explains in terms of the rise of the "nostalgia film" in American cinema since the 1970s (Jameson, 1992b: 217-29).

But, of course, one of the assumptions made by "cult" fans and many scholars of "cult" movies is that movies are first and foremost there for the enjoyment of the individual, in any case -- the fulfillment of the self, for its "solipsistic pleasure" as Ian Hunter has phrased it (Hunter, 2000: 151). It is surely not incidental that it has become an increasingly common practice in recent years for scholars to include their own first-person recollection and anecdote in their discussions of the relationship between viewers/audiences and the filmic text (for examples, see Sconce, 1993: 104, Hawkins, 2000: 206, 211, 212) -- a tendency which, although it positively acknowledges the implication of the critic in the viewing practices and responses of the fan, threatens to replace the totalizing tendencies of mass media scholarship with an equally unhelpful atomization of the social into so many monadic individual viewers, and to copper-fasten the privatization of viewing experience characteristic of the present postmodern environment with the privatization of criticism itself. This privatized critical practice, in turn, leads down a one-way street to the solipsistic fascination of the "cult" movie fan with the incidental details of particular films, productions, and personalities -- rather than with context, with history, with theory, or with politics.

It is in this sense that, as alleged at the outset of this essay, the valorization of "cult" is symptomatic both of an unfortunate contemporary over-attachment to micro-identity politics, and of disaffection in an era of relative political conservatism and quiescence when a broad-based and inclusive mass culture of resistance no longer seems imaginable. Indeed, it seems perfectly appropriate that the decade most affectionately esteemed by fans of "cult" -- thanks to Ed Wood and Roswell, New Mexico one might almost call it the spiritual home of "cult" -- has long been the 1950s, another decade of relative political conservatism and quiescence, immediately preceding the rise of a socially- and politically-driven social movement and film culture in the 1960s.

Raymond Williams long ago warned us, of course, that in the ongoing dialectical interaction of dominant, residual and emergent elements in late capitalist culture and society, oppositional social and cultural practices tend always to be selectively incorporated (that is,



remembered or forgotten) "in the interest of the dominance of a specific class", although typically only in the form of the commodifiable trappings or "facsimiles" of oppositional movements rather than their political and ideological values and positions (Williams, 1990: 116, 126). "Cult" movie fandom, and much "cult" movie criticism, is complicit in, and facilitating, this process in so far as it fails to resist, tolerates, or endorses the commodification, dehistoricization and de-socialization of the cultural objects it values or examines. This is not only because, as Eileen R. Meehan has demonstrated in relation to the merchandising phenomenon of *Batman*, the devotion of the cult film fan and film memorabilia collector is very much in keeping with the needs of corporate capitalism in today's consumer economy, but also because the rewriting of popular cultural history by "cult" criticism to continuously re-include the marginal and/or subcultural is of little ultimate value if it does not work towards an understanding of all movies, including "cult", in terms of the dialogics of social classes, against the commodifying logic of the Hollywood cinema (Meehan, 1991).

This should be our greatest fear: that "cult" movie criticism may operate *de facto* as an unwitting accomplice to the neo-liberal hegemony of the "free market" and its rather narrow range of ideological possibilities, in relation to which "cult" movie criticism seems part of a more general complacency in much Film Studies today -- a complacency one sometimes also discerns, for example, in the various "apologias" for ideologically regressive high concept cinema put forward in recent years by critics such as Peter Kramer (Kramer, 1998; Kramer, 2001). But against such tendencies, one can happily identify rich seams of critical enquiry which remain to be pursued and key works which open them up, not only such as those by David James, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam cited above but also, for example, Robert Corber's integration of spectatorship theory and queer studies with the historical analysis of Hitchcock and American ideology in *In the Name of National Security*; John Orr's identification in *Contemporary Cinema* of diverse non-Western cinemas and the exciting new directions they map out for the medium in the twenty-first century; and the thorough and committed study of Hollywood's frightening dominance and persistence offered by Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell in *Global Hollywood* (Corber, 1993; Orr, 1998; Miller et al, 2001).

These lines of investigation bring Film Studies in enabling and engaging directions, avoiding massifying and totalizing views of consumption but not surrendering to the privatization of viewing and thought which dominates the current historical moment; acknowledging a certain disillusion with intellectual modernism and the avant-gardes of the past but not kowtowing to the sensationalism of "cult". As such these works (and there are many others), offer a route around the critical huis clos promised by the notion of "cult" to a film and film-critical culture that is broadly rather than narrowly affirmative, which seeks to marshal both viewing and thought in the name of political effectivity and meaning, and which allows Film Studies to develop as a positive response to the cultural, political and cinematic challenges of our times rather than as a negative symptom.

## **Appendices:**

Appendix 1: It is important to note that the reappropriation effected by "cult" movie audiences is not monolithic. For example, although for some audiences, old mainstream films are reappropriated today for present-day meanings (for example, gay and lesbian re-readings of Howard Hawks films), not all films are subject to reappropriation as such: for the majority of audiences, old popular mainstream films (the classical texts of Hollywood's golden age, in

particular) are not so much "reappropriated" as endlessly 'reconsumed' in nostalgic terms, more in keeping with the manner in which they were intended to be consumed in the first place. For example, see, respectively, Doty, 1993; and Stacey, 1991.

Appendix 2: In the fall of 1996 and the spring of 1997, the author carried out in-person interviews in Los Angeles with Roger Corman (1/12/96), Peter Fonda (8/3/97), Laszlo Kovacs (20/11/1996), and other prominent filmmakers of the 1960s and 70s, as part of primary research for his PhD thesis for the British Film Institute/University of London, entitled "Radical Agendas and the Politics of Space in American Cinema, 1968-1974" (1999). The manuscript is currently being revised for publication. All interviews were primarily interested in the impact of the socio-political conflicts of the 1960s (especially the radical politics of the New Left, the Black Panther Party, and the women's movement) upon the Hollywood film industry and its formal and thematic representational strategies, particularly as articulated in the road movie genre.

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