

## After Midnight

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In his/her activity, the interlocutor displays not only a great promptitude, but also an authentic desire of adhesion, an availability to involvement, a willingness for co-responsibility. . . . Such a description brings us back, undoubtedly, to a circular model, since it emphasizes the viewer's contribution to the construction of the sense of the discourse, without forgetting the contribution of the discourse to the construction of the viewer. . . . A text is never given *per se*, but always directed toward others (in search of a mirror wherein to fix its own image); . . . a text is never given once and for all, but always bound to be reformulated.

—Francesco Casetti, "Looking for the Spectator"

I go walkin' / After midnight / Out in the moonlight / Just hoping you may be / Somewhere a-walkin' / After midnight / Searching for me.

—Don Hecht and Alan Block (performed by Patsy Cline)

**T**he cult film has most often been defined in two ways: as any picture that is seen repeatedly by a devoted audience, and as a deviant or radically different picture, embraced by a deviant audience. A film like *Casablanca* fits the first definition just fine, although a film as different as *High Sierra* would fit it just as well, while *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* clearly fits the second. Either way, the cult film can be defined primarily in terms of its acceptance: it is a movie with a following.

The property of being a cult film, whatever that turns out to be, is not necessarily inherent in *Casablanca*, which is basically a romantic political melodrama that happens to have been elevated to cult status. But it is an inherent property of a film like *Evil Dead II*, which has been designed to please a cult audience, ignoring the Milquetoasts who would never enjoy or understand it anyway, and which has been identified in the journal

*Cinefantastique* (June 1987) specifically as a "cult horror film . . . obviously made by and for fans of the genre" (114).

There are, then, at least two broad categories of the cult film, both of which invite us to go out walking after midnight. The first might be called inadvertent, the second programmatic. An inadvertent cult film, like *Casablanca*, may well be a straightforward, conservative, unself-conscious studio picture that appeals to an audience without threatening or redefining its values in the slightest. There is nothing in *Casablanca* that would offend the mainstream. It is dead-center, gung-ho mainstream, and no one has ever been able to imitate it. But a programmatic cult film, such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre 2*, sets out to be a cult film and often makes its appeal in terms of (or in terms of violating) shared values. It is, more often than not, well outside the mainstream ideology and represents a disruptive rather than a conservative force.

The basis of its disruptive strategy is exuberance. Rather than a lecture, the programmatic cult film gives intense pleasure (which may, of course, be a postmodern lecture tactic, a self-conscious deconstruction of the playground of signification). When these films have a political subject, they may use style to transfigure it or genre to rethink it, but theirs will usually be the direct, unyielding statements, the ones with power. We might compare, for example, the "best" American film on the psychological problems of the Vietnam veteran, the muddled and sophomoric *The Deer Hunter*, with the cult horror film *Death Dream*, in which the vet comes home to mother, even though he's dead (perhaps this is his dream as he dies in Vietnam, haunted by his promise to return). Cult films offer and glory in such otherness—in extreme spectacles of rebellion (*Rock 'n' Roll High School*), wacko power (*Rocky Horror*), wacko banality (*Glen or Glenda*, *True Stories*), melancholy (*Eraserhead*), difference (*Freaks*, *Chained for Life*), nostalgia for symbolism (*Black Orpheus*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Phantom of the Paradise*), nostalgia for simplicity (*King of Hearts*, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*), relentless satire (*Putney Swope*, *The King of Comedy*), the power of style (*The Road Warrior*), unglamorized violence (*The Last House on the Left*), ghoulish art (both of the *Texas Chain Saw* films), bourgeois apocalypse (*The Hills Have Eyes*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*). Such films offer unifying visions for an alienated audience, uncompromised celebrations of an other integrity.

The *High Sierra* audience is clearly not the same kind of community as the *Rocky Horror* crowd, even if members of both might get a kick out of *Repo Man*. And neither group quite evokes the darker connotations of the word "cult" as do those who line up for the latest satanic horror film. Yet what all of these audiences share is the satisfaction of appreciating an un-

usually rewarding picture, a certain degree of group identification, and, I believe, a sense of being somehow validated by the film, as if it acknowledged their values, knew they were out there watching and listening, and had somehow especially invited them to its party.

Taking my cue from the Italian narratologist Francesco Casetti—who has eloquently investigated the ways that movies make room for, chart a path for, and intimately address their audience, an “I and Thou” relationship that guides us through the inferno, the labyrinth, the joyride, the game plan of the movie—I should like to suggest that the cult film offers the most radical example, within the context of the commercial/narrative cinema, of both the commercial potential and the rhetoric of direct address. These are films with which we, as solitary or united members of the audience, feel we have a relationship. In the case of oldies like *Casablanca*, it is because we have enjoyed and allowed ourselves to feel open to them for so long; in the case of oddities like *Eraserhead* or *Liquid Sky*, it is perhaps because we made them hits, or perhaps because we found there the mirrors for which we were searching, the mirrorings of our buried concerns, our true self-images, and the outrageous projections of nightmare, of rebellion, or of style: a vision that, if not literally ours, still clicked with or spoke to ours. If the normal audience—and, even more so, the cult audience—feels “an authentic desire of adhesion, an availability to involvement” (28), as Casetti puts it, surely a film like *Rocky Horror*, built to fulfill those desires, must be considered a privileged text, a gold mine for the study of the rhetoric of second-person film, the film that says “you” when it means “us.”

Most such direct-address or second-person films have been of two types: propaganda and follow-the-bouncing-ball. There is a lot of the bouncing ball in *Rocky Horror*, but there is also a great deal more. It shows not only how a film may be “directed toward others (in search of a mirror wherein to fix its own image)” (Casetti 28), but also—through its costumed and participatory following, for example—how a film might literally construct an audience after its own likeness. How the films are open, how they, more than others, are liable to be read by their audiences as actually addressing them, are rhetorical and semiotic questions that would take rather too long to probe here. But there is such a rhetoric, and there is room to observe here that it has been developed by films that have, like the self-styled cult horror films of the 1980s, deliberately set out to engage, address, and patronize a cult audience. Such films have built on and in a way imitated the successful strategies of *Rocky Horror* and the other pioneering mutations of the 1980s in a virtually Darwinian manner.

*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was made as a horror film. Eventually, it became a cult film. To reach the audience that deserved and awaited a successor to the original, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre 2* was conceived and marketed as a no-holds-barred cult horror film; in a manner of speaking, it hung itself in the Hall of Fame it had helped to create. Those who cared witnessed the birth of a genre, almost a species. Between *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre 2*, a lungfish turned to a lizard before our eyes.

Such films survived the box office's version of natural selection because they were found by the untargetable audiences who had, perhaps without knowing it, been waiting for their address: fans who saw more in them than in what by comparison seemed lay or secular pictures, fans who found in them meanings they had not found elsewhere and recognitions not only of especially interesting and valuable spectacles, but also of themselves; such films, they gratefully thought, knew they were there. Even as they selected each work as one of special value, they felt selected by it.

Because of such effects, the cult film should be recognized as an extreme of spectator pleasure and as a site of audience power. The patronage of cult films demonstrates, in box office terms that producers understand, that what gets people into the movie theater is not novelty but quality. Repetition is a pleasure.<sup>1</sup> With the same degree of power, and making just the sort of decision that advertisers would die to be able to control—a consumer choice as definite as the decision to switch toothpastes—the cult viewer makes his or her product preference known. Not *Blue Thunder* but *Blue Velvet*, not *Parenthood* but *Parents*, not *Cocktail* but *The Cocoanuts*. One of the messages the cult audience is sending, then—along with the blatant demand for more “risky” new movies—is that the studios are wrong not to keep “old” movies in theatrical circulation, where the group could gather (forcing a further consumer move toward 16mm and video, laserdisc and late-night TV, and away from the theaters with their first or last runs of the same old—sorry—*new* thing), since the great works beloved by a culture should always be available for a people to see in their original form, which in this case is the theatrical release print, the real thing, the 35mm, the *movie*—not panned and scanned, not cropped, not abridged, not interrupted, and certainly not colorized.

Another message is that misfits and weirdos and film freaks do, sooner or later, buy a lot of tickets. Now, producers and distributors are not fools. It has not escaped them that pictures with small but devoted followings of *repeat viewers* have made good money. Where marketing considerations and film history intersect, the cult film has set up a fruit stand. Its financial

viability has established, within the industry, a haven for the offbeat picture. The lure of achieving cult status and long-term revenue has often tipped the balance, so that even if the producer considers a project to be terminally weird, it may still be approved for production on the grounds that it might well address and wildly appeal to a cult film audience. This may be the producers' rationalization for putting their own unacknowledged fetishes into production, or it may be genuinely intuitive marketing. What makes a difference is that it acknowledges the existence of a diverse audience and attests to the wisdom of catering to—which is to say, including and culturally addressing—minority and outsider tastes and perspectives. Because the cult film does not need to please or reach the mainstream, it may be uniquely free of the mainstream's terms, its dominant discourse, its way of insisting how things should be phrased and done. It can be off the wall—or blow up the wall—and still make money; it has license to be subversive, to be avant-garde, and above all to be tasteless. This is not true of just any independent or low-budget production, for the average independent feature is clearly targeted to as much of the mainstream audience as it can hope to attract.

As a business decision, the production of the cult film might be said to validate the financing of the obscure. It upholds the value of putting money into something that is down the alley, not on the main boulevard; something that not everybody knows about; something you have to get into and perhaps give some of yourself to; something that, despite being far into itself (like *Eraserhead*), can reach out and speak intimately to a vast number of outsiders; something so private that it's public, so systematically or antisystematically artistic that it has a chance to be popular—and so cheap that it has a good chance of turning a profit. Again because it is targeted to a small, repeat audience, the distribution of the cult film validates the sort of reliable commitment between an artist and a patron or publisher that is so utterly foreign to the film business: one that involves keeping the work in print and in circulation, even if it takes a long time to find its audience and make back the costs of production, rather than pushing the work for a short time and then remaindering or shredding it. So the cult film has, among other things, allowed more "special interest" pictures to be financed and to remain in distribution for relatively long periods of time, even if we must also acknowledge that some of the filmmakers have been ripped off down the line by unscrupulous distributors and bad contracts.

Still, the cult film succeeds, and it may prove a viable radical form, largely because it happily writes off mainstream audiences. It doesn't need them, though, and is free to laugh at them; it can make them squirm. If

this counterideology has its own dark and guilty secret, it might be the desire (hidden under mockery) to have Ozzie and Harriet for parents.

As the cult film is free to express unconventional perspectives, the cult audience is free to find its pleasures where it will. Maria Montez, Humphrey Bogart, Tim Curry . . . the scrambled eggs of vision in the deserts of *El Topo*, the Blob-meets-Dairy Queen brilliance of the fast food/health food/Bug-Eyed Monster nexus in the best science fiction satire of the 1980s, *The Stuff* . . . the heartless gross-outs of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the sexual horror movies of David Cronenberg, the Family According to Wes Craven . . . or the Marx Brothers, who went from four musketeers to three, Ma and Pa Kettle, the maligned Ed Wood, anything from Monogram and Republic studios, especially the serials . . . the movie queen in her bath—and what all this is, at the root, is the pleasure of the movies. It's an insult to call it "camp." We don't go back to these films to say how silly they were; what we keep discovering is how terrific and even necessary they are to us. This deep appreciation is a serious province of value, almost a matter of devotion.

The pleasure of the movies, revealed to us through the unabashed enthusiasm of the devotees of cult films or stars, is the incense in the temple. And it is in the temple, of course, that one reads again and again the sacred text, the story that defines the tribe. The cult film creates a ritual space, and the repeated movie is the center of the service. It is the cult object, the epic, the familiar scroll that unwinds to the devoted attention of the following that feels defined by it—and by following it.

Those who fail to understand, or who are closed to the beauties and revelations of these pictures, may well be dismissed as closed to the values of the subculture as well as to the full range of art. To a devotee, whether you are able to appreciate these films—that is, respect the sacred mysteries and recognize the sun when you are staring at it—may indicate what kind of person you are, whether you can be trusted. Such an attitude has, of course, popped up once or twice in the history of the politics of religion. And it is just as prone to show up in the political underground or among punk rockers or gay activists or golfing Republicans or polarized clumps or poets, take your pick.

Without conferring (because this is still in essence a private act, an intimate gesture of selection), without even declaring itself as a group, a self-selected elect founds a minor religion around the repeatable text. It is a work that they particularly understand and appreciate, but also one that appreciates, understands, and addresses them. They may be outsiders galvanized by something well outside the mainstream, or they may feel that there is something special about them because they appreciate this particu-

lar mainstream film. They may even feel that it calls to them, or that it presents itself as a calling. The ritual viewing may include a responsive reading, even the imitation of interaction. Respect and affection are part of this viewing experience, and homage, too—perhaps even in the form of a code of dress that acknowledges the power and special nature of their icon, as is easy to see in the case of *Rocky Horror*.

What this sacred text gives its worshippers, and what they are grateful for, is a mirror. It tells them something they realize as the truth, something they have been waiting to hear and to have validated. It does not flinch; indeed, it seems to take a certain glee, like the capricious Goya, in setting nightmares loose. Or it may, like the sappy *King of Hearts*, unabashedly express a sentimental worldview and make it stick. *Evil Dead II*, addressed to the fans of the horror magazine *Fangoria*, thumbs its nose at the values of the country club that runs America, absolutely confident that its inventiveness and nonstop creativity will be appreciated by that target audience it *knows* is out there, and becomes so gory that it's funny. A film like that, or *They Came from Within*, honestly provokes from me a rich, deep laughter; "They got it!" is how I feel in those moments, and I'm grateful to them for going all the way, for getting it right. I can be shuddering at the pain and still feel that way about the sawed-off face mask in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre 2*, or that earlier moment when a grossly excited Leatherface touches an erect chainsaw to the crotch of a screaming woman who must attempt to please him—one of the most uncompromisingly tasteless images of phallic aggression in any movie. Like the brother's habit of burning his scalp with a hanger and eating the broiled scabs, it just doesn't stop. It goes on to the end, as true horror is prone to do. It gets down to my sense of the dark side of the truth, and I am finally grateful to it for that—grateful enough to join a fan club, start up a cult. As I used to line up outside Cinema I for films like *Red Desert* and *Stavisky*, about which I now could care less, today you can find me at the mall for the opening of *Day of the Dead*. I know when the horror films are not made for me or those who share my tastes: when they are timid and stupid, like *Friday the 13th, Part VI*; or empty and unbelieving, like *The Guardian*; or unable to rise to the challenge of the material (in this case, Lovecraft), like *From Beyond*. I know, and I wait for the ones that *are* for me, aware that it can be a long wait.

But it is a joy to discover a work or an image that is (all right, *relatively*) free from compromise, as perhaps only the programmatic cult film and the avant-garde film can be, especially in a culture that eats and breathes and oils itself with compromise, from the script conferences of megaHolly-

wood to the arms conferences of our leaders. If the images I find uncompromisingly true, or disgustingly on target, or genre-perfect, prove a lone-some pleasure, too intense for most people to watch, too extreme to enjoy, and too insane to agree with, and if the only way to see *Salo* or *Motel Hell* or *Peeping Tom* is after midnight, then that is when I shall go out to meet them, alone or in company: searching for the films that are searching for me.

## NOTES

1. For a historical discussion of repetition in film narrative and its relationship to the pleasure principle, see my *Telling It Again and Again*.

## WORKS CITED

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