



The idealized romantic couple—Bogart and Bacall in *Dark Passage*. (Warner Bros.)

The Marx Brothers and their brand of anarchic comedy have developed a large cult following. (Paramount)



CHAPTER 1

Beyond All Reason: The Nature of the Cult

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I stopped lowering my head at the epithet "cultist" as soon as I realized that the quasi-religious connotation of the term was somewhat justified for those of us who loved movies beyond all reason.

—Andrew Sarris, *Confessions of a Cultist*

It is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more to the horizon of the uncrossable.

—Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*

We do not usually think of the film cultist, of the often bizarrely costumed patron queued up outside a theater showing *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, for example, in Andrew Sarris's terms, as someone who just loves movies. But Sarris's qualifier, that the cultist loves films "beyond all reason," is a point worth considering, for there is indeed something strange, even beyond reason in the relation between the cult film in its various manifestations and its nearly worshipful audience. In that movement beyond reason, beyond the usual ways of seeing, caring about, and identifying with a film or its characters, the cultist embraces a comfortable difference: from those who find film a brief diversion or pleasure, but of little lasting interest; from those who give scant attention to film, seeing little of themselves in its admittedly alluring imagery; even from those who take film quite seriously, but bridle at the excessive attachment or identification that marks some moviegoers. Cultists might well be said to *love* such differences, for to them they suggest something unusual, noteworthy, and valuable not just about the movies, but about their own character, too.

What the film cultist embraces is a form that, in its very difference, transgresses, violates our sense of the reasonable. It crosses boundaries of time, custom, form, and—many might add—good taste. And this is the case whether we are talking about classical films that have been resurrected by a special audience or the popular “midnight movies.” In fact, the popularity of both draws on their challenge to certain norms usually associated with the movie experience. And that challenge masks another sort of unreason, for as Foucault implies, the act of transgression may be little more than a gesture; it might only signal a kind of cook’s tour of various formal and cultural borders that, in the end, simply returns us “to the horizon of the uncrossable,” to a world of reason where we can relish the *feeling* of transgression. Still, that tour has proved quite popular, a transgression many love, and one that, I would suggest, speaks of the seemingly *unreasonable* way popular films often appear to work.

In using the term “cult” to mark off a group of films for study, I may already be suggesting another sort of transgression. For such an approach implies a kind of routine genre criticism, rooted in the idea that “cult” marks off a reasonably distinguishable film genre. That is a notion that many would quickly and justifiably challenge, for what we commonly label “cult” has come to embrace a very broad narrative territory. And even if we accept the notion of cult as genre, it clearly differs from others. As John Cawelti notes, “The essence of genre criticism is the construction of what . . . might be called a macro- or supertext. The supertext (genre) claims to be an abstract of the most significant characteristics or family resemblances among many particular texts, which can accordingly be analyzed, evaluated, and otherwise related to each other by virtue of their connection with the supertext” (56). So even if we conveniently describe the cult film as a genre and trace out characteristic markings or “family resemblances,” those markings will never quite produce the sort of relationships that genre usually implies. The reason is that with the cult film we are hard-pressed to find a clear “supertext” or storehouse for the form’s varied stylistic and thematic elements. The cult film simply transgresses even the boundaries we usually associate with the very notion of genre.

In fact, many of the elements that link such disparate films as *Casablanca* (1942), *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *Liquid Sky* (1983) fall outside genre study’s normal focus on plot, setting, character type, and theme. Instead, we find ourselves examining such often overlooked concerns as strategies of presentation and audience response.¹ The point is that an aesthetic of the cult film, as well as models for thinking about it, is still evolving; and one goal of this collection is to help in that evolution. Faced with the sort of difficulties noted

above, then, I want to begin by suggesting that we simply alter our usual notion of “supertext,” drawing the generic circle more broadly, extending its bounds beyond the purely textual to include the audience and its seemingly unreasonable “love” for these films.

Let us consider a simple initial definition of the cult film that includes these elements: it is a type marked by both its highly specified and limited audience as well as a singular pleasure that this audience finds in the film’s transgressions. Of course, it may well be that a particular cult film, *Casablanca*, for example, at one time appealed to a large and varied moviegoing public, and for quite conventional reasons, just as it is equally possible, as *Rocky Horror* suggests, that the cult work has at some point had great difficulty locating *any* audience prior to its successful cult incarnation. But in that life—or second life, if you will—it seems to speak meaningfully (or *lovingly*) to a select group.

While this distinction is a simple one, it reflects tellingly on our normal film marketing and viewing practices. In the United States, after all, feature films are generally targeted at and marketed for the broadest possible audience, as production companies, distributors, and theater owners all try to capture as great a share of the viewing dollar as possible. As a result, most films still take the most conservative path, following a classical narrative pattern that reiterates far from disturbing truisms about the moviegoers’ culture. Controversial topics tend to disappear—or to dissolve in the most simplistic imaginary formulations. So there is nothing to truly offend, nothing to hate, but by the same token often little *to love*. At its extreme, this practice leads to the current sequel mania, as almost every film that demonstrates a certain earning power quickly generates a slightly modified sequel, prequel, or third cousin—so we get, and perhaps as a culture well deserve, a *Friday the 13th, Part*.

Against this backdrop, the conjunction of a *limited* audience and a *limited*, even unconventionally measured *success* becomes significant. For it underscores how that “love” aspect of the cult film functions: it works in a realm of *difference*—from normal film viewing practices and from marketing customs. And this realm of difference, the space beyond the “line” Foucault describes, derives from a number of factors that contribute to the cult supertext, ranging from elements of the film narrative, to its exhibition practices, to the audience’s needs, and to a spirit of the times (which effectively constructs that audience).

It might be argued, as film historian Gerald Mast does, that some variations of the cult film work otherwise. He sees several briefly popular groups of films as signaling the emergence of a new, deliberate marketing strategy by the American film industry. Influenced by the unanticipated popularity

of the so-called "underground" films of the late 1960s and early 1970s,² especially the work of filmmakers like Robert Downey, Brian De Palma, and the Andy Warhol–Paul Morrissey team, and impelled by the increasing difficulty of competing with television for the larger entertainment market, the industry, according to Mast, embraced "elitism"; that is, it adopted a practice of segmenting and targeting potential film audiences, much as other American industries—the automobile and soft drink industries especially—have segmented and targeted particular consumer groups. Rather than trying "to make all of the films for all of the people, producers and exhibitors realized that they must appeal to very special tastes" (423). As evidence, he points to the appearance in the late 1960s of such special-audience forms as the "blaxploitation" film, the new "art" films of directors like Arthur Penn, Mike Nichols, and Robert Altman, and "sexploitation" films aimed at a variety of sexual orientations and tastes.

However, this targeting explanation cannot bear too much weight, since many films that gain a cult label and following are never successful through normal patterns of film distribution. In fact, many seem to become cult works largely because their audience—their potential lovers—cannot be accurately assessed through conventional wisdom, much less segmented and targeted. Indeed, many works initially gain a cult aura more because of anticanonical and extraindustrial forces, although distribution practices invariably try to follow the lure of new audience dollars. For example, a rising gay awareness, coupled with the new feminist consciousness, clearly has much to do with the resurrection and cult embrace of an old and conventional Hollywood hit like *The Women* (1939). And a more recent film like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*—which inspired its own unsuccessful sequel, *Shock Treatment* (1981)—seems to owe much of its phenomenal success to its unique blurring of genre forms, which attests to both an appreciation and violation of certain classical narrative formulas. What Mast helps us see, though, is how much the cult relies for its very existence on what we normally think of as extratextual matters, in effect, how much the cult film's nature depends on both its own amorphous shape and a set of industrial practices divorced from a specific film's creation.

These matters that challenge our usual notion of a supertext also help account for a major difficulty we have in explaining the appearance or popularity of the cult film. All of our explanations, after all, must consider two very different sorts of films that together tend to be lumped into the cult category. On the one hand, we typically label as "cult" a number of conventionally successful films, usually resurrected from Hollywood's past, the period of classical film narrative. The list of works that fall into

this category is long and subject to change, but it almost invariably includes films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *The Women*, *Fantasia* (1940), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Rebel without a Cause*, and most obviously *Casablanca*. These films generally appeal to a heterogeneous audience, albeit one apparently united by a certain fondness for the conventions and appeals of classical narrative, and by an almost worshipful—and thus truly cultish—attitude toward particular figures from Hollywood's so-called "golden age"—Humphrey Bogart, Joan Crawford, James Cagney, Judy Garland.

Our love of such films turns partially upon their previous success: their prior ability to evoke a desirable or soothing response, particularly through their stars' numinous quality, and our desire to repeat that earlier experience or even to enjoy it for the first time. In effect, they evoke a kind of nostalgic thrill, even if it is only the pleasure of a parvenue. But we would be mistaken to see that as the sole reason for their cult status and success, since the ways in which they speak and the themes they develop are equally important. For example, it almost goes without saying that the Bogart and Dean personas, bearing their burdens of existential angst or youthful frustration, are mainly responsible for the continuing appeal of films like *Casablanca* and *Rebel without a Cause*, while Joan Crawford's spirit and emotional strength in a work like *Mildred Pierce* (1945) clearly strike a responsive chord in modern audiences attuned to feminist issues.

Yet such iconic figures also work so powerfully upon us *because* of their placement in time. For despite their rootedness in an era, they display a remarkable ability to live on through and, in effect, outside of history. Like one of modern fiction's cult figures, Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, they are "unstuck in time" and, in that transgression of temporal bounds, win a kind of victory over it. Our nostalgic attachment to such figures thus carries a double weight. On the one hand, those human icons evoke all the more keenly a modern sense of estrangement and alienation that we commonly feel, as we increasingly seem bound to an unsatisfying time, an era that somehow feels not quite right. But on the other, they suggest a hope of overcoming the present, or at least breaking free of the stifling mundanity that seems to mark it. Such cult figures essentially represent what Christopher Lasch terms "ego-ideals": "admired, idealized images," in a most fundamental sense, *loved ones*. In their ability to capture "the contradictory quality of unconscious mental life" (178–180), he argues, such images prove "indispensable" for our well-being. For by speaking simultaneously of our place in "the natural world" and of our "capacity to transcend it," they offer a soothing, imaginary release from the various tensions that impinge on the modern psyche.

Initially, we might see a somewhat different appeal, due partly to its dif-

ferent audience, in that other type of movie we often term "cult." In fact, the small, far more homogeneous audience—usually identified by age and social situation—and the special viewing circumstances they prefer quickly distinguish the midnight movie from the classical cult film. The former's audience is usually the middle-class teenager and young adult, the 17- to 24-year-old group that often—as a sort of rite of passage—sees itself as separate from the cultural mainstream. This subculture's interests and concerns—drugs, rock music, sexual experience, alienation from their parents and established society—clearly surface in such films as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Fantastic Planet* (1973), *The Harder They Come* (1973), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Eraserhead* (1978), *Liquid Sky*, and the most popular of midnight films—indeed, the one that has prescribed so much of the behavior that helps define them—*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

The typical venue for these films is the midnight showing, usually at suburban mall theaters rather than art or rerun houses. And this alternate viewing practice seems essential, a defining characteristic of the midnight movie, as we have come to call it; in fact, it is part of its true supertext. For the midnight film, like a kind of forbidden love, apparently loses much of its appeal in a conventional or culturally sanctioned context; it is simply no longer *subcultural* and other. Even the traditional art house—the few that remain—cannot quite sustain this context, since it bears a burden of intellectual pretension and acceptance, by virtue of being a home for *recognized* art, a *sanctioned* venue for difference (nonmainstream viewing practices). For the same reason, it is nearly unthinkable for the midnight circuit's films to appear on television as well and still retain their full cult appeal, since it is precisely their alterity that we love in them. Originally, they may have seen little or no main-line distribution, and hence slight or no box office success. They have only been properly mated to an audience—and found profit—on this special late-night circuit.

Another obvious distinction between the classical cult film and its midnight movie alter ego lies in their respective conditions of production. Sourced in the Hollywood studio system, the classical work is typically marked by a large budget, a big-name cast, technical expertise, and a measure of original and conventional success—all of which signal a cinematic status quo and quickly mark it off from the "outsider" cinema of a *Putney Swope* (1969), *Pink Flamingos* (1970), or *Eraserhead*. The stories of George Romero's use of friends and neighbors to flesh out his cast of zombies and of his simple but effective "special effects"—such as raw meat from the local butcher—for *Night of the Living Dead* are well known, and they suggest just the sort of *bricolage* that characterizes these films, a catch-as-catch-

can approach toward production that seems more their rule than an exception. Perhaps the forthrightly "crude" look that often results not only underscores their difference from mainstream cinema, but also hints at their basic appeal, specifically, their ability to play effectively at the very margins of cinematic illusion. By turns, they seem to make us aware of that illusion—of what we term the "cinematic imaginary"³—and, by the persistence of its power, to draw us into that realm, allowing us to relish our awareness of the illusion, and to willfully abandon ourselves to its lure. *Rocky Horror*, for example, repeatedly calls attention to the iconography and patterns of the classical cinema, including the RKO logo in one scene, even as it deploys various genre conventions that help cue our responses to and ensure our participation in its narrative. This dual pull might also explain the "camp" attraction we find in such pointedly *bad* cult films as *Reefer Madness* (1936) or *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959). But more important, it recalls the complex nature of the "love"—its "contradictory quality"—we noted in the classical cult film and its iconic personalities.

Despite some obvious differences, then, the two broad categories of cult film identified here have much in common that justifies grouping them generically. For example, they seem to respond to audience needs—and thus *define* their audiences—in a fundamentally similar way. That is, they evoke a kind of subcultural desire, a desire not simply for difference, but for an identifiable and even *common* difference, in effect, for a *safe* difference that is, ultimately, nearly not difference at all. While classical cult films project appealing images that speak to the contradictions in our present lives, midnight movies fashion a context of difference—of rebellion, independence, sexual freedom, gender shifting—that helps us cope with real-world conformity. In common, they offer a kind of loving understanding that acknowledges our own sense of difference or alienation, even as it mates us to other, similarly "different" types in the audience or the films themselves.

Of course, the forces of modern mass culture always seem to pull us in very different directions. On the one hand, all the forces of mass culture typically urge us to conform, to be like everyone else. Indeed, television, radio, film, and the other voices of culture address us as if we are one, and the lure of answering that voice, of identifying oneself as the subject of that direct address, is great. So we wear the same jeans, buy the proper running shoes, eat at the fast-food chains of current choice. But we also comply partly because of other voices we hear, those that admonish us to assert *our* individuality; in many cases, we even hear that wearing those jeans, buying those running shoes, or eating at certain places is the surest

mark of such individuality. We might well see the cult film, then, with its highly ritualistic conditions of presentation, as a kind of mass (i.e., "religious" service) of cultural contradiction, calling us to worship simultaneously gods of difference and sameness, or at least permitting us to feel better about those unresolved cultural contradictions in which we instinctively feel ourselves enmeshed.⁴

In light of this impulse, it is most fitting that the very term "cult" bears a curiously double implication that harkens back to Sarris's original notion of "love"—a term I may already have stretched beyond common recognition. Most often, we use that term to signal a feared or ominous difference, such as when newspaper headlines speculate on the role of cult religions or satanic groups in the latest crime. Fundamentally, though, used in this way, "cult" could refer to any organized minority beliefs that threaten the status quo. When so deployed, it intellectually exiles the group, thing, or theology so designated beyond the pale of the normal or accepted, certainly outside the circle of our "love." The thing so designated seems potentially dangerous in a vague *variety* of ways; the subcultural has simply become subversion itself. The term "cult," consequently, often becomes a kind of warning sign, a psychic surgeon general's report, denoting taboo intellectual, emotional, and even spiritual territory.

And yet the cult is also desire itself, a longing to *express* the self, to express difference. The cult film, after all, is a way we have of crossing boundaries, even if we let others share in that brief, satisfying transgression. Such sharing still expresses our yearning for distinction; we at least want to *feel* different from the norm and from the conventional self we are supposed to become. So the cult film, whether in the reggae rhythms of *The Harder They Come* or the new-wave sensibility of *Liquid Sky*, becomes for a time—or perhaps, as with the multiple viewings of *Rocky Horror*, for time after time—our voice, our vantage, an expressive mask we don to speak in ways we ordinarily cannot.

The act of differentiation is thus fundamentally linked to the sort of love we feel for/through these films. If the imagery and themes of some of these films seem to have something of the aura of "forbidden fruit," it is because they embody a most basic desire. For the cult audience implicitly desires something unavailable in the undifferentiated world; and the cult promises a meaning different from that handed down or sanctioned by society and its privileged institutions. It thus holds the implicit appeal of the secret, the cabalistic, and that appeal gains in potency by suggesting a lack of real meaning, significance, or relevance in the everyday world—even the sort of slipping away of the real that Jean Baudrillard has so persuasively described.⁵ At the same time, this privileged knowledge promises a freedom,

since its very alterity suggests a release: temporarily from reality itself, as Baudrillard would suggest, or simply from the dominant culture, as cultists assert their special character—as when *Rocky Horror* devotees dress up like their favorite characters and, in so doing, temporarily discard their normal, culturally determined identities. In this way, the cult fills a human need—or desire—one made all the more pressing by the routine, repetitive, and impersonal nature of modern technological societies such as ours.

Of course, we also *need* society for our identity; every subculture implicitly constitutes itself as an alternative to the establishment. For this reason, we should note that "cult" is also clearly linked to "culture," and thus to the body of human society and all that we imply when we label someone or something *acculturated*—that is, made one with the group in its most fundamental beliefs or practices. From this vantage, we might better understand the body of practices that clusters around every cult film, whether a midnight movie or classical narrative. Memorizing dialogue, practicing gestures, wearing costumes, and attending repeatedly are required. In effect, a body of ritual, of the sort that marks both the religious and theatrical experiences, attends the cult film experience and, in the process, gives it, almost in spite of itself, a clearly social dimension. It effectively constructs a culture in small, and thus an island of meaning for an audience that senses an absence of meaningful social structures or coherence in the life outside the theater.

In essence, therefore, every cult constitutes a community, a group that "worships" similarly and regularly, and finds a strength in that shared experience. The true *Rocky Horror* experience, for example, depends on more than just a time slot that differentiates the film and its viewers, the cult object and its worshippers, from a world of daylight and conventional viewing habits. It relies on a set of practices or conventions shared by the devotees. And the demonstrated knowledge of those things certifies the initiates, binds them in their privileged knowledge to others—and even to another side of the self, a repressed self that longs to be known *otherwise* and to find expression. Knowing and even reciting lines of dialogue are part of this bonding ritual—a "wisdom" of the other—but as *Rocky Horror* again dramatically demonstrates, such a practice goes beyond sheer rote. For one thing, it can involve a participatory action, as audiences anticipate lines and furnish answers to rhetorical questions, or as those who come costumed as screen characters prance around the auditorium at set times in the narrative (doing "The Time Warp," for instance), as if affirming, if only briefly, that their usually prosaic world is coextensive with another, admired, and exciting one. For another, it invokes a kind of transubstantiation as well, a transformation of the cinematic event into something

totally outside the diegesis, such as when, on a specific cue and as a demonstration of their initiate status, viewers hurl rice or slices of bread toward the screen. The glory of successfully negotiating these tests of understanding—reciting dialogue, answering questions *in unison*, knowing what to hold up or throw into the audience and *when*, situates viewers in a new community. They know their catechism. And that acceptance is reaffirmed by the repeat experience.

It is only natural, then, that both “cult” and “culture” come from the same root, although one with its own varied implications. For the original Latin term *cultus* signifies both “worship” and “cultivation,” an act of adherence and mastery, submission and domination. Perhaps we might even say, with an eye to traditional use of the terms, that it hints of both the feminine and masculine, and thus always of an opposite side of the self that we might, deep down, desire. The etymological underpinnings of “cult,” then, point to a dual impulse. These films let us join in common worship, acknowledge common allegiance to a god of sorts, and admit our common possession by that god. But they also let us cultivate our own gardens, grow individually beyond the rules and roles laid out by society. In effect, they let us possess and be possessed, as in a real love relationship, surrendering the self in a most satisfying self-expression.

At the same time, the films participate in the ongoing ideological project of the mass media. They contribute to the constructing of a cultural cinematic imaginary, for example, by building upon the pantheon of gods and mythic actions already established in Hollywood legend, or by contributing new images for commercialization and exploitation. The song “Don’t Dream It, Be It,” one of *Rocky Horror*’s paeans to difference, for example, has recently provided the melody for a cotton fabrics commercial on television. But even as they work in these conventional, even co-opted ways, cult films also manage to assert their own difference, cultivating a new, separate life that continues to grow outside of the normal nurturing conditions of conventional production and exhibition practices. Thus certain figures of difference, spawned by cults, haunt our movies and our psyches: the Bogart persona codified in *Casablanca*; Leatherface, the killer in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and model for the unending *Friday the 13th* series; or the late Divine, John Waters’ 300-pound transvestite star.

While we seem to talk about two different types of films, then, I want to emphasize that we are also talking about two common thrusts that mark and link these films. Whether it is the classical narrative redivivus or the midnight movie, our subject has two thrusts. Part—the most visible part—of its appeal is the way it transgresses the normal to fashion a statement of difference. In going to a cult film, we embrace the other in us—the com-

mitted hero in the uninvolved cynic (*Casablanca*), the rebel in every maturing teenager (*Rebel without a Cause*), the gay in the straight (*Rocky Horror*). But because of the insecurity that embrace implies, we also need a stable ground from which to make that assertion, a ground *within* the very boundaries we seem to transgress. Thus these films also express a fundamental need for culture, for a society that will let us, from time to time, acknowledge our difference. And that necessary society is not just one of similar transgressors, of other *different* types—as in *King of Hearts*’ alternate world of the insane or *Liquid Sky*’s punk subculture—but the social world we daily inhabit. Acknowledging that world as ultimately inescapable, our cult films, in their minor subversions and assertions of individuality, finally help us love it, too.

I am already hinting at why this phenomenon of the cult film has emerged, as well as why the lure—and life span—of some cult films seems so weak. While many films aim at a very specific market—the youth market, black moviegoers, a rural audience—it is clearly difficult to design a film for cult status. Arranged marriages seldom work, and trying to dictate desire seems almost inimical to the cult spirit, as the failure of *Rocky Horror*’s sequel, *Shock Treatment*, attests. As Sam Kitt of Libra Films, distributor of many successful cult movies, notes, the cult experience usually involves a “discovery on the part of the audience,” assuring them “that they’re part of an inner circle. *Rocky Horror* is the best example of this. It is a need to identify with something, to have something that is emblematic of their feelings” (Strout 74). As is the case with most successful films, the cult work touches some deep-felt and perhaps unacknowledged desire; yet in its most successful instances, it seems to do so almost accidentally, offhandedly, letting the audience find that pleasure in the film as if by themselves. So while the cult plays upon transgression, it tends to disguise it as an act of *discovery*—or rediscovery, as when one age resurrects and finds anew the pleasures of an old film like *Casablanca*.

What we discover varies with the particular cult text. Whether it is our need for and embracing of a specific persona like Bogart or Dean, or our longing for the social and sexual transgressions of a *Repo Man* or *Rocky Horror*, we face a form that transgresses the limits of time and custom, and that implicitly speaks a dissatisfaction with the status quo. We might do well, therefore, to return to Foucault’s vantage as he speaks of the very nature of transgression: “It does not transform the other side of the mirror, beyond an invisible and uncrossable line, into a glittering expanse. Transgression is neither violence in a divided world . . . nor a victory over limits . . . and exactly for this reason, its role is to measure the excessive

distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to arise" (35).

"At the heart of the limit"—in this phrase Foucault strikes to the very core of that strange link between transgression and love that defines the cult film experience. For despite the midnight movie's counterculture trappings and the classical film's nostalgic retreat from the present, these films are finally not about violence or violation. Rather, their experience of limits marks a longing to measure our longings, not a desire for something, but a yearning that humanly identifies us and differentiates us one from the other. While it lets us experience limits, it does so without ever vanquishing those limits or wielding any sort of truly radical power. In fact, no really radical films have ever become cult favorites, since the "tracing of limits" in these films proceeds from within the violated border, from this side of limits that stay in effect. But the cult film's transgressive thrust helps us see beyond, trace our own limits, and even feel a momentary power over them. Of course, eventually the film ends, and then we return to that world and its boundaries. However, that return is bolstered by the fleeting affair we have there had—truly an affair of the heart—that leaves us feeling better about ourselves and our world, better because we have seen and spoken our desires.

For this reason, it is very difficult to think of the cult film outside of the cult film *experience*. It does, after all, represent a "supertext" that can be described only in terms of a boundary crossing—including the boundary that often divides viewers and critics from the text. If that crossing evokes a kind of loving experience, it is because we thereby sense something special in the cult film: that we are part of this text, our embrace necessary for its very identity. In this experience, we celebrate a most pleasurable transgression, as we vicariously cross over into taboo territory—the self's *terra incognita*—and then emerge to tell of it. There we do not simply trace out a foreign shape. On that other side of the mirror, there beyond the usual boundaries of common reason, we discover another, different self, and gain a brief, interrogatory power over the limits that seem to shape our lives. This simultaneously dangerous and safe trip is what we so love about the cult film.

NOTES

1. Cawelti points in this direction, as he notes that Aristotle also approached genre from two complementary directions, focusing on both "the object of imitation"—the common form of genre studies today—and the "manner or form of representation" (55).

2. We should note that underground films anticipated and helped establish a common viewing practice for today's cult and midnight films. The late 1960s saw the development of a nationally circulating program of underground, camp, and experimental films entitled "Underground Cinema 12." These programs, which changed weekly, usually played at midnight in local "art" houses in the major film markets around the country.

3. The cinematic imaginary refers to the artificial sense of self and the self's relations to its culture that a film's images fashion. Bill Nichols, in his study of cinematic ideology, *Ideology and the Image*, offers probably the clearest explanation of this concept: "How we see ourselves and the world around us is often how we believe ourselves and the world to be. Images generally present views; films present particular kinds of views . . . and how we see them has everything to do with how we see ourselves" (5).

4. In this regard, the cult film seems to operate almost in the sort of mythic pattern outlined by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his famous essay "The Structural Study of Myth," wherein he suggests that the basic function of any myth "is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction" (226). When viewed in this context, the cult film more clearly reveals its status as a kind of cultural myth, one characterized by certain constants despite its widely varied manifestations.

5. As Baudrillard has noted, in the modern world we increasingly seem to inhabit a realm of simulacra, of *versions* of the real, and that environment has had the effect of essentially squeezing out the real. Thus Baudrillard concludes that today what we are seeing is nothing less than "the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real; murderers of their own model as . . . Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity" (168).

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