

# Part I

## Receptions and Debates

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# Cult Reception Contexts

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We have proposed in our introduction that cult cinema is primordially known through its reception. In this chapter we provide a conceptual view of various elements that inform cult reception contexts. In order to illustrate how cult receptions differ from mainstream or normalized trajectories our attention first goes to the paradigmatic historical exemplar of cult cinema, namely the midnight movie. Next, we will outline the significance of a phenomenological approach to cult film reception. Subsequently, we will theorize the kind of experience cult receptions offer, and the value it generates.

## Midnight Movies

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Traditionally, the midnight movie is associated with New York. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum (1991: 310) observed that, on a worldwide scale, “New York is Palookaville when it comes to midnight movies,” and there were vibrant late night scenes across North America and Europe.<sup>1</sup> Yet the New York scene is the only one thoroughly investigated and therefore we will use it as our key example.

Most scholars agree New York’s midnight movie scene started when, in the late 1960s, underground and avant-garde theaters, with established clienteles and institutional affiliations, started programming risqué and exploitative materials. Mark Betz (2003) argues this shift was encouraged when “kinky” foreign art films and American underground films came together, near the end of the 1960s, in an exploitation/art circuit that emphasized the countercultural potential

of cinema. Parker Tyler (1969) suggests a cross-fertilization between filmmakers who started to include more sex and violence in their films, and the demands of theaters catering to more permissive taste patterns, created a momentum in which practitioners and patrons encouraged each other to go ever further (Tyler 1969). The film usually credited with initiating the transition is the infamous *Flaming Creatures*, with its Dionysian theme and brutal rape-orgy. It was seized at several screenings and stunned audiences at others (for more on this film, see Chapters 3 and 14). Soon, other films with provocative aesthetic attitudes, and shocking or politically radical imagery drew similar receptions: *Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man*, *Blow Job*, *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, and *Chafed Elbows*, which Tyler describes as “the offbeat of the offbeat.” It had a “marathon run at a small East Village theatre” (Tyler 1969: 53). Probably the most cultist trajectory was that of Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* and *Invocation of My Demon Brother*, both of which ran for long periods of time at late night slots in theaters East of Greenwich Village (Betz 2003; Tyler 1969). A constant reference in the receptions of these films was that of physical and mental liberation from repression – a function similar to that of ancient rituals.

At the beginning of the 1970s a string of New York theaters started midnight programming. The underground repertory was complemented with exploitation films with kaleidoscopic and apocalyptic motives, revivals of previously banned films, new and explicit horror, films pushing the boundaries of sexual permissiveness, and exotic and surreal foreign films (Figure 1.1). The acceleration was a sign of the



**Figure 1.1** Midnight movie classics from 1970 to 2002: from left to right, *El Topo*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Donnie Darko*.

vibrancy of the counterculture, and of its widening into radical “outsider” films – the weirder the better. Topping them all was the visceral and symbolically heavy Mexican western-on-acid *El Topo*. Virtually unadvertised, *El Topo* sold out the Elgin theater for half a year. After a while, its screenings were described as a “midnight mass” (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 94). With the success of *El Topo*, the midnight movie really took off. Films as diverse as George Romero’s zombie film and civil rights-metaphor *Night of the Living Dead*, Alejandro Jodorowsky’s *The Holy Mountain* (a mystical adaptation of René Daumal’s *Mount Analogue* to which Jodorowsky improvised a clever ending), and the mind-boggling surrealism of *Viva la muerte* attracted repeat audiences looking for “underground” thrills, and gusts of revelations – often aided by illegal substances. With these films, the midnight movie added an anti-establishment stance to its radical aesthetics; increasingly graphic depictions of sex and violence and explorations of immorality correlated with the audience’s anxieties about the “violence engulfing the United States” (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1991: 99, 112). Even if this feeling that the midnight movie exemplified a revolutionary attitude was more an impression than a fact, for midnight movie viewers the era’s general unrest seemed to synchronize with what they experienced

on screen – as if it predicted “the end of the world as we know it.”

As the 1970s progressed, the countercultural movement lost momentum. Midnight movies became ever more outrageous, but as their popularity widened across campuses, generic and aesthetic radicalism replaced ideological commentary. Art house and B-movie distributors such as Janus films and New Line Cinema became engaged in the midnight movie. Lesbian vampire movies, porn chic, blaxploitation movies, and foreign philosophical allegories such as *Antonio das Mortes*, *The Saragosa Manuscript*, or *WR: Mysteries of an Organism*, replaced the original batch of films. The most notorious among these films was *Pink Flamingos*, which tested viewers’ threshold for revulsion – exactly the reason for its successful reception.

By the late 1970s, the midnight movie had become a staple of alternative cinema exhibition, the urban and college town equivalent of the drive-in. It was characterized by a hedonistic and wildly extravert context of rambunctious yet joyous celebrations. Many of the films championed in the circuit were as flamboyant as their audiences, with as figureheads campy rock musicals such as *Tommy*, or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Proudly self-referential, these films were as much performances of cults, as cults themselves. Because of its endless runs *Rocky Horror* became a repertory in its

own right (Weinstock 2007; Austin 1981a). Occasionally, “original” cults would still develop, around enigmatic films such as *Eraserhead*.

In the 1980s, much of the midnight movie attitude moved to VCR viewing, where “pause” and “rewind” functions on the remote control replaced the theatrical repeat viewing experience. What survived were nihilistic or flamboyant post punk movies such as *Heavy Metal*, the hardcore *Café Flesh*, or *Liquid Sky*. By the end of the decade many of the original midnight theaters had closed their doors, and filmmakers joined the burgeoning “independent” scene, or went underground again, with Abel Ferrara (*King of New York*) and Larry Fessenden (*Habit*) as crossover exceptions (Hawkins 2003). Only with large intervals would new midnight movie cults appear. The most prominent ones – *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* and *Donnie Darko* – became the phenomenon’s de facto eulogies. In 2001 “everything changed”, writes Joan Hawkins:

The World Trade Center in New York City was destroyed . . . The geography of downtown Manhattan has changed. So has the mood in the USA. And it’s not at all clear what new avant-gardes and cult films might rise up to address what seems at this point to be a new era (one in which irony, for example, may not be considered an appropriate response to anything) (2003: 232).

For Hawkins, the cult of the midnight movie, a “moment when we believed that direct intervention in the country’s spectacle would do some good,” was over (2003: 232).

As befits cult receptions, the midnight movie did not really die. Since the 1990s the demise of the original phenomenon was balanced by three other trends. First, new films found their ways into festivals, which increasingly included midnight showings as part of their programs. Second, midnight premieres also became a feature of blockbuster releases vying for cult status. Third, the midnight movie phenomenon went into meta-mode. *Donnie Darko*, for instance, arguably the most famous midnight movie after 9/11, is also a meta-midnight movie. Its audiences at the New York Pioneer Theater, aware of the legacy of the midnight movie phenomenon, were not only continuing a tradition that had existed for more than thirty years, they also consciously knew they were contributing to

the heritage of the phenomenon by keeping it alive, or honoring the tradition by paying lip service to it. A decade after its first midnight run, college campuses, art houses, and festivals still screen *Donnie Darko* at midnight for this reason. Other instances of the meta-mode of the midnight movie include nostalgic revivals and queer celebrations of often overtly mainstream “classics” such as John Hughes’s teen comedies (*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*), or sword and sorcery fantasy films (*Conan the Barbarian*). Their midnight success relies on the kitsch and camp attitude *Rocky Horror* had cemented as a core characteristic of the cult reception trajectory, and it reclaims some of the irony Hawkins claims it lost by exposing topical political attitudes through cheesy old movies. In its most recent form, this reflexive nostalgia has also included the original midnight movies, with relaunched of *El Topo* joining the never-ending runs of *Rocky Horror* and occasional newcomers, such as *The Room* (Bissell 2010).

In sum, the midnight movie highlights the key characteristics of a cult reception trajectory: films lumped together in a lively and “countercultural” exhibition context by their capacity to commit, through outrageously weird and explicit imagery, subcultural audience collectives, and to elicit performances of fandom and obsessions with the interconnectedness of elusive details intrinsic as well as alien to the films that enables allegorical and political interpretations that position themselves outside the realm of normalcy.

## The Difficulty of Researching Cult Cinema

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As the exemplar of the midnight movie illustrates, cult reception contexts are extremely heterogeneous. According to Mathijs and Mendik (2008a: 4–10), part of why they are called cult is because these receptions contain multitudes of competing and opposite discourses that stand in contrast of what a “normal” consumption process ought to be like. How does one begin to research such diverse contexts? At the basis of the cult reception context lies a fundamental philosophical question: does the value of a cultural product lie in its features and intentions or in the eye of the

beholder? This question has important implications for the methodology of researching cult cinema.

Mathijs and Mendik (2008b: 15–16) distinguish between two schools of thought on this problem, with different implications:

ontological approaches to cult cinema are usually essentialist: they try to determine what makes “cult cinema” a certain type of movie . . . Phenomenological approaches shift the attention from the text to its appearance in the cultural contexts in which it is produced and received. Such attempts usually see cult cinema as a mode of reception, a way of seeing films (2008b: 15).

In the ontological approach, the reception process is one that affirms the properties of the product. In the phenomenological approach the reception process negotiates these properties in the light of how they make themselves known – as a kind of phenomenon. Mathijs and Mendik refer to the work of Jerome Stolnitz as an effort that tries to solve the deadlock between these two positions. For Stolnitz (1960a, 1960b) any value is less a matter of the properties of the work or the viewer than of the experience generated by the flow of meaning during the process of perception. Stolnitz distinguishes between objectivist, subjectivist, and objective relativist views of experience. Objectivism, like the ontological approach, places the essence of value in the work itself – as if the work carries meaning within itself. This makes perception a process of detection. Subjectivism, on the contrary, identifies value as a faculty of the perceiver – as if the audience places its own meanings upon the work. This makes the work “empty.”

Most reception studies of cinema embrace this approach. Janet Staiger (1992), for instance, explains that in order to understand how films work, and how the strategies through which they are given value operate, one has to distinguish between meanings generated through texts, through readers, and through contexts. Throughout, however, one has to accept

that cultural artifacts are not containers with immanent meanings, that variations among interpretations have historical bases for their differences, and that differences and change are not idiosyncratic but due to social, political, and economic conditions, as well as to constructed identities such as gender, sexual

preference, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality. (Staiger 1992: xi)

Staiger argues that the best methodology for stressing contextual factors is to shift the focus of subjectivism from the mind of the spectator to the material conditions (the labor) involved in assigning meaning to a work – she calls this methodology a neo-Marxist approach. According to such an approach, studies of receptions should place emphasis on the use-value, exchange-value, and symbolic value of films (the latter being the value that is not expressed in material terms but in terms of the knowledge, expertise, kudos, and status, but also the dangers for exclusion and isolation any affiliation brings).

There have been several attempts to carve out procedures for this methodology. One attempt, by Barbara Klinger (1997), distinguishes between diachronic and synchronic approaches to film reception. The first stresses the materials that feature in a chain of events over time during a film’s reception; the second emphasizes the materials from events that co-occur within the reception. The first method gives breadth, the second depth. Because cult reception trajectories are known to be volatile it is necessary to use both approaches simultaneously. Moreover, cult reception contexts are highly influenced by what Martin Barker (2004) has called unpredictable “ancillary materials”: already existing artifacts and discourses that relate to the upcoming release that lead to polemics and legends and that prevent a nice match between expectations and the actual experience. The best example is probably the myth surrounding the troubled production history of *Casablanca*. Another good example is the abrupt way in which *Night of the Living Dead* was introduced to audiences, as part of a matinee double bill, before it became a midnight movie. This means that an essential part of the cult reception context is that it is “fractured.” Its smooth running is interrupted or otherwise compromised, and audiences struggle to find an appropriate frame of reference for the newly released film.

Another attempt concentrates on the units of meaning that circulate in receptions. Each reception contains “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” references. Following David Bordwell (1989: 13), intrinsic references can be labeled “cues,” elements of the film and its immediate

production context used by viewers as tools in their construction of arguments about the film. Extrinsic references are “quotes,” influences from outside the regular context that interfere with the reception. The degree to which a film’s public course takes on the characteristics of a cult reception often depends on the abundance and the weight of extrinsic references. The longer a film’s public visibility lasts (even in small communities), and the bigger the influences, the more likely it is to fracture a smooth reception. Controversies and moral panics are frequently a major part of the fractures in a cult reception trajectory.

There are some complications with the attempts we sketched. Topical events can penetrate so far into a film’s reception they take over its direction. This is what initially happened to *Donnie Darko*. Even though it had been set for the Halloween weekend, traditionally a time for darker, more adult fare, *Donnie Darko* was too meta-generic to pose as a horror film, and the destruction of New York’s World Trade Center on September 11th had temporarily eliminated audiences’ appetites for dark materials and provocations. As one critic put it in hindsight: “why seek out talking rabbits warning of the end of the world when it already seemed to be happening?” Cult receptions also demonstrate psychological tendencies towards “insulation.” Russ Hunter (2009, 2010) observes how subsequent to *Suspiria* (usually considered his best film) the reception of Dario Argento’s films petrified into a series of mantras, which led to a refusal to include new achievements (or rather the lack of them) into reappraisals. The more Argento’s reception became mantra-like, the more frequently it was called “cult.” Such inoculation from new debates demonstrates how difficult it is to distinguish between instances of cultism that are convictions, and instances that are *performed* as attitudes, and if indeed there is a measurable difference.

Finally, there is the complication of a cult reception context’s endurance. Films such as *The Wizard of Oz* or *Casablanca* have been enjoyed *as cult* by generations of audiences. The label cult is also instrumental to the long-term reputation of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or *Pink Flamingos*, films that can be said to be on perennial release, as well as to the cult status of *Emmanuelle*, which played in theaters for a full decade. As figureheads for a certain period and style, their long-term receptions are imbued with a sense of nostalgia,

one that is equally often a nostalgia for a period (a zeitgeist or a popular myth) as a nostalgia for a kind of cultic experience. For years, *El Topo* was virtually unavailable – it only made it more cult. The search for bootlegged copies of *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* quickly became a characteristic of its cult instead of an obstacle to it – as the vibrant illegal trade of VHS copies of it testifies.

As a result of these complications cult reception contexts ultimately remain exceptions to insights into how film receptions work. It is in this important sense that cult cinema is kept isolated from the mainstream – as an unresearchable, “fugitive” object with elusive receptions that don’t “work” and that are in essence, dysfunctional and unproductive.

## Cult Cinema as Phenomenal Experience

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The way into investigating cult cinema receptions, and cult cinema, as an object of research lies in operationalizing that exceptionalism. This is possible through the third view Stolniz isolates, namely objective relativism. This concept assumes value and meaning lie in between product and perceiver – in the actual *phenomenal experience* of the spectator, and the mutual material environment of both. Adopting a phenomenological perspective, argues Dudley Andrew (1985: 631), attempts to make visible reason “on the run.” When we look at the ways in which our exemplar of the midnight movie presents itself, a more matching approach hardly seems imaginable. There are several reasons why Stolniz’s practical form of phenomenology, objective relativism, and its focus on the phenomenal experience, provide a good framework for studying cult reception contexts.

First, the phenomenal experience is an aesthetic one. It is an experience that is sought for its own sake – as an end in itself. It sketches the experience as one that cannot be purposeful, that cannot be an end to a means. Otherwise the perception would shut down under pressure of the perceiver’s desire to find functions for the work (Fenner 2008: 104–106). There are several advantages to outlining the reception of cult cinema as a phenomenal experience of an aesthetic kind. It offers the opportunity to balance traditional

points of attention in a reception study (such as box office performance, critical reception, marketing, and so on) with a focus on elements such as emotive overtones, degrees of investment, or formations of attachment. It also offers a possibility to investigate terms such as loyalty, time-wasting, excessive idolatry, or enthrallment in a reception. These terms are exactly the kinds that are found time and again in descriptions of cult receptions as “useless.”

A second characteristic of seeing cult receptions as a phenomenal experience concerns the space in between the work and the perceiver. A phenomenal experience implies closeness, and so does cult cinema. This spatial relationship is to be understood as both geographical and mental. The cult film experience is indeed often described as one of close proximity to the screen (enthrallment with the giant canvas), to fellow viewers (huddled together in communion), and to the subject matter (overly close-reading of themes and motives). The two most commonly employed metaphors are that of the darkness of the theater (much loved in lyrical assessments of the midnight movie), or that of being glued to a home viewing set. The mental closeness refers to the viewer as someone near to the film, someone with a connection and an investment in it, and, as we will see in our discussions of fandom, someone with a sense of ownership over the film. At the same time the closeness also assumes that the object itself (the film) has some agency in the relationship, not only as carrier of cues and clues, but also something that first receives its meaning from the viewer and then talks back. Often, the closeness makes it difficult for the researcher to clearly distinguish between viewer- and object-agency (for an elaboration, see Miller 2010: 42–78).

A third characteristic Stolnitz draws is that of disinterestedness. Disinterestedness needs to be seen here not as a refusal to engage with a particular reception, nor as a position of free or detached engagement towards it, but rather as a form of decontextualized commitment, a sense of focus. It is not in the film that the cult reception is disinterested. Rather it concentrates intensely on everything to do with the film, the properties and appearances of which are interrogated and elaborated upon with detail and repetitively. Repeat viewing, as a physical reliving but also as a reactivation of emotion, is a key component and

recurrent characteristic of cult receptions (Wood 1991: 156–166, Châteauevert and Bates 2002: 90). The parallel with a religious exegesis of sacred texts is an obvious one. This is not to say that any attention for the rest of world is absent, only that it is viewed through the lens of the text and its affiliate discourses. Norman Kreitman (2006) employs the term “cultural disinterestedness” to identify this form of attention. He adds that it operates with a keen sense of the “generalized other,” and that it can achieve a feeling of liberation from immediate personal concerns. Jean Châteauevert and Tamara Bates (2002: 93) observe how film cultism always harbors the desire to know the other’s experience. For cult receptions, this characteristic is essential, as it highlights the extent to which the perception is always part of a larger whole – never limited only to one individual.

## Cult Cinema as Bad Experience

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An important qualification governing cult receptions is their perceived status as “bad,” as an inferior form of experience. Watching a film for its own sake, from really close up, and with an intense focus that channels everything else through that film’s perception in order for it to achieve meaning, is generally regarded as something an enlightened or informed viewer would not do. Ritual repeat-viewing is regarded as childish, boring, compulsive, but not tasteful. It goes, for instance, against the template of the cinophile as someone with an omnivorous curiosity and taste for films of quality.

Many cult reception contexts explicitly refer to the films as “bad,” as poor or distasteful filmmaking. This badness has moral as well as aesthetic components. In chapters throughout this book we will analyze instances of cult films that are celebrated because of their representations of transgression, abjection, freakery, grossness, gore, misogyny, or cruelty. Likewise, cult receptions are known to revel in exoticism, fetishism, idolatry, and repetitiveness. This badness is as frequently approached ironically as it is carried as a sign of pride.

The tendency to classify the cult experience as inferior depends largely upon the degree of rationality and freedom attributed to how people watch films.

Studies of receptions of cult films often deal with expert audiences (such as critics, connoisseurs, or taste leaders). Often this is for practical reasons: these groups are the ones who most visibly embrace the positive attitude, the direct access, and the obsession with detail typical for disinterestedness – they are the easiest to research. If one looks at some influential studies of film reception contexts, especially fan studies, that apply to cult cinema, one gets the impression there is an assumption all such viewers operate as perfectly rational agents, not affected by cultural or social conditions, and totally free to choose their affiliations (Peary 1981; Jenkins 1992; Sconce 1995, Taylor 1999). Not only is this an artificial form of rationality; it is also far removed from the reality of many cult receptions. The liberty to browse freely between kinds of receptions before electing one is balanced by personal inhibitions, and by the cultural and social conditions that influence the environment within which the phenomenal experience occurs. It seems obvious to state that choice is limited by the material conditions within a given time and place. Next to that, alignments and affiliations frequently come through certain cultural ties, such as class, gender, ethnicity, or heritage. To use Kreitman's terms: the sense of the generalized other often looms large. These conditions make concepts such as loyalty, affordability, and pride, *and* the connections between them (such as declaring a loyalty to an affordable item at a certain time and place as a source of pride) a key feature in cult cinema receptions. Yet many scholars of cult cinema and many researchers of film receptions overlook these conditions and consequences.

One of the most prominent scholarly efforts to address this limited freedom has come from Pierre Bourdieu (1984). According to Bourdieu, taste can be distinguished in “tastes of luxury” and “tastes of necessity.” Tastes of luxury are typical of the kind of freedom and limitless choice assumed by rational agency, though they can depend on habit as much as conscious decision-making. Tastes of necessity are, Bourdieu argues, the result of a “forced choice” that is fulfilled not only because it is an economic necessity but also a cultural reflex of people who “are inclined to fulfill it, because they have a taste for what they are anyway condemned to” (1984: 178). Bourdieu's conceptualization of taste as socially conditioned has been

very influential. Yet his conclusions are often criticized by studies of cult receptions that continue to assume that cult viewers exercise free taste. In fact, the cult receptions of “tasteless” films (gore, pornography, rape-revenge, video nasties, trash) are regarded as choices of luxury by cult fans who thereby assert themselves as taste leaders because they can elect to apply aesthetic criteria to otherwise unredeemable movies. Reading protocols such as “camp” and “paracinema,” which we will discuss at length in Chapter 8, are examples of this assertion.

One important exception to this view is the work of Mark Jancovich (2002). Paraphrasing Bourdieu, Jancovich sees these protocols as games of formalist sophistication: “As Bourdieu shows . . . the privileging of form over function asserts the ‘superiority [of the bourgeois] over those who, because they cannot assert the same contempt for . . . gratuitous luxury and conspicuous consumption, remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies’” (Jancovich 2002: 312). In this sense, cult receptions display tastes of necessity as much as tastes of luxury. Cult reception contexts can thus be conceptualized as sites of struggle between choices of necessity on the one hand and games of luxury typical to bastions of middle-class luxury such as college towns or urban centers like Manhattan (locations where the midnight movie blossomed) on the other hand, with “taste” (and tastelessness) as the tool of distinction between kinds of cult receptions.

## Cult Cinema as Collective Experience

A major way in which cult receptions are different from other forms of film receptions is that they are part of a collective process. We have already alluded to the fact that cult reception contexts work with a sense of the generalized other and that they are tied to social conditions of groups of people. Of course this notion is embedded in the very definition of the term cult as a community, a commonality of congregation that sees itself at odds with normalized culture. But it is not always this clear-cut. The collectivity of cult receptions is not just an aggregate of individual perceptions; it is more an impression of a collective effort that supersedes it. Put otherwise, the phenomenal

experience is a shared one, even when the actual perception occurs individually.

This means that the collectivity of cult receptions is frequently a sensibility in addition to a material fact. There have been numerous attempts to describe collective processes of cultural reception of this nature. Siegfried Kracauer (1926) and other members of the Frankfurt School of sociology, employed the terms “crowds” and “masses” to describe movie audiences unaware of each other’s presence yet attuned to the same points of interest. Throughout this book we will return to how film cultists and fans have been described through labels that stress collectivity. Overall, the intent was pejorative: by describing these audiences as groups they are denied individuality and agency – they are seen as an effect of their consumption rather than an active force shaping it.

Recent decades have seen a change in that patterning of collectivity. Benedict Anderson (1983) has used the term “imagined communities” to refer to autonomous and sovereign communities not based on face-to-face everyday contact yet sharing strong convictions and opinions. The conceptualization of community that comes closest to capturing the collectivity of cult receptions comes from Michel Maffesoli, who uses the term “affective communities” to describe what he regards as instances of neo-tribalism in contemporary society. According to Maffesoli (1996a: 40), such communities are active agents rather than powerless or passive recipients, even in their resistance to productivity. He observes how they place an emphasis on style and hedonism as a reaction against what is perceived as an increased instrumentalization of the world:

the more one encourages a “utensilitarian” conception of existence, then the more, as if in response, a sociality asserts itself, one that, on the contrary, rests on the imaginary, on an existential casualness, a search for hedonism, a shared pleasure in living, and on appearance and the play of forms. (Maffesoli 1996a: 40)

Maffesoli stresses how this reaction is shared and social, a collective effort. Furthermore, his observation of how it relativizes utilitarianism acknowledges the aesthetic component of the collectivity – a core component of the phenomenal experience. Maffesoli’s

preferred metaphor for this conceptualization is the mythical figure of Dionysus (see Chapter 12). Maffesoli’s description fits perfectly formations of fandom that have developed around cult receptions. It also matches the analysis of various subcultures (see Chapter 5).

Maffesoli (1993a, 1993c) further observes how collectivity is not always expressed in numbers, such as attendance figures. It often remains hidden (“imaginary”). The collectivity we speak of here is often an impression, a feeling of feeling together, an impression of solidarity and sharing that informs one’s emotional attitude, and not necessarily one’s material life (though it has effects in that material life). According to Maffesoli it is also a collectivity inspired by directness of experience, by hope, by a tendency to imagine other times (nostalgic pasts or utopian or even apocalyptic futures), and by a desire to dissociate itself from purposefulness. Instead of purpose it preferences “drifting” and the seeking of pleasure in what Maffesoli calls “the excesses of everyday life” (Maffesoli 2005; also see Mathijs 2010a). These elements certainly influenced the exemplar of the midnight movie, even in its post-heyday incarnations.

There is a tension between Maffesoli’s conceptions of collectivity and those underpinning a lot of studies of fans and subcultures. Maffesoli’s observations concentrate on radical degrees of collectivity that carry a deep suspicion of authority and an anarchist resistance to it, and that refuse to settle into “the real totalitarianism [of] interpretative systems [that] reinforce every social and political institution” (2005: 199). This is a collectivity of simultaneously active and passive opposition to dominant ideology that in its anti-intellectualism stands at odds with some more radical activist, utopian, and nihilist forms of cultism. It also stands at odds with more authority-friendly versions of cult reception contexts that see themselves less in opposition to dominant ideology and/or are co-opted into normalized patterns of consumption and behavior. Tensions between degrees of commitment in the collective experience, for instance between oppositional versus co-opted cult receptions, inclusive versus exclusive cult receptions, omnivorous versus univorous receptions, and sincere versus ironic or performative receptions, will inform much of our discussions of the cult experience.

At its broadest, for instance at moments when films such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *The Lord of the Rings* acquire a sort of cultural presence wider than their immediate niche appeal, the collective experience can be close to a sensibility that typifies a zeitgeist. At such moments it can be referred to as “part of the fabric” of society or a defining feature of the “social ambiance” (Maffesoli 1993b). When *The Lord of the Rings* films became a massive success some critics saw this as the result of the fact that its niche, which was frequently described as “geekdom,” was now no longer a cultist, marginal position “but a formative force in the cultural imagination of our times” (quoted in Biltreyst, Mathijs and Meers 2007: 46). In this book we will analyze specific articulations of various senses of collectivity on numerous occasions.

## Cult Cinema as Connected Experience

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In some of his analyses of affective communities, Maffesoli (1996b, 2007) remarks that they give rise to “networks of relationships” whereby the network itself creates a feeling of belonging. The implication is that next to the collectivity the very notion of the network is of importance to maintain a sense of togetherness. This observation is not new. The idea finds its roots in the 1950s, when the concept of “para-social interaction” became a central component in attempts to understand how mass media could offer viewers a sense of close interaction with performers (Horton and Wohl 1956). In the 1960s the idea also appeared in media theories and semiotics (the work of Marshall McLuhan, Umberto Eco, and Jean Baudrillard).

The concept of connectivity fully entered onto the foreground in the 1980s and 1990s, when the idea of the network became the point of focus of Manuel Castells, who employed it to posit the idea of a “network society” (1996–1998). According to Castells, the end of the twentieth century (and of the millennium) is a moment in which a new kind of global society is coming into place, one that is based on three processes: the information technology revolution, a string of crises in capitalism and statism, and the

coming of age of a range of social and cultural movements such as environmentalism, libertarianism, and feminism (what Maffesoli would call “neo-tribes”). Castells calls this emerging society one of “real virtuality” – a pun on one of its technological tools of imagination, virtual reality, but also an indication of how much of that new society exists as a network of links and connections between “cultural communes,” which produce what Castells calls “global hypertexts,” units of information in constant flow. Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum, the copy without original, is a powerful influence on this vision (Castells 1998: 336; also see Bell 2006: 55). Castells’ network society is not a program for an ideal world, nor is it a dire forecast for a dystopic world – it explains how “bad” and “good” cultural communes exist in spite of public spheres that pressure them.<sup>2</sup>

If we apply the idea of the network to cult reception contexts the emphasis shifts from the “essence” of these groups (that what makes them unique) to the ways in which they establish and differentiate themselves in relation to the rest of the world (that what connects them) through the quantities and qualities of their connectedness. In theory, this allows for the mapping of cult receptions in terms of their proximities, alignments, or affiliations as much as in terms of their isolated identities. It is a perspective that is less concerned with the preservation of the essence of each group in alignments between communes or tribes (to use Maffesoli’s term) and more with how the tangents through which they share contexts of action shape their existence.

Since Maffesoli and Castells presented their ideas there have been a number of attempts to apply them to cultist receptions. Joshua Meyrowitz (2002) uses the concept of connectedness in relation to fan obsessions and degrees of intimacy between fans and celebrities – what he calls the cult of media friendship. Diken and Laustsen (2002) discuss *Fight Club* as a film about cultural communities (for instance neo-fascist ones). Judith Halberstam (2003) and Angela Wilson (2008) use it to examine lesbian punk-rock and Riot Grrrl subcultures. Bernard Cova, Robert Kozinets, and Avi Shankar (2007) apply it to the receptions of goth subculture, surf culture, and *Star Trek* wikimedia. It also informs numerous studies of online fandom. What remains under-researched is how links *between*

micro-groups fuel cult receptions. Early twenty-first-century cult films such as *Donnie Darko*, *Ichi the Killer* or *Ginger Snaps* have derived at least part of their cult reputation from crossing over between various cultural communities, and as such they are perfect illustrations of how the connected experience affects cinema cultism, fandom, and subcultures. For instance, the cult status of *Ginger Snaps* largely lies with how it links cultists from various cultural communities (horror, Goth, lesbian, feminist) around an affective catch-phrase (“morbid sisters”) that allows the building or sustaining of bridges between each of these communes—it is a “facilitator” of crossovers (Figure 1.2). In that sense, *Ginger Snaps* is an exemplar of a new kind of cult reception, equally deep in its commitment, but less easily pinned down to just one type, and because of that more empowered. For the study of cult cinema this perspective can be of great importance. For one, the concept of connectedness

explains how a shift might be needed from studying cult receptions in function of finding their essence to studying them in function of how they connect to each other.

### Cult Cinema as Surplus Experience

Cult reception contexts frequently upset protocols of meaning making. Next to generating values that can be understood in terms of the mainstream (i.e. in terms of productivity and functionality) cult reception contexts generate what Paul Ricoeur has called a “surplus of meaning and of value which is qualified but not exhausted by analysis” (quoted in Andrew 1985: 631). We would call it surplus experience.

In cult receptions, a connection equals an intimate affiliation, and what is connected acquires power. In a move to update Marxist methodologies of



**Figure 1.2** A collage of imagery from *Ginger Snaps* arranged around the “morbid sisters” motive and dialog: “out by sixteen or dead in this scene, together forever.”

understanding material culture, Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1990) argued that objects – such as films – do not uniquely occupy a use value (their practical value) or even exchange value (their monetary value), but that they rely on symbolic value: they trigger needs and desires which attract cultist affections – such as investments in paraphernalia, antiques, or memorabilia. The connections of such objects, and object-signs, to each other generates a complex network of proxy seductions and fetishisms. One example of this is the appearance of an actor at a fan convention, where they sign autographs on posters and where, via exclusive meet-and-greet sessions, distinctions are drawn between those who can converse with the actor, and those who remain outside that circle. These networks of seduction, appropriation, and fetishism can be summarized as what Andrew Ross (1989: 210) has called a “cult of knowledge and expertise.” In terms of value, these networks produce as a surplus value: they are the outcome of a form of labor in which the involvement of the perceiver is crucial, but which is not generally recognized as a productive effort, and does not render a direct profit. Therefore the surplus generated by cultist details is often called wasteful, a “geeky” self-indulgence that does not advance cinema, or improve the material conditions or cultural literacy of the perceiver. The components informing these extensions of the perception process are furthermore elusive, obfuscated, and difficult to chart because they exist at the margins of what is accepted as evidence and material fact: gossip, trivia, hearsay, legend, prejudice, are often relegated as pieces of information, excluded from data as insignificant. Because of their contentious nature they pose a challenge to methods of analysis (they are almost impossible to codify, quantify, or qualify). In terms of a cult reception context it means cultists will always look for a further meaning, even when there is none, because connecting things gives the impression that one displays expertise and is, hence, powerful.

A complication is that not all elements of a cult reception are of equal weight. Nor does the physical film itself remain at the center of its reception. Klinger (1989) has called attention to the ways in which actions accompanying the reading of a film allow for “digressions” in which contextual information provides clues for enjoyment and communication

with the text that compete with the ones in the text itself. This is at least in part informed by an ability to connect the (experience of the) text to an active knowledge of (and willingness to use) contextual or ancillary information. Some receptions disregard a film’s features altogether. The video nasties (films whose UK video releases were caught up in a controversy in the early 1980s) are an example where a reputation of a group of films developed independent of their intentions or even their actual content: they were lumped together by the press, and subsequently by prosecutors, for their supposed impact on the viewer, not because they shared any common features (Barker 1984; Egan 2007). Furthermore, some meanings cannot be seen in separation of other texts, such as sequels, remakes, serializations, or re-imaginings. Trailers, double bills, directors’ cuts, added footage, accompanying soundtracks, retrospectives, revivals, rediscoveries, restorations, prequels, spoofs, and new cultural sensibilities all impact on that reception. Literally anything can change public opinion on a film, as is demonstrated by Klinger’s (1994) research on the changing status of the films of Douglas Sirk, and Cynthia Erb’s (1998) study of the changes in the reputation of *King Kong* as a cultural icon after numerous remakes, appropriations, and parodies. Any research into a cult reception context, then, needs to integrate the complex patterns of influences and opinions operating in particular situations (synchronically), and maps them as processes over time (diachronically), all analyzed as types of “talk” – uttered by those involved in the production, presentation, and perception – in order to map the combinations of strategies used to forge (or fail) meaning. The obsessive mining for details and endless *kinds of talk* imply an *explosive* and *completist* frame of reference for cult receptions. For those outside that frame of reference any knowledge it generates is irrelevant, *only* surplus.

There have been numerous attempts to conceptualize the obsession with connectedness and cross-talk. According to Dana Polan (1978) they are part of an increase in “self-reflexivity” of cinema. Robert Stam (1985) has called it “reflexivity.” Umberto Eco (1986) sees it as “intertextuality.” Danielle Aubry and Gilles Visy (2009) label it “transtextuality.” Whatever its label, early attempts regard the concept as a

countercurrent to cinema's mainstream. Polan calls it Brechtian; Stam links it to Jean-Luc Godard's interrogations of film language. But in later discussions of the concept it is less seen as exceptional and more as a routine or protocol that has gradually been embedded into the very fabric of cult film, as well as into the range of expectations audiences have of cult films, so that every cult film becomes intertextual by default – that is how Mathijs and Mendik (2008a) present it. There are some small but significant differences between the various ways in which this cross-talk is discussed. We will address these in chapters that analyze the specific contexts in which they are used (see Chapters 2, 17, 18, 21).

There is some dispute over connectedness and cross-talk as surplus experience. One school of thought holds that the obsession with trivia is playful and revealing yet without relevance for the perceiver. The affiliations that connections allow are less causal than rhetorical, circumstantial, or incidental. They can be made for the sake of it. For Robert Stam (1985), the way in which films can invite connections, and be reflexive, is a sign of their aesthetic maturity. It testifies of expertise in contemporary culture, of posture to show off one's social standing within an existing cultural constellation, but also of a need to demonstrate some connections are indeed precious in a society that increasingly comes across as detached, specialized, and fragmented. But it does not do anything of a wider cultural relevance (see Chapter 21 for an elaboration). Against that view stands another school of thought, which claims that if one looks carefully at the moral and political consequences of the obsession with details, it becomes clear that they can *also* be used to uproot existing constellations and instead promote revolutionary ideals (Ross 1989; Havis 2008). Thinking through the ideological implications of the

“transgressions” of culture that occur in films said to be cult can create imbalances, provoke controversies, and stimulate utopian ideas. Through their fascination with details, then, the surplus experience that cult receptions generate allows audiences to “imagine” another world with other rules, and laugh at that world at the same time. It creates a rebellious attitude of defiance at odds with what dominant forces in a society endorse.

## Conclusion: Cult as Performance?

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In this chapter we have argued that cult cinema is best served by an approach that has its philosophical roots in a practical form of phenomenology. We have moved in this chapter from cult cinema's paradigmatic exemplar, the midnight movie, and the smallest possible unit of perception, the spectator, to the largest possible, a society, and we have identified the cult experience on each of these levels. Needless to say all of these levels inform each other.

In conclusion, we would like to highlight one aspect that we briefly touched upon in our summary of the history of the midnight movie, namely the fact that in several cases the cult is less lived than performed. The distinction between an actual, sincere, and authentic cult experience and a performance of one is difficult to make and we will argue throughout this book that in many cases it is virtually impossible to make the distinction. In most of our chapters we will discuss instances of cult receptions and indeed of moments in cult films that can both be seen as authentic *as well as* a performance of an experience. We will tie some of those debates into an organized view on just how performative a cult experience and, by extension, the very notion of cult is.

## Notes

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1. In Paris, it is often associated with the ten-year run of *Emmanuelle*. In Los Angeles it has kept close links to the underbelly of Hollywood, with a special interest in reviving “maudit” and “bad” Hollywood films such as *Plan Nine from Outer Space* or *The Room*. In London it is connected to

the vibrant nightlife of Soho. In Antwerp cinemas like *The Monty* linked to the cosmopolitan attractions a port brings. In Ottawa it is still associated with the Mayfair cinema, whereas in Vancouver all original midnight movie houses have been replaced by multimedia centers such as

the Rio Theatre. San Francisco (with its Roxy Theater and Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive), Cambridge MA (with its Brattle Theater, which started the *Casablanca* cult), and Montreal (with its Rue St Catherine repertory theaters) also had lively midnight scenes. Many American college towns, such as Ann Arbor, MI, Madison, WI, Austin, TX, or Lexington, KY, also were, or are, at some point or another, thriving markets for midnight movie programming (Waller, 1991).

2. The concept of connectedness has been the subject of discussion for many decades, from the experiments of psychologist Stanley Milgram in the 1960s, to Malcolm Gladwell's musings on "Connectors" as people essential

to setting trends. The concept of connectedness gained popularity in the early 1990s when it became the central metaphor of John Guare's play *Six Degrees of Separation*. In the play, a character declares: "I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation." (Guare 1994: 81). According to Gene Plunka (2005: 352), Guare's play exposes how in an attempt to "make a difference and feel we belong" the only thing one *can* do is *connect*. A revealing variation of the degrees of separation concept is the cult game *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*. The challenge is to connect actor Kevin Bacon to as many other celebrities in as few steps as possible.