

# the dark side of the rainbow

## *The cult movie phenomenon - part I*

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Try as one might, an article on cult films can almost certainly not start without posing the question: 'What is a cult film?'

Unfortunately there is no singular definitive answer. Ask twenty people what their definition of a cult film is, and you will most likely end up with twenty different answers, or at least twenty different variations on a similar theme.

The wonder and enjoyment of cult films, however, is the very diversity and sense of mystery surrounding this twentieth century phenomenon. In reality there is no way of defining this subsection of cinema, but for the sake of some semblance of clarity, let's have a look at what some people define a cult film to be.

One of the earliest books, *Cult moves*, a compendium of approximately 60 films on cult movies, was written by Danny Peary in 1981. In its preface he states that 'cult movies are always marked by excess and controversy far beyond that usually permitted by Hollywood'. This may have been an accurate description at the time he wrote this much re-issued and updated book, but it doesn't quite make allowance for many films (classic and modern) that have achieved cult status.

The standard first port of call for information on the World Wide Web (after Google), Wikipedia, states that 'A cult film is a film

that has acquired a highly devoted, but specific group of fans'.

They make a very valid point, and we may be getting closer to understanding what all the fuss is about. Another Internet resource I found is Wise Geek ([www.wisegeek.com](http://www.wisegeek.com)) who proclaims that 'a cult film refers to a movie that has a devoted following, perhaps underserved by the movie's quality, box office performance, or critical reviews'.

Again, we seem to be getting closer to an at least vaguely acceptable definition. Yet another resource is Combustible Celluloid ([www.combustiblecelluloid.com](http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com)). Their semi-elaborate definition goes as follows: 'A cult movie is a movie that earns a fanatical following by a small group of people. It's also a movie that bears [repeated viewing], and contains memorable, repeatable dialogue. Cult movies preferably [consist of] socially unacceptable ingredients, such as horror, sex, violence, or science fiction.' ('Science fiction is socially unacceptable?' I hear the Sci-Fi enthusiasts ask.)

One more site, [www.ehow.com](http://www.ehow.com) has the following to say: 'Cult films are defined by a comparatively small yet fanatically devoted group of fans. Beyond that, they can come in almost any form, from campy pieces of schlock to ambitious and intellectually complex films which the world as a whole never quite warmed to. Particulars vary from cult film to cult film, but a few generalised traits can be found in the vast majority of them.'

This comes very close to a true definition.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, contributor to a symposium on cult films for the American Quarterly magazine *Cineaste* implies that a cult film is a film that attracts the special interest of a particular group. Jamie Sexton, his colleague, makes the point that cult films have a niche appeal and therefore tend to be positioned as films that are in some manner against or outside of the mainstream. In his rather lengthy definition he continues to mention that cult films tend to give rise to passionate attachments. As many reading this article might well relate to when thinking of *The Rocky Horror picture show* or *The sound of music*.

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In short . . . a cult film seems to be a film with a distinct, passionate following, and may consist of subject matter that is not considered mainstream, or is even socially unacceptable.

Now that the inevitable question of defining a cult film has been (somewhat) clarified, let us move on to the more enjoyable part of the exploration of this unique section of cinema, and explore some examples, and their significance and contribution to it.

If we assume that cult movies are a sub-genre of cinema in general, it is interesting then to note that these films appeal largely to subcultures of society. Some of these may, for example, be the gay/lesbian subculture, the drug subculture, the 'white-collar' or the 'Bohemian/Artistic' set. It is a sub-genre for a subculture. It is similar to the concept of 'a wheel within a wheel'.

Examples of films that appeal to the gay/lesbian subculture could be **The Wizard of Oz** (1939), **The adventures of Priscilla, queen of the desert** (1996), and of course, the seminal **The Rocky Horror picture show** (1975). Examples of films with an appeal to the drug subculture would include **The trip** (1967, featuring a young Jack Nicholson), **Easy rider** (1969, again with Jack Nicholson), **Christiane F** (1981), and **Reefer madness** (1936, remade as a musical [of all things!] in the 1990s). For the white collar society films such as **Office space** (1999) may ring true, and for the Bohemian set, the

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list seems to be endless, from the films of Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí: **Un Chien Andalou** (1929), and **L'Age D'Or** (1930), to the confounding efforts of Alain Resnais's 1961 contribution **Last year at Marienbad** to almost any off-kilter foreign film produced in the last seventy years or so.

If you do not recognise some of the above titles, do not despair. Cult films are not solely relegated to the obscure. Numerous mainstream films have become cult successes. In this instance think of **Four**



▲ *The Rocky Horror picture show*

weddings and a funeral (1994), **Gone with the wind** (1939), **E.T. - The extra-terrestrial** (1982), **Jaws** (1975), **Raiders of the Lost Ark** (1981). Interestingly the last three mentioned films are directed by Steven Spielberg, a man who caters for the masses, which makes one wonder about that earlier definition of a cult movie being one that may appeal to a small group of people.

As some of the modern titles suggest, cult movies are still being made, despite a popular belief that they are something of the past. Indeed, it is becoming rarer for recently produced films to become cult favourites. Even modern titles initially embraced as cult films have been forgotten by their fans in less than a decade. Yet they do still occur, but with more and more rarity. Why is this?

The question has as many answers as our first question of the definition of cult films had. To keep things brief, it relates to extremely high production values of mainstream Hollywood films, the change of the studio system (there really are no more such things as 'B-movies', that beloved staple of the 1950s), the loss and closure of repertory cinema theatres in the United States in the 1980s, and the advent of digital media.

It is perhaps the advent of digital media that has dealt the growth of cult movies a severe blow. Before the 1970s, if there was a particular film you liked very much, you would have to check your local newspaper in the hope that the film might be playing at

some old bughouse movie house (Cape-tonians might remember The Roxy Theatre as one such venue). Or if you were living in the USA, then your hope would be to catch some late night rerun of the film on television. Following that the 1980s saw the rise of VHS and BETAMAX video recorders and players, which made it easier to rent or record from television your favourite film, and later also the chance to buy them. DVD and Blu-ray, our current trends (not to mention Internet downloads - legal, or otherwise - have made it even easier to watch what you want and when you want to watch it, making the sourcing and availability of an inexhaustible array of film titles as easy as tucking into a box of popped corn.

The fact is that the rarity and sporadic availability of most of what we know today as cult classics is a major part of why they became known as such. Back then people would frantically ask their friends and co-workers if they didn't perhaps have a copy of a certain film, or know of a theatre where it's showing. Today you click a button, and within an hour to 14 days you have your very own copy to enjoy. This is why few of our latest films become cult movies, yet . . . but time will tell.

Just to briefly return to the definitions of cult films, it may be helpful to return to the article mentioned at the beginning published in *Cineaste* magazine. In its introduction it refers to the many 'faces' of cult films.

Among them are mentioned: 1) Shock and schlock; 2) Nostalgia; 3) Marginality; 4) Intensity and passion; 5) Marketing hype; and 6) Historical era markers (or bookmarks, if you like).

I'd like to mention some films which I think fit nicely into these 'categories' of cult films, as I think they cover some of the most important components of what makes a film a cult film.

## shock and schlock

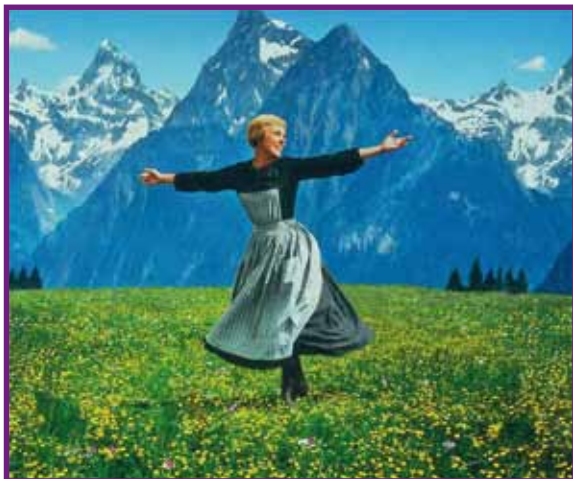
(If you will pardon the shocking use of 'slang')

Someone once said to me it seemed that most cult movies were either horror films or science fiction films. This person had made a succinct observation. Indeed, it seems that if one is intent on intentionally producing a cult film, your best option of genre would indeed be horror and/or science fiction. If one had to make a random list of, say, one hundred well-regarded cult films, one can say with almost complete certainty that at least 70 of those films would fall into this genre.

If the reader is not convinced of this statement, allow me to mention (very briefly) a dozen or so films which very strongly (that is, hardly anyone disputes their cult status) fall into this category:

**Cat people** (1942), **The day the earth stood still** (1951), **Forbidden planet** (1956), **Psycho** (1960), **The birds** (1963), (the latter two both by Alfred Hitchcock), **Night of the living dead** (1968), **Planet of the apes** (1968), **The exorcist** (1973), **The Texas chain saw massacre** (1974), **The wicker man** (1974), **Halloween** (1978), **The shining** (1980), **Blade runner** (1982), **Evil**

### ▼ *The sound of music*



**dead** (1982), **Dune** (1984), and **Terminator** (1984).

Indeed, the list is quite literally endless. The shock element in most of these films is what turned mainstream audiences away (at least after their initial release), but kept the die-hard fans repeatedly coming back for more, eventually bestowing on these films the title of 'cult classic'. Horror has, and always will be, an almost certain indicator of a film's chances of becoming part of this subgenre.

Another point worth mentioning is that the majority of cult films carry (or at least did at the time of their release) an age restriction, prohibiting rebellious teens from seeing them, thus making these films 'forbidden fruit'. One to be sourced, and plucked later on when they were out from their parents' control. And what is sweeter than forbidden fruit? This also could add to the reason films become cult films long after release. Imagine almost an entire generation flocking to see **Rock around the clock** or **Monty Python's the life of Brian** for the first time many years after its release.

Furthermore, due to most studios these days catering for younger audiences, and not wanting to court high age restrictions (which spells loss of revenue), it might also be yet another reason why so few new 'true' cult movies are being formed in our time.

## nostalgia

As briefly mentioned before, the sense of nostalgia audiences have for their favourite films is a huge contributing factor to what becomes a cult film, and what does not.

Many a wallflower becomes suddenly overexcited when the subject of **The sound of music**, or **The way we were** or **Beastmaster** or **Superman**, et cetera, comes up in the conversation. Were they particularly well produced, significant contributions to cinema? Mostly no, but one can be sure to expect such exclamations as: 'Oh I LOVE that movie!' to come up more than once or twice. And if you are less fortunate, that wallflower will suddenly sprout quotes from his/her favourite

film, and jabber on for an hour about it.

The reason? Nostalgia. Simone Signoret, the French actress, titled her autobiography **Nostalgia is not what it used to be**, and this might also go some way to explain why there is a decline in new/fresh titles to add to this genre.

## marginality

People who feel marginalised have always tended to stick together; to identify with those of like minds. The same goes for marginalised people and films depicting the same, subsequently lending these films a subculture of their own. Examples may include films dealing with race issues, sexual orientation (gay/bi-sexual, transgender,



▲ *Dead Poets Society*

transvestite), xenophobia, et cetera. Some titles that come to mind are **Boys don't cry** (1999), **A clockwork orange** (at a stretch) (1971), **Harold and Maude** (for the taphophiles out there) (1971), **Rebel without a cause** (for teenagers of all eras) (1955), and **Dead Poets Society** (for the 'outsider' artists) (1989).

## intensity and passion

This is a difficult category to define or to provide examples of, as intensity and passion seem to be the one element which all cult movies have in common.

What is meant by intensity and passion is that these are films that people feel intensely passionate about. Some might say they would quite literally fight to defend the honour of their chosen favourite cult films. Some examples may include the perennial **The Rocky Horror picture show** ('How can



anyone not understand this film?' they would protest); almost any film by directors Tim Burton and David Lynch; **Monty Python and the Holy Grail** (1975); **Yentl** (1983) (Barbra Streisand pretending to be a Yiddish boy? What's not to love?); and so forth. Many of the readers of this article will surely know someone in their family or circle of friends who often quote, or refer to these films – now that's passion!

## marketing hype

To twenty-first century people, this is surely the easiest concept to understand. We are constantly bombarded with marketing in all fields, including from the film studios promoting their latest wares. Who can forget the hype surrounding the release of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy? Or the overwhelming campaign to promote the *Harry Potter* films? Going back a few decades the merchandising for films like the *Star Wars* trilogy and **E.T.** was something the world had not known until that time. These films were made with an almost deliberate *intent* of becoming cult movies. And have they? Yes, they have!

## historical era markers (bookmarks)

These are the films that so typically identify a period of our history that they (again) invoke a feeling of nostalgia. Such films include **American Graffiti** (1973), **Radio Days** (1987), et cetera.

## the best of the rest

Certain genres of film also lend themselves to the cult subgenre. Aside from the horror and thriller genre mentioned earlier, films that fall into the category of musical, action, or erotica have also added a large number of films to the cult cinema.

Some of these films have become legends in their own right. **The Wizard of Oz** (1939) enchanted children and adults alike, and decades on has become a film identified with the gay sub-culture, where gay men often refer to each other as 'friends of Dorothy' (a reference to Judy Garland's character Dorothy Gale in the film). Even the drug subculture has embraced this film, and rumour has it that when the film is watched (with the aid of psychedelic drugs) alongside to the soundtrack of Pink Floyd's seminal album, **The Dark Side of the Moon**, the film has a whole new meaning. Who knows if this is true or not, but it is a fascinating urban legend that one just cannot help but wonder about . . .



▲ *La Dolce Vita*

**Singin' in the Rain** (1952) is yet another musical which has taken root in cult cinema. It is over the top comedy, and lavish production values may have something to do with it – also the inclusion in the cast of Debbie Reynolds, who has a cult following of her own (very cleverly exploited in the cross-dressing camp comedy **Connie and Carla** in recent years.)

Of course musicals like **Cabaret** have become cult classics for obvious reasons (least of which is the fact that **The Wizard of Oz** star Judy Garland's daughter Liza Minnelli takes the lead). The seediness and moral decay which serve as the backdrop to this truly

remarkable film are the true stars of this film, directed by the legendary Bob Fosse.

As mentioned earlier, any subject matter which seems to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, often provide us with cult classics. And which subject other than erotica (let's keep this family friendly) can push that envelope to the limit?

Films such as **Emmanuelle** (1974), **Behind the Green Door** (1972), **Deep Throat** (1972), **Caligula** (1979) (what is it with the 1970s and erotica?), and **Betty Blue** (1986), has piqued the interest of even prudish cinema goers over the years, enough for them to have even just a little peek.

Even silent films feature strongly in the subgenre of cult films (perhaps largely because of their scarcity and small following?). Remarkable films were produced during that time. Some of the best include **Pandora's box** (1929) with Louise Brooks sporting her trademark bobcut hairstyle. **Birth of a nation** (1915) caused riots upon its release due to its overt racism against black Americans. **Nosferatu** (1922) was controversial on so many levels that a film, **Shadow of the vampire**, was made about the making of the film a few years back. More importantly, in its Germanic expressionistic style, it utilised the art of never-again-heard-of actor Max Schreck to produce some of cinema's most truly frightening images of all time.

The films of Charlie Chaplin (who was a die-hard producer of silent films, even a decade after the advent of sound) produces so many cult classics that one is forced to choose just a few as the best examples.

**Modern times**, an indictment of industrialism, and **The little tramp** are among the best of his work, yet, as mentioned, there is hardly a film by this genius of silent comedy which is not worthy of inclusion. (For die-hard fans of the master, try and source a copy of **The circus** – a little-known, but hilariously funny film).

Foreign films (defined for our purposes here as films produced outside the USA and UK, or filmed in a language other than English), have provided a plethora of additions to cult cinema. Federico Fellini certainly provided his fair share with titles such as **La Strada**, **La Dolce Vita** and **8 ½**.

Other interesting titles in this genre include the film noir; **A Bout De Soufflé**, **The bicycle thief**, **Das Boot**, **Last year at Marienbad**, **La Belle et La Bette** and many more.

Documentaries, mockumentaries, war movies, disaster films (think **Titanic**, **The towering inferno**, **Earthquake**, et cetera), children's movies, epic films, fantasy movies and such have contributed to this weird and wonderful world of cult cinema.

Cult cinema may have experienced its heyday before, or during the advent of videocassettes, and most certainly before the days of DVD and Blu-ray, but luckily the field is so expansive that even if one lives to be a hundred years old, one will never be able to see all the films generally considered true cult movies. But one can try ...

The field of cult cinema is just as strange and difficult to define as some of the examples of it are to watch, but it is a fascinating

subgenre of cinema that no true lover of the silver screen can afford to ignore. So go ahead, be thrilled, be scared out of your wits, laugh as loudly as you can, be as revolted or disgusted as you wish, sing along, and dance as if no one is listening or watching you, and by all means make use of the wonderful selection of films (on VHS and DVD) which is available in CPLS, and explore this marvelously malevolent, magnificently malicious, divinely decadent world of cult cinema. It's all there for you, waiting in antici.....pation!

*Note: In the next issue a detailed list of stock on hand in this genre will be published.*

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### internet resources

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