Which came first, the cinéphile or the cultist? This simple question of generation or periodization opens out onto rather murky waters. These two forms of film love seem, at first glance, to be strange bedfellows: the former defined by a tradition of ciné-clubs, demitasse cups, art houses, little film magazines, and modernist tastes, the latter by midnight screenings, excessive bodies, ruptured decorum, talking at the screen and subterranean circulation. But are these superficial differences that conceal points of convergence within a history of living in and with the cinema? One is left with a nagging sense that these seemingly distinct forms of cinematic feeling and connoisseurship are in many ways actually one and the same.

In his recent collection Sleaze Artists, Jeffrey Sconce connects the genealogy of these two uniquely obsessive forms of reception, using Pauline Kael's essay "Trash, Art and the Movies" to suggest that cinéphiles are joined together in their adulation and preoccupations: not with the "good" but with the "bad movie." Sconce's apt regard for these two forms of movie love takes their linkage as self-evident. Tracking these idiosyncratic modes of devotion, we might see a set of intersections between the B-movie and the French New Wave, the Surrealist shock tactic and the Troma schlock repertoire. If my account here prioritizes a connection between the French and the American contexts of the "ciné-maudit" and the "film freak," it is not to disqualify other national or global networks of filmic engagement, but only to trace a set of tendencies that find apt pairing in the exaltation of French cinephilic traditions and their cross-pollination with cultism in the contexts of American film culture.

Connections between cinéphiles and cultists are buried deep within the history of cinema. As J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum note in their seminal book Midnight Movies, the American film critic Harry Alan Potamkin, referring to the developing cinemania around silent comedians Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, was the first to identify the presence of the film cult in 1932. He also recognized the European antecedent to the American slapstick cult in French film culture of the 1920s, where other popular American films, some of which Potamkin thought beneath contemplation, were valued as forms of art. The French staging grounds for cultism, obliquely linked by Potamkin to Surrealism, bridged the distance between American and French artistic and popular traditions, and contravened the border between high and low forms. Resonating with Potamkin's observations from across the pond, Salvador Dali would in 1932 proclaim the Marx Brothers' Animal Crackers, a triumph of "concrete irrationality," stating that such films "mark an authentic route to poetry." And late Surrealist Ado Kyrou famously quipped that it was the "worst films" that were the truly sublime, fusing the esthetic appeals of the exalted and the debased, the pornographic and the redemptive. That Un chien andalou would find its way into cult fanzines and video catalogs fifty years later would probably not have ruffled the Surrealists. Their pleasure-taking in the dregs of cinema established some of the terms that would embolden the rise of the cult film as a distinct category of cinematic experience. That cultism glories in the "magnificent failures" of film history, and in shock, horror, surprise, and varieties of generic deformation, returns us to the basic principles of Surrealism and the faith in the powers of the cinema to transform our perceived reality.

In another strand of French cinephilia, from Jean Epstein to André Bazin, we see a cultlike critical tradition studded with a salvaging, found art ethos, one that Paul Willemsen has called a "discourse of revelation." Epstein’s critical concept of photogénie privileged the ineffable materiality of the film image and the spectator’s encounter with it. Photogénie exemplified a kind of cinephile rapture, a sensibility which highlighted that "what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown." This model of discernment required a working on cinema, a traversal of and within the film frame, a seizing of a previously unnoticed "cinéphiliac moment" for exegesis and criticism, even if the detail often appeared unexpectedly, evaded sufficiently rational language, and settled instead into the realm of the ritual and the sublime.
shoved with the "white wine and canapes crowd," in the interests of seeing exposed female flesh. Through a set of geographical overlaps between the sure-seater and the nude house, Roger Vadim's Bardot could touch base with Russ Meyer's *Lorna*. As the gap between high and low narrowed, their attendant taste publics began to intermingle.

Before cult film became a phenomenon associated with treading the lower, sometimes libidinal, depths of film history through time-shifting technologies like video, the cultist sensibility was piecing together a set of relations to the fragments of Hollywood's fading past. This fertile period saw the change of focus from the film star as cult object towards the understanding of films as products of director-creators, of recognizable generic formulae, and of distinct modes of production. Gloria Swanson's swan song in *Sunset Boulevard* and Joan Crawford and Bette Davis' showcasing of the grotesque horrors of aging beauty in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, highlighted these industrial and spectatoral transformations: the decline of studio product seen through the allegory of the star body's deterioration. New modes of film practice also became visible through Hollywood's temporary decline in the 1960s, bringing an awareness of different horizons of film experience, of different kinds of movies, and of variant ways to make them and to view them.

The pop avant-garde of Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, and the Kuchar brothers was in fact turning cultism into a project of filmic authorship. Greg Taylor has detailed this fascinating history, observing how the critical legacy of postwar film critics Manny Farber and Parker Tyler diffused into practices of filmmaking and the production of an alternative esthetic. Employing cult ritual and camp irony, the New York underground filmmakers transposed their own cine-cultist spectatorship into their films. Smith manufactured the star cult of the unknown B-movie actress Maria Montez in the pages of *Film Culture* and in the frames of *Flaming Creatures*, and Mike Kuchar gave earnestly kitsch homage to comic strips and creaky science-fiction movies in *Sins of the Fleshpaps*. These and other underground films fused the cinéphile and the cult, breathing life into seemingly degraded mass cultural forms and bestowing camp playfulness to the rattling ghosts of the filmic past.

As the underground film waned by the late 1960s, the baton of authorship seemed to get passed to those unforeseen rebels in the theater seats. Underground film screenings in the 1960s were already tenaciously hectic affairs, often likened to Happenings, and they set the terms for broader appropriation and dispersion. Camp had been ousted by Susan Sontag as a sensibility and penchant for the outdated and the malformed, and was quickly seized on by the press and by the youth cultural affinities of the decade's popular culture. Parker Tyler who had in many ways introduced this mode of "erotic spectatorship" in his own books of the 1940s began decrying its massification. His 1958 essay "On the Cult of Displaced Laughter" presaged the rise of an esthetic disdain that still permeates our cultural present. Tyler wrote regarding a moviegoing nostalgia on the part of both cinéphiles and middlebrows that produced, out of the pathos of the tragic and the preposterousness of the fantastic, the brute comedy of anachronism: "maybe it is chthonic laughter to which the cult leaders and art albums of the film world invite us: the chthonic laughter that belongs to Hades and the grave as well as to the womb—from-which—all-things-come." Predicting the arrival of the midnight movie by about fifteen years and the championing of "bad taste" for its own sake.
somewhat later, Tyler's investment in esthetic value and discernment was itself becoming outdated.

The efflorescence of the midnight-movie circuit in the early 1970s, in urban locales like the Elgin Theater in New York's Chelsea neighborhood as well as in college towns, seemed to shift the field, from the "death of the author," to the (re)birth of the audience. The performative collectivity of the 1970s midnight movie made the experience of the cult film a spectacle of postcountercultural protest—engendered in repetition and reenactment, a badge of much vaunted ritual and refusal. The high period of midnight movie cultism needed cinema's new alibi of esthetic value in order to thwart it, just as John Waters' queer gross-out cinema needed liberal bourgeois propriety so as to mock it—with Divine tenderizing a filet mignon between her meaty legs. In the context of the acquisition of cinema's mantle of high art, the cult film could reconstruct the oppositions between high- and lowbrow tastes with the exceeding forcefulness of its outré images, its messy bodies, and its unruly fans. If cinephilia represented an idealist view of the cinema in terms of the plumbing of its esthetic capacities for a quasi-religious experience, the cult film of the 1970s retorted with an equally ritualistic antiesthetic, taking the principle of failure—on visual, cultural and political grounds—as its guiding logic.

Perhaps the midnight movie directed a retroactive gaze onto one of film history's founding myths: the audiences of the first public film screening at the Grand Café in Paris, where spectators of the Lumière brothers' film *Arrival of a Train at the Station* purportedly thrilled and chilled to the projected sight of an onrushing train. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* seemed to wishfully reenact the fantasy of those past
Robot Monster (1953) tells the old familiar story of a space alien who resembles a gorilla in a modified diving helmet who follows orders to destroy everyone on Earth, and, while trying to eliminate the last six people, falls in love with a young woman (photo courtesy of Photofest).

shocks and pleasures, precisely as performance. The Rocky Horror experience exhibited a desire to feel the cinema as if violently new again, but also mobilized a notion of it as the living dead. No matter how the myth of cinema’s earliest audiences has been debunked, the “chthonic” energies of cult restaged an encounter with the imagined spectator of the filmic past, an uneasy balancing act between naiveté and world-weariness. Cult film reception signaled a need for the feeling of being rented from customary modes of perception—while tacitly acknowledging that everything, every flourish, stylistic technique, and esthetic innovation had to date been exhausted and done.

Even if cultism in its accepted guises today follows the path of specific genres or trash auteurs—the raggedy exploitation film, the Italian Giallo film, the corporeal grotesques of John Waters or Takashi Miike’s films—its driving momentum as an esthetic sensibility still derives from an historical insistence on cinema as an art of shocks, arousals, attractions, and repulsions, an experience “beyond all reason” but also reanimated from beyond the grave. The affective pulls of cinephilia have been affiliated with a necrophilic longing, while the hyperbolic styles and subjects of the cult film mapped this appeal through a fixation on the body torn asunder and brought back to life, evoking Renata Adler’s observation in 1968 that “the more serious a film cult is, the more likely it is to be preoccupied in all types of ways with death.” It is clear why the horror genre became one of the holy provinces of the cult film specialist; the undead and the uncanny could offer rich allegories of both contemporary postindustrial capitalism and of the melancholia that pervaded the history of cinema. Cinephilia perambulated around the undead body of film history in an abstract way, on the level of form and ontology (vis a vis Bazin’s “mummy complex”). Cult film spectatorship as it was expressed in the 1970s and 1980s made these underpinnings of cinephile obsession an overt drama of chaotic, aggressive content, of a battle between that which could be seen in the frame, and those excesses which hovered beyond and outside it.

The 1980s saw cult film practice veer towards a revival of the cinephile “little film magazine” in the more subterranean form of fanzine culture. The DIY, punk-rock esthetic of the fanzine was also aided and abetted by the rise of video as an affordable means of home viewing. The actual artisanal poverty of Sixties underground filmmakers like Smith and the Kuchars had transmuted into an ideological investment in impoverishment as a formal raison d’être, a criteria for cult adequacy. The mythos of the low-budget film artiste became the constitutive backbone of many cultists’ anti-aesthetics. Fanzines and enthusiast guidebooks like Psychotronic Film, Shock Cinema, RE:Search Incredibly Strange Films and Fangoria redistributed the cultural capital of the misaligned auteur, establishing a revisionist film historical canon including the miss-understood Ed Wood and the quasianonymous labors of exploitation’s many minor geniuses: Herschell Gordon Lewis, Larry Buchanan, and Doris Wishman, among many others. The midnight movie, on the wane by the late 1970s, persisted as cult cinema’s origin narrative, allowing cult fans to hold on to the idea of cinema as communal place and resistant space of sensual disorientation, rather than as site of quotidian commodity consumption.

Rather than seeing the cinema through a deranged fragment, cultism chose the fragmentary as a model for the whole film, replacing the idealistic totality of cinephile feeling with the pleasures of the cult movie’s intrinsic structural dissolution. As Sconce has elsewhere suggested, the “bad movie,” readily acknowledged as a product of budgeting exigencies and limited means, could be celebrated by the cultist sensibility, seen to challenge the continuity styles and “codes of verisimilitude” of a dominant, capital-intensive cinema. Hollywood had by this time remonopolized film exhibition with the boom of minimall theaters and multiplexes. Thus, the preference for shoddily made films with aspirational integrity—Wood’s Plan 9

Space aliens attempt to conquer Earth by recruiting an army of zombies in Ed Wood’s classically awful, riotously funny Plan 9 from Outer Space (1959) (photo courtesy of Photofest).
from Outer Space, or Arch Hall Sr.'s Eegah!, for example—reconnected with the Surrealist cinephiles' model of free-association and antirationalism, but also with a critique of a one-size-fits-all model of PG rated mass culture. Rather than a sense-defying interpretive or artistic strategy, the ready-made, cruddy antiformalist form of the trash film became the basic skeleton on which cult aficionados could structure their pursuit of cinema's elusive, inefficient meanings—in theory resembling the labors of their cinephile contemporaries and predecessors, in practice seizing on radically opposed objects for similar effect.

Instead of the ambivalence resident in the finely crafted art cinema of a Resnais or an Antonioni, the cultist sensibility located ambivalence in film history itself, in the haphazardly crafted relics made by obsolete independent filmmakers. Nevertheless, cultism and cinephilia continued to be implicitly linked by a kind of marginal status, especially as Hollywood cinema continued to maintain its global economic dominance. In practice, we can see cultists and cinephiles sharing many touchstone films in common. Cinephiles embraced the work of Jesus Franco or Radley Metzger due to these director's affinities with European modernism, and cultists long relied on The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari or Eyes Without a Face for their doses of highbrow horror. The duration challenges of Tarkovsky's Stalker could provide a formalist palliative to the die-hard science-fiction fan.

Many have noted that fetishism, intrinsic to both cinephilia's esthetic predilections and cult connoisseurship's literal fixations on the erotic and the violated body, reached its apotheosis through the video as a commodity form. Film became a collectible, something that could be owned, replayed, rewound, paused, and duped, entering a new sphere of privatization and domestication. The screen shrank but the networks of perceived esthetic influence, generic hybridization, and alternative circuits of exchange grew, exponentially. A new generation of exploiters and cultists began another form of appropriation, that of bootlegging and amateur historicization. Trader networks in the back pages of these cultist magazines proliferated, and one-man entrepreneurs were started on two VCR decks and a feverish dream of cult acquisition. The video store collected eddies, flows, decks and a feverish dream of cult acquisition. 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between art and trash have become largely permeable, if not entirely irrelevant, at least within the realm of cinema. To use one prominent example, The Criterion Collection, the digital successor of the mid-century art-house distributor Janus Films, has its own line of Cult Films in its DVD catalog, appealing to the cultist that resides within every cinephile. Gray-market traders in bootlegged videos (often dubbed onto DVD-Rs from multiple generation VHS copies) on various auction sites specialize in the “rare” film, a broad category that spans avant-garde films by Warhol and Yoko Ono to no-name early 70s exploitation films and classical Hollywood obscurities that have yet to wend their way onto commercial DVD or Turner Classic Movies. Vast bodies of marginal cinema have migrated to online video sites, the public domain site Archive.org being one worthy example, which has broadened access to films from the history of nontheatrical 16mm exhibition. And one of the bastions of fanzine era cultism, Michael Weldon’s Psychotronic Video, has recently ended its print magazine operations due to rising expenses and the wide availability of trash film reviews on the Internet.

As a result, the perceived divide between cinephile and cultist has also become much more porous and at times illegible, since it is no longer oriented around the project of film as art and definitions of connoisseurship that rely on exclusivity and rarity. Media industries have embedded connoisseurship into online merchandising, for example, in the “Users like you enjoyed…” recommendation feature of Amazon, Netflix, and YouTube. New media formats have also widened the reach of cult’s use and defined by the shift to video than cinephile, which still sustains the prestige of the art cinema and international festival circuit to anchor it in specific locations and to the primacy of the artfilm exhibition, and implicitly to an argument regarding medium specificity.

This survey has suggested that cinephilia as a broader category did indeed predate the emergence of cultism, against which cult trends and sensibilities reacted. It seems that the cultist and the cinephile have in the present become indistinguishable from each other, through the overlaps between their broadening span of tastes and the ways that technological, rather than geographical, spaces have afforded or delimited such widening. The present situation however, threatens the absorption of the cinephile in the new larger, because commercially redefined, category of cult. Every media consumer is in some sense a ready-made cult viewer—that is, if we accept the identities that media franchises construct for us in advance and use technologies in the ways they are intended.

To present a counterargument, I see more value in using cult as a shifting historical category, placing it against the development and reorientation of film tastes, genres, and modes of production. When I teach an undergraduate seminar on cult film, I open the class with the question, “When was film cult?” To this I should now add, “Where was film cult?” Maybe this erosion of boundaries will produce new dialogs and new film histories that will emerge from the hypermediated contact zones of blogs, online journals, and discussion forums. Or it may push cinephiles and cultists to redefine themselves, yet again, perhaps more closely this time in relation to each other and in relation to the narrowing territory of their prized cinematic love objects, both sacred and profane.

End Notes:


Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Tim Curry), the “sweet transvestite from transsexual Transylvania, is the gender-blending star of The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) (photo courtesy of Photofest).