

# CULT-URE SHOCK

## Classic college films keep reeling from the mainstream

BY SEAN NELSON  
U. OF WASHINGTON

THE ZANINESS OF *Rocky Horror*, the lunacy of *Mondo Cane* and the dark humor of *Harold & Maude* — that's what cult movies are made of. We quote them at parties and revel in their wit, but what makes a low-budget flick a cult classic?

In countless articles not unlike the one you're about to read, college journalists have tried to define what makes a movie a cult favorite, and none has ever succeeded.

But let's get real. Cult films exist for a reason. Their appeal, although not quantifiable, is easily generalized.

College cinemas used to embrace these films because students were eager seekers of ideas that couldn't be expressed within the dull confines of mainstream popular art.

Do you remember hearing about a time when college cinema was synonymous with words like "fringe," "underground" and yes, "cult"? When off-beat independent or foreign releases could count on college audiences (without advertising on MTV) to

boost national awareness of them?

Of course, that was before the advertising industry really learned how to sink its teeth into the naive flesh of the student demographic. Before television had entirely brainwashed whole generations. Before *Reality Bites*.

Now, instead of hosting obscure films, many college cinemas pride themselves on showing the same old crap you can see at any multiplex.

The tragedy of college cinemas crapping out is that cult films, above all, defy the conventions of the medium. Whether in terms of form or content, these movies flout the whole idea that anything has to be done according to rules established by someone else.

In rock music, that's called the punk ethic. The same thing extends to film: The very nature of the experimentation — the divergence from the road more traveled — is what makes the film worth seeing.

The divergence however, doesn't necessarily make it good — which is another classic hallmark of cult



Lunacy, B-grade horror, cowboy songs — cult films offer the whole schmeer.

films, and one that most people fail to understand the beauty of. The movies are often incompetently assembled bits of random celluloid wankery in the guise of narrative. But that guise, and the way they tear it down, is the whole point.

The Sex Pistols weren't about anarchy. They were about the shock value of calling themselves the Antichrist on the BBC. It all comes down to personal expression.



Cult films turn over *A New Leaf*.

## Cult classics every college student should see

Here are some core picks — best viewed at midnight, of course.

**The Parallax View** (1974, Alan J. Pakula) The scariest conspiracy film of all time puts JFK to shame. Warren Beatty plays a reporter who gets caught up in a web of intrigue and murder while investigating the assassinations of political figures. So cynical and dark a version of America that even the light at the end of the tunnel is dim.

**Spider Baby** (1964, Jack Hill) And you thought John Waters (*Pink Flamingos*) was weird. This tale of a family of inbred killers is the standard old dark house genre with twists so kinky they put hard-core fetishists to shame. Classic exploitation filmmaking.

**Head** (1968, Bob Rafelson) Starring the Monkees and written by Jack Nicholson, this is the only truly successful (although not financially) psychedelic film. It's an active deconstruction of the prefab teenybopper rock stars, and it revels in smashing icons — the group appears as dandruff in a hair commercial at one point — and tweaks the nose of rock movies in general. Even the music is good.

**A Bucket of Blood** (1959, Roger Corman) Made in two days, this strange little horror story about a coffeehouse busboy with dreams of being a sculptor proves that ultra-low-budget films can be not only well-made but also more witty and subversive than studio projects. Walter Paisley wants so badly to impress the artists who hang around the cafe that he's willing to kill... accidentally, at first.

**Joe Versus the Volcano** (1990, John Patrick Shanley) With Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan? Yes. It's a criminally underrated allegory of the movie business — with a bad ending tacked on by timid producers. This one combines the elements of magical realism: Brechtian theater, pulp '30s serials and cowboy songs. Some of the best lunatic romantic dialogue ever lensed. The story is daffy, as are the characters. That's the best part. Don't believe what you've heard.

**Q (The Winged Serpent)** (1982, Larry Cohen) A prehistoric god in the form of a giant pterodactyl has built a nest in the Chrysler building! You really don't need to know any more about it, except that it elevates the standards for characterization in B-grade horror films with an impressive array of actors who are really allowed to act. (Also see *God Told Me To* by Cohen.)

**The Trial** (1963, Orson Welles) The consummate Kafka nightmare done up in classically expressionist detail by the greatest director of all time. The spaces squeeze Josef K. into odd corners, just like the plot does. The real story lies in the shadows, barely visible.

**A New Leaf** (1971, Elaine May) Starring Walter Matthau, this long-lost dark comedy is about class in America told through the eyes of star-crossed lovers. One of them spends most of the film trying to kill the other in order to save the family fortune (in the vein of *The Ruling Class*, which is also highly recommended).

**My Breakfast With Blassie** (1983, Johnny Legend, Linda Lautrec) Starring Andy Kaufman, this satire of the pretentious *My Dinner With Andre* takes place at a Sambo's restaurant in Los Angeles. Two characters order greasy food and chew the fat about their careers as entertainers and wrestlers. So subtle it's almost not even there. But it is. The joke is on you. Nothingness hasn't been so absurd since *Waiting for Godot*.

**Forbidden Zone** (1980, Richard Elfman) Odd nightmare set in what looks like a Betty Boop cartoon of hell, all of which breaks loose. Freaks and perverts abound as Queen Doris and King Fausto battle for control of the forbidden zone, where Dingo Boingo make the music and everybody scores. Consummate cult.

OK, we ran out of space. But here are some more cult movies you won't want to miss: *Little Shop of Horrors* (original), *The State of Things*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Cars that Ate Paris*, *Children That Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* and *Mickey One* (a Holy Grail of cult filmdom — starring Warren Beatty).

Sean Nelson, a junior at the U. of Washington, is the film critic for the Glass Onion, and he watches way too many movies.