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# Amongst friends: the Australian cult film experience

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# **Amongst Friends: The Australian Cult Film Experience**

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the  
award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

From

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

By

Renee Michelle MIDDLEMOST (B Arts (Honours))

School of Social Sciences, Media and Communications

Faculty of Law, Humanities and The Arts

2013

## **Certification**

I, Renee Michelle Middlemost, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Department of Social Sciences, Media and Communications, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Renee Middlemost

December 2013

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## **List of Special Names or Abbreviations**

ACMI – Australian Centre for the Moving Image  
AFC – Australian Film Commission  
AFI – Australian Film Institute  
FLICS – Film Lovers for Independent Cinema  
MIFF – Melbourne International Film Festival  
MUFF – Melbourne Underground Film Festival  
NFTA – National Film Theatre of Australia  
N.S.W. – New South Wales  
RHPS – The Rocky Horror Picture Show (motion picture)  
RHS – The Rocky Horror Show (stage show)  
SBS – Special Broadcasting Service  
SOBIG – So Bad, It's Good  
SUFF – Sydney Underground Film Festival  
TAFE – Technical and Further Education



## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the relationship between cult films and audiences in an Australian context. As a topic that has received little prior scholarly attention, several strands pertaining to the study of cult film are unpacked, including attempts to define the term 'cult' by both popular and academic studies. Relevant studies in the related fields of genre, audience and film spectatorship are explored and rearticulated in terms of the findings from interviews, questionnaires and participant observation carried out with the organisers, archivists and audiences of cult film in Australia.

My contention is that cult film fandom in Australia represents more than just a fleeting interest; that in the cases highlighted in this thesis, cult film fandom creates a type of community, one that leads to social involvement outside of the cinema. This engagement recalls earlier forms of sociability, the activities of which can be thought of as nostalgic, such as craft groups and get togethers, and themed 'retro' discos. The formation of this type of 'cult community' is reliant upon the organisers of these screenings, for whom this longing for the past, and for home, motivates them to provide not only a physical place within which to screen their chosen films, but a more abstract 'space' that relates to Foucault's notion of heterotopic, or 'other' spaces.

In conclusion, I argue that contrary to already existing studies of cult film universally, and cinema going more generally, Australian cult film practices involve a complex relationship with both the present and the past. The resulting connection between individuals in a unique social setting can be thought of as a shared identity project, as illustrated by the many forms of ritual behaviour that ensue. Thus the examination of cult film practices in Australia shifts the attachment of the adjective 'cult' from the text to the fan, from cult films to cult audiences.

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## Introduction

2003: It began, like most crazy schemes, over movies, pizza and drinks with friends. My partner and four closest friends (and pitifully few others) had been attending 'cult film' screenings at the Brass Monkey Bar in Cronulla for several weeks during the winter of 2003. The evening was being organized by Jay Katz and Miss Death, a couple who spoke passionately about films we had (mostly) never heard of, and carried on a dialogue with the films whilst they were playing. This, Jay Katz and Miss Death assured us, was how they did things at their other screenings in the city, at the Annandale Hotel, and their home cinema, The Mu-meson Archives.<sup>1</sup> We soon began attending the city screenings, and planning witty banter of our own to impress the other viewers.

Even then, as a 'newbie', there seemed to be something special not only about these films, but the way the audience reacted to them - some sort of magical dialogue was opened up between the film and the audience – whether it was the venue, the organisers or the films themselves, I was not sure. And the audience too seemed different, a suspicion that was confirmed once I began attending the screenings at their true home (after the short lived Cronulla screenings), the Mu-meson Archives. The audience engaged not only with the screen, but with each other – and for someone who had (aside from the pervasive *Rocky Horror Picture Show* experience) only read about cult film groups (and was frankly a little turned off by their apparent dislike for 'outsiders') – the door to what seemed to be a 'secret society' opened up. Over time, as I voraciously consumed any text mentioning 'cult' that I could lay my hands on (which aside from popular

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<sup>1</sup> The Mu-meson Archives takes its name from Jay Katz's former band, the Mu-mesons, a punk/noise group with a reputation for chaotic performances. The name 'meson' comes from the field of Physics: "Because a meson consists of a particle and an antiparticle, it is very unstable. The kaon (K) meson lives much longer than most mesons, which is why it was called "strange" and gave this name to the strange quark, one of its components" (The Particle Adventure, 2013). This is definition reflects the origins of The Mu-mesons, an experimental musical group in which Jay Katz was involved, members of which were considered 'strange outsiders' as they suffered from various mental illnesses and addictions; today the name is reflective of the attitude of the organisers who wish to initiate change by screening 'strange', lost films to people who may feel they are outsiders, and create a sense of community despite being a small group.

compendiums, were few), my knowledge of so-called 'cult films' grew. More importantly I became aware of the dominant perception of cult fans as elitist, exclusive and unbearably patronising to those they considered less informed than themselves. The discrepancy between the image of cult fans and my own experience of a cult film audience was a major impetus for this study.

As months passed I was invited to other activities organised in addition to the cult screenings such as Miss Death's Stitch and Bitch (craft group) and the Sounds of Seduction nightclub. As I expanded my study of the cult film experience from Sydney to Melbourne, it became clear that there was more to cult film fandom in Australia than competition and patrolling of boundaries as described by Sconce (1995). This thesis argues that at the heart of any cult text is the audience, and for the cult audiences studied here, membership in a cult film screening group is a significant part of their everyday life and identity formation.

The title of this thesis references *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), which represents, to many people, the epitome of a cult film. Soon after their arrival at Frank-N-Furter's castle, Janet proclaims: "If only we were amongst friends! Or sane persons!"; this is perhaps the same reaction a first time attendee would have to the diverse behaviours observed at cult film screenings. The sub-headings throughout the thesis also include dialogue from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and other cult films, in order to introduce and emphasise key themes.

Audiences of cult film have, like other fan groups, been positioned as awkward outsiders.<sup>2</sup> Studies of cult film were invisible within the academy until the early 1980s, when studies such as Austin's (1981) account of Rocky Horror fans emerged alongside early academic accounts of horror films, such as Britton, Wood, Lippe and Williams (1979) and Barker (1983). Fan-based accounts that focused on specific cult texts began to emerge from the late 1980s (Peary, 1981, Hoberman

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<sup>2</sup> See Jenkins (1992) where he cites the example of a *Saturday Night Live* sketch featuring William Shatner in which Shatner tells rabid fans of *Star Trek* to 'Get a life'.

and Rosenbaum, 1983).<sup>3</sup> Cult film began attracting more attention within academia from the 1990s onwards when there was a marked increase in the volume of work devoted to the subject, such as that of Telotte (1991) and Sconce (1995). Given that cult film and the study of its audience is still marginal within cultural, media and film studies and has largely focused on American and British cult film viewers, this thesis offers an original approach by interrogating both academic perspectives on cult film viewers and their practices, and the perspectives of Australian cult film fans and setting this investigation within a framework of several fields of study – cult film, audience studies and film studies. Information gathered from Australian cult organisers, fans and filmmakers is presented here in an endeavour to shed light on cult film spectatorship in Australia in relation to wider screen culture.

Specifically I ask how do audiences engage with cult films in Australia as compared with what we know of cult film fans elsewhere? How do cult film screenings differ from viewing 'mainstream films' in terms of fan practices? Moreover by studying participants of cult film screening groups this thesis seeks to expand our sense of the possible relations that viewers have with film by exploring in detail those who are cult film enthusiasts and whose film viewing is a central part of their everyday life. This thesis seeks to understand how an appreciation of cult film becomes the impetus for engagement and community beyond the cinema.

The thesis falls into two distinct parts. Chapters One, Two and Three examine the history of the idea of cult. My aim is to bring to the fore the various stakeholders who have shaped the concepts of cult and cult film audiences, expanding beyond academic literature to look at fans writing about cult film (including academics writing as fans), and film marketers whose attempts to manufacture 'instant cult classics' are a recent development in cult film discourse shaping relations between

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<sup>3</sup> In the context of this thesis, 'fan-based accounts' is a phrase used to signify a text written by fans, for fans, in uncomplicated language, but using jargon specific to the fan (sub)culture in question. Fan-based accounts are deemed, in this thesis, to comprise a separate genre to academic accounts, which apply specific established theories to the analysis of any texts, objects and/or behaviours.

the film industry and cult film fans. A second aim is to situate the cult film experience within a wider film culture to suggest how the changes in where and how people watch films may impact on the cult film experience.

The second part of the thesis, which includes Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven, focuses on a study of two cult film screening groups, one in Sydney and one in Melbourne that have been operating since 2002 (Sydney) and 2005 (Melbourne). I present findings from interviews and participant observation data and discuss what this research tells us about why people start cult film groups and why they attend them.

Chapter One examines the history of attempts to define cult film. I explore the extensive debates as to whether cult film is a genre and trace the gradual shift towards more audience-focused definitions of cult in academic studies. Alongside academic accounts I track the emergence of fan-based accounts of cult that to an extent, anticipated the academic turn towards understanding cult as a genre defined by the characteristics and behaviour of its audience.

Chapter Two opens with an examination of the literature on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, as the most well known example of cult film. Fans of the film are vital in the creation of the *Rocky Horror* cult, and the chapter shows a shift to more audience focused accounts of the *Rocky Horror* experience before locating this shift in the broader context of the evolution of fandom studies. The history of fandom reveals changing perceptions of the fan, largely as a result of the work of Henry Jenkins (1992) who reframed the fan as consciously active, rather than passive and/or crazed. As Jenkins and other scholars have noted, fans and academics are not two mutually exclusive groups, a point of particular significance in light of the important part played by cult film fans in theorising their own practices. I discuss how this paradigm shift in our understanding of fan activities has also opened up research into the role of fandom in the formation of social identity and forms of community.

Chapter Three examines the practices of viewing in places other than the cult screening: the multiplex, art house, film festival and the home. The chapter reviews trends in film spectatorship, and reception to provide a later point of comparison with the practices of Australian cult film audiences. The work of Hubbard (2003) who suggests that multiplex viewing constitutes a form of 'consumption of place' provides a framework for drawing comparisons with cult film practices. Themes such as audience activity, interactivity and participation and the crossover of public and private viewing strategies suggest that cult film screenings offer something to audiences that other types of screening do not.

Chapter Four outlines how the primary research for this study was undertaken with cult film organisers and audiences in Australia. Here I reflect on the methodologies used to gather material from primary research candidates. A qualitative approach, as suggested by O'Reilly (2005), Burns (1994) and Burns and Grove (2005) was applied to material gathered, with the focus on understanding the unique world of cult film participants. In examining the material, I also reflect upon the idea of being both an 'insider' and 'outsider' as suggested by Merton (1972) and applied by Hodkinson (2002) in his participation/ participant observation study of the gothic subculture in which he also participates.<sup>4</sup> Both Jenkins (1992) and Huggett (2002) have also spoken of the need to exercise caution when writing from the position of both fan and academic, a factor taken into consideration during the research process. Specific details of the locations and participations are described in Appendix B, and the questionnaire and interview questions are listed in Appendix C.

Chapter Five draws on a range of interviews with cult film organisers about aspects of their own fandom and the factors that influenced their decision to launch a cult screening group. This chapter examines cult film screenings in relation to broader

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<sup>4</sup> Hodkinson dubbed the act of both observing, yet participating in a subculture as being a 'critical insider' – one studying a fan culture from the position of ones' own fandom (2002).

Australian film culture, and reflects upon the growth of cult screenings and film festivals, and micro-cinemas as a response to the closure of other independent and art house cinemas. The interviews showed that for organisers, cult screenings and fandom are powerful influences on their everyday life, and suggest that cult fandom can be understood, following Thompson (1995) and Hills (2000) as a project of the self. Three themes in particular emerged in the interview data: issues of space; community; and nostalgia. These three key themes are expanded upon in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Six is concerned with Australian cult audiences and the role of space in cult viewing. This chapter draws from questionnaires and interviews with audiences in Sydney and Melbourne to discover what needs are met by cult film screenings when so many other forms of screenings are available. Importantly, the lack of formality in the viewing places of cult film (as opposed to viewing in home cinemas, where viewing practices of the multiplex have infiltrated the home) increases the feeling of membership and belonging between audience members. Foucault's (1986) concept of 'heterotopia' is applied to cult film screenings to suggest that what is unique about cult film screenings is that they create a space that is 'other' in the utilisation of places not typically used for film viewing.

Chapter Seven focuses on the themes of nostalgia and community. Nostalgia is a key concept in understanding the activities of the cult film groups, as each group betrays a longing for the filmic activities of the past such as double features and screenings on 'obsolete' technology such as 16mm film, and each group seeks to recreate experiences from this past for audiences in the present. This could be described as a longing for home, or a place of belonging, as nostalgia is often defined in these terms. By framing the activities of Australian cult film groups in terms of this type of longing, a greater understanding of the complexity of cult film fandom can be achieved.



My approach to cult film viewing draws on a range of disciplines from cultural studies to media studies and combines information from secondary sources with the insights offered by regular participants at cult film screenings. By using these methods, this thesis aims to push research about cult film in new directions.

## **Chapter One – Defining Cult Films**

“When you speak of cult movies, you speak in extremes” (Peary, 1980).

The term ‘cult film’ is the site of multiple, complex and conflicting views. How should the cult film be defined? Where is it located in relation to genre, and what is the role of the audience in its production? In other words: What is a cult film? In this chapter I track some of the key shifts in the concept of ‘cult film’ as conceptualised by academics, marketers and fans.

### **1.1 “I would like, if I may, to take you on a strange journey”<sup>5</sup> – What is cult film?**

Cult film poses a challenge to traditional genre theory. Despite sharing certain textual features, a definition of cult based solely on the text seems inadequate. Telotte (1991, 6) explains the inherent complexity in applying the word ‘cult’ as a label:

What we commonly label ‘cult’ has come to embrace a very broad narrative territory. And even if we accept the notion of cult as genre, it clearly differs from others ... The reason is that with the cult film we are hard-pressed to find a clear ‘supertext’ or storehouse for the form’s varied stylistic and thematic elements. The cult film transgresses even the boundaries we usually associate with the very notion of genre.

Telotte’s comment designates the way cult films cut across traditional generic boundaries; one can find cult films in genres ranging from the musical (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* [1975]) to the romantic melodrama (*The Room* [2003]). And while cult films seem to have in common a tendency to subvert generic convention, as Grant (2007) notes, the subversion of convention is a classic strategy used to revive a worn out genre. Umberto Eco was one of the first theorists to draw attention to the importance of the audience in defining cult in an essay published in 1987. Eco noted that fans of a cult film have an encyclopaedic knowledge of trivia relating to the film and to movies in general. Eco suggests that cult films have a high number of intertextual references that are stitched together to create the fabric of the film. He describes this as part of cult film’s ‘glorious

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<sup>5</sup> *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).

ricketiness' (1987, 198) and holds that this ramshackle quality allows cult films to be dissected and pored over, as well as giving them endless 'quotability'. The capacity to quote from the film is part of the audience's performance, as cult film screenings, and in some cases dialogue cues, will be distributed to attendees, as happened recently at screenings of *The Room* at the Chauvel Cinema in Sydney.<sup>6</sup>

In examining cult films, Altman (1999) suggests that films that operate outside of generic conventions provide a greater opportunity for interpreting meaning, in stating that: "Films often gain generic identity from similar defects and failures rather than from shared qualities and triumphs" (1999, 33). This statement accurately summarises the appeal of cult films – given that what they often have in common are their defects and failings, their value lies in overcoming these challenges. In explaining these types of defects, Altman observes that: "Films with weak generic ties usually depend heavily on their own internal logic, whereas genre films make heavy use of *intertextual* references" (original emphasis, 1999, 25). Both of these tendencies can be observed in *The Room* (2003), a film that has gradually gained a cult following since its initial release. Within this film the plot takes such outrageous (and often, non-sensical) turns (like the impromptu game of football the male characters engage in whilst wearing tuxedos; the random appearance of previously absent characters for one dialogue heavy scene before they disappear again; the unexpected and unexplored cancer diagnosis of a supporting character; and the shocking suicide of the hero/protagonist at the close of the film) that the film is forced to depend on its own internal logic, to make any kind of narrative sense. Despite being produced within a generic framework (in this case, romance/melodrama) the use of internal logic within the film suggests a failure to work within the conventions of any recognised genre which has contributed to the film's unexpected appeal among audiences (and its subsequent computer game and stage performance spin offs).

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<sup>6</sup> While the audience was waiting in line for this screening, a program was distributed with 'dialogue cues' for the audience – so when certain dialogue was uttered onscreen, the audience would take part in the corresponding dialogue or action as suggested in the program.

Cult films are also often associated with intertextuality as suggested by Eco (1987). This feature is also illustrated in *The Room*, for example when the protagonist shouts: “You’re tearing me apart!, a famous line from *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955); this is meant to be a moment of high drama within the film, yet it becomes a source of hilarity amongst cult audiences for its obvious appropriation, and camp delivery.<sup>7</sup> Whilst *The Room* shares generic traits with other films, it has been defined by the response of audiences as a ‘cult film’. While it was universally labelled as a flop upon original (serious) release, it gradually developed a keen audience following when screened weekly in Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup> Altman concludes his argument by commenting on the way that the transgression of convention leads to a sense of community amongst audience members: “The counter-cultural commitments involved in generic spectatorship create an invisible bond among fans of the same genre. Membership in the resultant ‘constellated community’ surrounding each genre constitutes an important source of spectator pleasure” (1999, 165). While ‘cult’ film may appropriate certain generic conventions, such as the musical (in the case of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) or the romantic melodrama (*The Room*), these films achieve their identity as a cult film when audiences recognise or claim them as such – though, not in a regularised or automatic fashion.

During the 1990s, academic definitions of cult film began to shift away from the textual features and towards the type of relationships that emerged between cult films and their audiences. Telotte, for example, argued that cult film transcended

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<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I have applied Ziff and Rao’s (1997) definition of appropriation: “The term ‘cultural appropriation’ has been defined as the taking from a culture that is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (1). In the context of this thesis, it is also revealing that they suggest: “... cultural transmission [through media and other forms] can be seen as an *appropriative* practice – a process whereby dominant groups may be criticized and challenged when they borrow the cultural forms associated with subordinate groups” (original emphasis, 1997, 7).

<sup>8</sup> *Entertainment Weekly* labeled *The Room* as: “the Citizen Kane of bad movies”; It was ranked number 10 in *Empire*’s “50 Worst Movies Ever” (*Empire Magazine*, 2013). Since 2009, *The Room* has also inspired an unofficial, fan created video game (2010); a musical theatre tribute *You’re tearing me apart: The Roomsical* (at the Sydney Fringe Festival in 2013); and a memoir by Greg Sestero about his experiences of working on *The Room*, entitled: *The Disaster Artist: My life inside The Room, the Greatest Bad Movie Ever Made*, released in October 2013 (Collis, 2011).

genre because any definition of the aesthetic of cult film must: "...include the audience and its seemingly unreasonable 'love' for these films" (1991, 7). As Mittell (2004) has pointed out, however, ideas of genre have also expanded beyond the text. Certain genres are defined less by the text than by their presumed or intended audience – such as the teen drama.

The idea that some genres may be defined in ways that are 'extra-textual' was anticipated by the Russian theorist Tomashevsky, who, as Bordwell recounts, argued that:

... no firm logical classification of genres is possible. Their demarcation is always historical, that is to say, it is correct only for a specific moment of history; apart from this they are demarcated by many features at once, and the markers of one genre may be quite different in kind from the markers of another genre (Bordwell, 1989, 147).

In the case of cult film, a key marker is the unique qualities of the responses evoked in the audience. Telotte suggests that cult film is:

... a type marked by both its highly specified and limited audience as well as a singular pleasure that this audience finds in the film's transgressions. Of course it may well be that a particular cult film ... at one time appealed to a large and varied movie going public and for quite conventional reasons; just as it is equally possible ... that the cult work had great difficulty locating *any* audience prior to its successful cult incarnation. But in that life – or second life, if you will – it seems to speak meaningfully (or *lovingly*) to a select group (original emphasis, 1991, 7).

The recurrence in descriptions of the audience's response of terms such as 'love' and 'unreasonable love' and 'singular pleasure' may to some extent be a legacy of the way the term 'cult' has been used in the past for more marginal forms of religious devotion.

According to Nelson (1969), the use of cult in its modern sense to describe a devoted group of spiritual people emerged in the United States in 1842. He proposes:

... a definition of cult in terms of one basic criterion – that cults are religious movements, which make a fundamental break with the religious tradition of the culture – and two subordinate criteria – that cults are composed of

individuals who have had or seek mystical, psychic, or ecstatic experiences, and that they are concerned with the problems of individuals (1969, 152).

In Nelson's description of the different characteristics comprising a cult, he also refers to so-called 'spontaneous cults', which bear a similarity to the makeup of the cult film groups studied here. For him, a spontaneous cult is comprised of:

... individuals who have common interests, ideas or experiences [who] come together, at first informally, to provide each other with mutual support and encouragement, or because their interests require the presence of others. ... They tend to develop a democratic structure of leadership (Nelson, 1969, 156).

Both Marty (1960) and more recently, Mikul (2009), distinguish cults from other forms of religion in terms of the level of commitment that membership requires. As I shall illustrate later, this notion of commitment is echoed in the devotion of cult film organisers and participants to lost films, which is above and beyond that of the casual filmgoer.

Hills (2000) and Newman (2008) have identified instances of cult-like behaviour in relation to fans and entertainment occurring over one hundred years ago. In the lectures of William James from 1901-2, Hills observes how James describes the 'cult' of Walt Whitman, depicting mediated celebrity as being "cult like" (2000, 134). Similarly, Newman shows how: "There were cults around opera singers and stage actors in the nineteenth century ... The Astor Place Riot of 1849 was a product of class conflict between fans ([although] they wouldn't have been called that then) of different actors and styles of performance" (2008,1). Potamkin (1932) and Benjamin (1936) were amongst the first writers to discuss film and 'cult' together, as they both wrote in order to preach the potential of the (then) new medium of film. In particular Potamkin, in *Film Cults* (1932) discussed the genres of slapstick comedy, German expressionism and cartoons, and how, for him, film cultism began: "... with more earnest zeal as dissent from the popular ritual" (Potamkin, 1932, 227). Thus we begin to see how the behaviour of early audiences towards the new technology of film, as a forum to question the status quo, resembles in part the appeal of cult film to modern audiences, as a form of

transgression. However, during the 'Studio Era' (1928-48) Newman notes that: "... cults [were] organised more around stars than films" (2008, 1) – indeed, this period was notable for the addition of the word 'fan' to the common lexicon. The end of the Studio Era heralded wide reaching changes for both production and exhibition of film.

In order to redress the downturn in American cinema attendance throughout the 1950s and 60s, various changes were initiated by both industry regulators and cinema operators to lure back audiences. In America during the 1950s the power of the Production Code had eroded, and more films with 'adult content' were emerging, as cinema going became something seen beyond mere 'family entertainment'.<sup>9</sup> Teenagers, who had become "... the most loyal and regular segment of the movie going audience" (Schaefer, 1999, 331) also made up a substantial portion of the audience for drive-in cinemas, and although the era of the classic exploitation film was drawing to a close, often these films were reworked as 'teen-pics'. The 1960s saw the rise of the 'sexploitation' film, beginning with Russ Meyer's *The Immoral Mr Teas* (1959) (Schaefer, 1999, 337) and the 'Blaxploitation' film, prominent between 1969-1974, such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) (Koven, 2001, 13). These turning points in the history of cinema going are significant, for each of these events and types of films has a link with the canon of cult film; drive-in cinemas (screening 'B' movies, which frequently gain a cult following as part of a double feature) and the rise of art-house, sexploitation and Blaxploitation films. Because of their commentary on the historical moment in which they were made, some sexploitation and Blaxploitation films such as *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), *Blacula* (1972), *Foxy Brown* (1974), are now celebrated for their cult value (see Mathijs and Mendik, 2008, 167; Koven, 2001).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A strict code enforced by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America; "... the organised industry detailed the 'salacious' subjects that it would no longer allow in the movies. Exploitation films literally exploited this state of affairs by making pictures on almost all the topics forbidden by those mechanisms" (Schaefer, 1999, 8).

<sup>10</sup> Koven (2001) in particular discusses the tendency of blaxploitation films to use subject matter topical to the time in which it was produced (9).

It seems that the idea of 'cult film viewing' entered the popular lexicon in the 1970s, coinciding with the emergence of the phenomenon of 'midnight movies'. Midnight cult screenings were first observed in the late 1960s in both Paris and London. As double features that concluded well into the following morning, after the last buses and trains had stopped running, the location and session time of these films contributed an important sense of illicit activity amongst attendees (Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 1983, 3). The owner of the Elgin Theatre in New York, Ben Barenholtz, for instance, pioneered the screening of 'midnight movies' in America, as a way to market counter-cultural films, beginning with *El Topo* (1970) (*Midnight Movies*, documentary, 2005). Significantly, there is an overlap in time frames (late 1960s-early 1970s) between the more pejorative connotations of the term cult as a descriptor for 'new religious groups' that were often the subject of intense moral panics, such as the Manson Family in the 1970s, and the description of the midnight movie as a 'cult' movie. In this instance, 'cult films' typically described 'outsider' tastes, representing an affront to 'mainstream' tastes and values, in the same way that these new religious groups represented a challenge to established societal values. One could suggest, as does Mikul (2009) that these trends need to be viewed: "... in the context of the social upheavals of the period, including the rise of the counterculture, the sexual revolution, racial tensions and the explosion in recreational drug use" (7). The appeal of midnight movies also initiated the growth of popular writing on cult film, such as Sarris' (1970) article, *Confessions of a Cultist*, which encouraged readers to unashamedly celebrate their devotion to film.

## **1.2 "Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy night"<sup>11</sup> – Fan based accounts of cult**

During the 1980s, the increased proliferation of videocassettes increased access to films that may have been overlooked by cinema going audiences. Repeat viewing, which was enabled by video players (VHS and Betamax machines) in the home also led to an increased audience for 'cult films'; an important innovation

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<sup>11</sup> *All About Eve* (1950).



given that repeat viewing has been identified by Jerslev (1992) and Klinger (2010) as a key feature of cult film viewing. Simultaneously, the first wave of books written about cult film by fans, for other fans (including most notably Peary [1981]) began to appear. Peary's early book, *Cult Movies: a hundred ways to find the reel thing* and later titles such as *The Rough Guide to Cult Movies* (Simpson, 2001) and *Video Hound's Cult Flicks and Trash Pics* (Schwartz, 2002) typically comprise little more than a list of the films deemed 'cult' by the writer, and a summary of each, thus maintaining the focus on the film text, rather than the audience. However, the appearance of these books increased the profile of 'cult films' and repeat viewing in the broader cultural lexicon by their presence in 'mainstream' bookshops, rather than cult films gaining an audience solely via word of mouth spread.

By the mid-2000s, as Hawkins (2000, 3-4) suggests, the number of fan books, websites and other "associate paraphernalia" about cult films had grown substantially (given the sheer numbers of the above), and cult was a term in much more frequent use in the media, in connection with 'non-mainstream' films that were difficult to label such as *Fight Club* (1999) and *Donnie Darko* (2001). In *The New York Times*, Lim reflects on the difficulty of labelling and marketing *Fight Club* at the time of its release, in a reflection published in 2009. It states that *Fight Club* is: "surely the cult movie of our time" as it still inspires: "obsessive, worshipful scrutiny" (Lim, 2009). Both of these films quickly garnered a loyal following and were seized upon by fans as 'cult' films once released onto DVD after lacklustre cinema releases, not only for the fact that they stood outside generic boundaries, but for their passionate, repeat audiences, as suggested by McCarthy (2003).<sup>12</sup>

Each of the cult film fan texts (Peary, 1981; French, P. and French K., 1999; Davies, 2001; Simpson, 2001; Catterall and Wells, 2002; Dirks, 2002; Schwartz,

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<sup>12</sup> McCarthy (2003) speaks in particular about the transgressive themes featured in *Fight Club*, especially in terms of anti corporate sentiment. For him a sense of irony is apparent in that a major studio released a film that commented on society in such a critical fashion, and became a cult favourite for its anti commercial message.

2002 and McCarthy, 2003) examined in this thesis follows a standardised layout, where a general description of the traits of cult films identified by the specific writer (such as poor scripting and enduring appeal) are given, before a list of specific cult texts are outlined.<sup>13</sup> A review of each of the listed cult films and reasons why the writer considers them to be 'cult' usually comprises the bulk of the material.<sup>14</sup> A prominent theme in fan based accounts of cult is the identification of the role of the audience – particularly the way in which the audience is said to 'worship' the cult film, and partake in repeat viewings - as suggested by Peary, 1981; French, P. and French K., 1999; Davies, 2001; Simpson, 2001; Catterall and Wells, 2002; Dirks, 2002; Schwartz, 2002 and McCarthy, 2003 – all fans writing about cult film. According to Peary:

Of the tens of thousands of movies that have been made, only an extremely small number have elicited a fiery passion in moviegoers that exists long after their initial releases ... Cultists don't merely enjoy their favourite films; they worship them (Peary, 1981, xiii).

Many of these fan writers listed above point to the way audiences loyally defend their favourite cult films in the face of criticism. For Dirks:

They [cult films] ... may cause cultists to enthusiastically champion these films, leading to audience participation and repetitive showings. Cult movie worshippers persuasively argue the merits of their choices, without regard for standard newspaper or movie reviews (Dirks, 2002, 1).

Despite the consensus amongst these writers upon the vital role of the audience in creating cult films, most fan accounts such as these do not include the voices of the audience. Only one (McCarthy) makes a point of mentioning that he interviewed: "... lay people, film aficionados, independent theatre owners and video store clerks" (2003, xii) in developing his book. Yet the opinions of these major stakeholders regarding the traits of cult films, or how they are engaged with, are absent. For a group of writers emphasising the role of viewers/fans in creating and maintaining film cults, the absence of any reflection from the community they represent seems curious.

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<sup>13</sup> A breakdown of the components of a cult film according to these fan texts can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>14</sup> Which differ according to the film, but can include the enduring appeal of the film, the 'quotability' of the dialogue and screenings at midnight.

Several other trends emerge from an analysis of fan accounts of cult film –most commonly that cult films contain: offbeat dialogue, or unforgettable lines that are endlessly quotable; novel handling of genre; and upon release, the fact that these films were often panned by critics, and/or had poor box office takings.<sup>15</sup> Despite highlighting these characteristics, fan writers as a whole do not help us understand why, despite all these apparent flaws, cult films hold such appeal for audiences. Fan texts serve primarily as an entry point for those with a curiosity about cult films, or perhaps reference material in identifying films for future viewing for those already familiar with the appeal of cult film.

A major turning point occurred in the 1990s with the emergence of academics writing from the position of their own fandom in relation to cult films. A key text is Sconce's 1995 article: *'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess and Emerging politics of cinematic style*, which focuses on the identification of what he calls the 'paracinema' or cult community. For him:

Paracinema is ... less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus ... the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorise all forms of cinematic 'trash', whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture (Sconce, 1995, 371).

Sconce argues that paracinema fans are highly competitive with one another, such that they position themselves as existing not only against the 'mainstream' film audience but also against other subsections of their community. Like Jancovich (2002), Sconce sees the policing of authenticity to be a critical part of paracinema fan activity, with authenticity defined as the possession of cultural capital.<sup>16</sup> Sconce insists that cult fans pity those with 'mainstream' tastes as compared to the cult film audience, whose advanced reading skills and cultural

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<sup>15</sup> Although there are exceptions to these trends – *Casablanca* (1943) was popular from the beginning and had significant takings at the theatre, yet it is often labeled the 'quintessential cult film' (see Eco, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> 'Cultural capital' is a concept articulated by Bourdieu (1986). His initial work involved assessing the academic achievements of children from different social classes, and how class influenced achievement. As Barker (2000) suggests "...cultural capital acts as a social relation within a system of exchange that includes the accumulated cultural knowledge that confers power and status" (37).

capital allow them to value that which has been deemed without 'taste'. Yet he suggests that the reading methods used by paracinema fans indicate that they too possess a level of "cultural capital" comparable to those whom they construct as "Other" due to their conflicting tastes (Sconce, 1995, 373). Thus, according to Sconce, the paracinema community represents an elite group, which mimics society in its elevation of: "... primarily a male, white, middle class and 'educated' perspective on the cinema" (1995, 375).

Conversely, Jancovich's work on cult film emphasises its rebellious stance toward the mainstream:

Indeed, the frequently stated problem of defining cult movies is precisely based on the fact that they are specifically defined according to a sub cultural ideology in which it is their supposed difference from the mainstream which is significant, rather than any other unifying feature (2002, 308).

Although Jancovich seems to be making a straightforward argument about the textual content of 'cult' films, this statement needs further clarification, as Jancovich is really alluding to the way fans define as cult those films that support their identity as opponents of the mainstream. One of the chief predicaments in studying cult film is highlighted here: that cult film is often identified not by what it is, but by what it is not. A binary created by protective cult fans against the 'mainstream' becomes problematic, as the mainstream is not a cohesive, monolithic structure. Nonetheless, casting the mainstream as the 'Other' appears to be necessary to both camps, according to Jancovich (2002, 309-310), because it allows those involved to distinguish themselves from the 'conformist mass of viewers' at the same time as it enables them to present their chosen films as 'defamiliarisations' of the 'signifying practices routinely associated with the mainstream.

The trend of scholars writing about their own fandom, and helping to legitimise the fandom of others, developed into something distinct at the end of the 1990s. As Mathijs and Mendik (2008) suggest, a new type of fandom emerged which started by paying attention to 'academic fan-boys', depicted as possessing the same level

of devotion of regular fans, but with the skill sets obtained by degrees and professional experience within the Academy. This group of fans seek to distinguish themselves by maintaining their 'privileged positions', but refusing to 'adhere to aesthetic tastes' considered suitable to their positions. Thus, their cult film fandom becomes the "unapologetic equivalent of 'guilty pleasures'" (2008, 472). The authors' observations about academic 'fan-boys' emphasise that fan and academic are not mutually exclusive categories and that academics employ similar strategies of cultural capital to validate their work and distinguish themselves from other film viewers.

For several feminist academics such as Hollows (2003) and Read (2003), the trend of male academics gravitating towards cult film studies represents a path towards viewing themselves as 'academic bad-boys' (Read, 2003). Thus, for Read, Hunter's (2000) discussion of himself as an academic and unashamed fan of the film *Showgirls* (1995) takes on the added connotation of representing the 'cult of masculinity' emergent in the late 1990s and: "... embodied in the figure of the 'new lad'" (2003, 55). In her view, this represents an attempt by male academics to overcome anxieties about their status as both fans and consumers, by reasserting a compensatory form of masculinity that often works to exclude female fans from participation.

Read's analysis of Hunter's work provides an interesting perspective on his stated aim of achieving: "... an interpretive defence of *Showgirls*, vaguely hoping thereby to re-appropriate a much loved film from its camp detractors" (Hunter, 2000, 191). The approach of Hunter's article seems to be exorcising the same anxieties surrounding fandom that Read suggests: that fandom could be considered 'emasculating' for its association with consumerism (2003, 56); thus her suggestion that a 'cult of masculinity' is reinforced by the defence of texts which may be distasteful to women (such as *Showgirls*). By defending *Showgirls*, Hunter explains that being a 'fan-boy' (as he calls himself) is not so different from:

... my usual life of academic research ... That's why it's hard for me to distinguish between the cultural production of this chapter on *Showgirls*

and the sort of thing I might write for a fanzine. At most, they're just two kinds of theoretical performance, which seek access to nominally different but equally valid interpretive communities (Hunter, 2000, 196).

The anxieties suggested by Read are repelled by Hunter's insistence that being both a 'fan-boy' and an academic are equally valid types of performance, yet Hunter's argument reminds us of the continuing existence of bias against fans in favour of scholars (Jensen, 1992, 19). As a result, the voices of fans are often absent in academic accounts of cult film fandom, an oversight I hope to redress in this thesis.

### **1.3 "You've arrived on a rather special night..."<sup>17</sup> - Promoting the cult**

In the past, as fan-based accounts of cult emphasise, for a film to acquire cult status in the eyes of its fans, first it usually had to do poorly at the box office, or be overlooked and ignored by critics, permitting cult fans to rediscover it after a considerable time lag (Catterall and Wells, xi). In the 1970s, some exhibitors did make an attempt to salvage a film that had been a flop by screening it at midnight in an attempt to infuse it with a cult flavour and recoup their money – such as Ben Barenholtz's midnight screenings of *El Topo* (1970).<sup>18</sup> Of course screening the film at midnight was no guarantee that it would become a 'cult film'. A second ingredient in the making of the cult film is that its reputation should grow through word of mouth, such that it is seen to be genuinely a film rediscovered by the audience who may feel as a result, a sense of cultural ownership (Peary, 1980; Austin, 1981). In fact, midnight movies that achieved cult status took several years to establish their devoted following, as Hoberman and Rosenbaum discuss in their book *Midnight Movies* (1983) – and also as in the case of *The Room* discussed above.

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<sup>17</sup> *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

<sup>18</sup> As shown in the documentary *Midnight Movies*; Schaefer (1999) also describes how distributors as early as the 1930s screened films as a 'special midnight show' for 'adults only'; these films typically featured nudity or burlesque shows (124-5).

One of the trends in recent times is the use of the word 'cult' as a promotional tool. As Mathijs and Sexton (2011) discuss, it has been recognised that: "... the label 'cult' has enviable commercial prospects" (26). Both fan writers and academics suggest this trend started in the 1990s (Mathijs and Mendik, 2008; Catterall and Wells, 2002, 26). Mathijs and Mendik suggest: "... often promotion campaigns even try and present a film as cult before it has reached an audience – packaging it as cult to fit into a niche market segment" (2008, 7). This type of packaging is often reliant on models that have worked in the past, such as the online presence of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) which elaborated upon the mythology surrounding the fictional Blair Witch legend, and offered further background on the 'filmmakers' who had disappeared. By offering this type of additional material the website: "... propagate[s] the notion of authenticity" (Telotte, 2001, 267). Perkins (2011) also speaks to the way that the concept of: "...cult is defaulting into the mainstream", when discussing the possibility that *Juno* (2007) has gained a cult following. She contends that the success of *Juno* in straddling both mainstream box office success and cult appeal is the combination of: "... highly stylized whip-smart dialogue and an ambience of kitschy nostalgia" – this is achieved by both the look of the film (retro t-shirts and toys, hamburger telephones) and dialogue which references cult films and directors (Hershell Gordon Lewis and Dario Argento).

Whilst the word 'cult' is often used to market films, other terms can also 'stand in' for 'cult', such as 'new classic', 'unique', or 'underground hit' as well as certain names who are associated with 'cult film' such as Quentin Tarantino. After the 1992 premiere of *Reservoir Dogs* at the Sundance Film Festival to much acclaim, Tarantino's tendency to pay 'homage' towards his favourite cult films by articulating their elements in his own films (and also 'presenting' them through various commercial DVD distribution labels) led to him being dubbed a 'cult director' in his own right by the media (see Stone, 1994). This tendency is evident in advertisements for *Grindhouse* (2007), which not only call the feature 'the next classic', but also use slogans common to classic exploitation films, such as '...that

will make you scream for more!' 'Together in one smash explosive show!'.<sup>19</sup>

These types of slogans recall the sensation slogans used for films such as William Castle's *The Tingler* (1959) ('terror is just over your shoulder!'). The *Grindhouse* double feature also referenced the type of poor production values associated with cult films by using digital post-production techniques to recreate 'defects' typical of classic 'grindhouse' films (such as grainy film print, and 'missing reel' cards).

The distributors of both *Donnie Darko* (2001) (Newmarket) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007) (Paramount Pictures) have attempted to use particular audience strategies to build a cult following around their films, with differing measures of success. Both Lee (2004) and Tobias (2008) have tracked the progress of *Donnie Darko*, a film which was initially "widely ignored" (Lee, 2004). After screening at the Sundance film festival to poor reviews, Tobias notes that the film fell to a second tier distributor (Newmarket) who released the film to lukewarm reviews and poor box office takings (2008). At this point, the film was considered a failure, until audience word of mouth began to spread. On the recommendation of his son, the owner of the Pioneer Theatre in New York began screening *Donnie Darko* as a midnight movie, which ran for two years – as Tobias (2008) notes, this was miraculous considering midnight movies were also a trend which had been: "...left for dead". As DVD sales of the film were strong, Newmarket attempted to capitalise on the sudden 'buzz' around the film by releasing a 'Director's Cut' of the film back into theatres - a move which also failed (Tobias, 2008). Despite this attempt to capitalise on the growing 'cult audience' for *Donnie Darko*, as Lee reflects:

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<sup>19</sup> 'Grindhouse' refers to the name of the low grade cinemas in which exploitation films were traditionally shown. Advertisements for the film *Grindhouse* explicitly marketed the film double as 'the next classic' from Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez, only omitting the word 'cult'. This is implied, given the nature of other Tarantino and Rodriguez films (such as *From Dusk til Dawn* (1996) which have, over time, grown in cult status. *Grindhouse* is likely to have the same kind of cult appeal for its creative team, pastiche of classic genres, and the format of the film itself (a double feature incorporating 'Coming Attractions' and 'Missing Reel' cards throughout). Klinger also discusses the use of the word 'cult' in marketing *The Big Lebowski* (1998), particularly as the popularity of the film increased (2010, 5-6).



Ultimately... it was the fans that rescued the movie. It's not uncommon for a critically acclaimed but audience-ignored movie to be re-released (*Mulholland Drive* reopened shortly after its disappointing initial run). But *Donnie Darko* is a special case: a commercial failure resuscitated as a cult hit by the audience alone (2004).

The box office success of *Paranormal Activity*, compared to *Donnie Darko*, was fuelled by attempts to appropriate word of mouth spread into a 'cult following' for the film.<sup>20</sup> As Winblad (2011) reflects, the distributors of *Paranormal Activity*, Paramount Pictures adopted an: "... unconventional release strategy" for the film, which was initially very successful. Upon release the film was only screened in a small number of cinemas, and during the screenings, advertisements instructed audiences to demand the film be screened in their local cinema. This strategy apparently created demand for the film and: "... also encouraged audiences to form a community around the film – and this before they had even seen it". The strategy of gradual release, in addition to the sequel and prequels of the film have kept the film's brand in the public eye since its first release in 2007. However, the same gimmick of releasing the film due to 'audience demand', in Winblad's eyes, also damaged the film; by attempting to influence the audience to create hype around the film, instead of allowing a following to grow organically, by the time the film was in wide release *Paranormal Activity*: "... had outlived its golden days" (2011). Although the film was a huge commercial success, the expectations of the audiences and critics were so high (due to the hype created) that public opinion fractured, leading to the isolation of fans who then bonded more closely to defend the film. For Winblad: "The effect was to create around *Paranormal Activity* the niche audience necessary to cult films" (2011). Having marketed *Paranormal Activity* as an alternative to big budget Hollywood horror films, the appeal of using the term 'cult' to market the series seems to grow with the release of each film, as reflected in the media with headlines such as: "*Paranormal Activity* latest Cult Horror Saga" (*The Jakarta Globe*, 2012). Academic studies of the series have also began to emerge, acknowledging the divisive nature of describing

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<sup>20</sup> Domestic (American) box office takings for *Paranormal Activity* (\$107 million) far outstripped those of *Donnie Darko* (\$1.2 million) (Box Office Mojo, 2013).

*Paranormal Activity* as cult, for example, by asking: What are the most polarising cults today? (Centre for Cinema Studies, University of British Columbia, 2011). Despite the attempts of film distributors to appropriate fan practices in order to sell their films back to the audience, any 'cult following' which grows around these 'modern' cult films is still, ultimately, a function of the audience.

The American film company Troma, is another proponent of the 'instant cult classic' strategy. Troma's website states that they are "... the oldest continually operating fully independent movie studio in the world. Since 1974, Troma has produced, acquired and distributed more than one thousand feature films from all regions of the globe and in all genres" (Troma, 2009). Their films borrow heavily from so called 'cult genres' such as horror (splatter and gore films) and exploitation films, and they trade heavily on their audiences' recognition of certain 'cult' conventions (such as low budget production values, and repeated motifs) to make meaning.<sup>21</sup> This can be seen in films such as *The Toxic Avenger* (1984), which pays homage to superhero films, before descending into a horror/gore film; and *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead* (2006), which obviously references classic cult zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) for its plot. By rearticulating generic elements of other cult films, and remaking them on minimal production budgets, the company markets this as a unique genre – a 'Troma' film. By appropriating textual features of 'classic cult films' and including them in modern features, it seems that Troma is marketing itself to fans of cult films by attempting to create 'instant' cult films – films with the 'look' and feel of generic elements of cult film, without the period of obscurity – cult films without the waiting period, or what we might call 'instant' cult films.

At this time, the commodification of 'cult' in relation to film has not been extensively studied. Preliminary observations, as well as the recent study by

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<sup>21</sup> Horror and exploitation being the genres from which many cult films have emerged; see Mathijs and Mendik, 2008; and Shiel, 2003.

Mathijs and Sexton (2011, 30) suggest that it is primarily the media that drives the application of the word 'cult' to films. These are films which:

- a) fall outside of a clear generic boundary (*Pulp Fiction* [1994]; *Donnie Darko*);
- b) are so poorly received that they need to be 'rebranded' to gain any audience at all (*Snakes on a Plane* [2006]);
- c) are based on a book, cartoon or graphic novel which already has a 'cult' following (*A Scanner Darkly* [2006], *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* [2010])
- d) are from a director/creative team who have already produced 'cult' works (Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino; Ethan and Joel Coen; Wes Anderson) or,
- e) are promoted by the afore-mentioned directors who personally admire these lesser-known films and wish to share their enthusiasm with their fans (e.g.. Quentin Tarantino promoting Australian film *Patrick* (1978).

I would suggest that the idea of the 'instant cult classic' ignores both popular (McCarthy, 2003; Bergan, 2008) and academic (Eco, 1987; Jancovich et. Al., 2003) sources which insist that cult films must go through a cycle of neglect before they are restored to revered status by a devoted audience. An article by Leigh (2008) in *The Guardian* takes the arguments of these scholars further in claiming that cult film is dead, and names Paul Verhoeven (*Showgirls*) and Quentin Tarantino as those: "... who did the most to end the era of cult" (2). It further notes that:

What *Reservoir Dogs* began and *Pulp Fiction* made into a phenomenon was the pillaging of decades worth of cult influence – stripping out an entire generation of movies for shots, lines and soundtrack ideas. And the problem was never the plagiarism, it was that in becoming a one-stop shop for the history of cult, Tarantino didn't persuade people to investigate further, he became the filmic equivalent of a giant Tesco putting every smaller shop for miles out of business (Leigh, 2008, 2-3).

Certainly, the success of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* has led to the increasing tendency to describe films with similar generic qualities as 'cult'; however, in the case of Australian film, I would disagree with Leigh's statement

that Tarantino has not persuaded people to investigate other cult films. As a direct result of Tarantino's fandom of Australian 'cult' films, the documentary *Not Quite Hollywood* (2008) was funded, which in turn led to the release of many seldom seen Australian films onto DVD (as discussed further in Chapter Five). Martin (2008, 1) also reflects upon times passed when the term 'cult' was imbued with elitism in fan circles, rather than: "... every second 'indie' movie being pushed as an 'instant cult classic'". In reflecting on the inevitability of the appropriation of 'cult' as a marketing term, he suggests that: "... the 'cult film' offers the film industry the opportunity of exploiting that elusive second (or third, or fiftieth) viewing of its products" (Martin, 2008, 2). The tendency of Tarantino to 'strip mine' decades worth of cult influence, and the appropriation of 'cult' as a marketing term has been read by some commentators as the 'death of cult' – showing just how important the obscurity, time lag, the search, but ultimately, the audience discovery, is to cult film fandom.

The promotion of films as 'cult' can be seen as part of a broader trend to convince consumers of the 'irreplaceable' nature of their product: "The very term 'cult' is finding increased application in marketing because of the rising awareness that it might lead to some kind of revenue" (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, 30). In their discussion of cult branding, Ragas and Bueno (2002) discuss the appropriation of the commitment of consumers (fans) as a way to increase consumption. This appropriation has become increasingly visible around the use of the word 'cult', to differentiate particular films from other 'mainstream' features. For Ragas and Bueno, cult brands (such as Apple, Volkswagen and even Oprah Winfrey) represent a type of 'benign cult', which is not harmful to the consumer, but does:

... help fill the emotional wants and needs of their followers in a benign way. Benign cults and their followers enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship, with both receiving a real sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, belonging and enlightenment from the relationship (2002, xxii).

Whilst it can be argued that all brands try to fill the 'emotional wants and needs' of their customers, only a select few inspire the type of devotion which is described as

‘cult like’, and: “... they actually become a crucial part of their customers lives and identities” (Ragas and Bueno, 2002, xxi).

In distinguishing a cult brand (e.g. Volkswagen Beetle) from a non-cult brand, the authors look to the history of the company to explain its long-term appeal. They point to several factors: in the United States there are hundreds of active Beetle clubs and organisations which hold rallies and meets, despite the original Beetle not being imported since 1977: “While the vast majority of other out of production cars quickly fade from memory, the Beetle’s hold on the passion and enthusiasm of millions of its followers has never waned” (Ragas and Bueno, 2002, xxxvi). Most important for Ragas and Bueno, is the strong connection between cult brands and meeting the hierarchy of needs as outlined by Abraham Maslow (1943).<sup>22</sup> They suggest that the Volkswagen Beetle has been able to at the top of this hierarchy for 50 years, due to the fact that:

Ownership of a Beetle is just as much a statement of individuality and self expression today as it was in the 50s and 60s. How many other brands can we point to that have managed to stay cool for multiple generations? There simply aren’t many. The Beetle brand continues to make and maintain strong emotional connections with many of its followers (Ragas and Bueno, 2002, xxxvi).

It is my contention that this type of emotional connection, and brand devotion as described by Ragas and Bueno explains why marketers have begun to utilise the term ‘cult’ in the marketing of genre films; they have realised the strong devotion which fans of cult films show to their preferred texts, and believe this will ensure an audience for these films.

At the Critical Symposium on Cult Film in 2008, a number of academic stakeholders asked whether the term ‘cult’ had now lost its meaning and whether

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<sup>22</sup> Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs is based on 5 needs, of which we should aim to work towards the possession of all 5. These are: 1. Basic Needs (air, food, drink, shelter); 2. Safety Needs (protection from the elements, security, law, order); 3. Social Needs (belonging and love, family, relationships); 4. Esteem Needs (self esteem, achievement, mastery, independence, status) and finally 5. Self Actualisation Needs (realising personal potential, self fulfilment). See McLeod, 2013).

there can still be the kind of search for: "... the unknown, obscure object of film going desire that marked the cult adventure in the long ago days of the midnight movie, screened in the kind of independently owned movie theatre that barely exists today" (Church et. Al., 2008, 2). This question reveals a desire to hold on to a stable and homogenous idea of 'cult', but as this chapter has sought to show, the term 'cult' is extremely flexible and can vary according to who is using it, when and for what purpose. Perhaps the most useful approach to cult film comes from Mittell's suggestion that we should: "... examine genres as *discursive practices*" (original emphasis, 2004, 12) because while genres are manifested in texts, they also operate within the practices of critics, audiences and industries. Hence, anyone:

...who uses generic terms is participating in the constitution of genre categories... Thus we might look at what audiences and industries say about genres, what terms and definitions circulate around any given generic instance, and how specific cultural assumptions are linked particular genres (2004, 13).

Thus it is of particular importance to the study of cult film to take into account the significance of the audience when interpreting texts.

This chapter has examined the overlapping discourses of a number of constituencies engaged with cult films. Fan-based accounts of cult have long been conscious of the role of the audience in determining what films are deemed 'cult'. Academic studies of cult have followed in developing beyond exclusively textual definitions of cult towards an appreciation of the significance of the audience. Ironically, the appropriation of 'cult' by film distributors, and the popular press moves definitions of 'cult' in the opposite direction by attempting to leapfrog the audience's role in defining cult films, in order to create films that are 'instant cult classics'. Yet if fan and academic writers now acknowledge the importance of the audience, neither group directly engages with the audience to ask them how they feel about cult films and what it is that cult films do for them that other films do not. To a large extent the voices of actual cult film audiences continue to be absent. One significant exception would appear to be the literature surrounding

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (RHPS) which has focused heavily on the critical role of audience participation in the RHPS cult experience. In the next section I review the literature on the RHPS focusing on what is known – and not known - about that audience and setting this information in the context of changing perceptions of the film fan in general. As I will argue, the highly ritualised behaviour of audiences at screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* set the trend for audience participation at cult film screenings, which in turn illustrates the unique nature of fan engagement with cult film texts.

## **Chapter Two – “Don’t Dream It, Be It”: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and The Creation of Fan Communities**

“Fans often come in for pretty heavy criticism, but without them there would be no cult films” (Catterall and Wells, 2002, xv).

Studies of film fans and fandom cover similar, often murky terrain in the study of cult film. The case study of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, upon which this chapter focuses, is indicative of organised fandom within cult film audiences, yet it is unique in terms of its reach and influence. This chapter analyses how cult film screenings such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have established standards for organising cult film events, while popularising ritualised audience participation and remaining in the public consciousness with stage show revivals and anniversary edition DVD releases over time. Drawing on these findings, this chapter will contextualise local and global fandom of the RHPS within a broader history of the changing perceptions of fans, from crazed loners to creative communities enabled by technology. To set the context for this case study and the thesis more generally, this chapter examines trends in fandom, especially those that cross over with those of cult film fandom, and the perception of fan activities both past and present.

The origin of film fandom is often traced back to the evolution of Hollywood as the centre of film production. As Barbas (2001) suggests, from 1910 onwards film fans had a constant presence in the popular media which were apt to characterise fandom as a disease in statements such as this one from the *McClure’s* magazine: “Overtaken by the movie bug, fans allegedly lost control of their senses” (Barbas, 2001, 2). The stereotype of fandom as something that is ‘abnormal’ has persisted: “...film fandom as depicted in popular culture seemed to attract the lonely, the naïve, and the immature” (Barbas, 2001, 3).

The phrase introduced by Telotte (1991) ‘beyond all reason’ seems apt in attempting to describe the elusive quality that distinguishes cult fans, that draws them to certain films, and which proves so difficult to pinpoint or characterise. Films



are often said to fill some sort of 'lack' within the lives of their fans, as fans have typically been portrayed as dysfunctional social outcasts or crazed lunatics (Lewis, 1992; Barbas, 2001).

The perception of the fan as unstable was challenged by the publication of *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins (1992); this represented a turning point in how fandom was understood. In opposition to the crazed fan, Jenkins suggests that:

Fandom functions as an alternative social community ... Fandom's very existence represents a critique of conventional forms of consumer culture. Yet fandom also provides a space within which fans may articulate their specific concerns ... its cultural products articulate the fans' frustration with their everyday life as well as their fascination with representations that pose alternatives (1992, 280-3).

While Jenkins' work has successfully displaced the pejorative images of fans as dysfunctional loners, to some extent the description is still upheld to differentiate cult film fans. In terms of cult film fandom, Telotte (1991) suggests:

... there is indeed something strange, even beyond reason in the relation between the cult film in its various manifestations and its nearly worshipful audience. In that movement beyond reason, beyond the usual ways of seeing, caring about and identifying with a film or its characters, the cultist embraces a comfortable difference ... cultists might well be said to *love* such differences, for to them they suggest something unusual, noteworthy and valuable not just about the movies, but about their own characters as well ... What the film cultist embraces is a form that, in its very difference, transgresses, violates our sense of the reasonable. It crosses boundaries of time, custom, form and – many might add – good taste (original emphasis, Telotte, 1991, 5-6).

One could surmise from Telotte's characterisation that cult film fans actually welcome the negative discourse of fandom; by embracing this identity these fans mark themselves as belonging to a separate, and in their view superior, taste culture. In this way, the emergence of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a cult film showcases the fans' strong and passionate commitment to their text of choice, and their desire to connect with other fans sharing this passion that may come to understand them on a more personal level.

## **2.1 “Give yourself over, to absolute pleasure”: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show***

With millions of fans worldwide, and a 38-year history *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) has earned its place as the quintessential cult film (McCarthy, 2003, 150). It has been suggested that: “What may in fact be most remarkable about *Rocky Horror* is the observation that both academics and laypeople seem to agree that it is [as Peary states] the ‘... very definition of the term cult’ (Weinstock, 2007, 32).

The evolution of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* from flop to crowd darling, is significant in terms of this thesis because it illustrates the devoted nature of fans worldwide, and the lengths they will go to in order to promote their favoured cult texts. In their book *Midnight Movies*, Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983) offer a detailed account of the emergence of the RHPS as a cult film favourite, with a focus on the activities of those fans in New York who were instrumental in initiating the audience interaction: interaction which remains one of the primary attractions of the film as an event today – no matter where in the world it is screened.

The first wave of midnight movie screenings in London, and the B-grade and Science Fiction titles which were screened, such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *The Invisible Man* (1933) provided the inspiration for *The Rocky Horror Show* (RHS).<sup>23</sup> Richard O’Brien, the creator of the original stage version of *The Rocky Horror Show* was a fan of these screenings, and in turn, included plentiful references to these films in his musical. The stage musical premiered in London in June 1973 at the tiny Theatre Upstairs, Chelsea, which seated only sixty patrons. The early success of the stage show saw it moved in quick succession to the Classic Cinema (a converted movie theatre), and thence to the spacious (500 seat) King’s Road Theatre. It finally relocated to the Comedy Theatre in the West End of London where it was still playing in 1980 (Rockypedia, 2013). After attending a

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<sup>23</sup> *The Rocky Horror Show* refers to the original stage incarnation; *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* refers to the film version of the stage show.

performance in London, American producer Lou Adler brought the stage show to Los Angeles in 1974, before commencing work on the film version, known as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The film was produced in London, with many of the original cast reprising their roles, including Tim Curry as Frank-N-Furter and Patricia Quinn as Magenta.

In his oft cited article “Portrait of a Cult Film Audience: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*”, Austin (1981, 46) notes that: “During the preparation and early marketing of *Rocky Horror* in 1975, the word ‘cult’ reportedly never came up”. However, publicist Tim Deegan, who had been assigned to promote the RHPS, observed a strange pattern emerging in relation to the film; although few people were going to see the film, those that did expressed extreme enthusiasm and were coming back again and again. When he began attending regular screenings of the RHPS at a particular cinema (the United Artists Westwood in Los Angeles) that had drawn capacity crowds, Deegan noticed that many of the audience members were undertaking repeat viewings of the film, and had begun memorizing and singing along to the soundtrack (Sullivan, 2013, 189-190).

Despite the enthusiasm with which the film was received in Los Angeles, the film received scant attention elsewhere, and after complaints about lack of attendance nationwide, Fox removed the film from theatres (Sullivan, 2013, 189). Recognising the tendency for a small but committed audience to attend the RHPS screenings on a regular basis, Deegan decided that it should be screened as a midnight movie, to try and build a fan base. As stated in Chapter One, screening unusual films at midnight had already succeeded in the early 1970s as a marketing tool by cinema owners such as Ben Barenholtz to build an audience. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* opened at midnight at the Waverly Theatre in Greenwich Village, New York on April 1, 1976 (Weinstock, 2007, 19) where it would run continuously until early 1978, setting a house record of 95 weeks. By the summer of 1978 it was also playing midnight sessions on the weekend at three other Manhattan cinemas and several other surrounding suburbs. From an initial promotional budget of only

\$400, by the end of the 1970s, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was generating a profit of more than five million dollars per year, with 200 prints in constant circulation (Hoberman & Rosenbaum, 1983, 13).

The repeat viewing trend surrounding the RHPS was the basis of fieldwork carried out by Austin (1981, 46) exploring the motives underlying this fan activity. His study was carried out in October and November 1979, and involved interviewing 562 patrons waiting in line to see the RHPS in Rochester, New York. His analysis is valuable for the ways in which it draws attention to the innovative ways that fans interacted with the film:

Throughout the showing of the film fans call for camera cuts and character actions. They ask questions of the characters, respond to the characters' comments and add lines to the film's dialogue. The fans also 'help' the characters - by providing flashlights to show the way to Brad and Janet as they trudge through the dark rainy night for example. In addition, the audience adds its own special effects such as hurling toast when a toast is proposed in the film, and squirting one another with water pistols in the rain sequence. The audience members for *Rocky Horror* interact as much with each other as they do with the characters and action on the screen (Austin 1981, 46).

Austin's study was one of the first to acknowledge the role of the audience, not only in the creation of original material (the counterpoint dialogue for which the RHPS is known), but also through their participation with what was occurring on screen, and with other audience members.<sup>24</sup> Although Austin's study makes detailed observations of audience participation, it did not explicitly ask audience members for their input regarding their fan activities.

Austin's results, however, do point to the large number of repeat viewing that distinguishes audiences for cult films. He notes that nearly two thirds of those interviewed had seen the RHPS at least once, and categorised the patrons as

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<sup>24</sup> "Counterpoint dialogue" refers to the responses of fans to breaks in the dialogue during the film, which are yelled at screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (and later cult films such as *The Room*). Louis Farese Jr., a regular viewer of the film is credited with starting the trend of 'talking back' to the screen at a screening in 1976 (Piro, 1990).

being either first-timers, veterans (1 – 12 viewings) or regulars (13 + viewings). Austin also highlights the importance of word of mouth for the dissemination of information regarding the RHPS, as nearly three quarters of those surveyed discovered the film in this way. Austin states that at the time of his research: “It is worth noting that 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox’s current marketing strategy for the movie has been purposefully low key, on the assumption that the audience needs to feel it is creating an event rather than responding to media hype (1981, 50). Fox’s initial marketing strategy works in opposition to contemporary trends, which tend to over-hype films and even explicitly market them as cult films, as discussed in Chapter One.

From observing the social practices taking place in line before the screening, Austin concludes that attendance at the RHPS is about more than viewing a film:

In fact, the queuing behaviour appeared to be less of a wait, and more of an opportunity to meet one another, talk with friends and re-establish acquaintances ... much of the in line activity seemed to be an important prelude to the more intense activity, which was to occur later on in the theatre ... The preparation, the waiting, and finally the active participation in the viewing of the film itself appear to be part of a group ritual which characterises the audience of the cult film (1981, 53).

While Austin’s work offers an overview of audience participation at screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Hoberman and Rosenbaum offer a more specific case study of fan group behaviour, which emerged around the first screenings of the RHPS at midnight at the Waverly cinema in New York City.

... [central audience member] Farese Jr., noticing long pause in the dialogue delivery, suddenly felt compelled to talk back to the movie, and his wisecrack retorts – which he himself called ‘counterpoint dialogue’ – were soon picked up by other Waverly regulars ... the movie seemed to be asking for it; and whenever the repartee went over well, it would be repeated the following Friday or Saturday, becoming absorbed within the general text. ... The *Rocky Horror* reaction ... came closer to being a dialectical response – a real dialogue between screen and spectator (Hoberman & Rosenbaum, 1983, 176).

Simultaneously, with the emergence of the counterpoint dialogue, audience members began attending the screenings in costume as the RHPS characters,

shouting out dialogue which they had memorised, throwing rice, and bringing other themed props and singing and dancing along to the musical sequences (Sullivan, 2013, 189-90). In his assessment of why fans began talking back to the film, Richard Hartley (musician on the film) suggests: "It's because the film is so slow. It's so boring that people had to make up lines to make it entertaining" (Michaels & Evans, 2002, 100). Whatever the origins, counterpoint dialogue now comprises a key part of the enjoyment of the film for audiences.

A resurgence of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* cult at the Waverly led to innovations at the midnight event, such as ritualising the counterpoint dialogue and 'regulars' or organisers of the screenings taking charge of the crowd, in particular welcoming the 'virgins' and informing them of the rules.<sup>25</sup> Another innovation was the expansion of hand-held props by regularly returning attendees to be used in tandem with the film (ringing bells, throwing rice and toast, etc. – often sold at the venue entrance on the night by those who take charge of the crowd). As word of mouth ensured larger crowds, veterans would arrive earlier to secure their position and use the waiting period, as Austin (1981) described, as a chance to exchange information and ideas. An obvious extension of this practice was the formation of the RHPS fan club, by Sal Piro (President of the fan club) and other original audience members from the Waverly Theatre in 1977 and the production of the newsletter *The Transylvanian*. Following the growth of the club, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox endorsed the fan club after the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the film (RockyHorror.com). The pre-show proscenium performances of songs now extended to performances throughout the film (on or in front of the stage or screen). The popular press also helped to legitimise the cult by publishing an article about the screenings in *The*

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<sup>25</sup> Although differences in audience behaviours are present depending on where the screening is being attended, organisers or regular attendees of the event tend to 'take charge' in reading 'rules' specific to their event (what type of participation is expected; what is not acceptable), initiating 'virgins' (first time attendees of the film) and leading the shadow cast during the screening. Watkins-Mormino (2008) discusses the significance of virginity within the context of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and how the initiation of virgins within the audience echoes the 'defloration' of several characters on screen. As she suggests, each group has different rituals to initiate virgins into the group which typically occur prior to the film's screening, and: "... most of them reenactments of sex acts in the form of contests" (2008, 170).

*Village Voice* in September 1977 (Bell, 1977). As often occurs when community movements are publicised, outsiders began to appear at screenings to mock and intimidate audience members, resulting in the cancellation of the RHPS screenings at the Waverly in January 1978 (Hoberman & Rosenbaum, 1983, 179- 185).

New York was not the only centre of the RHPS cult in the seventies, although it may have been the most organised. Midnight screenings of the film were attracting an increasing number of fans in most major cities in the United States such as Austin, Philadelphia and Boston (Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 1983, 13). In 1978, attention surrounding the film began to reach new heights. The national weekly magazine *Newsweek* (Foote, 1978) published a short piece about the phenomenon of the RHPS film experience, and two conventions had been held in Long Island, New York in 1977/78 (RockyHorror.com), with appearances from almost all of the lead actors. Around the same time, fan participation at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was featured in the hugely popular film *Fame* (1980).<sup>26</sup> Two of the characters, Doris and Ralph attend a screening of the film, despite the fact that Ralph had previously teased another character in the film for wearing the RHPS style drag/makeup. Whilst at the screening, which was filmed at the 8<sup>th</sup> Street Playhouse, Doris gets caught up in the excitement of the participation, and joins the audience-cast members on stage. In short, attending the screening is presented in the film as a type of 'rite of passage' of being young and living in Manhattan.<sup>27</sup> The portrayal of the RHPS and its audience participation culture in the popular press and *Fame* at the time in turn introduced an even wider audience to the film.

Australia caught on to the phenomenon of the RHS soon after the premiere of the stage show in London. A localised production of the stage show premiered in

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<sup>26</sup> *Fame* (1980) won an Academy Award for Best Original Song, spawned a spin-off television show, and still ranked a respectable #42 on *Entertainment Weekly's* list of Top 50 High School Movies in 2006 (*Entertainment Weekly*, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> A rite of passage which arguably translated into 'real life' – Tim Curry (Frank-N-Furter) remarked that "...in America, it's [viewing the RHPS in the cinema] become a sort of rite of passage" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 1981, 193).

Sydney on 15 April 1974 at the New Arts Cinema, Glebe (which was renamed the Valhalla Cinema until its sale and redevelopment, completed in 2008). The stage show ran for almost two years and featured Australians Brian Thomson (Production Design) and future director of the RHPS Jim Sharman. The premiere of the RHS subsequently helped to establish the New Arts Cinema as a home for alternative live performance and later the Valhalla Cinema as a venue passionate about art-house and cult film screenings. The stage show was also revived by Australian promoter Paul Dainty in 1981 and continued to play throughout most of the decade.

In 1984, the stage show celebrated its tenth anniversary, and in 1992 it was transformed to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the stage show in London. Again this revival was initiated by Dainty as *The New Rocky Horror* with: "... a million dollar stage set and a cast full of celebrities [including Australian actors Craig McLachlan, Marcus Graham and Gina Riley]" (Absolute Astronomy, 2009). During the late 2000s, the stage show went through yet another transformation. In February 2008 the most recent Australian stage incarnation of *The Rocky Horror Show* opened. The show was marketed as a 'brand spanking new production' of *Richard O'Brien's The Rocky Horror Show* and debuted at Sydney's Star City Casino. Ironically, the stage show opened a week after the long running Sydney audience participation screenings of the RHPS had been closed due to poor audience numbers (McWhirter, 2008). After gaining positive reviews, this production also moved to Melbourne (Hallett, 2008; Teives, 2008), highlighting the text's continuing appeal to Australian audiences, despite its now sporadic appearance in cinemas. The continuing appeal of the show for a new generation was again illustrated with the announcement in June 2013 of another stage revival of the show to tour the Australian capital cities in 2014 (James, 2013).

Organised screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* encouraging audience participation have been operating in Sydney since the late 1970s. The first season of screenings were at the Hoyts Entertainment Centre on George St, Sydney,



which ran from 1979 until 1984. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* screenings made a comeback on May 26, 1989 with a dedicated floor cast and reinvigorated audience participation, lasting until its conclusion in 2008.<sup>28</sup> Like the first, this program ran at the Hoyts/Greater Union Cinema complex on George St, Sydney. It is noted on the RHPS website ([www.rockyhorror.com](http://www.rockyhorror.com)) that the new season of screenings were commenced at the request of theatre management, due to demand from the organisers and audience of previous the RHPS screenings. According to this website, the 1990s was a very active period for screenings of the RHPS in Australia during which the floor cast began performing in character in nightclubs as nostalgia for the 1970s experienced a resurgence.<sup>29</sup>

In 1999, to celebrate twenty years of audience participation at screenings of the RHPS in Sydney, the Sydney floor cast and fans marched for the fourth consecutive year in one of the city's biggest events – The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade (Rocky Horror, 2009). This suggests that the film is still symbolic of freedom with reference to expressions of sexuality and identity, despite the many years since its release. In 2010, a screening of the RHPS was also organised at the Chauvel Cinema as an event during The Mardi Gras Festival, reflecting the ongoing popularity of the film. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* also appears yearly at the open air Moonlight Cinema held in Centennial Park, Sydney during its summer program, as well as the occasional cult film program (such as the Dendy Newtown's winter cult film program in 2013). Despite plans to reinstate it as a regular monthly event once more (after a few sporadic screenings in 2013), a regular screening is yet to recommence. Given the lack of alternative screening venues in Sydney, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* experience in cinemas may now be relegated to the 'one-off special event'.

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<sup>28</sup> The floor show, or shadow cast refers to fans who come dressed in costume as particular *Rocky Horror* characters each week, and lead audience participation with counterpoint dialogue, singing the songs and acting out the film at the front of the cinema as it happened on screen. Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983) explain this in relation to the Waverly cinema cast (p177-198). The name 'floor show' comes from the film itself, as Frank-N-Furter organises the other characters to perform a show while under his influence.

<sup>29</sup> See Juke (2002) and Andersen (2012) on the cyclic nature of nostalgia in popular culture.

## **2.2 Reflections on *Rocky*: “Do you think I made a mistake splitting his brain between the two of them?”**

In Australia, public screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have decreased gradually over time, seemingly in line with the closure of many independent or repertory cinemas that would screen the film.<sup>30</sup> At the end of the 1990s, *Newsweek* (Anon, 1999) reflected on the closure of the film after its 22 year run at the UC Theatre in Berkley, California, as a reflection of an overall trend towards film screenings in the home. Hoberman and Rosenbaum suggest: “The tradition survives ... but the phasing out of independent exhibitors makes their existence precarious and much of the counter-cultural energy that used to keep midnight movies going has relocated elsewhere” (1991, 8). As Chapter Three illustrates, Australian screen culture (in particular, although the trend is visible worldwide) is suffering as a result of fewer alternative screening venues; in particular public screenings of midnight movies and cult films have all but vanished from theatres – in Sydney, there has not been a regular cinema screening of the RHPS since 2008.

Chemers (2008) ponders some of the reasons behind what he perceives to be a general decline and the fading of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* since the late 1980s when he was active in the RHPS cult. While conducting research between 2000-2003, Chemers discovered that although a 'vibrant community' of the RHPS fans was found in several U.S. cities (such as Seattle, Des Moines and Pittsburgh), none of these cities still screened the film (2008, 117). Although the listing of screenings on the official fan site rockyhorror.com is often out of date (for example, the Sydney screening is still listed) – it suggests that approximately 80 venues in the U.S.A. are screening *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* on a regular basis. A quick Internet search suggests that in Seattle, screenings are occurring again on a semi-regular basis, at the Admiral Theatre, organised by the Vicarious Theatre Company (Vicarious Theatre Company – Facebook, 2013). In Pittsburgh, fans of

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<sup>30</sup> Certainly this is the case in Australia, with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* without a permanent screening venue in Sydney since 2008. Chapter Three discusses the closure of independent and repertory cinemas which specialised in midnight, cult and classic screenings both domestically and worldwide. Klinger (2006) reflects on similar issues in her research on the transformation of cinema exhibition.

the RHPS have been very active in attempting to re-establish regular screenings, even screening during the period Chemers describes. The efforts to re-establish a regular screening were helped immensely in 2012 by author Stephen Chbosky.<sup>31</sup> At present, the Pittsburgh RHPS fans are organising a fundraising drive to purchase a digital projector for their home theatre, The Hollywood, to ensure the group has a permanent screening venue.

Although it is unclear why there is such a disparity between the facts that Chemers quotes, and the screenings listed on the RHPS fan site, he attributes the decline in regular screenings of the film to several factors. These include the: "...renewed attempts by Twentieth Century Fox to 'officialise' the event" with the hosting of a Twentieth Anniversary Convention (1995) and a two DVD set in 2000 offering an 'official' recording of audience participation, and onscreen participation prompter (Chemers, 2008, 117).<sup>32</sup> In contrast to Chemers' views, I am inclined to attribute any decline in the amount of regular screenings to the lack of venues in which screenings may occur, at least in Australia; despite the release of these 'special edition' DVDs, watching the film in the cinema has always been a vital part of the cult appeal of the film. As 'virgins' are told at their first screening: "Seeing it on home video (Blu-ray, DVD, VHS, Netflix Instant etc.) or on TV doesn't count! (Norman, 2013).

A further factor in the ongoing 'officialisation' of the event for Chemers, was the revival of *The Rocky Horror Show* on Broadway around the time of the DVD release (2000):

From the point of view of the historical avant-garde, nothing could be more disastrous for this cult performance event that can exist only at the fringe of a culture than to be officialised' by the very systems of bourgeois aesthetics

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<sup>31</sup> Chbosky is the author of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) which was made into a major motion picture which he also directed, in 2012. A significant part of the coming of age story revolves around the protagonist attending a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. When it came time to film that scene for the film, Chbosky opted to film it in the cinema where he had first seen the film – The Hollywood Cinema in Pittsburgh (Steel City Rocky Horror, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> In this instance, to 'officialise the event' seems to overlap with the appropriation of 'cult' as a marketing tool – using the term 'cult' as an indicator of 'cool' and a way to create profit for the distributor.

that it ostensibly was created to ridicule and subvert. It seems unlikely that the participants in the event would fail to see these incidents... as an attempt to co-opt and commodify the performance cult not for the purposes of preservation but to secure more control over the cult's money making potential... (2008,118).

A similar transition has taken place in Australia in relation to the life cycle of the stage version of *The Rocky Horror Show*. It should be noted that typically, the stage show does not facilitate the same level of audience participation as the film screening – there are substantial differences between the two texts, and the theatres are less accommodating when it comes to the audience 'heckling' the actors (although most will allow the audience to get up and dance to 'The Time Warp').<sup>33</sup> While the stage show in the 1970s was controversial for its outlandish themes, it has since been revived several times during the 1990s and most recently in 2008, at Star City Casino in Sydney. The staging at increasingly prominent venues throughout its run thus emphasises the 'officialisation' of *The Rocky Horror Show*, from fringe event, to legitimate theatre simultaneously appealing to both an existing and a new generation of fans.

Seymour (2008) also reflects on participation during screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, by highlighting the contrasting reception to the Sing-a-long-a versions of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Sound of Music* (1965).<sup>34</sup> She suggests that while screening subtitles ('Sing-A-Long-a') during *The Sound of Music* has encouraged audience participation previously not present during cinema presentations of the film, there was:

...uproar over Sing-a-Long-a's acquisition of the rights to show *Rocky Horror* on a limited-run basis in the United Kingdom. *Rocky Horror* fans and floor show cast members have publicly stated on a now defunct Web site that this move undermines the entire viewing culture that has grown up around the film and also potentially threatens individual theatres' and floor

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<sup>33</sup> The differences between the stage show and film version relate mostly to the soundtrack. A detailed list of the differences can be found in the rockyhorror.org fan forums.

<sup>34</sup> 'Sing-a-long-a' is a company based in the U.K. The idea behind their company is to bring 'sing a longs' to the cinema, starting with 'Sing-a-long-a *Sound of Music*' which has been touring theatres in the U.K. continuously since 2001 (About Sing-a-long-a, 2013).

show casts' rights to exhibit the film as they choose as they have long done (Seymour, 2008, 134).

The outrage of fans of the RHPS at the appropriation of their beloved text is linked to the audience's feeling of 'ownership' over the text, which is threatened by the mainstream appropriation of their rituals.<sup>35</sup> The innovation of Sing-a-Long-a represents another example of co-opting an organic fan community in order to generate profit. The subsequent uproar amongst RHPS fans raises the overlapping issues in cult film theory regarding ownership of texts, and hierarchies of fandom.<sup>36</sup> The feeling of ownership over venerated texts by fans of all types seems heightened when it comes to cult objects, as suggested by Mathijs & Mendik (2008, 4).

An examination of the long and varied history of *The Rocky Horror Show* in both stage and film formats reveals a great deal about the contribution of audience participation to the longevity of the stage and film phenomenon. Few films produced in the 1970s have gained regular public screenings, and almost none have inspired the types of fervent worship of the RHPS (Weinstock, 2008, 2). The fact that the RHPS is still so visible in popular culture (being referenced in other works such as *Fame* (1980 & 2009); *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (novel and 2012 film), *Gilmore Girls* (TV, 2002) and *Glee* (TV, 2010) can be viewed as testimony to the devotion of RHPS fans. It is the fans that have ensured the original message of the film: "Don't dream it, be it" is still alive through innovations such as counterpoint dialogue and floor show casts, activities that continue at screenings today.

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<sup>35</sup> Jenkins (2006) discusses 'mainstreaming' in terms of fandom and how many fan activities are being drawn into mainstream consciousness.

<sup>36</sup> According to Seymour (2008) the 'insular impulses' of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* fans led to the uproar regarding the screening of Sing-a-long-a's version of audience participation: "*Rocky Horror* fans and floor show cast members have publically stated on a now defunct Web site that this move undermines the entire viewing culture that has grown up around the film and also potentially threatens individual theatres' and floor show casts' rights to exhibit the film as they choose and as they have long done" (134).

### **2.3 “Enchante. Well! How Nice!” *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* Fan Community**

As an established cult film for 38 years, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has helped to formalise the way that fan participation is manifested.<sup>37</sup> This can be seen in the Frequently Asked Questions sections of RHPS fan websites where instructions and advice are given to first time attendees, or RHPS 'virgins'. Several RHPS fan sites (such as RockyHorror.com, timewarp.org.uk, rockypedia.org and barelylegal.rhps.org) also include lists of participation cues and props. These commonly include: throwing rice at the screen during the first wedding scene; bringing a newspaper to be worn over your head during the scene where Brad and Janet are caught in the rain; water pistols to simulate rain; candles/lighters, for the song “There's a Light (Over at the Frankenstein Place)”; rubber gloves, to simulate the sound of Frank-N-Furter putting on gloves and numerous other examples.<sup>38</sup> By the early 1980s attending the RHPS had become something of a rite of passage for American teenagers and college students, as suggested by Corliss (1985), the then *Time* movie critic, as well as in academic studies of the RHPS phenomenon, such as those of Siegel (1980) and Austin (1981), which had begun to appear.<sup>39</sup>

More recently, as mentioned in Chapter One, the film *The Room* (2003) has begun to elicit a style of participation from audience members similar to that of the RHPS. Like many ‘cult films’ the production history of *The Room* is shrouded in mystery, from the creator/director/star Tommy Wiseau’s background, to his claims that importing leather jackets from Korea raised the \$6 million film budget. After

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<sup>37</sup> Although most screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* follow the general ‘script’ of counterpoint dialogue that can be found on the Rocky Horror fan websites, each screening is different in terms of what is permitted at the venue in terms of the throwing of rice etc., and the utilisation of props (candles and water pistols may also be forbidden). The dialogue tends to differ at each screening dependent on several factors, including how many ‘virgins’ are in the audience – I would suggest from the screenings attended personally, that Australian screenings tend to be more sedate than those described in texts such as Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983) and Weinstock (2007). Perhaps, as suggested by Death (2004) in Chapter Five, this has to do with a lack of the tradition of midnight movies within Australia. Assessing local specificity within Australia is an area for future research.

<sup>38</sup> See the section “Participation” on the rockyhorror.com website for detailed prop information and visual cues.

<sup>39</sup> Corliss (1985, 22); see also Weinstock (2007, 113).

completing *The Room*, Wiseau booked the film for two weeks in Los Angeles at Laemmle Fairfax and Fallbrook theaters, advertised the film with a huge billboard on L.A.'s Highland Avenue (which stood for five years), and submitted the film to the Academy Awards (Jones, 2010). Despite terrible reviews, and the fact that many initial audiences asked for their money back, the film began to gain a following after word of mouth began to spread from Hollywood comedians Paul Rudd and Jonah Hill about 'The *Citizen Kane* of bad movies' (Rose, 2009).

As suggested in Chapter One, and argued by Rose (2009) the audience response to this film is beginning to become ritualised in the same manner as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. 'Dialogue cue' sheets indicating how audiences should respond at a given moment, are distributed before screenings in addition to handfuls of plastic spoons to be hurled at the screen (as I witnessed at screenings at Sydney's Chauvel Cinema in 2010, and at the 2013 Sydney Underground Film Festival launch screening, and 10 year anniversary screening at the Mu-meson Archives in December 2013). Likewise, following the UK premiere of *The Room*, the cinema in which it screened (The Prince Charles) distributed a 'Viewer's Guide' to each audience member: "... providing the uninitiated and experienced attendees alike with the necessary materials and information to mimic the participatory behaviour seen in the film's American screenings". After several months of screenings, this distribution of rules ceased because: "Everyone knows what to do now... and most people bring their own spoons" (McCulloch, 2011, 202). This example illustrates not only that the audience is a repeat audience who have learnt 'the rules', but also that participation at the screenings has been ritualised. It has also been suggested by McCulloch (2011) that a 'culture of participation' now surrounds the film – although it is possible to view the film at home, his audience research on participation at screenings of *The Room* insists that: "... it would be far less enjoyable alone" (193-196). As I suggest, seeking out other audience members to view these films with is part of a desire to forge a bond, that is, to share the experience of viewing with a like-minded community.

Although McCulloch (2011) points out how the media have compared the ‘cult following’ of *The Room* with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, he asserts that this is based on the simple fact that both films have inspired audience participation, rather than any textual feature. For him, the main difference is that audience members of *The Room* can be heard laughing at the film throughout. The audience response to *The Room* relies upon the subversion of authorial intent – that is, while it seems that the author’s intention (Wiseau’s) was to create a serious film, the audience participation depends upon viewers reading *The Room* as a comedy – or a film that is ‘so bad, it’s good’ (SOBIG) (McCulloch, 2011, 195-196). MacDowell (2011) also insists that the notion of authorial intent is notoriously slippery, despite cult film appreciation assuming that the original intention of these films can be accurately gauged. For him:

... the most interesting kind of ‘bad’ tends to be that which is unintentional – or ‘naïve’, to again invoke Sontag on camp. ... trying to work out a filmmaker’s intentions is thus often a crucial part of the process of cult pleasure. ... We absolutely must assume that *The Room* wasn’t intended to be a self-parodic comedy in order to laugh at it in the way that we do (MacDowell, 2011, 6).

Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, after *The Room* had gained a ‘cult’ following, producer Wiseau began claiming in the media that the film was: “intended as a black comedy” (Rose, 2009) – an alternative reading that audiences brought to life through their initial subversive reading of authorial intent.

Cult film groups are typically described by academics as entities that remain closed to outsiders or groups that ‘privilege male competencies’ (Hollows, 2003). Yet, as Mathijs and Mendik illustrate (2008, 4), the one cult film group where the term ‘community’ is most relevant is the fan-base of the RHPS. The word ‘community’ is used by theorists to explain the ongoing appeal of the film to audiences who continue to group themselves around it. Despite efforts to ‘officialise’ the film as a type of event, for Rosenbaum:

...any contemporary movie experience that relates to a community is almost by definition ‘counter cultural’ ... you still have that almost religious



communal experience at certain rock concerts ... I see *Rocky Horror* as one of the last gasps of collectivised theatrical movie going before video took over and atomised the audience (1991, 20).

Although both Rosenbaum and Aviram (1992) comment on the irony that the RHPS cult can be celebrated in the home on video (183), academics such as Corrigan (1991) and Minor (1995) draw attention to the participatory style of the audience and the feeling of community whenever the film is screened to fans in a public forum. However, Kawin (1991, 20) states that the kind of community is not the same for each cult picture:

... what all of these audiences share is the satisfaction of appreciating an unusually rewarding picture, a certain degree of group identification, and ... a sense of being somehow validated by the film, as if it acknowledged their values, knew they were out there watching and listening and had somehow especially invited them to its party.

Although it is not clear how Kawin draws his conclusions (no reference is made to audience research of his own), in the chapters that follow, I wish to address whether the cult audiences studied for this thesis see themselves as a type of community, and if so, what they gain from involvement with this group.

The ritualisation of audience participation at the centre of the RHPS experience, as both Grant (1991) and Wood (1991) have suggested undoubtedly creates a sense of community that is felt amongst viewers:

... the predetermined costumes, repetition of the characters' lines at specific times and the ritualisation of certain acts during the screening (throwing rice or toilet paper) ultimately reconstitutes *outside* the film a community not unlike the one lampooned within it. The rote quality of these rituals, which discouraged the spontaneous improvisation by newcomers, suggests that this community is in its own way every bit as conformist and repressive as the middle class satirised on screen (original emphasis, Grant, 1991, 129 – 130).

Whilst the suggestion that the RHPS fan community is as 'conformist and repressive' as the middle class satirised in the film may be overstated, Grant's observations highlight the pressure to participate in a prescribed fashion during screenings. My own experiences of attending screenings of *The Rocky Horror*

*Picture Show* in Sydney confirm Grant's assertion regarding the enforcement of 'the rules', as my refusal to sit in the front rows of the cinema caused consternation amongst the organisers, as it was misinterpreted as a refusal to participate. Nevertheless, a strong sense of community is created in coming together in costume, and participating in counter dialogue. Organisers and fans of the RHPS could be said to form a 'gated community', in which people who wish to 'live' there must abide by community rules and regulations.

The nostalgic tone of the narrative during the RHPS may contribute to the sense of community felt by fans. As Delanty notes: ... the modern discourse of community has been dominated by a theme of loss" (2003, 15). Interestingly, the RHPS is itself littered with references to past B-movies and Hollywood classics – the opening song, "Science Fiction Double Feature" is a tribute to the double feature movie shows of the past, and the films such as *King Kong* (1933) and *Forbidden Planet* (1956) which played at these features. During Frank-N-Furter's song, "Don't Dream It (Be It)" he mourns the golden era of Hollywood, asking: "Whatever happened to Fay Wray?" before his lifeless body is carried to the top of the RKO tower by Rocky (mimicking King Kong) at the conclusion of the film. Cornell also points to the scene during "Don't Dream It" where the cast: "...frolic in the pool in a parody of Esther Williams' nautical spectacles" (2008, 45). Indeed it could be argued that the theme of loss is apparent throughout, especially the idea of the loss of innocence. At the beginning of the film, Brad and Janet are attending a church wedding in their hometown of Denton, and become engaged. During their drive to visit their old university professor, Dr Scott and gain his blessing, Richard Nixon's resignation speech can be heard in the background, signalling their transition from 'innocence' towards 'darkness'. By the end of the film during the musical performance, Brad is reduced to 'Oedipal confusion', while Janet sings of "sexual empowerment and liberation" - these small details all function against the backdrop of America and cynicism which emerged post-Watergate and post-Vietnam (Weinstock, 2007, 21). Numerous other examples of loss are evident on screen, but Frank-N-Furter's gradual loss of control over his servants/captives and

attempts to reassert himself throughout the film mimic the efforts of the fan/interpretive community to keep newcomers in their place by using rituals such as 'virgin' introductions, and the enforcement of the 'rules'.

Here the term or concept of *communitas* (Turner, 1969) helps us to understand how fans of the RHPS come to form a type of community. Turner suggests:

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or 'holy', possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalised relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency (1969, 128).

Essentially, Turner is speaking to the application of ritual by a group forming around a sacred (cult) text – an element previously suggested by Hoberman (1991). Locke suggests that: “The *Rocky Horror* phenomenon creates the experience of *communitas* by embodying textual and performative elements that can only be called religious” (2008, 144). In this way, it is possible to align the ritual/religious elements of the RHPS and other cult screening experiences with a type of nostalgia, where the community that is formed around the ‘sacred’ text becomes a substitute for religious experience for cult film fans. A more in depth discussion of nostalgia as representative of a type of loss will be undertaken in Chapter Seven.

So what can be learned from charting the rise and fall in popularity of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*? Several key points emerge from this study. Firstly, fans have managed to keep the film in the public consciousness for 38 years – a significant feat, considering the small number of films that still receive regular cinematic screenings that long after release. It could be said that the RHPS is now a well known ‘brand’, as countless theatrical revivals have shown. As a well known ‘brand’, attempts have been made to appropriate its popularity for commercial use, as can be seen with the example of ‘Sing-a-long-a’, where the innovations of RHPS fans and floor casts (counter dialogue, sing a longs) have been used (Seymour, 2008). Finally, the decline in public screenings in recent years is linked

to a lack of venues in which the film can be screened, in conjunction with the aforementioned attempts to 'officialise' the event by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. The study of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* highlights the differences between ritualised audience participation, and that of the cult screenings examined in this thesis, which will be expanded upon in later chapters.

## **2.4 “Whatever happened to Saturday night?”<sup>40</sup> - Fandom in everyday life**

Rapid technological development has influenced the behaviour of audiences of all types of media, and the study of digital media is fundamental in interpreting how fans and audiences operate in the current media milieu. Jenkins' more recent work identifies the current atmosphere of media engagement as typical of 'convergence culture', a phrase he uses to suggest how: "... old and new media collide" and to locate: "where grassroots and corporate media intersect" (2008, 2). As Jenkins' work on fandom has spanned the greater part of two decades, he suggests that what he originally identified as 'textual poaching' in fan activity is now being recognised by mainstream channels, rather than being confined to the fringes.<sup>41</sup> Fans are being recognised for possessing the power to shape media, and this power is described by Jenkins as representing a 'participatory culture', as opposed to past, passive notions regarding media consumption. It is his contention that the line between producers and consumers of media is now blurred in terms of engagement with texts and each other (2008, 3).

Where once the ability of fan groups to appropriate texts and re-fashion them was largely invisible, new technologies and ways of disseminating information have highlighted the creativity of fans to fashion their own inventions and for these to be available to other audiences. This type of fan activity is highly visible in the Bronie community, where fans create their own original music with excerpts of the television program; laser shows featuring the characters set to original music; and

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<sup>40</sup> *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).

<sup>41</sup> Indebted heavily to the work of de Certeau (1988), Jenkins' work speaks of fans, as a disempowered group, producing their own material from that of their worshipped text, to make something new, and meaningful to the group.

hand-painted figurines for sale at conventions.<sup>42</sup> The 2012 documentary exploring this fan group: *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*, was also funded by the Kickstarter crowd funding website, so the documentary is truly about fans, funded by fans and for fans. These types of 'home-grown' activity appear to be worrying for large media conglomerates, who are struggling to find their place in this constantly shifting terrain, and are endeavouring to appropriate fan practices to market new texts back to these groups. The desire to create texts of their own, and passion to fund these projects was once associated only with 'cult' fans; technology is making fandom activities more accessible than ever, and blurring the lines between the level of devotion of fans and cult fans. Fans like Bronies can be compared to cult film fans because they are forming a community of support, rather than a competitive fan group. Bronies, like cult fans are also 'outsiders' because of their tastes are considered 'inappropriate' or 'un-cool', leading them to create texts, and fan events of their own to compensate for the lack or disconnection that they feel.

The term 'interactivity' is vital to understanding the way cult audiences operate. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, interactivity is particularly relevant to understanding audiences in the new media paradigm. Cover (2006) takes up Jenkins' argument by noting that:

The interactive and digital nature of computer-mediated communication results in several new tensions in the author-text-audience relationship, predominantly through blurring the line between author and audience, and eroding older technological, policy and conventional models for the 'control' of the text, its narrative sequencing and its distribution (140).

The advances in technology can be viewed as a mixed blessing in terms of cult film fandom - despite the increased availability of previously lost films enabling increased viewing, this ease in locating lost titles can reduce the 'thrill of the chase' and thus lessen their cult appeal.

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<sup>42</sup> Bronies, are adult, mostly male fans of *My Little Pony*, in particular the modern television incarnation – *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-)

Given that cult film screenings are part of the traditional media milieu, one might have expected the shift to digital media to render them obsolete. After the decline of the videotape from the late 1990s onwards, cult film viewing, as suggested by Catterall and Wells, seemed: "... destined for extinction" (2002, xiii). However, cult film fans have rapidly embraced the possibilities afforded by the Internet. Activities online have flourished, and initiatives include: using the web for promotion of screenings and underground festivals (particularly important for low or no budget activities); promotion is carried out via websites and social networking pages like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter; creating online magazines to discuss their favoured films, and interview filmmakers (such as *Film Threat*); and individual fan groups set up to discuss favoured cult texts (RHPS fans are amongst the most well organised; however, many other cult films also have their own fan groups). Many of these fan websites also discuss, and offer a 'How To' on specific aspects of these cult films that have become ingrained in popular culture, such as drinking games based on *The Big Lebowski* (1998) or *Withnail and I* (1987). This drinking game, known as "G & T with Richard E. G." involves keeping up with, drink for alcoholic drink, the character Withnail throughout the film; most fan sites devoted to the film mention it – it is even referenced on Wikipedia (Withnail and I, 2008). While it is possible that replicating the drinking on screen in its entirety could cause death (as it contains over 40 units of alcohol), this activity illustrates where cult fandom diverges from that of regular admiration for film, in that cult movie fans tend to go even further. These games, and the knowledge that comes with them, represents another form of 'textual poaching' – of integrating aspects of the original text into next texts or activities created by fans.

In some respects, cult films seem made for the new viewing conditions catalysed by digital culture. In describing this new culture, Rosen (1997) used the example of the film *Repo Man* (1984), in which he was involved at production level. For Rosen, the fact that a shift in viewing styles had taken place was encapsulated in the revelation that audiences were undertaking multiple viewings of the film, yet he had never had discussions with fans about the film *as a whole*.

And what was clear was that the movie was being received and appreciated based on its parts ... we're dealing here with a whole generation of people who are receiving things in pieces and then making the leap to the whole with a different kind of narrative. ... It's simply a different [mode of reception] and its one for which digital media, new modes of story telling yet to be evolved, are ideally suited (2002, 10).

Cult texts are in this respect well suited to the digital environment, as one of their textual characteristics is that they may be highly fragmented, and as Eco (1987) notes, enjoyed for their 'glorious ricketiness'.

The activities of online cult film groups on websites such as Badmovies.org, B Movie Central and Eccentric Cinema, and indeed all of the RHPS fan sites (including cosmosfactory.org, rockyhorrorfan.com, midnightmadness.org and sweet-transvestites.com) thrive on fan reviews and discussion, and to a lesser extent, trade and sales of memorabilia, rather than the pursuit of any social events or meetings in person. In this sense, the internet activity related to B and cult movies more closely resembles the model of cult fandom as a solitary, competitive pursuit as put forth by Sconce (1995), rather than the cult groups on which this thesis is based.

The competitive nature of fans, including fans of cult film, in relation to collecting is frequently mentioned in studies of cult/fandom (Sconce, 1995; Jancovich, 2002). Sconce discusses the example where a controversial cartoon positioned the readers of cult film magazine *Film Threat* as cool hipsters with a posse of women, in opposition to their competitors *Psychotronic Video*, who were made to illustrate 'typical' representations of fans as: "... passive, overweight and asexual, with a bad complexion" (Sconce, 1995, 373). This was a 'war' marked only by differing taste cultures within cult fandom, with one group focusing on exploitation films of the past, while another preferred contemporary underground auteurs. Meanwhile, Hunt (2003) discusses how the trivia that surrounds cult films is used:

... by fans to assert a special and privileged relationship to texts which is used to establish a sense of ownership over them. This inevitably enables fans to police the boundaries of fandom; to distinguish a 'real' fan from a cultural interloper or 'tourist' (10-11).

These ideas will be discussed in later chapters as a point of comparison to the cult film groups interviewed for this thesis.

For Hills (2002), fandom, and cult fandom in particular as modelled by Jenkins (1992) has become a tired discourse. Hills argues that the construction of 'good' and 'bad' fandom excludes the fact that all fans are consumers, no matter how they wish to position themselves outside of mainstream activity. Here, Hills addresses the 'inescapable contradiction' of the fan condition:

On the one hand, we are presented with a view of fans as (specialist) consumers whose fandom is expressed through keeping up with new releases of books, comics and videos. On the other hand, we are told that fans whose practices are 'clearly linked with' dominant capitalist society ... are likely to be censured with the fan culture concerned (2002, 28).

As a way of understanding fans and the relationship they have with the object of their admiration, Hills proposes an adaptation of the approach suggested by Lancaster (2001) which argues that fans should be understood as performers, which requires a refocusing from: "... an emphasis on the text-reader interaction" and instead highlighting the varied forms of engagement fans can have with their favoured texts (Hills, 2002, 41). This approach is particularly appropriate to the study of cult fandom, which as I have suggested, goes beyond that of admiration and love of a text, to a performance that is ingrained in the practices of everyday life.

It is Thompson's account of being a fan (1995) that is most relevant to this present study:

... being a fan is an altogether ordinary and routine aspect of everyday life. To be a fan is to organise one's daily life in such a way that following a certain activity (like spectator sport) or cultivating a relation to particular media products or genres, becomes a central preoccupation of the self and serves to govern a significant part of one's activity and interaction with others. Being a fan is a way of reflexively organising the self and its day to day conduct. Viewed in this way, there is not a clear dividing line between a fan and a non fan. It is only a matter of degree – of the degree to which an individual orients himself or herself towards certain activities, products or genres and begins to refashion his or her life accordingly (1995, 222).



In light of this suggestion, one must consider whether cult fandom is simply a matter of degree of fan investment, or if it is a quite different practice of fandom. Whilst further research is essential, as Mathijs and Sexton (2011, 59-61) discuss, and I have suggested above, it seems that greater access to technology which enables greater organisation amongst fan groups has drawn other forms of fandom closer to the fandom associated with the cult film experience.

Hills (2000) expands further on Thompson's argument that fandom is closely linked to ideas of self and identity, when discussing cult film fandom. For Hills, cult fandom can be described as a 'project of the self' – where fans create significant identities based on the relationship they have formed with texts which have resonated with them. This form of fandom brings a new layer of emotional signification to the way texts are experienced: rather than a process of making meaning it becomes a set of lived practices (2000, 73).

The idea of cult fandom as an identity project is a one way of explaining how cult film fans integrate their fandom into everyday life. In the previous section Hills (2000) described cult film fandom as a 'project of the self'; this concept offers the most accurate depiction of the way of life of those studied for this thesis. Giddens (1991) has also spoken about identity constituting an ongoing project, one that is never finished. In identifying the importance of fandom in terms of identity formation, fandom can finally be understood as being something of value.

The subject of fandom remains divisive both within the academy and society at large in terms of its value. In particular, Jenkins' (1992) work has legitimised fan activities and debunked many myths regarding fandom. Meanwhile, fan activities such as textual poaching and participation with venerated texts have contributed immensely to academic studies of audiences. The question of how to separate the particulars of cult film fandom from other kinds of fandom persists, as few have touched on the topic. By applying primary information gathered from audiences, the experience of cult film fandom within an Australian context will be interrogated

in an effort to expose the unique practices of cult film fans. The following chapter examines how audiences engage with film in other settings, forming the baseline from which we can compare the activities of cult film audiences.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Viewing in Practice: Other Audiences**

This chapter discusses the reception of films in places other than the cult screening: the multiplex, the art house and the home cinema. By assessing what is known about how people watch films in these venues, I will attempt to discern the points of convergence and divergence from the ways in which cult audiences experience film. Whilst cult audiences often enact traits ascribed to the 'active audience', participation at cult screenings extends beyond the borders of existing theory into territory that has been underdeveloped.<sup>43</sup>

The contrast between viewing a film in a public or community setting, and viewing it within the privacy of the home – and the impact this has had on fan engagement with the text – is apparent throughout this chapter. This distinction is of particular relevance to this thesis and indeed to the practice of cult film viewing which challenges the dichotomy of public vs. private. By combining existing research on audiences and spectatorship in other viewing contexts (multiplexes in the West and East, the art-house and the home cinema), these theoretical strands offer a starting point from which to analyse the findings from research into Australian cult film audiences.

#### **3.1 Opinion Leaders and Active Audiences**

In terms of this project, two key 'moments' in the evolution of audience studies stand out when attempting to understand the appeal of the cult film to certain audiences. The first period in the 1950s involved scholars focusing on the unique role of the opinion leader. The 'two step flow' of communication was popularised in the seminal text *Personal Influence*, where the influence of the media was filtered through 'gatekeepers' and 'opinion leaders' – a type of audience hierarchy (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Whilst dated, this work is useful in interpreting the activities of

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<sup>43</sup> For Barker (2000) the active audience paradigm: "... suggests that audiences are not cultural dopes but are active producers of meaning from within their own cultural context" (269).

cult groups, and the ways individual's function in group situations. According to Katz and Lazarsfeld, 'opinion leaders': "...serve informal rather than formal groups, face to face rather than more extensive groups. They guide opinion and its changes rather than lead directly in action" (1955, 299). Opinion leaders are said to:

... seek out mass media messages relevant to their expertise and disseminate these through vertical or horizontal flows in their local community, especially during periods of uncertainty, resulting in a selective transmission process (which resists or facilitates social change) mediated by interpersonal relations in primary groups (Livingstone, 2006, 236).

Building on this idea of the opinion leader, Livingstone (2006) offers further issues relating to active audiences by showing how everyday talk is central to the creation of active audiences as it takes place: "...in ordinary, social contexts" (2006, 237). In relation to cult film viewing, audiences can be seen to actively engage with film texts in the ordinary social context of viewing a film in the home of the organisers. This illustrates how all audience/media engagement is filtered through the contexts in which they are enacted, especially: " ... community and face-to-face interactions", which provides a starting point for understanding the complexity of audience practices (2006, 243). In this scenario, the reaction of cult audiences to cult films is impacted upon by the context of viewing with members of a likeminded community.

The second key turning point in the study of audiences occurred in the 1980s with The *Nationwide* project, Brunsdon and Morley's (1980) study of television audiences and current affairs programs. In this stage, as others such as Wilson (2009, 29) note: "... the relationship between media and their users fundamentally involves audiences interpreting narrative content". Both Eco (1972) and Hall (1973) influenced Morley's work. Hall's (1973) *Encoding/Decoding* essay untangled what audiences 'do' with texts, and how the consumption of texts is an active process. Morley reveals how social context influences the interpretation of texts and how the text is then articulated within the real life experience of audiences. This is

particularly relevant to cult groups, who, in viewing marginalised texts together, favour meanings outside of the norm as a way of solidifying the group.

Morley has provided a starting point from which numerous researchers such as Radway (1984) and Ang (1985) explored the creation of meaning via the 'active' consumption of texts. The audience studies emerging during this period focus on 'interpretive communities'" (Alasuutari, 1999, 5), as: "... a way to understand the complexity and variability of audience responses to media messages" (Carragee 1990, 86). With these prior studies in mind, the idea of investigating audiences as an interpretive community becomes significant when clarifying the material offered up by fans of cult film that view films together, as in later chapters.

### **3.2 Public Viewing – The Multiplex**

As the most accessible venue for public film screenings (and for observing audiences), it is helpful to consider the role of the multiplex in dictating the discourse of viewing. The multiplex was an innovation that stemmed from the growth of the shopping mall in the U.S.A. from the 1960s onwards (Stafford, 2007, 153). Multiplexes are:

...purpose built cinemas offering a wide choice of viewing across at least 5 screens (and typically 10 to 15). Most feature surround sound systems (360 degree digital sound), wide screens, a range of food and confectionery, spacious seating, air conditioning and free/easy parking. Many also incorporated themed restaurants, cafes, shops and amusement arcades (Hubbard, 2003, 256).

Attending the multiplex is, according to Hubbard, not only about viewing the film, but also about the "consumption of place". Therefore, cinema going comes to encompass not only the film, but: "... the embodied experiences of travelling to the cinema, the use of attendant facilities and the spaces around the cinema, all of which are part of the cinema going experience (2003, 259). According to Hubbard, audiences expect four features when attending the multiplex, which are also related to ideas of place and personal space: 1) cleanliness and comfort; 2) socialising opportunities; 3) travelling in one's own car to the cinema and parking safely; 4) focusing on family values. These features point to a broader trend within

viewing: despite the multiplex being a public screening area, the stated importance of the features above results in the multiplex experience moving closer to the experience of watching films in the home. This contention is clear when one witnesses the makeovers of multiplexes and art house cinemas in recent years, with an emphasis on comfort – by making the cinema more comfortable, or like home, it is able to compete more readily with the proliferation of home cinemas. One local example is how Greater Union at Macquarie Centre is appealing to older viewers by making cinemas more like lounge rooms. This consideration was discovered by conducting focus groups with their patrons, and investigating their viewing preferences. Based on the focus group results, Greater Union created the ‘Silverscreen’ experience to appeal to customers seeking a comfortable, relaxing experience – something positioned between Gold Class and regular screenings (Maddox 2005, 10).

The suggestion that the multiplex is a place to socialise is intriguing when one considers the typical multiplex experience; that is, one rarely interacts with anyone other than those with whom one is attending. Put simply, the screening session is dictated by silence between viewers. Indeed as Hubbard points out: “... it is apparent that crowd participation, talking and other forms of social interaction with strangers are strictly curtailed in multiplex cinema auditoria by social convention” (2003, 263). Multiplex viewers also typically select seats away from one another. In fact, the Greater Union study shows that: “... older audiences wanted more space than arm-to-arm contact with a stranger, more comfort and something more grown up than popcorn and cola” (Maddox, 2005, 10).<sup>44</sup>

This sense of personal space begins with and is maintained by the use of the car to travel to the multiplex, suggesting that: “... fear emerges as a significant factor shaping rituals of evening leisure ... the use of particular leisure sites can only really be understood in relation to the wider myths of the city at night, a city where

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<sup>44</sup> Although this is becoming more difficult with the spread of ‘assigned seating’; film festivals also differ from this trend.

fear and Otherness are intensified and embodied” (Hubbard 2003, 266). The idea that the multiplex is a 'safe place' for these reasons, and the fact that they are usually located outside of the city, mean that the multiplex is often designated as a family space, with benefits not dissimilar to viewing in a home cinema – and that requires a car due to inadequate public transport beyond the city limits.

Despite the examples of Hansen (1993) and Butsch (2000) which point to the high level of diverse activities amongst early nickelodeon audiences, there have been few accounts of audiences engaging with film texts in public. Both authors point to the tendency of greater activity amongst working class audiences, and the fact that the audience members all knew each other, as well as the manager. Within this context, clever managers utilised: “...the delicate balance between acquiescing to their audiences' wishes, and 'managing' the audience” (Butsch, 2000, 23). For Butsch, this community knowledge enabled the audience to some extent, to control the space: “... so they collectively shaped the reading of the situation and movies to fit their own ... experience and ... for producing an alternative culture” (2000, 24). Hansen extends the similarities between these two types of experiences by analysing the conflict amongst audiences growing from the increasing use of home video. She relays the growth of complaints about incessant talking in cinemas with pundits at the time suggesting that: “... the vulgarians simply cannot tell the difference between watching a movie in the theatre and watching a video in their living rooms” (1993, 198). The contrasting styles of viewing between public and private from the nickelodeon through to home video parallel the competing viewing styles that exist today between home and cinema viewing.

Similarly, Staiger (2000) focuses on the experience of cinema going in the U.S. from 1915 onwards. Drawing upon research from Hansen (1993) and Gunning's 'cinema of attractions' (1986) Staiger highlights distinctions between a 'cinema of attractions' and a narrative cinema. The cinema of attractions relies on a sense of 'spectacle', while narrative cinema emphasises story. For Staiger this results in a binary in which the cinema of attractions triggers the 'confrontation and critical

involvement of the spectator', as opposed the narrative cinema: "... in which the experience consists of an absorption into an illusion" (2000, 12). Staiger rearticulates the thinking about U.S. cinema because: "... a diverse set of modes of address, modes of exhibition and modes of reception have always been concurrent even if certain parts of these modes are in dominance in particular situations" (2000, 24). This research suggests a more engaged response than has been attributed to popular audiences.

In considering the history of attending the movies in the U.S., Staiger acknowledges several instances of audience behaviour which is not typical in today's multiplex cinemas, going back as far as 1915. In recounting an early instance of talk by one (male, middle class) audience member upsetting another (female, working class) member, the influence of class over audience behaviour is highlighted. Staiger also reflects upon the 'variety style' format of screenings during the 1930s and 40s in which other events such as bingo and giveaways were a normal part of the evening (2000, 20). For Schaefer (1999) the inclusion of other activities with the screening were even more prominent in subsequent run houses, where exploitation films would stop and start for lectures and book pitches (122). Other cinemas also experienced these types of disruptions, as Staiger suggests that: "Even if movie goers were supposed to be trained to be quiet during the classical narrative cinema period, it was clear they were not always so obedient" (2000, 20). She recounts an example in which a test audience of the Orson Welles' film *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) disliked the film so much that they talked back to the screen and deliberately laughed at the wrong times. However, Staiger illustrates that the most prominent examples of talking at the cinema however were amongst minority (such as black and gay) audience groups. It is her belief that the participation made visible by midnight screenings in New York in the 1970s had:

*its precedents in situations in which Hollywood films were screened. This context is the teenage film going parties of the 1950s, where attendance at drive-ins or even four wall theatres featuring showmanship gimmicks promoting B grade horror and thriller films scarcely encouraged an absorbed, identifying spectator. ... William Castle's antics during *The Tingler* (1959) and *House On Haunted Hill* (1959) suggest that some*



exhibitors of Hollywood movies were interested in a much more lively experience than the quiet that was expected at other 1950s screenings (original emphasis, 2000, 21-22).<sup>45</sup>

Whilst it is less likely for modern multiplex audiences to talk back to the screen, Staiger concludes that no matter what the viewing scenario, even if talk does not occur during the screening, it does take place afterwards. In later chapters, the communities created by cult film groups by their talk/talking before, during and after screenings will be illustrated in the embeddedness of cult fandom in their everyday lives.

In addition, Carter (1996) has observed instances of frequent talk amongst African American cinema audiences. Citing audience examples from films such as *Independence Day* (1996) and *Eraser* (1996), Carter discusses how watching with an African American audience is an interesting experience: "Often, the black movie going experience is louder – and it can be a lot funnier. That's because, basically, many black folks don't watch a movie. They talk to it" (1996, 6). This talk in cinemas is attributed to the African American tradition of 'call and response' particular in church and blues music and as Carter believes, this carries over to the movie going experience.

Hence, certain circumstances will arise where cinema audiences will engage with the screen, and where the lines between public and private viewing blur. Thus the value of talk in the public forum: "... seems clearly to be personal, but other use values are social – the creation of communities of people who use the text as the object through which to construct networks of attachment, discovery, and sometimes authority and power" (Staiger 2000, 29).

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<sup>45</sup> William Castle was a filmmaker whose films have become synonymous with the types of audience activity that has been labeled 'cult'. As a filmmaker he tended to 'build in' gimmicks and features to encourage this type of reaction, such as putting ex military parts under the seats in some cinemas, so during his film *The Tingler* (1959) audience members would experience some vibration during certain scenes; for his film *Macabre* (1958) life insurance policies were issued to audience members should they die of fright, and nurses and hearses were stationed outside the theatre. See *Spine Tingler: The William Castle Story* (2007).

The case studies in this thesis build upon these former studies in order to explain how and why cinema going can be a more participatory experience for audiences. In so doing, later chapters apply the work of Hansen (1993), Butsch (2000) and Staiger (2000) to examine the ways in which cult film audiences are behaving today. The effect of the context of film screenings on the amount and types of participation is examined further in the following section by contrasting brief examples of multiplex audiences in the West and the East. With particular regard to the habits of multiplex audiences in Iran and India, these examples provide not only a contrast with Western multiplex audiences, but also the opportunity to examine how class effects activity in the cinema, and also limits access to particular spaces. Details from these two specific locations, in addition to previously mentioned activity amongst black and gay viewing groups illustrate how minority groups engage with film texts during public screenings.

### **3.3 Community Viewing in Public**

The habits of multiplex audiences in Iran and India demonstrate that multiplex audiences worldwide are not a monolithic group, and suggest a more 'participatory' style of viewing. Naficy (1996) recounts his experiences of the cinemas of Iran where audiences became the producers of meaning: "... by not following the proper etiquette of passive movie going" (10). This practice is illustrated in the example of a repeat audience member who would begin relaying the story ahead of the action of screen. Although this talking activity met with opposition of some audience members, it was a common practice and proved helpful in increasing comprehension for the audience as films were rarely dubbed into Persian (11). Even when Persian captions were inserted into the film, the illiterate members of the audience often hired students as translators, increasing both the level of sound in theatre and the likelihood of a change in the intended meaning of the film:

Since these intermediaries had to translate the intertitles, the subtitles, or the foreign language dialogue in real time, they often resorted to colourful Persian phrases and expressions, thereby indigenising and enriching the film experience(Naficy, 1996, 11).

Other examples of behaviours in Iranian cinemas that would be unimaginable in today's Western multiplex include: spectators sitting both in front and behind the screen; intermission breaks at a majority of screenings; and patrons urinating on the theatre floor so to not miss any of the film.<sup>46</sup> Other distractions include the loud consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables, pumpkin and sunflower seeds, and the disruption of the film to accommodate the wealthy and the infamous should they arrive late. Finally: "... audience's interaction with the diegesis, too, heightened the contentiousness of the viewing experience. People would not hesitate to tell the actors on screen what they should do next" (Naficy, 1996, 13). Although Naficy's work (1996) is now quite dated given the rapid advances in film technology, and modern cinema roll outs across the world, it does provide an introduction into the diverse methods of cinema going and participation worldwide, as well as the idea of a 'class divide' when it comes to the style of participation during screenings. The idea of 'talking back' to the screen is far removed from typical multiplex viewing in the West, yet appears frequently at cult film screenings.

In addition to the examples of cinema going in Iran, spectatorship in Indian cinemas also blurs the line of public and private viewing regarding loud talk and the construction of networks of attachment at the cinema. Srinivas (1998, 2002, 2005, 2010) is one of a few scholars whose research has specifically focused upon the behaviour of cinema audiences in Southern India (Bangalore). She suggests that for these audiences:

The social experience of movie going is as important, if not more important, than the film itself, is seen in the ways in which audience members structure the experience as well as the manner in which film exhibition is organised to anticipate the social aspects of the event (Srinivas, 2002, 159).

The social aspect of film going that Srinivas describes seems exaggerated in comparison to Western multiplex attendance - in the examples she describes, the exhibition of films is planned around the needs of the audience, rather than the audience working around the film schedule.

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<sup>46</sup> Although this manner of loud, raucous activity does recall the early years of attending the nickelodeon (Butsch, 2000; Hansen, 1993). Bowles and Huggett (2004) and Bowles (2007) also suggest participatory activity in their work on early cinema going in Australia; however their oral history does not address the topic of audience interactivity specifically.

The layout of the theatres in Bangalore also impacted upon Srinivas' (2002) findings regarding the social aspect of cinema attendance. These cinemas are structured in a similar fashion to the 'picture palaces' of the 1920s – 1930s with separate sections, divided up according to social class; again, space becomes significant for how people experience screenings. According to these class divisions:

Middle class viewers expect those seated closest to the screen to be loud and boisterous and to adopt overtly participatory viewing practices similar to the Elizabethan pit audiences who were part of the spectacle and the subject of comment in 16<sup>th</sup> century England (Srinivas, 2002, 163).

Thus, the lower class, by their participation provide an extra element of entertainment for the middle and upper class, despite their open disdain for activities: "... such as throwing coins at the screen or throwing torn up lottery tickets to indicate appreciation of the movie or of certain stars" (Srinivas, 2002, 163).

While literature on the emergence of early 'picture palaces' alludes to the emergence of rules and behavioural norms in relation to audiences in the West, these norms are striking in their absence at screenings in Iran and India.

In further opposition to screening practices in the West where the audience must adapt to the screening/content of the film, in India, the screening is structured around the needs of the audience. Intermission is an essential part of the screening, particularly in India where the films typically run for 3 – 3 ½ hours. Even Hollywood films with their shorter running times must have an interval in India, for without it:

... viewers become restless and leave their seats. Rather than pay attention to the film they carry on conversations with their friends near the concessions stands or in the aisles. [During intermission audiences typically chat, eat and drink, but some] ... plunge into everyday life as they ran errands to nearby stores during intermissions (Srinivas, 2002, 164).

Thus far, the practices identified seem to violate the idea quiet, attentive viewing at the Western multiplex. This point is accentuated during Indian film screenings, as there are constant sounds of conversation in the cinema, including the use of

mobile telephones whilst the film is in progress (a behaviour that is frowned upon in Australian cinemas).

The 'mobility' of the Indian audience represents another disparity, as it is common for people to move around quite a lot, taking toilet/cigarette/food breaks, or chatting in the foyer. One can conclude that film viewing:

In India, where interaction is central to the experience, is therefore very different from the emotional experience which contemporary Western audiences have of Hollywood films, where audience members expect to be riveted by onscreen action and do not expect their fellow viewers to distract attention from the screen (Srinivas, 2002, 164).

Thus far, it seems fair to describe the Indian audience as being highly participatory (rather than interactive, as suggested), but also, to have a less obvious contrast in behaviour between public and private viewing. Perhaps, as suggested by Srinivas, this can be attributed to the fact that most film viewing is still done in public at the cinema – however, it is essential to acknowledge that the cinema environment in which this research was carried out was a single screen cinema and does not take into account the rapid spread of multiplex screens across India.

Since the opening of India's first multiplex cinema in New Delhi in 1997, there has been rapid growth in the number of multiplexes driven by a small handful of exhibition chains. The growing number of multiplex cinemas has added another dimension to the experience of cinema going across India which contrasts with that described by Srinivas (2002). Athique and Hill (2007) and Athique (2009) have carried out in-depth studies of this growth, and the most prominent themes, which emerge, are the strong influence of class in accessing multiplex facilities, and the consumption of the cinema space.

Economic factors have exerted a strong influence over the spread of the multiplex. As Athique (2009) states: "... the guiding hand of government has been a relevant factor in generating the multiplex boom" (130). This guiding hand has manifested in significant tax breaks for multiplex cinemas, both in entertainment tax exemptions

for the first five years of their operation, and further, in a number of states, multiplexes are allowed to operate with fluctuating ticket prices, unlike the fixed prices of cinema halls; these concessions have: "... paved the way for admission prices three to six times the average cost of a ticket" (Athique, 2009, 135). The growth in multiplexes has, in conjunction with tax concessions come at a time where: "... India's urban milieus [are] being re-visioned within the framework of consumerism" (Sharma, 2003, 1). The impact of these economic factors can be seen in the increasing divide between classes when it comes to cinema viewing.

Prior to the advent of the multiplex in India, cinema hall screenings catered to the mass audience. Srinivas' (1998, 2002) discussion of cinema hall screenings highlighted the divide between classes when it came to seating arrangements inside the hall, with the poorest (males - dubbed the 'Ghandi' class) occupying the front stalls, whilst the female, and wealthy patrons were seated in the balcony area. It was the patrons sitting in 'Ghandi' class who were primarily responsible for the loud participation during the film, indicating the earlier link suggested between minority viewers and participation. Athique and Hill (2007) suggest that the: "... appearance of multiplex cinemas in India ... has represented a sustained attempt to create appropriate public spaces for theatrical exhibition for the middle-class family" (112). In achieving this type of separation between the classes, one could speculate that multiplex cinema viewing in India would be similar to the Western style of viewing, described as one of 'passive absorption'.

The separation of the classes is not only related to economics, but also has a spatial component. As Hubbard (2003) discussed, multiplex viewing can be understood as a consumption of space. Athique and Hill (2007, 116) suggest that the emergence of the multiplex "solves the problem" of cinema going for the middle class, by creating a: "... growing physical distance between the poor and privileged in India". The advent of television and home video meant that cinema hall patrons from the 1970s onwards represented a 'mobile bachelor population' and after dark, these cinemas were increasingly viewed as a dangerous place for families. The

increasing number of multiplexes in India reflects an increasing suburbanisation, and as Hubbard (2003) suggested previously, multiplexes are seen as a safer 'family' oriented experience, as they are away from the city, and access is by private transport, usually car (Athique, 2009, 139). These examples show how the composition of the audience in terms of social class, and space in which the screening occurs influence the level of activity during screenings.

With the advent of video, DVD and Internet, as well as home cinemas, Klinger (2006) suggests that repeat viewing of films is now common practice in the West. In India, repeat viewing is still carried out primarily at the cinema, and is a result of word of mouth – much the same as a successful 'midnight movie' during the 1970s. In an article by Abrahams (2010) *Indian Cinema – where the audience joins in the action*, as in her academic work Srinivas reflects upon the way that cult films or midnight movies are 'pointed out as instances of participatory viewing', however, she argues that as opposed to Indian viewing, with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at least: "... audience participation is scripted and choreographed" (1). Abrahams (2010) has also reflected on repeat viewing amongst Indian audiences, and he suggests that this practice enables audiences to gain more from the films. In India:

...repeat viewing is a phenomena that is fairly routine and cuts across age and gender. Engaging with a narrative whose story is known is something Indian audiences have been doing for generations. Getting to know each movie well allows a certain spontaneous involvement as viewers shout out comments to the screen, talk to characters, give them advice and take sides (Srinivas, interview in Abrahams, 2010, 1).

As will be discussed later, the activities of Indian cinema audiences in the early 2000s are quite similar to those witnessed at the Annandale cult film group, which is discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

### **3.4 Public Viewing: The Art house**

The definition of what art house or art cinema encompasses has evolved over time and has included an association with high art, and/or European cinema. For some,

art films are: "... a refusal of what was seen as the formulaic cinema of Hollywood" (Stafford, 2007, 72). For others, the distinction should be abandoned:

... 'art cinema' and 'art house' are perhaps terms that should be dead and gone ... they are seen to refer to the distant past and are thought to be off putting for younger audiences ... [perhaps for this reason] the U.K. Film Council decided in 2002 to use the term *specialised* to refer to any film that was not considered 'mainstream' in terms of distribution (Stafford, 2007, 71 - 72).

'Art house' as a term has now come to encompass American independent films, as well as world movies. Sconce (2002) has identified yet another category of film with his designation of 'smart movies' – typically American independent films which represent: "An interesting shift in the strategies of contemporary 'art cinema', here defined as movies marketed in distinction to mainstream Hollywood fare as 'smarter', 'artier' and 'more independent'" (350). Examples of this style are films such as *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Ghost World* (2001) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). Both art and co-called smart cinema have flourished from the recognition that audiences interested in these films represent a niche market and want a different experience from that which is offered at the multiplex. For Stafford: "Smart cinema is concerned with a view of the world that on one hand abhors the conformity of consumer culture and on the other celebrates the possibilities for difference that exist because affluence allows choice" (2007, 157). In some ways smart cinema is suggestive of cult film in its search for something nonconformist. As Jancovich (2002) observes, the rise of cult film fandom is indebted to art cinema audiences:

... cult movie audiences developed out of the audiences for the art cinema and repertory theatres, and it was these institutions that provided the spaces for congregation and often acted as the gatekeepers who classified and reclassified films through their advertising and exhibition (Jancovich, 2002, 315).

While this point is easy to grasp, other articles such as Alvin (2007) and Meyer (2010) discuss the difficulty in maintaining repertory and art cinemas in the face of competition from multiplexes. Due to expansion of multiplex chains, Alvin believes there are three main issues threatening the future of art house cinema. Firstly,



financial circumstances stemming from the risk of programming unknown films must be balanced against takings. The growth of home cinemas must be able to compete with the experience that smaller theatres provide, but without leaving home. Secondly, the merging of mainstream and art house audiences, as multiplexes have more theatres they can diversify into screening 'smart' and 'indie' films such as *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Milk* (2008) which would once have only screened at the art house (Alvin, 2007, 2). In order to sustain themselves, art cinemas have been forced to apply various measures to keep themselves viable, most commonly, refurbishment into 'luxury' cinemas.

In Australia, the unfortunate reality is that independently owned art house cinemas either occupying valuable real estate and/or experiencing dwindling audiences have been forced into closure, rather than rebranding themselves as luxury cinemas. Coslovich (2005) cites the example of the Lumiere cinema in Melbourne, one of the last independent (non cinema chain) theatres having to close due to lack of patronage. Although she states: "Nobody went to the Lumiere for its décor or facilities. ... The foyer was small, dark and dingy, the seats as hard as church pews... But for many people, all that didn't matter. They went for the programming" (2005, 1) the article quotes cinema consultant Andrew Pannel who attributes the closure of the cinema to being a: "... story of a cinema that failed to keep up with cinema patrons' expectations of comfort and quality facilities" (Coslovich, 2005, 3). Closures such as these arguably contribute to a decline in film culture, as cinema screens are dominated by both multiplex and art house chains screening the same kinds of film, resulting in a lack of diversity in content.

The struggle between business and audience needs in Australia is ongoing, and the forced transition to digital technology in cinemas will more than likely see the closure of more of the family owned independent cinemas, as 35mm film production ceases – examples of these closures are plentiful across the United States (Susman, 2013). The value of the property in which art house cinemas are

situated is frequently a contentious issue when it comes to the continued ability to screen. Verhoeven (2013, 36) recounts the recent situation:

“... in the never-ending story of the cinema’s decline, demise and defence [which] recently surfaced over the closure of Sydney’s Academy Twin cinemas”. A rental dispute between the landlords of the cinema and the lessee, Palace Cinemas ended with Palace being evicted, and the landlord stating: “... there’s no emotion or drama in this. For God’s sake, it’s only a cinema”. The swift and angry public response to this statement illustrates that the Academy Twin was more than ‘just a cinema’, but:

... a meaningful community and cultural ‘place’ that accommodates a type of film spectatorship which is also a proxy for a sense of community (sensibilities apparently not found in multiplexes or fast food outlets) and which must at all costs be preserved (Verhoeven, 2013, 36).

The sense of public outrage over the loss of the Academy Twin and the Valhalla in Glebe, as well as the public campaign to save the Chauvel Cinema in Paddington again illustrates Verhoeven’s point that these are not ‘just cinemas’, but, as I suggest in Chapter Six, ‘other’ spaces, and places where audiences can feel a sense of belonging and community.

For instance, in terms of repackaging or refurbishing venues, Zushi’s study of art house cinemas in England uncovers the existence of places such as the Phoenix cinema in East Finchley and the Close Up film library/screening centre in the East End of London. These examples share an ethic that resonates with that of cult film organisers in Australia. In these related cases, the content, and the idea of getting lost films out to the public by whatever means is pivotal. Damien Sanville, owner of the Close Up library laments: “... the disintegration and disappearance of what cinema was about – namely its social function as an affordable, democratic art form” (Zushi, 2008, 42). Like the cult film organisers consulted for this project in Sydney and Melbourne, Sanville runs: “... enormously popular screenings ... in conjunction with fellow movie missionaries [which] attest to the enduring appeal of the film lovers’ film club” (Zushi, 2008, 43). His motivation, like that of the Sydney

and Melbourne organisers, is all about: “Sharing ... it's pretty straightforward” (Zushi, 2008, 43).

A number of art house cinemas are being repackaged as new luxury venues in order to compete with multiplex cinemas. For instance, Zushi (2008, 42) traces the transformation of the Everyman Cinema in Hampstead, England, from being: “... the very epitome of the art house and repertory fleapit” to being an experience of comfort and luxury with the motto being 'Indulge'. The experience is now almost identical to the Australian multiplex ‘Gold Class’ theatres – with velvet ropes marking the entrance, expensive food and alcohol, and service staff available to bring food and drink at the push of a button from within the cinema. For the owner of the Everyman cinema, the point was to move away from the 'film-centric' attitude where: “... independent cinemas become tethered to content”. In order to flourish, “... the independent cinema needed to be divorced from its responsibilities as a cultural institution”, in favour of [developing a]“lifestyle” [focus] (Zushi, 2008, 42). It seems that refocusing on ‘lifestyle’ also means a change in content towards ‘mainstream’ films more likely to draw a crowd (the author mentions *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *Hellboy 2* (2008) screening when he visited), rather than underground or cult films, in order to recoup the financial outlay from refurbishment.<sup>47</sup>

The 'experience' of the new luxury art house cinema, with the emphasis on space and comfort to rival the home, has been successful in drawing audiences. In an interview with the manager of the Everyman Cinema, Williamson notes that the: “... aim is for a 'one stop' night out, providing couples with a chance to meet friends, have a drink and watch a movie in one comfortable location” (2009, 14). Although the small amount of literature on art house cinema does not refer to any

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<sup>47</sup> According to their website, the refurbishment of the Hampstead Everyman Cinema has been successful, with the chain acquiring another independent cinema group (Screen Cinemas) and expanding their business to the north of London (Leeds) with a brand new cinema opening in 2013. A newspaper article from 2009 quotes the Chief Executive of Everyman, Kath Sloggett that “The launch of the newly refurbished Everyman has been a great success and we’re pleased it has been so well received by both old and new customers” (*Ham & High*, 2009).

participatory activities, informal observations lead one to suggest that this form of viewing is closer to the 'quiet absorption' identified in relation to multiplex viewing (Faber, O'Guinn and Hardy, 1988). In line with Alvin's (2007) argument about the merging of experience between the multiplex and the art house cinema, I would argue that art house cinema chains in Australia (Dendy; Palace Cinemas) are drawing ever closer to the Gold Class experience at the multiplex. The cinema experience in both theatres is focused on comfort and 'indulgence' and films which would previously have screened only in the art house are now showing at the multiplex. Meanwhile art house cinemas must make 'safer' choices, meaning the variety of films screened is fewer, to ensure they remain competitive in drawing an audience.

### **3.5 Film Festivals and Audiences**

Film festivals are undergoing a period of exponential growth. Whilst the total number of festivals worldwide varies immensely what cannot be disputed is their rapid expansion in all parts of the world.<sup>48</sup> In their contemplation of the nature of film festivals, de Valck and Loist (2009, 179) show how film festival studies have (like studies of cult film) until recently, been treated as a deviation, rather than main focus of scholarly endeavour. This is despite the production of numerous festival histories and anniversary books, which tend to celebrate, rather than interrogate the true function of festivals.

Little mention of audience activity is apparent in existing scholarship on film festivals, although festivals that are screened simultaneously, or entirely online claim to foster audience participation, such as the Manhattan Short Film Festival. At each of the screening venues worldwide, audience members are given a voting card when they enter to select the film they believe should win. Results are tabulated locally before being submitted to festival headquarters in New York and being posted on the festival website. The organiser of the festival, Nicholas Mason

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<sup>48</sup> Turan suggested around 400 in 2002; Gore, 622 in 2001, whilst online, filmfestivals.com had over 4000 listings in 2004.

says that this practice is unique because it allows the audience to vote for the winner: “Audiences loves the voting thing... I’m a huge believer in audience participation” (Crosby, 2012, 1).

Film festivals, and film festival research is typically focused on content rather than audience behaviour. Research into film festivals has concentrated on 1) bemoaning the lack of diversity amongst ‘mainstream’ film festivals (Sundance in particular), and 2) neglecting their ‘true function’ (to support cinephilia), as suggested by Koehler (2009) or, more pertinent to this thesis 3) the way that festivals can operate to support smaller national cinemas by operating as an alternative viewing space in the face of the loss of smaller (art house) cinemas (Stevens, 2011). This loss of smaller venues has a further consequence suggested by Martin (2009), that some films are relegated to the status of ‘festival films’, shown once, but without a venue to support further, widespread viewing. This problem was suggested in the previous section, with art house cinemas succumbing to economic pressures and playing more populist fare that can also be seen at the multiplex, rather than challenging works that may draw a smaller audience.

Stevens (2011, 144) suggests that the pervasiveness of film festivals in Melbourne (where her study is focused) presents: “... as a whole, a sustained exhibition system. ... The appeal of film festivals above other sources of cinema emanates from their event status and their ability to program a diverse range of cinematic works”. The freedom of choice in programming for film festivals operates in stark opposition to the art house theatres that maintain a commercial imperative in order to remain viable. The commercial restrictions on art house cinemas: “... limits the variety of product on offer” (Stevens, 2011, 145) as cinemas opt for ease of access for audiences with all cinemas in the chain screening a similar selection of films, rather than exhibiting a broader selection and forcing the audience to potentially travel a greater distance. Festivals have an advantage over art house cinemas:

The sense that a festival offers a temporary experience of cinema that is here one day and gone the next motivates not only local audiences but an increasing number of cultural event tourists to move beyond their own

locality to access a diverse range of cinematic experiences (Stevens, 2011, 145).

In being a 'limited time only' event, the film festival is freer to exhibit a wide range of films without the concern of maintaining a sustained audience. Stevens concludes that:

Released from the commercial constraints that have led to increasingly conservative programming within the theatre space, the festival emerges not simply as an alternative source of film but as a platform that stands to succeed the cinema, becoming the premiere means through which art cinemas can be experienced. ... Within the Melbourne context, this new cinema of festivals can already be seen as taking over from the specialised cinemas, emerging within the city as a venue-less platform comprising singular recurring events that celebrate a diversity of cinema (2011, 145).

The growth of film festivals then, can perhaps be seen as a response to the loss of alternative screening venues, and the desire of audiences to view a greater variety of material.

Martin (2009) delves into this possibility in discussing the consequences of the unmitigated boom in film festivals. As film festivals have become marked as the film culture event, so has there become an increasing chasm between two types of audiences (local and visitors) and two kinds of festival attempting to satisfy the demands of the disparate audience. For Martin, the aspiration of festivals to be all things to all audiences has: "... detonated the once-upon-a-time 'local community' experience" and resulted in an increasingly fragmented program aimed at various niche audiences (fans of animation, shorts, documentaries etc.). Whilst he acknowledges the creation of a massive range of films to be viewed, in his opinion:

The niche-oriented festival merely confirms spectators – or rather gangs of spectators – in the already-established prison-house of their frequently rigid, exclusive tastes; as a general rule, audience members who follow the marketing cues designed precisely to 'target' them do not wander over and cross the lines of starkly diverse types of cinema. Where can the fervent dream of cinema as a transformative experience – which is, from a certain angle, the very heart of the cinephile passion and cinephile culture – go in this kind of segregated landscape? (Martin, 2009, 102).

The tendency described by Martin for audiences to remain faithful to their preferred 'type' of cinema is precisely what, as Stevens (2011) suggested, has enabled film festivals to flourish and expand at a rapid pace. Finally, Martin describes the:

... recent creation of a truly hideous term: the 'festival film', which is apparently the name for a film whose destiny, nowadays, is *only* to play (on the big screen at least) on the international festival circuit. What this means in practice, is that, in many countries, the films prized by progressive cinephiles ... are branded, virtually from the outset of their public life, as unfit for general (or even moderately specialised) distribution and exhibition (2009, 105).

Martin's point emphasises the limits placed on art house cinemas attempting to balance commerciality with creativity; with limited numbers of screening venue this trend is unlikely to be reversed, and ironically, may well result in the creation of further film festivals to screen films which have been overlooked for consumption in the art house.

Both Martin (1988) and Gorfinkel (2008) have suggested that cinephilia has something in common with cult fandom. Like cult film fans, a cinephile tends to be a: "... viewer who prides him or herself on their expert opinions on the topic of cinema" and who practices a "... righteous, eclectic and often pretentious form of aesthetic judgement" (Mathijs and Mendik, 2008, 5). A connection thus emerges between the nostalgia for the 'golden age' of cinephilia: "... epitomised by the movie-going habits of the devotees of the cine-clubs and cinematheques in 1950s and 1960s Paris" (Czach, 2010, 139) and the contemporary equivalent – attendance of film festivals. For Czach, the proliferation of the multiplex in conjunction with the declining numbers of art house cinemas has turned the film festival into: "one of the last refuges for the cinephile (2010, 140). The film festival offers the chance for cinephiles to bask in a traditional film experience, as they represent: "... a seductive return to classic cinephilia with their promise of a unique, unrepeatable experience frequently offering a rare opportunity to view films on the big screen before they disappear into the ether or only reappear on DVD" (Czach, 2010, 141). Cult film screenings hold the same type of attraction as film festival screenings offer the opportunity to view rare or lost films on the big screen which

are unavailable on DVD. Cult film screenings also offer the cinephile what is often an 'unrepeatable experience' in terms of double and triple features and special screenings shown on the 'big screen': "... as they were meant to be seen" (Czach, 2010, 141) – for example, the Mu-meson Archives initiated Halloween screening of *At Midnight I Take Your Soul* (1964) at the Vanguard (typically a live music venue) with a specially composed, live score being performed by the band Darth Vegas in sync with the (silent) film. This screening has resulted in further one-off screenings of the same type, for example the screening of *Nosferatu* (1922) with another live score performed by Darth Vegas, hosted by Jay Katz (Mu-meson Archives) at the Sydney Opera House in April 2010. One could characterise 'unrepeatable screenings' as being part of the 'magic of cinema' which Martin describes in his unpacking of the cinephile:

The cinephile ... lives in a dream world, that world of cinema which is both the screen image and the darkened womb of the picture theatre. He is a mad, voracious consumer of film. He regards the cinema as something almost sacred, the source of his most intense and intimate pleasures (1988, 117).

Thus, one could explain the value of the unrepeatable film screening for the cinephile as both part of the 'magic of cinema', where one views that which has eluded them, but also valued for its elite, rare status, which holds great cultural capital amongst the fan group. For Martin, the importance of cinephilia lies in its link to film culture: "Cinephilia, as an indiscriminate and all consuming passion for films is written as the originating moment for all national film culture histories" (1988, 118). Gorfinkel (2008) sees similarities, despite: "... superficial differences" (33) between cinephilia and cult film fandom. In particular she draws attention to: "... the logic of reclamation" (34), which operates in both forms of fandom, where there is a refusal of: "... the parameters of artistic value and the idea of the hallowed masterpiece" (34). One can assert that cinephiles and cult fans, with their passion for film, are vital to the film culture of their surroundings, as their passion motivates them to reclaim lost films, and organise screenings when they perceive the local film culture to be lacking, as is the case with the organisers under investigation in this thesis.



### **3.6 “Home is where the moving image is” - Home cinema viewing**

Home viewing is a relatively recent area of research into audience spectatorship, but a significant one. It is a practice that has expanded exponentially with the development of home theatre technology, and the ever increasing options to source content (*Wired*, 2010). The contemporary cinematic trend of home viewing and home theatres is examined in depth by Klinger (2006), who discusses how in the home: “... audiences of Hollywood movies are free to manipulate virtually all aspects of a film” (128). Despite having the ability to engage with the film as one pleases, it is intriguing that as Klinger suggests, many home cinema viewers enforce the traditional discourse of the cinema by maintaining silence throughout screenings:

Research on video consumption at home has demonstrated that viewing dynamics commonly linked to the motion picture theatre – that is attentive watching from beginning to end without interruption have also affected domestic spectatorship (Klinger, 2006, 3-4).

According to Klinger, further examination of audiences highlights the way that home cinemas reinforce the idea of the big screen cinema screening as authentic, as opposed to the inauthentic experience of home video. Video is said to value convenience over art and: “...disturbs the communion between the viewer and film and interferes with judgements of quality” (Klinger, 2006, 2). This suggestion of an ‘authentic’ experience may account for how the discourse of cinema behaviour has seeped into the home and now increasingly, dictates the way one behaves when viewing at home.

The idea of the ‘authentic’ viewing experience in the home is also discussed by Kendrick (2005). He focuses on home theatre enthusiasts and:

... how issues of class and taste are negotiated by this group in debates about what constitutes a ‘legitimate’ viewing experience in the domestic space... home theatre enthusiasts attempt to shape a particular mode of film presentation and viewing for the home theatre environment by denouncing competing modalities as lesser, inappropriate, or ‘illegitimate’ uses of DVD technology (Kendrick, 2005, 58).

It is suggested that creating a home theatre is an effort to: "... reproduce the theatrical movie-going experience, creating a domestic version of the old movie palaces and generating in the process a new film culture within the home" (Kendrick, 2005, 59). In creating their own cinema, these enthusiasts enact codes of the cinema, where the film must be screened in original aspect ratio. Kendrick discusses at length the way that these enthusiasts, by having an active online community (Home Theatre Forum): "... are actively and constantly engaged in making meaning" (2005, 60). Home theatre fans thus perceive themselves to possess greater cultural capital than the typical 'Joe Six Pack' home viewer. The proliferation of home theatres has changed the dynamic present between public/private viewing in unexpected ways; instead of creating a more active audience which adapts the texts to their own needs, both Kendrick and Tryon (2009) have shown how those home theatre enthusiasts who are active online, are militant about screening films only as they were shown in the cinema, in an effort to replicate the cinema experience in its entirety. Therefore, by replicating the cinema experience, home audiences are often also enforcing discourse on the 'proper' behaviours of 'quiet absorption' found at the multiplex cinema.

### **3.7 New Media, Interactivity and Spectatorship**

In the era of 'new media', we must also consider how the relationship between audience and texts is now being discussed in terms of 'interactivity'. The use of the term 'interactive' has particular bearing in terms of cult film viewing practices. Despite the assessment of Holmes (2004, 214), who identifies interactivity as a 'buzzword' (in relation to reality television), and as: "... increasingly structuring the interface between industry, text and audience", aside from audience activity at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, interactivity has not been adequately discussed in terms of film audiences. However, in several of the surveys and interviews conducted for this thesis, cult film viewing is referred to as being 'interactive'. Many theorists also refer to the 'participation' of the audience during screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as being 'interactive'. The activity of the cult audience operates in contrast to perceptions of multiplex and art-house viewers who are

thought of as being more quiet and passive during screenings. Recent innovations such as the German film *Last Call* (2010) where the audience actively influences the outcome of the on-screen action while still in the cinema, via their mobile telephones, are blurring the line between multiplex and cult viewing activity (Fischer, 2010). The growth in home cinema usage is also changing how audiences watch, by re-creating the cinema experience right down the aspect ratio. Despite these innovations, I still content that there is something unique in the types of activity undertaken at cult film screenings – the bringing of props, and rapid fire responses to dialogue – to name just a few. Thus, in order to gain a sense of what 'interactivity' and 'participation' may mean in terms of cult film fandom, we must turn to other disciplines.

Holmes points to the ambiguity present in attempts to define interactivity (2004, 217) especially in its association with new media. The unstable nature of the term 'interactivity' becomes apparent upon review of accounts such as Kiouisis (2002), Koolstra & Bos (2009) and Smuts' (2009). Kiouisis (2002) applies the technique of 'concept explication' – in order to untangle: "... conceptions [which] are hotly contested" (356).<sup>49</sup> The primary characteristic of interactivity seems to be the ability of the audience to react to, and perhaps alter, the media text, a view which both Kiouisis and Koolstra & Bos (2009) share, as Kiouisis states the: "... emphasis [is] on feedback. This ability for message receivers to respond to message senders has developed into a core component of many interactivity conceptions" (2002, 359). In terms of film viewing, interactivity seems to refer to the ability of audiences to alter films texts, such as test audience screenings. Taking this definition into consideration, I would suggest that the activity occurring between audiences and films should be described as 'participatory' rather than 'interactive'.

Smuts' (2009) departs from previous theories on interactivity by highlighting the contrast between participation and interaction. Smuts suggests that: "Participation is best thought of as a behaviour ascribed to agents who are helping us to achieve

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<sup>49</sup> 'Concept explication' being dubbed by Chaffee (1991).

some goal. ... to call an activity participatory seems to imply that we react to or are reacted to by another agent" (62). To create a contrast with the nature of participation, as responsiveness is a trait of both participation and interactivity, Smuts then clarifies that the type of responsiveness is paramount. Based on these factors, Smuts states that:

*Something is interactive* if and only if it is responsive; does not completely control; is not completely controlled and does not respond in a completely random fashion. ... For the thing to remain interactive for us there must be forms of input that result in responses that we cannot accurately predict ... in themselves, things are not interactive; it is only in relation to our ability to control something that it is interactive *for us* (original emphasis, 2009, 65).

On the basis of Smuts' definition, no film, no matter how much it is claimed to be interactive (such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) can meet these criteria, particularly that of responsiveness. Whilst audiences may respond to the film in their counter dialogue, use of props etc., the film cannot respond to the audience's response. Overall, in assessing 'interactivity' and 'participation' in relation to audience response, 'participation' seems more apt; if we are to accept Smuts' view that a text must be able to respond to an audiences' response, participation better explains the involvement of audiences in shaping outcomes and altering texts. This section suggests the complex nature of the term 'interactivity', and the need for further research into its application in the study of cult film, and indeed all types of film going practice.

The discussion of whether film viewing can be described as 'interactive' or 'participatory' is related to the concept of spectatorship in cinema, which also focuses on how audiences receive film texts and what they do with them.

According to Mayne (1993, 1) the perception of cinema as an institution is vital to any understanding of spectatorship, which she defines as:

... not only the act of watching a film, but also the ways one takes pleasure in the experience, or not; the means by which watching movies becomes a passion, or leisure time activity like any other. Spectatorship refers to how film going and the consumption of movies and their myths are symbolic activities, culturally significant events.

As Stafford (2007) suggests, spectatorship is focused on the idea of the audience. Staiger bridges the gap by extending ideas of the audience to include the historically constructed: "... identities and interpretive strategies *brought by spectators to the cinema*. ... The historical circumstances sometimes create 'interpretive communities' or cultural groups such as fans who produce their own conventionalised modes of reception" (original emphasis, 2000, 23). In recent years, as Stafford (2007) has suggested, spectatorship has been overlooked in favour of reception studies – switching the emphasis to the messages being received, rather than *how* they are being received. However, both approaches remain relevant to studies of cult film, as Aaron (2007) maintains: "The discussion of spectatorship has always been bound up with ... its negotiation of the spectator's activity or passivity, manipulation, or resistance, distance or implication" (1). Cult film viewing encompasses several of the issues inherent in studies of spectatorship in terms of the level of activity during the screenings, and the manipulation of texts, as well as if this activity can be described as 'interactive'.

Having examined the features of the multiplex, art-house, film festival and home viewing, it is useful to reflect upon how these different types of viewing relate to each other, and to cult film viewing. Firstly, I discuss the influence of place over viewing practices. Although multiplex viewing codes vary across multiplexes (e.g.: Indian audiences), and many home cinema owners have adopted these same viewing codes, I would still suggest that place *does* have a significant impact on how films are viewed. As Hubbard (2003) suggests, attending the multiplex is also a consumption of place, and I posit that several of the features he describes as appealing to audiences (cleanliness and comfort; a focus on family values and a fear of the city at night) apply equally to the home cinema. The fact that home cinema owners are so particular in replicating the experience of attending the multiplex, right down to the aspect ratio (Kendrick, 2005) suggests that audiences want the experience of the multiplex, but without leaving the house; in fact: "... the act of installing a home cinema system was referred to by some as 'bunkering the house' or 'post 9/11 cocooning'" (Klinger, 2006, 25). In the case of Indian cinema

audiences, the rapid expansion of multiplexes since 1997 has opened up a divide between minority audiences attending the cinema hall, and the middle class families attending the multiplex. Both Srinivas (1998, 2002), Athique and Hill (2007) and Athique (2009) also refers to class divisions within the audience, which suggests an earlier incarnation of cinema going where talk was more common, as Staiger previously suggested (2001). Clearly, despite the fact that this is a public screening, the physical location or 'place' in which the screening is held, as well as the class composition of the audience demands a different set of conventions. The influence of place is also reflected at art-house screenings, where the cinema is typically a lot smaller, with a focus on comfort and an 'experience' of indulgence, with food/beverage service available in the theatre. Given that the audience is of an older demographic, the cinema is much quieter than a multiplex which typically draws children and teenagers to the latest blockbusters. In the chapters that follow, a comparison will be drawn with cult audiences and the role that place plays in the context of cult viewing.

As has been revealed in this chapter, there has been a gradual merging between multiplex, art-house and home cinema viewing. This could be described as a blurring between public and private codes of viewing, as 'quiet absorption' is the mode of viewing to which most audiences in these contexts adhere. There is also a merging between the experience of attending the multiplex (particularly 'Gold Class') and the art-house cinema, as both experiences are premised on the theme of indulgence, with comfortable chairs, hot food and service inside the theatre. Film festivals and cult film screenings seem to differ in that they are able to offer 'unrepeatable experiences' which are not available at the multiplex (although art-house cinemas sometimes participate for special events such as film festival screenings). As discussed in the subsequent chapters, unrepeatable experiences can include a triple bill of films; films played with unique soundtracks/orchestras; special prints; limited seasons; and meet and greet sessions where audiences can meet the creators/actors and ask questions. If it is the case that the boundaries between these types of viewing are merging, it is important to ask cult audiences in

later chapters what cult film screenings give them which they can not get from other types of screenings, and why they choose to attend cult screenings over those at the multiplex, art-house or home.

Another type of blurring in the film experience may be occurring in the designation between different types of alternative film viewers – be they art-house audiences, home theatre enthusiasts, festivalgoers or cinephiles. Bordwell (2008) has suggested that: “Most film historians – teachers, archivists, journalists and freelancers – are *cinephiles*, lovers of cinema. Like birdwatchers, fans of 1960s television, art historians and other devotees, they enjoy acquiring knowledge about the object of their affection”. So whilst all of these groups are lovers of cinema, there are slight differences between them. As Kendrick (2005) suggests, home theatre enthusiasts are often distinguished by their need to set themselves apart from ‘Joe Six Pack’ viewers (i.e.: viewers who do not share their need to screen in correct aspect ratios etc.). As discussed, the line between multiplex and home viewing also seems to be blurring as a result of audience’s desire for comfort and safety.

Although all of the viewers examined in this chapter claim they are unique, their similarities outweigh their differences. This is where I propose that cult film groups are distinctive – because cult film fans are also cinephiles, home theatres enthusiasts, festival goers – but they seem to take their fandom further in incorporating it into the fabric of their everyday life. Rather than just an ‘interest’; cult film fandom constitutes a form of identity construction, a point which will be explored in later chapters.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Research Strategy**

Sydney, May 2010: It is a cold, windy night and groups of friends huddle together in the bar area lining the Chauvel Cinema in Paddington. Just an ordinary Friday night at the movies ... except the audience members are all clutching... plastic spoons?

The above scenario (though usually without spoons) is repeated several times a week at the cult film screenings that are at the heart of this thesis affording a glimpse into the uncharted territory that is cult film viewing in Australia. The central aim of this thesis is therefore to unpack not only the appeal of cult films in an Australian context, but also the particular ways in which Australian audiences engage with cult films from the perspective of the participants, of which I am one.

The first part of this thesis has been concerned with the history of cult film and has revealed that most definitions of 'cult' centre on the film text, rather than the essential 'cult-making' component, the audience. Chapters Two and Three explore the spectrum of audience behaviours ranging from the ritualised fandom that characterises cult film phenomena such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – to newer fan activities such as hurling plastic spoons, as experienced during screenings of *The Room* - to the relatively restrained behaviour of cinema-goers at the multiplex, art house, film festival and home cinema. The second part of this thesis examines the activities of specific cult film audiences in Australia. This chapter explains the methodology used to gather the data.

#### **4.1 Towards Filling the Gap**

One of the fundamental aims of this thesis is to understand why people attend cult film groups; therefore a qualitative research strategy as defined by O'Reilly (2005), Burns (1994) and Burns and Grove (2005) was implemented. Burns (1994) summarises this strategy by noting that:



The task of the qualitative methodologist is to capture what people say and do as a product of how they interpret the complexity of their world; to understand events from the viewpoints of their participants; it is the life-world of the participants that constitutes the investigative field (12).

To capture this perspective I employed a combination of participant observation, surveys, in-depth open-ended interviews and historically oriented background interviews. My participant status gave me access to the experiences of cult fans both at the screenings and in relationship to their daily lives, such as attending the wedding of the Annandale organisers, as well as birthday parties, art exhibitions and other celebrations held by the organisers and audience members. These activities are consistent with Barker's (2000, 28) view of ethnographic methods as offering a: "qualitative understanding of cultural activity in context" (28). The use of several methodologies concurrently also enables the voices of different strands of cult enthusiasts to be heard when discussing the practices surrounding cult film in Australia.

In any study, a part of its logical progression is the continual revision of the theoretical framework upon which it is based. Very little academic material exists specifically relating to cult film but more especially the perspectives of the audiences involved in screenings. Furthermore, there appears to be nothing specifically relating to Australian screenings. As a result of information gathered during the initial stages of the project, it became useful to apply several methods in order to gather further detail from participants. This process is described as triangulation.

Triangulation may be defined as *the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour ...* triangular techniques in the social sciences attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint and/or using a variety of methods. (original emphasis, Burns, 1994, 272).

I therefore approached the cult film screening groups with three key research questions:

1. What is cult film? That is, how do key stakeholders (organisers, audiences) define cult film, and does the term 'cult film' still retain meaning as a term?
2. What do cult films mean to these key stakeholders? Why seek out cult film screenings when there are so many options available – what do they gain from attending cult film screenings that they cannot get elsewhere?
3. How do the activities of cult film groups relate to the broader Australian film culture? Have issues relating to Australian film culture (closure of venues, lack of financial support) influenced/impacted upon the decision to screen cult films?

#### **4.2 Introducing... Australian Cult Film Groups**

The data gathered for the second part of this thesis comes from two groups of Australian cult film audiences – the Annandale group in Sydney, and the Fitzroy Screensect group in Melbourne. The Annandale cult film group refers to the group that formerly held screenings at The Annandale Hotel and now screens exclusively from the organisers' home cinema, The Mu-meson Archives.

**The Annandale Hotel** is located in Annandale, a suburb in the inner west of Sydney, approximately 5 kilometres from the Central Business District. The venue is located on busy Parramatta Road and is easily accessible by bus, train or car. The immediate area surrounding the Annandale Hotel is a mix of furniture, antique and fast food outlets; since 2010, there has also been a surge in new apartment block developments on vacant lots or vacated buildings. The hotel is two kilometres away from the Broadway Shopping Centre and a ten-minute walk to Newtown, another local suburb similar in demographic and retail composition to Fitzroy in Melbourne (where the second survey was conducted). Both Annandale and Newtown are well known for their large populations of students and creative people (musicians, artists, actors) as well as a wealth of bars, cafes and restaurants. The streets surrounding the Annandale Hotel offer parking, but local residents are known for reporting any type of noise that they perceive to be emanating from the Annandale or its patrons. The ongoing conflict between the Annandale and local residents has resulted in numerous court battles over the

years, and the restriction of hours of operation, particularly in relation to band performances (Olding, 2009). As a result of a protracted battle with the Land and Environment Court to extend trading hours (Levin, 2013) in mid-2011 the Annandale was listed for auction, resulting in shorter opening hours, and the relocation of Cult Cinema Monday to The Mu-meson Archives. Matthew and Daniel Rule, the owners of the Annandale staged a survival campaign by inviting patrons to 'buy a brick' to raise funds to renovate and soundproof the hotel, but as a result of the costs of the legal action, the pub went into receivership in February 2013. Shortly after this, the former owners were enraged, launching an online tirade again Leichhardt Council when they reversed their long opposition to live music by adopting a 'Good Neighbour Policy' to end legal action against music venues. As of July 2013, the Annandale remains open Wednesdays through to Saturdays and was sold on May 30 to the Oscars Group of hotels, who at this time, say they will continue with live music at the venue.

**The Mu-meson Archives** is also located in Annandale, one street away from the Annandale Hotel. The organisers of this project, Jay Katz and Miss Death had been running screenings from 1993-2000 from their home in Chippendale. They view their collection as not only a personal project, but in some cases, one of conservation, where they are often able to donate 16mm film and other items to official Australian archives (such as ACMI) when they have exhausted their own ability to store such items (such as a Scopitone music jukebox which they donated as it was too large to house at their residence). In addition to holding screenings every Tuesday between 2000-2011 at the Annandale Hotel, several screenings per week are held at The Archives, as it is affectionately known. Since 2011, when the Annandale began closing on their usual screening night, Katz and Death have instead run 3 to 4 screenings a week (on average) of cult films and documentaries at 'The Archives'. A monthly program of coming screenings is issued to subscribers (in hard copy and via email) on the last week of the month.

The close proximity of The Archives to the Annandale Hotel has meant that screenings could be relocated there at short notice when bands took over the regular screening space. In addition to the weekly screening (Cult Cinema Tuesday, formerly Monday) the Mu-meson Archives typically hosts at least two further cult film or documentary screenings per week, as well as Miss Death's Stitch and Bitch (monthly) and The Sounds of Seduction nightclub (several times a year); information about which can be accessed through both the website (Mumeson.org) or printed monthly programme. Adjunct screenings to the Sydney Underground Film Festival (SUFF), A Night of Horror, and other alternative film festivals, as well as Trasharama screenings are held as part of the season of these film festivals. Screenings at The Archives include the added advantage of supper (homemade soup, or cake, tea and coffee) as part of the door cost on the additional screenings during the week, and offer the experience of home viewing with an audience.

Most of the screenings at the Mu-meson Archives are themed. Mondays are known for 'Paranoid Politics' – usually documentaries, or other screenings about conspiracy theories and/or politics. Tuesday continues in the tradition of the Annandale 'Cult Cinema Tuesday' – often films from the 1980s. This event is usually the most well attended and audience friendly. Every 2<sup>nd</sup> Wednesday the theme is 'Marginalised Movies' – lost or 'classic' films, often from the 50s, 60s and 1970s, which have either been recently acquired by the organisers, or are reviewed with the purpose of sharing them with a 'new' audience. Once a month, Thursday is reserved for the 'Meson Master Class', usually involving the screening of a 'classic' cult film (such as *Female Trouble* [1974]) and the story behind the making of the film. Friday nights usually involve documentaries of cult film/ music figures; recent examples including: John Shipp: Independent Exploitation Film Merchant (*The Film Peddler*) and *From Straight to Bizarre: Frank Zappa*. Saturday nights are reserved for special events such as fundraisers for charitable organisations – held either at the Archives, or at local community venues (such as The Addison Road Centre), or their themed disco night 'The Sounds of Seduction',

where all of the guests dress in costume (60's go-go style, or other nominated themes). One Sunday afternoon of each month is devoted to 'Miss Death's Stitch and Bitch', a craft afternoon for friends and audience members.

While the band room at the Annandale Hotel could seat 120 people, an average audience there consists of between 20-50 viewers. At the Mu-meson Archives, however, an average audience is around 10-20 patrons with seating for as many as 80. Screenings generally begin at 8pm in both locations, and the audience gathers from 7.30 to catch up with the organisers and each other. Screenings typically run for around 2 hours, with previews of coming screenings playing before the feature. There is usually an intermission in which tea, coffee or other homemade light refreshments are available as part of the entry fee (\$5 on Tuesdays, \$10 for other screenings, and \$15-\$20 for charity events). After the screenings, audience members often linger to discuss the screening, and chat further with the organisers and other guests.

The Fitzroy group refers to the audience members of Screensect, a screening held at **Bar Open** on Brunswick St, Fitzroy in Melbourne, less than six kilometres from the Central Business District of Melbourne. Brunswick Street is recognised for being a local hub of niche boutiques, pubs, cafes and restaurants, comparable to the inner west of Sydney where the Annandale Hotel is located. It is an inner city suburb with a high proportion of young people, students and those working in creative fields. The venue is easily accessible by public transport, as a tram goes directly past Bar Open at regular intervals, and parking is available on nearby streets. Unlike the Annandale, noise complaints from neighbourhood residents do not seem to be a concern, as the bar is located slightly away from nearby homes. Like the Annandale, the bar is decorated in old style, comfortable furniture, a look far removed from the glossy bars of the inner city, creating a 'home away from home' feeling amongst patrons. The organiser of this event, Adam Spellicy, has been running these screenings every Monday since 2005, at the request of the venue's management who were keen to start a film night at the bar. Prior to 2005,

Spellicy had been holding an informal version of Screensect at his own home with a small group of friends. In 2008, Spellicy started another cult screening with Screensect member Ben Buckingham at Bar 303 on High St, Northcote, another fashionable suburb close to the Melbourne CBD. Programs for both events are advertised online, and regular attendees can join the mailing list. The upstairs band room at Bar Open where Screensect is held seats around 70 patrons, and the events draw an average of 20-30 people. Shorts begin at 7pm, and the feature starts at around 7:30pm. Audiences gather from 6:30pm for drinks and talking in the beer garden downstairs before the feature. Screenings run for around 2 hours (depending on the length of the feature) without an intermission. However attendees are free to go downstairs for more drinks etc. Screensect charge a membership fee of \$5 per quarter year, which entitles members to attend unlimited film nights during that period. After the screenings, audience members usually return to the beer garden to talk about the film and catch-up with other patrons.

#### **4.3 The Research Process**

The research process involved viewing as many 'cult' films as possible (classified as 'cult' films in fan texts as mentioned in Chapter One) in order to understand more about the kind of textual features that might designate a film as 'cult'.

Following this background work, I began identifying suitable candidates to interview about their involvement in organising cult film or underground film screenings.<sup>50</sup>

Each of the interviewees (15 in total; 11 men plus 4 women) were chosen on the basis of their profile, which I discovered via websites, in the local (Sydney) street press, or through word of mouth from other candidates. Despite conducting these interviews, and three additional interviews with other related candidates to gain some background knowledge of the Australian film scene in the 1970s, not all of the interview material gathered appears in the final thesis. As the project

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<sup>50</sup> Mendik and Schneider (2002) describe 'underground film' as a larger category which encompasses a range of film styles that are not mainstream (exploitation, alternative, independent) that includes 'cult film'. They contend that the underground film scene is "... a space where art-house stands shoulder to shoulder with spectacle-based atrocity, and where experimentation is a regular feature of exploitation" (1-2).

developed in a different direction than initially conceived, certain interviews were no longer as pertinent to the overall direction of the argument. The focus of the thesis thus became a comparison of the activities of two cult screening groups on the East Coast of Australia (Sydney and Melbourne). The Annandale group was chosen because of my previous attendance at their screenings, and profile in the local street press. The Melbourne Fitzroy group was chosen for its similar venue and profile to the Annandale group; thus, without having met this group previously, I suspected it would provide a point of comparison due to its similarities.

After conducting this background research, it became apparent that some careful negotiation would be required in order to gain access to those actively organising cult film screenings within Australia, and to gain their permission to observe their audiences (whom I also had hoped to interview and survey). Hence, developing a certain amount of rapport was needed before the organisers would probably feel comfortable in granting me access to their groups. Having already attended numerous screenings at the Annandale cult movie night myself, it seemed logical first to approach the organisers Jay Katz and Miss Death. Not only are they very knowledgeable about cult film, but they also have a public profile in the local inner city community due to their long running screening night, their radio program *The Naked City* on station FBi which talks about Sydney culture, and local press coverage of their activities (Bennett, 2005; Hawkes, 2009). As Katz and Death are key gatekeepers of alternative film culture in Australia, gaining their trust was crucial to my research project. On the subject of access, O'Reilly notes:

Such gatekeepers or key informants may be crucial to your gaining access. They are often people who are key to the group because without their approbation you will not gain access, or because what they know about the group is wide-ranging and deep. Sometimes they are people who are high status, sometimes they are merely well connected and well known. Getting access to or through these individuals may aid your general access to other people and to information you might not otherwise have gained (2005, 91).

As such, the Annandale organisers were vital to my project, providing me with information and contacts with the other main figures in the cult film 'scene' in Australia. As this strategy suggests, this referral process involved a 'snowball

sampling' technique where one contact expands into many contacts. From these initial interviews with organisers I gained access to other organisers, archivists, cult video storeowners and filmmakers who agreed to offer their perspectives on cult viewing. By attending more and more screening nights (as a social member myself), I also established a relationship with both the organisers and several members of the group which granted me access to other events while also increasing my understanding of the group dynamic. In turn, this made reaching out to a second screening group in Melbourne easier because I was better prepared from prior experience, despite being an outsider. To gain a broader global perspective on the operation of small cult film screenings, and to establish similarities and differences with local cult film screenings, I made contact with the organisers of three separate cult film groups overseas. Accessing organisers and participants connected to cult screenings was not always easy. Potential interstate and international participants were often difficult to track down, despite numerous emails, phone calls, and even domestic field trips. In most cases, I was eventually able to establish contact, but most often this was via email, which presented communication limitations, but this was unavoidable in several instances.

The cult film screening groups that were eventually contacted hailed from Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, as well as London and Newcastle (in the U.K.), and Phoenix, Arizona). Typically, the venues used for these types of film screenings included pubs (as in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and London) or spaces in private homes (Mu-meson Archives). Less common were cult screenings in existing dedicated exhibition spaces, such as the Midnight Movie Mamacita in Phoenix, operating out of a small cinema within the Madcap Cinema Complex. The Star and Shadow group in Newcastle mobilised several film collectives in the local community in order to build their own 60-seat cinema, which is also used for live music, meetings, craft markets, discos and film festivals. Cult and Underground film festivals also make use of live music venues (Trasharama), or a combination of music venues and cinemas Melbourne Underground Film Festival (MUFF) and Sydney Underground Film Festival (SUFF). This alternative use of venues as a



space for exhibiting rare films enables cult screenings to exist even when attendance is not large enough for ordinary cinemas to run such activities. Chapters Five and Six include a full list of participants and venues investigated for this study with further information located in Appendix B.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the practices of cult viewing and participation, several months of 'formal' participant observation was conducted at the Annandale Hotel in Sydney (in addition to my previous experience as a mere fan). During this time I identified routines and rituals of those who participated and interacted with the screen, and observed the general conversations between patrons over the course of an evening (before, during and after the feature). Whilst observing the organisers and patrons in this way was informative, formal one-on-one interviews were conducted in order to supplement this material with deeper insights.

Three distinct types of interviews were conducted for this thesis. Firstly, there were in-depth interviews with organisers, archivists and underground filmmakers. Whilst I arrived at my first interview with a detailed list of open-ended questions, like most parts of this thesis, the interviews involved a process that was constantly refined. Upon commencement of the interview, it became obvious that the subjects were comfortable with the interview process, and as Burns (1994) notes of many ethnographic studies, the interview quickly became informal, and conversational in style. Most of the interviews conducted were face to face, or over the phone, often lasting for two or more hours. This informal style enabled a more informative discussion, which yielded noteworthy points and themes to follow up. Secondly, after administering a survey to participants in the Annandale screening group (on one particular evening), I conducted six follow-up email interviews with participants to clarify various themes, which had emerged from the survey, such as those of 'ritual' and 'community'. Each of the participants was asked how the screenings fit into their daily lives, and what the screenings meant to them. In total, 19 individual interviews were conducted with organisers and audience members. Thirdly

background interviews were conducted with three other participants who had involvement in the early years of underground screenings (particularly in Melbourne) in order to situate cult film activities as part of the larger film culture of Australia.

To supplement the interview data, I also conducted surveys of both cult film screening groups, copies of which can be found in Appendix C. After seeking approval from the organisers of the Annandale cult group, I surveyed participants during a Christmas screening of the Australian 'cult classic' *Wake in Fright* (1973). The survey consisted of ten questions, including questions on general attitudes towards film, the screening night, and Australian film. Other questions concerned the specific film being screened. Audience members were given the option of whether to remain anonymous, or to have their first names used when I referred to their comments in the thesis. All of the surveys were numbered (randomly, in the order they were stacked), and for those who wished to remain anonymous, I simply substituted the number of their survey for a name e.g. 'Respondent 1'. A total of forty-two surveys (out of 50 distributed) were completed and returned to me.

One year after the Annandale survey I conducted a survey in Melbourne with the Fitzroy Screensect group. Very low patronage on this particular night resulted in only five completed surveys (out of 5 distributed). Follow up surveys/interviews with this group were deemed unnecessary because the questions asked in the Melbourne survey reflected the refined questions which had been asked in the follow up interviews in Sydney (*Wake in Fright* was not shown in Melbourne so the survey was modified to accommodate newer and more precise questions). Despite the large disparity in audience numbers between the two screening groups, the results were nonetheless equally significant in shaping the direction of the thesis. Issues relevant to cult screenings, reception, identity, community and the place of alternative screenings in the larger film culture in Australia emerged, and the combined interviews and surveys resulted in a large amount of raw data.

With the large amount of raw material that was generated, it became vital to have a system in place to organise the contents and to begin assessing the data. Strauss refers to this process as 'coding': a process that has several key steps. For me, the most significant part of the process was the employment of 'open coding':

This is unrestricted coding of the data. This open coding is done by scrutinising the field note, interview or other document very closely: line-by-line, or even word-by-word. The aim is to produce concepts that seem to fit the data. These concepts and their dimensions are as yet entirely provisional; but thinking about these results in a host of questions and equally provisional answers, which immediately leads to further issues pertaining to conditions, strategies, interactions and consequences (Strauss 1987, 28).

Transcribing the interviews was the first step of the coding process. By repeat listening to the interviews, I became acutely aware of the repetition of certain words and phrases. After each cycle of interviews new concepts were uncovered, and new questions relating to these concepts were incorporated into the next group of participant interviews. Once the interviews were completed, key trends (discussed in the following chapters) were identified through the transcription and coding processes.

#### **4.4 Inside or Outside: The position of the Researcher**

As someone who had frequently attended cult movie nights as an audience member before beginning this study, it was important to reflect upon the implications of studying any group as either an insider or an outsider. As Merton (1972) suggests, there is a tension which exists between: "...insider access to knowledge and outsider exclusion from it" (12). Also, Thornton's (1995) seminal work on club cultures in the United Kingdom notes how the methods of participation and observation can work in opposition to each other: "As a participating insider, one adopts the group's views of its social world by privileging what it says. As an observing outsider, one gives credence to what one sees" (original emphasis, Thornton, 1995, 105). The challenge inherent in the insider/outsider binary is to gain the correct balance between participation and

observation to ensure a fair evaluation of the group under investigation. This was one of my central aims for this study.

In his study of the Goth scene, Hodkinson (2002) speaks of the need to become a 'critical insider' (6). Having already been an active member of the Goth community before beginning his research, Hodkinson identified the challenge in: "... continually taking mental steps back so as to observe, compare, contrast and question as well to experience" (2002, 6). Despite this challenge, he believes his position as a: "... long term genuine participant in the Goth scene... greatly enhanced the process of acquiring contacts, interviewees and information" (2002, 5-6). Huggett (2002) also speaks of the need to display caution regarding issues of power and representation when simultaneously writing as an academic and a fan. She believes that: "... the writers of such studies fail to explore the relations of power that still occur when one party produces meaning and speaks on behalf of another" (19). In conducting a project so close to my own heart, it became especially important to be mindful of the concerns raised by Huggett: "The danger inherent in studies of fandom is, therefore, in assuming a common identity with the fans one studies, the fans are seen as a projection of the researchers' views and experiences." (89)

As a researcher who ultimately speaks for the audience, Huggett reminds one of the need to remain aware of such an imbalance of power, even though the treatment of fans may be positive as in the case of Jenkins (1992). I addressed this particular issue by maintaining accurate records of any interviews and surveys and attempting to represent the participants in a manner consistent with their responses. In addition, informal verbal clarification was sought from the Annandale organisers and audience members on a number of occasions regarding the opinions that they expressed during the initial interviews. In so doing, the interviews and surveys conducted for this project avoided many of the dangers and pitfalls of which Huggett, Hodkinson, and Jenkins warn.

In short, the research for this thesis has placed me as an insider, an outsider, and in a place where I have occupied both positions simultaneously. I am an insider because I have been involved with cult screenings prior to the commencement of this study, and thus have recognised some of the main people whom I needed to approach. However, during my field trips to Melbourne I was an outsider, as I was new to the practices of the screening group there, and did not know any of the audience members. Finally, during the administration of the questionnaire in Sydney I occupied both positions concurrently – I was an insider who knew the way the group operated and was familiar with several of the patrons, yet as a researcher I needed to occupy the position of the outsider who was conducting a study in order to get unbiased results, and was not able to participate as I would if attending the event purely for leisure. For Burns (1994): “Qualitative researchers try to acknowledge and take into account their own biases as a method of dealing with them.” (268)

As Burns suggests, I recognise that my own personal history has coloured my thoughts regarding Australian cult film groups, as I have a relationship with both the organisers and the audience in Sydney. In this context, I believe that the organisation of cult events plays an important role in the film culture of the city. Over the years, as the project developed, cult screenings, and the regular audiences that came with them, were a type of touchstone. When all else failed, I could attend a screening and escape for a few hours with a group who enveloped me – with their intelligence, kindness and various eccentricities. Thus this project aims to recognise cult film screenings as something more than just an onscreen activity as the following chapters reveal.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Beyond All Reason: Organisers of Cult Events**

“Good taste is the chief enemy of creativity” – Pablo Picasso<sup>51</sup>

This chapter examines the role of the cult film organiser in terms of both their own relationship with cult film and the ways in which they recruit and engage with their audiences. By unpacking the diverse roles that organisers play in creating cult film events, with an emphasis on those occurring within Australia, it is hoped that greater insights into cult film fandom can be attained. This chapter analyses material gathered from interviews conducted with primary sources – those who ‘live’ the experience: the organisers of cult film events (screening nights and festivals), archivists, cult video store owners and filmmakers.

#### **5.1 “A good many dramatic situations begin with screaming”<sup>52</sup> – Beginnings of Cult Screenings**

This section of the chapter focuses on the ways that cult screenings came into existence and the motivating factors behind these events according to their organisers. A brief introduction to the background of each of the cult film interview candidates is included here to offer a window into the history of involvement with cult film, and areas of individual expertise.

Aspasia Leonarder (aka Miss Death) is an archivist, artist and projectionist who, with Jay Katz organises the Cult Cinema Tuesday night. She has been the facilitator for this activity for about a decade at the Annandale Hotel and at their home cinema the Mu-meson Archives since June 2011. She also runs other screenings at the Mu-meson Archives, and the Chauvel Cinema, The Sounds of Seduction nightclub and Miss Death’s Stitch and Bitch craft group.

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<sup>51</sup> Cited in Knight (1999).

<sup>52</sup> *Barbarella* (1968, Roger Vadim).

Jaimie Leonarder (aka Jay Katz) was a host of the new *SBS Movie Show* (2004-2005).<sup>53</sup> He presented *The Naked City* on FBI Radio (with Miss Death) until 2009, a programme on which they discussed films and the larger cultural scene in Sydney. Today, in addition to running Cult Cinema Tuesday at the Annandale Hotel and screenings at the Mu-meson Archives and Chauvel Cinema, he co-hosts *The Dirty Disbelievers* on ABC National Radio (since January 2012). Katz was also the subject of the SBS documentary, *Love and Anarchy: The Wild, Wild World of Jaimie Leonarder*, which focused on the music he produces with his band, The Mu-mesons, in addition to his work with the community and his love of lost films. The documentary was screened at the Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) in 2002 as part of the Australian Showcase and contextualises the beginnings of Katz's film collection and his involvement with cult cinema and outsider culture.

Adam Spellicy is the organiser/curator of cult film groups Screensect and Cine Cult (with Screensect member Ben Buckingham) in Melbourne. He also works as a screenwriter, filmmaker and musician. His latest completed short film is entitled *Dog Meat* (2010).

Andrew Leavold was the owner of Trash Video in Brisbane for fifteen years (until it closed in 2010), and a filmmaker. He is the subject of the SBS documentary *Escape from the Planet of the Tapes* (2003), which details his obsession with collecting rare and lost films. In the recent past, he ran a cult screening night in Brisbane, as well as the *Eat My Schlock* film festival (1997-2001). He currently programs films at the Tribal Theatre and appears on the *Schlock Treatment* program on local television in Brisbane, as well as contributing to film journals such as *Senses of Cinema*. His best-known film, rated on imdb.com 6.6/10 is a tribute to the late cult filmmaker Doris Wishman, *Lesbo-a-go-go* (2003). He is currently

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<sup>53</sup> SBS, or the Special Broadcasting Service is an Australian television network focusing on 'multi cultural' broadcasting. This network began in 1980 to meet the needs of minority language groups in Australia, as well as a wider range of international news, current affairs and films. SBS includes radio, television and digital television services.

working on a documentary of Filipino exploitation cinema star, Weng Weng, to be released in late 2013, entitled *The Search for Weng Weng*.

Dick Dale is the Festival Director of the Trasharama film festival that originated in Adelaide and now travels across Australia. He is also a filmmaker of trash 'disaster pieces', and he plays in a punk band called Kamikaze.<sup>54</sup> Trasharama began in 1997 after Dick recognised the increasing number of horror films produced for a competition he had entered in 1997 called *Graveyard Shifty* that were being rejected by mainstream channel offering the contest, Foxtel. After Dale connected with Andrew Leavold from Trash Video in Queensland, the two gave birth to Trasharama.

Richard Wolstencroft is the Festival Director of the Melbourne Underground Film Festival (MUFF), which began in 2000 as a defiant rejection of the ideals encompassed by the mainstream Australian film industry, and as a forum to screen his own work, as well as the work of other like-minded guerrilla filmmakers. His films include *Bloodlust* (1992), *The Intruder* (1994) and *Pearls Before Swine* (1999), all of which are heavily indebted to the horror and exploitation genres. Through both his own films and the screenings at MUFF he aims to question the ongoing regulation of film within Australia.

Siouxzi Connor co-ordinated the Sydney Underground Film Festival (SUFF) in its inaugural year (2007). She is also a screenwriter and filmmaker of two award winning 16mm shorts, *Two White Lines* and *Jet Black*. Having published two novels since 2007, she is now based overseas as an Associate Fellow at the Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry.

Alex Kidd and Evrim Ersoy are the organisers of The Duke Mitchell Fan Club, a cult film night running in Kings Cross, London. They are both ardent film fans who

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<sup>54</sup> Dick Dale describes his films as 'disaster pieces' because of the low budgets, 'guerilla' filming techniques and unexpected nature of the finished film product.



started the screening group in mid-2007 at the request of the owners of the Cross Kings Hotel. After having held their own film parties for many years with friends, though, running their own film night was a logical extension to the efforts in their spare to expose audiences to the films they love.

Craig and Christa Wilson are part of the organizing committee of the Star and Shadow cinema in Newcastle, England. Volunteers who are active in the creative arts community in the area developed the Star and Shadow. The space is also host to live bands, craft activities and nightclubs.

Andrea Beesley-Brown is the organiser of the Midnight Movie Mamacita night in Phoenix, Arizona, which has been running since February 2006 with a monthly screening of the classic *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965). Beesley-Brown relocated to the US from New Zealand, where she first became hooked on cult film while attending Auckland's *Incredibly Strange Film Festival*. Currently, she manages a burlesque troupe in her spare time. All proceeds from the Midnight Movie Mamacita screenings go to animal welfare charities.

Bill Mousoulis is an underground filmmaker from Melbourne, now based in Greece. He has made over 100 short films, including *Spring Rhapsody* (2004) that screened at MUFF in 2005, winning two awards. His most recent film is *Wild and Precious* (2012) that won the Nostimon Imar Award at the Cyprus International Film Festival in 2012. Mousoulis founded the Melbourne Super 8 film club in 1985, and the online film journal *Senses of Cinema* in 1999, which is committed to the serious discussion of film as art, with an Australian focus.

The abovementioned interviewees represent a cross-section of organisers and filmmakers who have a diverse range of cinema interests and are involved in a variety of events. Drawing on these biographies, several patterns emerge that highlight the differences between cult film fandom and other forms of film fandom. The first pattern lies in the types of people who start cult screening groups. All of

those interviewed were in their mid-thirties or older, and two thirds of those currently running cult film screenings had begun by conducting film screening nights – privately in their spare time, or at their own or a friend's home before securing a public screening venue. The organisers of these screenings and festivals are all either filmmakers themselves, or have strong links to the arts community where they live, participating in and/or organising music/bands, art, burlesque, television, nightclub events. In addition, it became evident that all of these organisers have strong social networks from which to draw support for their film screening endeavours. All of them have declared a desire to 'make a difference' on a micro level in changing the landscape of film exhibition where they live – that is, by attempting to fill a void/lack which they perceive to exist in their local area – in this case, a lack of cinematic diversity or screen culture:

We can't easily go out tonight and find groups that are interested in the same thing we are, unless we create an event. And then all of a sudden, people will come from far and wide and we'll go 'Well we're not alone in thinking this way', there is a great number of people out there, we just need to get them all together (Jay Katz, 2004).

Establishing their motivations, and discerning how they became attracted to cult films initially, is essential in order to comprehend the place of cult film in people's lives, begging the question: What kind of people start these groups, and why?

A majority of the organisers/filmmakers (9 out of 11) indicate that their obsession with film commenced during childhood and adolescence, often as result of feeling isolated. All of the males that responded to this question said that their interest began from a young age and three attributed geographic isolation (being raised in a small country town) as a major contributing factor to their burgeoning interests.<sup>55</sup> As suggested in Chapter Three, academic research on cult film fandom has often suggested that this is an isolating and solitary pursuit. Hunter (2000) identifies himself as both an academic and a 'fan boy'. He describes his fandom of *Showgirls* (1995) as a form of ideological isolation as *Showgirls* was not (at the time of its

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<sup>55</sup> The emergence of fandom during childhood/adolescence correlates with the experience described by Jenkins (1992) of both the fandom of those he studies, and his own emerging fandom (4).

release) considered to have any so-called redeeming features, or even potential cult appeal –largely because it was a commercial flop. In the years following its release, however, the film began to gain cult status via word of mouth, and today it often appears in popular texts on cult film (for example, see French and French, 1999). Hollows (2003) also reflects upon the often solitary nature of cult film fandom. She claims that cult film fandom remains ‘off limits’ to women, because: “...the masculinity of cult is naturalised in many of the key consumption practices that constitute cult fandom” (2003, 37) – such as collecting and late night viewing in city cinemas –places which she believes make women feel uncomfortable about their safety. In opening their collections up to the public, and by sharing their obsession with others, the behaviours of the organisers under investigation here challenge the construction of solitary cult film fans as described by writers such as Sconce (1995) and Hollows (2003).

On the contrary, as the stories of the organisers consulted for this study reveal, is apparent feelings of isolation have led them not only to collect and create but also *to share* a love of specific films with other like-minded individuals. A majority (6 out of 11) of respondents state that once their interest was piqued, this evolved into an obsession/obsessive love for particular films and a desire to seek out other lost gems. More than half (7 out of 11) were also inspired to create their own films. Mousoulis, for example, states that his urge to make films was compulsive; there was an urge to reproduce what was being experienced as a viewer, to ‘give’ instead of ‘getting’ (2005) – as one might expect from a Hollywood blockbuster created by Ridley Scott or James Cameron. He also suggests that the desire to create or search out lost films is “out of respect” for all the films which are so treasured.

The theme of compulsion frequently surfaced in the interview responses; in that a newfound desire to be involved with film was perceived to be all consuming. Cult theorists such as Telotte (1991) suggest that a key aspect of cult fandom is the integration of cult films into one’s lifestyle. Indeed as shown in Chapter Two, both

Thompson (1995) and later Hills (2000) suggest that cult fandom represents a 'project of the self', in which fan activities become a part of one's everyday life and identity. The descriptions offered by interviewees support this claim, making it clear that they both consume, and are consumed by film (Leavold, 2005). Film is simply their life. For Leavold, the more he watched, the more he wanted to watch and collect – in an ongoing cycle. Fiske (1992, 37) describes the compulsive desire of collectors and their focus on valuing the quantity of the collection rather than the quality, as seen in these cult film collectors. Leavold maintains that a feeling of compulsion led to the opening of his own video shop as a way to pay homage and respect to the films he loves (2005). Whilst a certain level of devotion may be expected among those who participate in film fandom since their childhood, the depth of devotion of the organisers in this study (dedicating their life/career/savings) to cult film fandom can be described as an unexpected finding.

For those that have made their fandom into a career there is, therefore, a constant battle to stay afloat. During a period of low attendance at the Mu-meson Archives in 2009, for instance, Craig Wilson who was visiting from England put on a screening and talk about his own cinema in Newcastle, the Star and Shadow, in order to encourage patrons to attend more regularly and to bring more friends. Although the Archives is their main business, both Katz and Death do other paid work hosting gigs and events and working at the local community organisation Reverse Garbage. When Andrew Leavold opened Trash Video in Brisbane in 1995: "DVD was in its infancy – less than half of our customers had DVD players" (Leavold cited in Feeney, 2010) so it was really a niche business, a 'video shop-cross-archive' hub for those seeking out lost and obscure film titles, despite the growth of internet use. For Leavold, after investing his time and savings into Trash Video for fifteen years, he was forced to close after the growth of Internet file-sharing software: "...gave viewers access to even the most esoteric titles and directors. ... Our whole reason to exist was slowly being eroded. Suddenly you could access anything we had to offer elsewhere" (Leavold in Feeney, 2010). After his sadness and disappointment at the closure of the business (pers.

communication, 2011), Leavold made a deal with VideoZoo an: "... emerging video-on-demand portal" (Swanwick, 2011). This opportunity provided a new space in which he could fulfil his mission: "... to turn people on to the weird and wonderful in film and TV. The content to be provided for VideoZoo will be a combination between an online magazine and a TV show" (Leavold, in Swanwick, 2011). Although technology played an influential role in the demise of the bricks and mortar Trash Video store, this example shows how technology can be used to spread the word of those with 'cult expertise' further than would have been originally possible in the pre-internet days.

When asked about the beginnings of their cult screening events, several respondents stated that their starting point was their own personal collections. For several of the organisers, economics played a key role, at least in the beginning. That is, given that 16mm film was viewed as obsolete it was relatively inexpensive to purchase. However, as Miss Death (2004) recalls, given that the 'classics' were too expensive even on 16mm, their collection began with the films in which no one was really interested: the independent and low budget titles, which despite their bad scripting, acting and production, still made a connection with alternative audiences.

For both Katz and Death, along with the growth of their personal collection came the question of what to do with the films once they had obtained them. Running their own cult film screening night from home was the obvious mechanism for introducing so-called lost films to the public. In this case, cult film was an initial point of communication – the screenings offered a forum in which a dialogue could commence, because as Death reflects: "... we were collecting these films and so what do you do once you've bought it ... you've got to share it with someone, that's what cinema is about, the shared experience"(2004). Jay Katz shared this view by noting that their screening nights had always been public, with information passing primarily through word of mouth. For Katz, the screenings therefore represented a way to connect with people (Katz, 2004). In 2000, as awareness of their screenings

increased through word of mouth the audience outgrew their home and the cult movie night moved to the Annandale Hotel. It's not so much about the material conditions of the film, but what it leads to, that is, communication. Ultimately:

... it is really about the people, it is about connecting with people. It has to be shared with someone – it's like 'My God, look at this film, we've got this great film, you people need to see it!! I need to see it with you!!' So that is what motivates us to keep running the night (Death, 2004).

These comments reflect the common feeling amongst the organisers interviewed that once a lost treasure has been located, one has to share it with others, otherwise it remains meaningless.

For Leavold, his fandom led to establishing his own cult video store, Trash Video. His video collection also spawned a weekly screening night from 2000 until the closure of the store in 2010. For Leavold, the point of his venture was to share his favourite films with a like-minded audience:

Sometimes the problem with cult is that it becomes so exclusionary – cult magazines do this too, it's like a self-defence mechanism. Some people have felt so excluded, so they seek out other freaks and make their own fortress which leads to snobbery around what they consider to be cult objects. And that's not what it should be about (Leavold, 2005).

While acknowledging that cult fandom has a tendency to shut others off, for Leavold that's not what cult fandom should be about. Having his own store enabled him to pursue a form of fandom based on reciprocity with other fans and customers with which he encountered. Leavold explains the motivation behind his passion to run his store in the following terms:

You are surrounded by what you love, and you are able to share that. There is the joy of watching people discover films, and then they show you stuff. So it is a two way traffic of ideas, there is a constant flow when you engage people in conversation in the store (2005).

Australian underground and independent film festival organisers also share common goals in the creation of their own events. For Connor (2007), Dale (2005) and Wolstencroft (2005), their events (underground film festivals) represent a way to contribute to Australian film culture. They shed light on a range of films

(including ones either produced by them and/or other like-minded filmmakers) which are at the margins by providing a space to screen them. Connor and fellow organisers of the SUFF launched their festival in order to provide a new platform for the viewing of, and discussion about, non-mainstream and anti-genre films, given the lack of distribution channels for these kinds of works in Australia. First hand experience, involving the rejection of their own films from international festivals, motivated the organisers of SUFF to create a new festival that provided a space for their own work as well as films made by others who shared their vision. Likewise, Wolstencroft began the MUFF in 2000 as a much needed exhibition space for independent, guerrilla and underground films, (including his own) which had failed to receive ample if any government funding.

For international cult film organisers such as Beasley-Brown, Ersoy and Kidd, their events developed out of private film screenings that became more accessible to the public at the request of local live music venues. In London, Ersoy and Kidd (2007) had been holding their own private film parties for years when they were offered the opportunity to get alternative films out to a wider audience. This was seen as a logical extension of what they were already doing on their own. For Ersoy: "The desire to connect with people who might not have seen this stuff is also a motivating factor in organising the screenings. ... It is more fun when there is a group and you can hear the gasps and the laughs" (2007). After relocating to Arizona, Beasley-Brown saw cult films as a way to engage with new people in a new place, and also an opportunity to bring a new experience to the community – particularly since there was no event like it, and no place to showcase and enjoy these crazy cult classics. So she simply created her own events which showcased her love of these films to others. In Melbourne, Screensect also began at the request of venue management. Spellicy (2007) had also been screening films with friends for years when his local pub asked him to curate a film night. For him, this represented an extension of the informal screenings and a further opportunity to share films with an audience and to educate one another about alternative film culture.

The construction of the Star and Shadow cinema in Newcastle, England also aimed to fill a perceived void, although on a grander scale. By incorporating three filmmakers' collectives, the groups were able to find a space (an old costume storehouse at a television studio) in which the Star and Shadow could be built. The cinema was built entirely by volunteer labour with donated materials, and is still run today by a group of self-organised volunteers. The aim here was to create a screening space for experimental films in addition to a gathering place to hear live music, talks and other activities in need of a home. For Craig and Christa Wilson, members of the organising committee, if the event can be organised they are happy to fill the lack by providing a space (2009). Of operating the space, Craig suggests:

... there are things that just *need* to be shown - even if no one attends - it is important to get the films out there into the universe. ... the bar sales from the gigs and club nights augment the sometimes poorly attended screenings so we can keep them going (2009).

By mobilising disparate film interest groups in order to build their own cultural space, the Star and Shadow group were thus able to fill both a cultural and physical lack of space in their local community.

As several organisers have mentioned above, the primary concern is the act of screening – regardless of who actually attends. Even if one other person attends it is a worthwhile endeavour because the event recirculates film (or often circulates a film for the first time) into the public eye. Organising screenings with this type of attitude, and the de-prioritising of financial gain suggests a true desire to engage with a community of like-minded viewers. By fulfilling the need of the agents, this shows how cult organisers make an extra effort that goes beyond that of mere film fandom.



## **5.2 “We accept her... One of us! One of us!”<sup>56</sup> - Australian Film as Cult**

As the Australian documentary, *Not Quite Hollywood* (2008) reveals, the late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the production of a number of “Australian” genre films now labelled as 'Ozploitation' films, such as *Patrick* (1978) and *Dead End Drive-in* (1986). Based on the assumptions of this documentary and my own research, I hypothesise that many Australian films can be viewed as ‘cult’ for both their aesthetic qualities, and limited following amongst enthusiasts. For this reason, during the course of the interviews organisers of cult events were asked to describe their views on the relationships between cult film and Australian film more generally – to reveal some insights about how they fit into the national fold. Interviews with several local cult organisers suggest that many so-called ‘mainstream’ Australian films such as *Mad Max* (1979) and *The Cars that ate Paris* (1974) could be defined as ‘cult films’. This underscores the fact that Australian films often have B-grade scripts and production values (Katz, 2004). As Spellicy states, even Australian films which are released as “mainstream” cinema are often reminiscent of cult films since they routinely feature marginal characters, downbeat endings, have usually been rushed into production; they are half-baked films that are inevitably aimed at a niche audiences given the small population (2007). In other words, there is a strong connection, particularly amongst Australian genre films made during the 1970s – 1980s to the aesthetic qualities attributed to cult films.

These types of assertions made by cult film organisers regarding Australian cult films represents a point of departure from past historical accounts of Australian cinema, such as those of Murray (1994), O'Regan (1996) and Moran and Vieth (2006). These prior studies, upon which this thesis attempts to build, make no mention of ‘Australian cult films’. O'Regan (1996) suggests that several independent Australian films dealing with groups at the margins of society are: “... the true heart of Australian cinema: not only where it is at its most experimental, innovative and coherent but where it deals with the toughest issues and where it is

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<sup>56</sup> *Freaks* (1939).

‘most Australian’” (70). However, he stops short of describing these films as ‘cult’. Only Knight (1999) explicitly discusses ‘Australian cult film’ in an extremely short passage in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*.

Knight also defines cult film in term of a devoted audience, citing Sarris (1974), Peary (1981) and Eco (1987) in his definition. In terms of Australian cult films, he argues that some films gain ‘so-called’ cult status because of their influence on other filmmakers and cites Eco (1987) to the effect that: “... a cult movie is proof that ... cinema comes from cinema”. Knight therefore points to the influence of the *Mad Max* Trilogy (1979, 1981, 1985) on filmmakers such as the Coen brothers, Sam Raimi and John Carpenter (1999, 92). In addition to the *Mad Max* films, he also refers to *The Cars that Ate Paris*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *Walkabout* (1971) as having: “... cult film status among international audiences” as well as numerous examples of Australian cult films from the science-fiction and horror genres such as *Body Melt* (1993), *Razorback* (1984) and *The Marsupials: The Howling III* (1987) (Knight, 1999, 92). It is my belief that further research into the reception of Australian genre films overseas could establish whether it is the case that Australian films are defined as ‘cult’ when consumed outside of Australia and whether or not their exotic “Australian-ness” adds to their cult appeal.

Finally, Knight refers to the influence of two directors, Richard Franklin and Brian Trenchard-Smith: “Two underrated filmmakers who are usually dismissed in discussions of Australian cinema, [who] are significant in the cult film arena” (1999, 93) for films such as *Patrick* (1978) and *Roadgames* (1981) (Richard Franklin) and *The Man from Hong Kong* (1975), *Turkey Shoot* (1982), *BMX Bandits* (1983) and *Dead End Drive-in* (1986) (Brian Trenchard-Smith). The under appreciation and lack of awareness of these directors and their films (as evidenced in the anecdote below regarding Quentin Tarantino’s appreciation of Australian film), is the subject of Hartley’s documentary *Not Quite Hollywood* (2008). This documentary was influential in gaining a release or re-issue of these films onto DVD in the hope that Australian audiences would re-discover them, and a wider international audience

be found. Head of theatrical release for the DVD company Madman Entertainment, James Hewison stated in *Empire* magazine that the company was pleased with the release of *Wake In Fright* on DVD, having made \$300K in sales (Gonzalez, 2010). Anecdotal evidence (Curnow, 2013) also suggests the re-release of Ozploitation films by Madman has been successful in gaining a renewed interest in Australian genre films.

*Not Quite Hollywood* also featured extensive interviews with Quentin Tarantino who proclaimed his love for Australian film, as he had also done during the promotion of *Kill Bill* (2003). Whilst in Australia, Quentin Tarantino named Brian Trenchard-Smith as one of his favourite directors: "... before being surprised to learn he is not exactly a household name here" (Maddox, 2003). He also named Richard Franklin as a favourite, and admitted that the spitting scene in *Kill Bill* was a direct reference to *Patrick* (1978). This anecdote speaks to the level of 'cultural cringe' apparent towards Australian film, in that many Australians are unaware of our cinematic history, let alone willing to support Australian films at the cinema. Arthur Angel Phillips first coined the term 'cultural cringe' in the 1950 essay of the same name. This essay described 'cultural cringe' as:

... the tendency of Australians to be embarrassed by their own artistic endeavours, and to feel that any work by Americans and the British is automatically superior to anything we can do (Dale, 2012, 1).

As cult films also attract 'cultural cringe', or are looked upon as inferior amongst wider society, a unexpected link can be made between Australian films and definitions of cult film.

The emergence of cultural cringe as a theme during interviews with cult film organisers is vital to the assertion that Australian films can be defined as 'cult films'. In fact, the assertion by organisers that many Australian films can be viewed as 'cult films' suggests an alternative way of categorising Australian films. Defining Australian films as cult films suggests a 'cult aesthetic', particularly amongst the genre films produced in Australia during the 1980s, many of which shared features such as low budgets, generic features of the horror, thriller or science fiction

genres, and/or appealing to niche subcultures (such as *Stone* (1974) to motorcycle groups and *Dogs in Space* (1986) to young music lovers).<sup>57</sup> In the case Australian genre films, organisers such as Katz and Death have stated that greater exposure to these films could gain them a 'true cult audience of fans' – while they show Australian films when they can gain access to them, they dream of initiating regular midnight screenings of forgotten 'Ozploitation' films. They believe that midnight screenings of classic Australian films, in the model of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* screenings at inner city theatres could be a way of creating 'Australian cult films':

People don't think we have a cult film industry in Australia ... but nobody's ever pulled out an Australian film that's hardly been know, and put it on at midnight and said 'cult screening' ... the truth is that it's [Australian cult] out there... it's a matter of liberating it and making people aware of it (Death and Katz, 2004).

The identification of a range of Australian films as cult films was an unexpected finding of this research, given that cult film is defined by an audience who are committed to viewing the text. Cult film organisers argue that in Australia, while we may dress up and attend established cult film events such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *A Clockwork Orange* or *The Blues Brothers* (see Coslovich, 2003), we do not have the tradition of dressing up and attending midnight movies which are made in Australia. Despite not having this tradition, organisers argue that we *do* have Australian films that can be called 'cult'.

This finding may suggest how differently cult film is located with respect to national cinema in Australia, compared to other countries. Few people would be likely to mistake big budget American films for cult films. When organisers and audiences of cult events in Australia view Australian films, they do so within the framework of

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<sup>57</sup> A 'cult aesthetic' in this instance suggests visual and thematic similarities between cult films, as particularly reliant on the horror, thriller and science fiction genres. Thus, a cult aesthetic typically entails some, or all of the following features: an obvious low budget (poor props, costumes etc.); post-apocalyptic settings; gore, blood and guts; violence; nudity; the supernatural; a reliance upon poor lighting to create mood; amateur, poor acting; plenty of outdoor, location shots, often to take advantage of the Australian outback; high speed car and motorcycle chases and gangs of outsiders who create tension amongst 'civilised' society.

their fandom – that is, they localise the characteristics of cult film by applying them to Australian films – a viewing strategy which differs from that of the ‘mainstream’ viewing public. Indeed, reading Australian films in this fashion complicates the hostile portrait that the media presents of the relationship between Australian films and audiences. While president of the Screen Producers Association, Antony Ginnane, stated in 2008 that: “Australian filmmakers don’t deserve government funding while they continue to churn out movies no one wants to see” (Anon, 2008).<sup>58</sup> This is a view that is often supported by academics writing on the subject, such as Verhoeven who states that: “... it is not just anecdotal evidence that suggests Australian cinema has a ‘brand’ problem” (2005,1), which suggests that media commentary on Australian cinema and its sometimes lack lustre output has resulted in its lack of standing amongst the Australian audience. Many cult organisers suggest that Australian audiences feel a strong sense of ‘cultural cringe’ when it comes to Australian films, a factor they feel could be overcome by establishing a tradition of midnight movies which build a following, and more importantly, a sense of affection for Australian films.

### **5.3 “We return to Transylvania. Prepare the transit beam”<sup>59</sup> - The Place of Space**

Transformations of Australia’s screen culture have had a significant impact on the activities of cult event organisers, particularly in terms of space. Indeed, screen culture policy and development has led directly to changes in the ways that cult events are organised – in response to policy directions such as the lack of funding for a cinematheque in Sydney.<sup>60</sup> Despite Australia’s reputation for having made (possibly) the earliest feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906), the history of the Australian film industry has been, to quote Stratton (1990) one of ‘boom or

<sup>58</sup> See also Miller, 2008; Edwards, 2009; and Pomeranz, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).

<sup>60</sup> Concerns about policy remain outside of the scope of this thesis, however, one example is the removal of funding from the cinematheque program in Sydney by the Australian Film Institute in the early 2000’s, leaving Sydney without a home for the public screening of a diverse range of films from classic to contemporary, sourced from archival and new prints sourced from around the world (Kaufman, 2011, 2). This lack has in turn led to individuals like Katz and Death, opening their own home and collection to the public, as they maintain their own archive of lost film, and have donated their own prints to the National Archives to ensure their survival.

bust'. Simultaneously, domestic indifference has driven cinephiles to look elsewhere for thought provoking screen culture. In terms of defining what a screen culture might be, Kaufman notes that:

Over [the] years it has been defined in many and various ways: as the comprehensive nature of screen activity outside the mainstream; as the environment in which screen projects are developed, made, viewed, discussed and appreciated; even, in one lobbying foray, as 'the glue which holds the industry together' (2010, 16).

Although Screen Australia defines screen culture in similar terms, and acknowledges its significance, in Sydney at least screen culture seems to be a buzzword which is often discussed, but rarely acted upon.<sup>61</sup> Given that the concept "screen culture" is used to describe a variety of activities (much like the term 'cult'), it is challenging to define and place a value upon it. Screen culture also requires material support, most obviously in the form of a space in which to exhibit films which fall outside of the 'mainstream'. Yet, this is where policy in Australia has failed the most.

On top of the lack of adequate and proactive policy in Australia, previous scholarship has overlooked how and where alternative screen culture has survived. The exception is Moran (1995), who refers to five distinct forms of alternative film exhibition in Australia: the news reel, foreign language films, adult or sex films, art cinema and surfing or real life adventure films. He also outlines a distinct group of non-commercial forms of alternative exhibition, including left political cinema;

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<sup>61</sup> In a 2010 press release, Chief Executive Office of Screen Australia, Ruth Harley defined screen culture as: "... the environment in which films and programs are made, seen and discussed as well, of course, as the end result – the overall impact of the stories. A vibrant screen culture plays a vital part in the creation of a flourishing screen industry. And it helps to connect audiences with content – providing platforms of engagement and appreciation as well as debate and discourse. The responsibility for a healthy screen culture is shared by a number of players. Screen Australia has a major role alongside the National Film and Sound Archive, the state screen agencies and governments, local governments and commercial sponsorship as well as the rich array of festivals, events and publications themselves" (Screen Australia, 2010).

educational films; travelling film exhibitors; and film societies.<sup>62</sup> Moran also points out the ways that art galleries have embraced experimental, avant-garde and art house works for selected screening programs - a trend which continues at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (N.S.W.) today. These distinct types of film exhibition have been dependent to a great extent upon the specialist cinema venues which hosted them – the downturn in trade (particularly after the advent of firstly television, and then video) led to the closure and eventual demolition of these venues, leading to the homogenisation of screen culture due to a lack of venues (Moran, 1995). The formation of groups such as Ubu Films (1965-70) who used their filmmaking collective to express opposition to censorship, and thus conducted screenings in alternative venues became a response to the lack of space for underground film at that time (see Mudie, 1997).

In short, specialist-screening venues have struggled to maintain a presence in the face of expansion by multiplexes (including new 'experiences' such as Gold Class and 3D), and the growth of home cinemas, in addition to Internet downloads and viewing.<sup>63</sup> But also, this is precisely where policy initiatives such as the failed attempt in the early 1990s to house a dedicated cinemateque in Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, and the ongoing lobbying by the Sydney Film Centre Committee to open an Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) style centre (Melbourne's dedicated centre devoted to screen culture) in the proposed Barangaroo district failed to help. In each case too little was offered too late at the same time as several other specialist cinemas in Sydney closed during the protracted negotiations. Nevertheless, solutions have emerged out of necessity. In terms of the decline of specialist screening venues, Moran shows that 'cultural niches' such as film festivals fill the gap left by the lack of specialist venues, yet

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<sup>62</sup> Official' traveling film exhibitors operated during the period (1949-72) to ensure rural communities could view the library collection of the State Film Centre in Victoria, although independent traveling film exhibitors (such as the Corrick Family (1901) were common before 1909 with the opening of full time cinemas (ACMI website).

<sup>63</sup> For the purposes of this thesis 'specialist' screening venues are those which specialise in particular forms of film i.e.: art house; 'alternative' screening venues are those in which cult film screenings are often held i.e.: venues which are not purpose built for screenings such as pubs and private homes.

they are required to 'bridge commerciality' to ensure their continued relevance and financial success by: "... showcasing features from commercial distributors" (1995, 128). This type of compromise to remain commercially viable as discussed in chapter three in terms of film festivals, arguably overrides their initial purpose to expose a curious public to new forms of cinematic expression.

Recent studies dealing with the state of Australian screen culture – although far from encouraging for those interested in a more robust and variegated industry – illustrate the trend towards the 're-purposing' or utilisation of spaces other than cinemas to screen films. Walmsley-Evans (2010,1) points to the way the closure of one (or more) alternative/art-house venues can jumpstart a revival of non mainstream film culture, citing the case of Brisbane, where there is now: "... an increase of independent programmers screening classic, cult, horror and experimental films in left-of-centre venues". Brisbane's stagnant film culture was further rejuvenated not only by the reopening of the Dendy cinema (re-opened as the Tribal Theatre, a permanent space for alternative cinema), but also by the opening of the Australian Cinematheque at the Gallery of Modern Art (Walmsley-Evans, 2010, 2). This anecdote regarding Brisbane's recent screen history reflects similar trends that can be observed of the broader Australian screen culture. That is, when faced with the loss of alternative screening venues, ordinary people are mobilised into reclaiming these spaces (as with the Dendy in Brisbane, and the Chauvel in Sydney). Just a week after the independent Valhalla theatre in Glebe closed in August 2005, an emergency meeting was held to discuss the future of the Chauvel Cinema in Paddington. At this meeting the Australian Film Institute (AFI), who had been operating the theatre, announced that they could no longer afford to do so (Brady, 2005, 1). The cinema closed in September 2005, despite a campaign by local group Film Lovers for Independent Cinema (FLICs) that was supported by local film identities such as Bryan Brown, Rachel Ward and Cate Blanchett. Blanchett stated that:

If we lost this access to cutting edge 'art-house' material, how can we claim a diverse, broad, thriving culture? If we were living in a climate where the closure of one independent cinema meant another would spring up to take



its place, perhaps the urgency to save would not be so great, but in the current climate this will almost certainly not happen, meaning the hole for audiences will be cavernous (Blanchett, quoted in Coslovich, 2005).

For Sydney, the Chauvel is a particularly important venue, as it was (before its closure in 2005) the closest equivalent to Melbourne's ACMI.<sup>64</sup> The Chauvel is the home of: "... cinemathèque programs in Sydney as well as new Australian shorts and features" (Brady, 2005, 3). After a persistent campaign by the Save the Chauvel campaigners to the City of Sydney Council, Lord Mayor Clover Moore announced that the independent Palace Cinema chain would take over operation of the Chauvel Cinema from July 2006: "Under the agreement, Palace has undertaken to fully safeguard the Chauvel as a unique film centre, screening a mix of movies across commercial art house, culture, and community" (City of Sydney, 2005). This case highlights the importance of art-house screenings – which include cult films – to fill the gap left by independent cinema closures. In the case of the aforementioned organisers, developing and running their own festivals/screening nights helped to fill the gap caused by the loss of independent venues.

In response to earlier assessments such as that of Hodsdon (2001) who laments the state of film culture in Australia, short film producer Knox (2002) suggests that we must look towards cinema's 'orphans' (as he has dubbed them) for the most exciting developments in Australian screen culture. Knox crowns Jay Katz's Mummeson Archives, Andrew Leavold's Trash Video and Irving Gribbish's Splodge as the caretakers of film culture in Australia, precisely because they work without constraint, and are guided only by a genuine love of cinema. The vitality of the screen culture in the cities that these 'orphans' call home is strengthened by the fact that they all make a contribution on their own terms through the mobilisation of local audiences. In his reflections on local screen culture, Sargeant (2005) reveals

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<sup>64</sup> The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) is located in Federation Square in Melbourne, Victoria, and was opened in 2002. As stated on their website, the centre is: "... dedicated to the moving image" and is dedicated to "the preservation, exhibition and promotion of Victorian, Australian and International screen content" (ACMI website, 2004).

that options for Sydney's screen culture were: "... quickly running out" (1) due to the (then) closure of both continuous art-house venues in Sydney (Valhalla and Chauvel). For him, Sydney's culture of film is manifested through film festivals and special events, as these events act as a conduit: "... between filmmakers, communities, audiences and emerging talents" (2005, 1). In this example, Sargeant asserts (in a self-evident way) that screen culture needs to be constantly nurtured with a concerted commitment to screening material other than that which is playing at the local multiplex. At the same time, this is easier said than done because local audiences are perceived to reject films that challenge them, a misjudgement by the funding bodies responsible for the art-house closures. Sargeant cites cult movie nights at the Annandale as a key example of the desire of the audience to see repertory and cult film on the big screen, with like-minded patrons.

Recently, blogs such as Riviera (2009), and a series of articles from Kaufman (2010), Sargeant (2010) and Walsh (2010) in online journal *Realtime* have confronted the continuing struggles of Australia's screen culture.<sup>65 66</sup> In Riviera's words: "... if you ignore the city's film festivals, Sydney is shockingly free of truly independent cinemas. Nor does it have a [stand alone] cinematheque or a proper repertory cinema" (2009, 1). Although as noted in chapter three, film festivals have become akin to alternative screening venues (Stevens 2011) festivals are still temporary. Whilst Riviera does acknowledge (but does not specify who/where/how) the group of film fans who organise themselves in the style of the Annandale cult group, he concentrates mostly on recognising the Art Gallery of N.S.W. as a valuable screening location. Whilst the Gallery does provide another valuable screening space, one could argue it is not exactly alternative, and focuses primarily on films complementing their current exhibits. In his analysis, Riviera identifies two

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<sup>65</sup> Riviera's credentials include running a non-profit organization, The Festivalists, which helps produce film festivals.

<sup>66</sup> *Realtime* is a "...critical guide to international contemporary arts... focusing on innovation in the arts. Most of the writing is by practicing artists, art workers and other arts specialists." (*Realtime* website, 2013). *Realtime* is available both online, and as a free bi-monthly print edition available Australia wide.

significant and recurrent themes in discussions of Australian screen culture; firstly, that: "...screen culture is not a priority [and] ... the debate tends to focus on a film industry rather than a film culture" and secondly, he highlights the divide between viewing film as art, and film as commerce (2009, 2). Riviera's view that screen culture lacks visibility within policy discussions has earlier been suggested by Hodsdon (2001) who, based on his in-depth analysis of the Australian film industry, argued that: "... the focus on the commercial film industry constantly over-runs the need for thinking and shaping other cultural concerns and expressions around cinema" (168). By ignoring existing screen culture resources such as independent cinemas in chasing a commercially successful 'industry', audiences and filmmakers of the future are denied the opportunity to engage with works outside of mainstream fare.

These issues are identified and developed further in the *Realtime* series on Australian screen culture. Kaufman (2010) suggests that rather than supporting screen culture the AFI have in fact played a role in the demise of several screen culture initiatives. These include the absorption of the previously successful National Film Theatre of Australia (NFTA) and eventual end of these programs; and the decline of the National Cinematheque – firstly in relocating from Melbourne to Sydney, before its conclusion when the Australian Film Commission (AFC) withdrew funding in 1999. It appears that the initiatives that ceased were those, which would provide viewers with an alternative to mainstream fare. According to Kaufman, the end of these programs left a screen culture landscape (particularly in Sydney) bereft of opportunities to view a variety of international films outside of the big festivals.

According to Sargeant (2010) there is: "... an entire hidden cinema which exists, and even flourishes at the margins of Australian film culture" (1). The growth of Australian underground film festivals in recent years (from two in 1997, to six by 2010) speaks to the existences of marginal film, and a desire amongst filmmakers and audiences to address many of the policy gaps by creating diversity in

Australian screen culture.<sup>67</sup> Organisers Dale (2005), Leavold (2005) and Wolstencroft (2005) speak to the desire of Australian underground festivals to spawn underground works which could, in future years gain a cult following. For Wolstencroft (2005) the creation of the MUFF is a direct response to his dissatisfaction with the programming at the MIFF, and the crisis he and other filmmakers in the community perceive in the Australian Film Industry. It is his aim for MUFF to bring into being: “.... a more diverse, interesting, daring, confronting and challenging Australian cinema” (Wolstencroft, MUFF Manifesto, 2005). Dale says that he was inspired to start his festival after entering the 1997 Foxtel *Graveyard Shifty* contest and realising what great short horror films were being made. He believes that Trasharama screens short films that could become cult and some of them could be made by future cult directors. Organising Trasharama comes from a desire to create a canon of Australian cult film, and is his attempt to make it a reality (Dale, 2005). Similarly, for organisers of cult screenings conducting these nights represents a way to fill a lack that they perceive in the area that they hold their events. For Screensect’s Spellicy, having a public screening night was an extension of an informal ‘film club’ which he had conducted with other screenwriting friends, where turns would be taken to host a film night at their respective homes, introducing and playing films that had been influential, in the aim of educating one another (2007). In addition to the Screensect screenings, Spellicy began an additional screening night with Screensect audience member Ben Buckingham at Bar 303 in Northcote under the banner of Cine Cult in 2009.

Rainforth (2008) and Clift (2011) illustrate the growth of DIY film screenings in Melbourne, which supports my emphasis on the growth in independent screenings in recent years. Rainforth suggests that: “When multiplex fare becomes monotonous, Melbourne’s film buffs program their own festivals in pubs, galleries and lounge-rooms” (Rainforth, 2008,1). In addition to Screensect, three other screening nights are mentioned in the article, which range from 16mm screenings

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<sup>67</sup> As of 2010, there were six public underground film festivals in operation: Trasharama (est. 1997); Revelation Perth (est. 1997); MUFF (est. 2000); SUFF (est. 2006), A Night of Horror (est. 2007) and Brisbane Underground Film Festival (est. 2010). Others may exist, but are not publicised.

(Irving Gribbish's Splodge screening night, once a month), to those who have made the switch from 16mm to digital (Dean McNerney's Time Capsules, weekly, born from 16mm night, Psychopomp Cinema), to mixed media (Ronan MacEwan's Goonlight Cinema, every three weeks). McNerney's reasons for organising his screenings are common among the groups interviewed here: "I just wanted to create a cinema space where all these lost films could be seen" (in Rainforth, 2008, 1). Clift (2011) also insists that: "... the past few years have seen a resurgence of the cult film screening in Melbourne" (1). He cites the examples of 'Cult Cravings' at Cinema Nova in Carlton, with their monthly screenings of *The Room*, 'Freaky Fridays' at ACMI and the 'Cult Vault' on Fridays at the Palace Westgarth. Although the films being screened can be viewed on DVD cinema managers such as Kristian Connelly at Cinema Nova have attributed the success to the social appeal: "... people come to the cinema to enjoy these films with others" (Clift, 2011, 2). Clift's example is interesting in that these cult screenings are taking place in art house cinemas, reviving the tradition of the 'midnight movie' for a new audience.

Having posited that the rise of independent film festivals/screenings in Australia is a response to the perceived narrowing of local film culture, one can reflect on whether this type of activity is repeated worldwide. Anecdotal data (in Wright, 2003; Black, 2003 and Perez, 2006) from newspapers worldwide strongly suggests that the closure of art house cinemas is a trend that is being repeated elsewhere. Often this trend is blamed upon the expansion of local multiplexes, or the need to renovate old theatres with a lack of capital to do so, resulting in closure. Statistical data is a little more difficult to interpret; firstly, because it is more general when referring to cinema closures (not distinguishing between type of cinema), and secondly, because it suggests that the number of screens overall has increased. For example, data gathered by Screen Australia states that in the ten years between 2002-2012 the number of screens in Independent or art house cinemas (Dendy, Palace, Reading or independent) has grown from 786 to 906 (Screen Australia, online resource, 2013a). Despite this increase, it is also stated that:

“While the screen numbers have grown, the number of theatres is now at its lowest level in the 31 years since 1980” (Screen Australia, online resource, 2013b). In breaking down the location of screens across Australia, further data shows that screens located in the suburbs have increased: “...6 fold between 1985-2012 ... 56% of screens are now in the suburbs compared to 23% in 1985” (Screen Australia, online resource, 2013c). This data corresponds with earlier material regarding the location of multiplexes and megaplexes in the suburbs. Meanwhile, in the same period, the number of screens in city locations: “... has been in steady decline since 2000, falling to a historic low of 73 in 2010 where it remains” (Screen Australia, online resource, 2013c). This figure is in line with the anecdotal evidence cited, showing that inner city cinemas are on the decline, and that this has affected the diversity of material shown, as a number of the inner city theatres were independent or art house cinemas. Data gathered by Film London shows that the closure of smaller cinemas is also impacting on the diversity of screen culture in England as the growth of multiplexes is felt. There was: “... an increase of 232% between 1995-2004 in multiplexes, and a decline of 28% of traditional cinemas in the same period” (Local Cinema Project – Film London, online resource, 8). This research was concerned with the impact of cinema closure on smaller communities (<55,000), in particular how: “The mainstream programming of the vast majority of multiplexes has restricted the breadth of the cinema going experience for audiences outside the major metro areas wishing to see more specialised films” (Local Cinema Project – Film London, online resource, 8).

The case of the Star and Shadow cinema in Newcastle, U.K. illustrates a response to the issues raised by the Film London Local Cinema Project. As in Australia, those interested in maintaining a sense of film culture in their local area are mobilising groups to open their own spaces. The Star and Shadow was established in 2006 in Newcastle, England as a space to screen specialist films, and hold niche events. Although it is not a large city (population approximately 200,000) it does, according to organisers Craig and Christa Wilson, have a strong spirit of cultural activism. Three film collectives (Gay and Lesbian, Experimental, and Young

Filmmakers) combined to find a space where the films of each of the groups could be shown. The space was built using all volunteer labour in an old costume store for a regional television station that had moved to London. The theatre interior was fitted entirely with donated furniture, including seats from a cinema that had closed, and volunteers staff each session. As with the organisers of the Mu-meson Archives, the Star and Shadow will screen no matter the numbers (or lack of) patrons, as they believe in the importance of getting the films out into the world. For Craig and Christa, their efforts are reinforced when they travel and meet likeminded audiences; they believe that attending the screening group can form a worldwide network where they can help each other with new discoveries, and getting lost films out to each other (2009). The idea of a worldwide community of cult film fans was exemplified by their visit from the U.K. to make a presentation about the activities of the Star and Shadow at the Mu-meson Archives in 2009 (Craig was an audience member at the Archives whilst living in Sydney.) By drawing upon this example, we can observe how 'ordinary' film fans are responding proactively to a lack of supportive policy and the wide spread closure of alternative cinemas. By working together, they are creating a community cinema in which everyone is welcome, and diverse interests are pursued.

The example of the Star and Shadow cinema, as well as the Australian cult screening groups, reflects the worldwide trend of a growth in 'micro cinemas'. Berry (2003) suggests that in most cities in the U.S., the decline of venues showing low budget, small gauge, independent, radical and underground films, have encouraged people to started one of these themselves, spawning countless other related cultural and artistic ventures (3). In the U.K., Jones (2010) discusses how "shacks, caravans and sheds" are popping up across the country, offering audiences an intimate film experience. Both Jones (2010) and Aspden (2011) point to the growth of specialised micro-cinemas in the U.K. and in particular, the success of 'Secret Cinema' which began in 2007 and: "... screens classics in unusual locations, using sets, actors and music to create an all-encompassing immersive film event" (Jones, 2010, 2). Although Secret Cinema is held in locations

which are not small or 'micro' (such as public schools and warehouses), it is reflective of a movement towards a 'cinema of attractions' – organiser Fabien Riggall says his inspiration came from viewing art house films in cinemas that were cold, almost empty and in a state of decay.<sup>68</sup> It is his intent to bring back: "... the sense of spectacle and the spiritual nourishment that great cinema provides. ... Secret Cinema events add layers of interactivity, and even meaning to movie-going", because as Riggall insists: "People are the event" (Aspden, 2011, 2). Talking among audiences is also a key factor at Speakeasy, set up at the London Film School.<sup>69</sup> This is an invitation only group holding regular screenings in a 36-seat school cinema, followed by a three-course meal, in order to encourage discussion of the film in a relaxed environment. Organiser of the Speakeasy event, Suzy Gillett suggests:

There was a certain frustration that there wasn't really anywhere like it for us to go to. ... People are creating ways to see films. Technology has advanced now so they can have their own home-cinemas and projectors. You can't see all the films that you want to see anymore so places have sprung up in order to feed that hunger. It's an underground battle (Jones, 2010, 2).

To build on this, Jones points out that art house repertory screenings are declining, as DVD and Netflix have enabled audiences access to a wider array of films that ever. Micro-cinemas and initiatives like Secret Cinema are able to offer an alternative, by creating an: "... experience.... A more human and sociable way of watching" (Jones, 2010, 2). Alvin (2007) goes a step further, stating that these new micro- cinemas viewing experiences have taken the place of the traditional art-house in three ways:

Due to extraordinarily low overhead and a markedly different business model, micro-cinemas are able to bring truly underground, risk-taking works to the screen, regardless of commercial viability. The sense of community that is essential to the theatre going experience, distinguishing it from home entertainment, has been wonderfully rearticulated. And finally, the glory of

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<sup>68</sup> The phrase "cinema of attraction" is borrowed from Tom Gunning (1986), in which he describes how spectators of early cinema were enthralled by the mere spectacle offered by public film screenings.

<sup>69</sup> It must be acknowledged that much higher levels of funding exist in the U.K and Europe for the Arts, enabling these types of events at centrally owned venues.



cinophilia is extended to smaller suburban and rural communities in defiance of the overall perception that art films are appreciated only in big cities (Alvin, 2007, 2).

Alvin contends that micro-cinemas have their roots not only in the film societies, or 'cine-clubs' of Paris in the 1920s, but also in the community viewing style present at screenings in local halls and parks set up by travelling picture show men. As micro-cinemas are able to operate on low, or no budgets, they can maintain a sense of freedom in programming without an obligation to commercial viability. Organiser of San Francisco's Other Cinema, Craig Baldwin reflects that in comparison to underground cinema: "... the micro-cinema movement, is ... electronic folk culture ... More neighbourhood, more street, more underground, more contemporary more a community kind of thing and not so much just the avant-garde sort of thing" (Alvin, 2007, 4). Of the future of micro-cinemas, Alvin concludes:

It's clear that people are hungry for alternatives to the alternative cinema. ... While the strategies of the art houses seem focused on bringing more people to their cinemas, the micro-cinema exhibitor has a different concern - the need for a subculture, for an alternative to the alternative. In some cases, an audience of fifteen is actually preferable to an audience of 100 (2007, 5).

The growth of micro-cinemas worldwide reflects the point I have made about Australian audiences looking for alternative screening venues in response to the closures of independent and art house cinemas. The loss of these 'traditional' venues has in turn led to a growth in cinematic 'experiences' that are more participatory for audiences, and lead to a feeling of community amongst those who attend. The example of micro-cinemas abroad reflects the style of screening, and community based engagement present at the cult screenings studied here.

This section has given a brief overview of screen culture in Australia and some of the challenges it has been facing due to gaps in state policy. The most vital issue emerging from this section is the reduction in alternative screening venues within Australia (and worldwide) and the lack of vision by the government to lead the

development of this aspect of culture and the arts. It is my contention that fewer regular opportunities to view films outside of the mainstream, due to the closure of alternative screening spaces, and the commercial imperatives of remaining art-house cinemas have spawned the need for screenings to occur off the radar in smaller, alternative spaces. It is precisely within these alternative spaces in which a feeling of belonging and community amongst audiences has blossomed. This lack of space, according to organisers, is not only about the physical place in which to screen, but the metaphorical idea of space in which different styles of film are 'allowed'. These ideas will be explored further throughout the remaining chapters. But, next I explore how access and nostalgia on the one hand and gatekeeping on the other hand play a role in the way that value accumulates around cult films in general.

#### **5.4 "I think perhaps you better both ... come inside"<sup>70</sup> - Access and Nostalgia**

In accounting for the origins of their cult film practices, the organisers interviewed here reveal their nostalgia for the experience of their adolescence, when their fandom first surfaced. Several organisers describe a desire to relive their experience of the matinee, or the full night of entertainment. Jay Katz recalls the experience of the wonderful matinee program at the cinema where you would get a newsreel, cartoons, a short subject, a B film and then an A picture. By the time he was teenager Katz became frustrated that this experience had disappeared, and he dreamt of giving that back to the public. Not having the money to purchase a cinema, the answer he and Miss Death came up with was to screen from their own home (Katz, 2004). In keeping with the suggestion that these organisers exhibit nostalgia, Ersoy suggests that audiences respond to cult films in much the same way as the drive-in audience of the 1960s or 1970s, in that they establish a conversation with the film (2007).

For Leavold, running a film night as an offshoot of Trash Video offered a complete evening of entertainment, where patrons would pay five or six dollars for an hour of

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<sup>70</sup> *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

shorts or a documentary, followed by an hour and a half show (2005). The nature of the venues that the screenings are held in (pubs), also facilitates the provision of an old fashioned 'complete night of entertainment' – the patrons can have hot meals and drinks, there are often short films or cartoons before the main feature is screened, and there is participation between audience members, and with the screen. This is the type of program that was popularised during the peak of the drive-in cinema in Australia – alongside a host of other enticements such as huge gardens and grounds, a mini zoo and a readers and writers lounge – this range of amusements is compared by Goldsmith (1999, 158) to Gunning's 'cinema of attractions'.

Economic necessity often shapes innovative choices of screening venues. Unable to afford a cinema venue, cult organisers screen in their own home or in pubs, and can offer participants greater value for money by including shorts, educational films and documentaries in addition to the main feature. This speaks not only to a longing for the cinematic activities of the past to which Goldsmith (1999) refers, but for a space in which these screenings can be conducted. Aside from a desire to recreate a matinee style program, some cult enthusiasts also seem to draw a parallel between the technology of the past, lost films, and cult fans. That is, cult films have been viewed as 'low culture' and are unwanted by society at large, as the take-up of new technologies and devices has meant the discarding of viewing practices of the past.<sup>71</sup> What comes to mind here is how 16 mm film has been overtaken by video, DVD and then subsequently by Blue ray discs. Thus, cultists embrace the films that have been forgotten, but also the technology of the past (i.e. 16mm projection and films), which is a type of techno-nostalgia that is explored further in Chapter Seven. The idea of spending one's savings on a cult film collection which may not draw audiences to screenings (as Leavold, Death and Katz have) is further evidence of the commitment that these organisers have to cult

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<sup>71</sup> "Low culture" as described by Bourdieu (1984). Barker (2000) also states that: "... distinctions are never simply statements of equal difference; they entail claims to authority, authenticity and the presumed inferiority of others" (339).

fandom – a commitment which sets them apart from casual viewers (and owners of multiplex cinema chains.)

In discussing the value of the cult and lost films they collect, many cult organisers believe there is inherent value in these items because no one else wants them.

Mathijs and Mendik point to the tendency of cult films to create a:

sense of nostalgia. They frequently have troublesome production histories, coloured by accidents, failures, legends and mysteries that involve their stars and directors, and in spite of often limited accessibility, they have a continuous market value and long lasting public presence (2008).

Speaking about the value of films that have had troublesome production histories, Jay Katz believes the value of cult films can increase if there is an interesting back-story:

film is the most difficult canvas in the world to paint on, the most expensive and ... seeing someone in the worst dire circumstances achieve it, for better or worse, I think is a truly inspiring thing. All of us search for a sense of reality in the films we watch and the beautiful thing about B grade cinema and cinema that falls below is that reality bleeds through more than anything else. It's literally like the phoenix rising through the ashes to me when people get really excited about a film that's been lost. Most film distributors would say "This is trash, its dead, it shouldn't exist anymore" and then you pull it out and put it on and you see an audience go insane and they have one of the best times of their life. It rises above what it initially sets out to be. And that's what these films do, when you actually start to laugh about their technique, or the acting capabilities, but there's always this moment in there where you go "Oh My God, if they were able to extend this scene, they've got a real piece of gold here" (2004).

A comparison can be drawn between the so-called lost films to which Katz refers and the people that love them. Therefore it is meaningful to discuss how the films and the fans of these films are marginalised. In particular, the above quote is indicative of the heart of the Annandale group, and of cult fandom as a project of the self – that cult screenings are the impetus for something bigger, that: "they rise above what they initially set out to be". By coming together as a group, the organisers and audience members are rising above the notion of failure by seeing the value in these marginalised films, and the value in each other's marginalised tastes. Cult screenings become a way of starting a discussion, of not wanting to

contribute to disposable culture, but wanting to be engaged with issues – issues that are explored in depth in the chapters that follow. By sharing what they love, and in some cases, making a living from it, organisers are able to maintain a truly independent spirit, whilst having creative freedom. Most of all, it is obvious for both the organisers and the filmmakers that these films are a significant part of their life, and their identity; their passion for film is the motivating force which sustains them, so regardless of whether or not they have an audience, these screenings still take place, perhaps on a smaller scale. The theme of cult film fandom as a project of the self, as suggested by Hills (2000) in relation to fandom, is thus illustrated in the responses offered by cult film organisers who emphasise the importance which cult films have in their lives.

Access is also an important consideration with regard to films which are considered 'lost' or rare and which can take significant amounts of time for organisers to locate.<sup>72</sup> For the cult film organisers that I interviewed, the challenge and adventure of the search is part of its 'cult value'. The difficulty in locating cult films is representatively illustrated in the search for a copy of the 'lost' Australian film *Wake in Fright*. At the time of the interview (2004), this was one film that was considered to be lost (it was re-released on DVD in 2009). Katz and Death searched for a copy via extensive online research and email outreach until they located a copy at a drive-in in Texas, U.S.A. As Death states:

So I'd heard that, you know *Wake in Fright* is lost, nobody's got the rights, or the rights had fallen to who knows where... Apparently the Editor still has a print, which is pretty crappy, I think he's shown it once or twice up at Paddington Town Hall, and the National Archives has got a print, but its in such a state of disrepair that they can't run it through a projector, so they may as well not have a print. ... Well you know everything is out there ... I found a pristine 16mm print [of *Wake in Fright*], brand new, amazing colour on EBay. So then there's us, with a pristine print I can run anytime, just because I went up on EBay and there it was (Death, 2004).

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<sup>72</sup> Such as *The Day the Clown Cried* (1972, Jerry Lewis) - said to have been seen by less than twenty people (McCarthy, 2003, 45).

For Death and Katz, one of their quests as archivists and collectors is to hunt down Australian films because they often prove to be more difficult to find than anything else. For Katz:

there is nothing more exciting than actually seeing a film shot in your local suburb or town 30 years ago, and shot in an incredibly different way than what you'd ever imagine... [*Wake in Fright*] is going to be a big cult film, once people are able to see it. But the weirdest thing is we came about it on EBay. The story is that it sat in the Texas drive-in and was never screened, they'd seen it themselves once and said 'What's the point in this? No American is going to relate to this film, let's not be bothered with it (Katz, 2004).

As is evident in the case of *Wake in Fright*, the pleasure of viewing the cult film is amplified by the amount of work that goes into obtaining a copy. In fact, one can see a parallel between the hardships that organisers experience in finding a film, and the way they value the hardships that producers experienced in making the cult film. In both cases there is identification with the underdogs who succeed despite the obstacles stacked against them.

### **5.5 “Due to the horrifying nature of this film, no one will be admitted to the theatre”<sup>73</sup> – Gatekeeping and Cult film**

The Annandale cult organisers are acutely aware of the gatekeeping tendencies and roles that collectors play in the exposure of cult films to outsiders. In many cases, collectors and organisers self-regulate access to their collections. Jay Katz acknowledges that being a collector is typically associated with a ‘collecting ethic’ in which for him certain objects are canonised over others. For Katz, the whole point is to uncover things that have not been seen and get them back out to the people. He finds it futile to exert ‘closed’ ownership over these items when the screening of them, in turn, can inspire the audience to search for lost films on their own and possibly bring them back to the group. Through this process, suddenly a new community appears (Katz, 2004). For Miss Death, there is no point in acquiring all of these films if they cannot be shared with people. So for them, the

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<sup>73</sup> *Schlock* (1973).

best way to achieve their goal is to open up their home and put on the screenings (Death, 2004).

Previous accounts of cult film fans stress the competitiveness that surrounds the practice of cult film collecting. As discussed earlier, Hollows (2003) insists that cult film consumption practices are isolating and in many ways, restricted to men. While Fiske (1992) speaks of collecting in terms of fan hierarchies, later accounts of the activities of cult movie collectors focus on issues of fan hierarchies and gender. Academics such as Hollows (2003) and Read (2003) assert that cult film collecting represents an opportunity to create a homosocial world that: "... rests on a distinction between the alternative reading strategies of the minority and the mainstream reading strategies of the majority" (Read, 2003, 65), where women are clearly placed in the mainstream/majority camp, with the latter being devalued in this binary. Other accounts such as Sconce (1995) focus on the factions within cult film fandom that: "... promote rival visions of the 'trash' aesthetic" (375); Jancovich also points to niche film publications such as *Film Threat* and *Psychotronic Video* that:

... act to disseminate information in order to produce a sense of community [but] they are also concerned not to disseminate it too widely. They frequently announce their selective nature – that they are not for everyone - and their combative style is at least as much to warn off 'outsiders' and to reassure insiders by advertising the inaccessibility of the scene (2002, 319).

Whilst it is important to note the academic tradition of combativeness within cult film fandom, this is where my study differs. To the cult film organisers interviewed here, collecting is about liberating lost works, and sharing personal favourites with friends and audiences. It is about getting excited about these films as 'art'. This is achieved by spreading, and disseminating their love of film through the screenings and other events that they organise. The connections organisers make with their audiences enable other needs to gain a sense of fulfilment as well – such as support for other projects that either the organisers or other audience members are engaged in. Thus, the audience fills the need of a support network which can be mobilised around other events/causes. In this context, I am not suggesting that the

audiences studied here constitute a cohesive taste culture, nor am I trying to promote a utopian view of cult film fandom. Rather, the aims stated by the organisers in my study are aligned in their desire to create a space for screening lost and cult materials, as opposed to engaging in an avaricious competition (or competing with each other) to build the biggest collections or call attention to some proprietary example or definition of superior taste.

### **5.6 Cult Film as a Shared Experience**

In concluding the interviews with cult film organisers, participants were asked about their motivation behind the continued organisation of screenings and festivals. The most prominent variable driving the creation, and continuation of cult screening groups is the idea of creating a 'shared experience'. In addition to cult film fandom celebrating filmic triumphs over adversity, innovation, and the search for innovative ideas is also a key reason for their continued engagement with cult film.

An examination of the material gathered from cult film organisers reveals the needs that these groups service (for the organisers, as distinct from the audience), as well as how these needs differ from those of other forms of alternative film exhibition. Beginning a cult film screening night firstly fulfils the need for organisers to have a forum in which they can screen their collection/favourites. It also provides a space in which these films can be shown, even if it means the films are screened in a private home. Organising their own night which they can program fulfils the need to show the lost or out of print films that will not be shown elsewhere to an appreciative audience. By organising screenings, an important group is formed that shares the interests of the organisers, and thus fills a social need to connect with others. Despite the element of self-interest involved in the organisation of cult events, it is clear that the exchange of films and artefacts is also an exchange of ideas. As evidence of this, most interviewees express a dislike of the 'selfish' collectors ethic where collections are off-limits to outsiders. In fact, reinvesting funds (as described in this thesis) into more films that can be shared with the audience, illustrates the depth of their commitment to their cult film fandom.



Cult film organisers suggest that their own screenings also release them from the 'puritanical' attitudes towards film viewing in public, as participation is encouraged in opposition to traditional codes of conduct at the cinema. Participation during the screenings is one of the primary variations between the needs filled by cult screenings versus those in other alternative film exhibition settings. During cult screenings participation is encouraged, and takes on a more organic form, as opposed to the ritualised response present at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

In a world full of multiplexes cult film organisers are dedicated to creating a space where the films they love can be rediscovered and screened. Their interest in cult film is maintained by the thrill of the search, and the excitement in exposing audiences to films they may never have discovered individually thereby creating a "living community" of audiences engaged with cult films. In so doing, three key themes emerge – the importance of spatial interactions, community, and nostalgia surrounding cult film. The following chapters will examine each of these themes in more depth.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Alternative Spaces: Audiences, Cult Viewing and Heterotopias**

“... cult culture transforms the spectators into an audience” (Jerslev, 1993, 98).

Despite the consensus in fan and fan-scholar texts on cult film regarding the importance of the audience in creating cult films, the voices of the cult audience are noticeably absent. To address this gap in the literature, this chapter analyses data collected from participants in the form of interviews and surveys conducted at the two cult film screening groups in Sydney and Melbourne. The aim is to discover how including the voices of the cult film audience alters our perspective on cult film fans. This chapter will examine: how the screening night operates and how cult screenings fit into the routine of audience, as well as their reasons for attending screenings, and most significantly, why they attend cult screenings when they have so many viewing options available. The perceived differences between cult screenings and the multiplex are also examined; as suggested earlier, screening venues represent a consumption of place. Finally, this chapter suggests that cult screenings create ‘other spaces’, or spaces that can be called heterotopic. In order to frame cult film screenings and their position between public and private, Foucault’s work on heterotopia has been utilised to describe how cult film screenings stand outside of the home – possessing the comforts of home, without being home. Cult screenings can also be described as a heterotopia of compensation, for what is viewed as a lack – in overcoming the restrictions placed on audience behaviour in other settings. The creation of both physical and theoretical space is vital to participation in cult film fandom, and to the ongoing existence of cult film groups and screenings.

#### **6.1 The cult audience in Australia**

This section of the chapter examines the practices of cult film audiences in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, and conceptualises the routine and meaning of their attendance by actually asking the participants about their practices; this differs from previous studies where the practices of cult audiences have been observed,

but the voices of the participants have been absent. The practices of Australian audiences have also been omitted from prior studies into cult film fandom.

The cult screening events have a unique routine within an informal setting. Although the action of viewing a cult film at the Annandale/Mu-meson Archives in Sydney or Screenshot in Melbourne is not ritualised in the same way as screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, participant observation suggests that audiences do follow a routine of sorts, which is at least partially influenced by the place in which the films are shown. At the Annandale, most patrons arrive at least 30 minutes prior to the commencement of the feature, which enables them to view the short film, cartoons or mash-up being screened. During this time seats are claimed and food and drinks are purchased. Patrons often circulate around the room to greet others at the event. Hot food may be brought from the beer garden into the screening area, enabling audience members to enjoy dinner whilst viewing the film. During the film, the organisers typically engage with the film, by offering lighthearted witty 'conversation' with the action on screen, which encourages the audience to do likewise. Before and after screenings, and during the film, patrons are reminded to make a donation, which also enters them into a raffle for a cult film DVD that is drawn at the end of the feature. To attend screenings at Screenshot, a small fee is paid quarterly which aids in building a regular base of attendees. In contrast, the Annandale screenings rely on donations, which inspires more of an impromptu feeling to the gathering. In fact, many audience members have their first cult movie experience here after simply visiting the venue by happenstance at the time of the screenings. Without the formal collection of membership fees, patrons are free to drop in and out of screenings as they please. Based on these observations, patrons of Screenshot have established a more regular routine or ritual regarding the organisation of the night.

The main 'activity' of the Annandale group centres upon the film screening, during which audiences are prompted to respond to visual or spoken cues in the text, that

is, to 'talk back' to it.<sup>74</sup> The organisers initiate this type of participation. As Miss Death suggests, some of the films are so absurd she simply cannot remain quiet. She believes that if the people organising the night speak up in this way, then the audience will follow their lead and get involved too (Death, 2004). In contrast to the audience behaviour at the Annandale, the routine of the Screensect evening in Melbourne is more formal. Many of those intending to watch the feature at Screensect gather early in the beer garden to drink and converse with the organiser and other audience members. This differs from the Sydney group, which tends to congregate in small groups in the screening area for a drink before the film, but not as a large group. At the Annandale screenings most people prefer to meet groups of friends just before the screening commences, and then to meet new people during or after the film. Almost all of the patrons encountered in Melbourne knew one another from prior attendance at the screenings, and from attending university, whereas in Sydney the audience fluctuates between many regular attendees and almost none. It is common for some patrons in Sydney to arrive after the film has commenced, whilst people are less likely to show up after a film has started in Melbourne.

Participant observation conducted over six months prior to the interviews, and observations made at screenings during the course of writing this thesis, reveal that the screenings at the Mu-meson Archives result in a greater level of participation than those at the Annandale Hotel. Possible reasons for this trend include the fact that regular audience members attending the Archives are usually quite familiar with each other. The setting (at the rear of Jay Katz/Miss Death's residence) creates a superior level of comfort to the Hotel, as it is akin to visiting a close friend's home, complete with lounge chairs, and home made refreshments. Within this private residence setting there are no time restrictions, thus discussions regarding the film and other related topics continue well after the screening has concluded. The discussions occurring here also adopt a personal note, as most of those attending are familiar with one another. As a result, conversations often

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<sup>74</sup> These cues are typically some piece outrageous, or out-of-place dialogue or action.

move beyond purely film related topics, and the friendships formed enable a certain degree of intimacy. Patrons usually arrive early to extend their discussion time with the organisers and each other. Thus the type of space in which cult screenings are held directly influences the likelihood of increased engagement between patrons, leading to subsequent gatherings with each other in other spaces.

Discussions between Screensect patrons focus largely on the general topic of film as well as any films viewed by the group during the previous week. Throughout these observed conversations, respondents displayed evidence of the type of “encyclopaedic knowledge” about film of which Eco (1987) speaks. And, this knowledge was used in a different way than described by Sconce (1995) since it was used to educate, rather than compete with one another. Once again, a type of informal mentoring via sharing information could be said to occur. In one case, the organiser Adam, who has experience as a screenwriter, inspired and mobilised audience members by distributing supporting information about other endeavours outside of Screensect (for example, about a new film night called CineCult, and also the vote for Adam’s short film *Dog Meat*, which he entered in a audience selected festival in 2008). Discussions regarding film studies could also be heard before the screening, as many patrons of Screensect are university film students. It was noted from these conversations that the average age of the patrons at the Screensect was younger than in Sydney. Most of the patrons in Melbourne were in their 20s and 30s, whereas, in Sydney the patrons range from university students in their early 20s up to those who are in their 50s and 60s. This was a marked difference between the two groups, which accounts for fluctuating attendance patterns in Sydney due to other commitments such as family, longer working hours etc.

In terms of audience participation, the screening nights studied for this thesis differ from ‘traditional’ cult film screenings. That is, a different film is screened each week, whereas typically, cult screenings revolve around the repeat screening of

one cult film. Given that a different film is screened each week, at the Annandale screenings responses from organisers and others are invented on the spot. Remarks are usually witty and at the expense of the films' deficiencies such as holes in the plot or ridiculous dialogue. For example, during a horror film, when the characters take a wrong turn, audience members will shout out to 'help' the characters with remarks such as: "Don't go down there!!!"; "Like *that* will help!"; "Are you kidding, that's outrageous!!" etc. Whilst this type of participation does not occur at every film screening, the familiarity between audience members at the Annandale group enables an atmosphere which is relaxed enough to accommodate sarcastic quips in response to onscreen dialogue.

The tension that exists between ridiculing, yet respecting these films seems to be unique to cult film fandom. Cult audiences participate for numerous reasons, but above all, they love the films to the point of having an 'unreasonable' love for them. They value films that are viewed by society at large as having no value, or being trash, because their value is in the experience of watching them with others, as Respondent 30 suggests: "The big difference with cult movies is [that] people talk amongst themselves and are more likely to laugh at the 'crapness' of a movie" (2006). But with these 'cult' films, fans can quote them, dress up, talk to them – the film becomes the occasion to have a party, while the spaces in which cult screenings are held play a significant role in the type of activity which is 'acceptable' – cult screening venues being much less rigid in their expectation of 'typical' passive viewing behaviours. These types of behaviour are particularly evident at the Mu-meson Archives, specifically special events such as 'triple features' – on these occasions audience members arrive wearing pyjamas, carrying blankets, snacks and drinks, as it is an all night event. It seems unthinkable to attend any other cinema in pyjamas, thus illustrating the appeal of the screenings – the idea of 'public viewing in private'- where one can socialise with audience members, but otherwise behave as if they were in their own homes.

Cult viewing is further complicated by the argument proposed by Eco that in order to read and understand the intertextual nature of cult, one must have a high level of cultural competency: “The required expertise is not only intercinematic, it is intermedia, in the sense that the addressee must know not only other movies, but all the mass media gossip about movies” (1987, 210). Eco also suggests that: “... in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it, so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole” (1987, 198). Eco’s statement points to the practice of cult audiences ‘breaking off’ pieces of dialogue worthy of memorising, to be quoted back at the screening, or discussed with other audience members. The cult screenings studied here differ slightly from those described by Eco, in that a different film is shown each week. In these cases, intertextual references noticed in the film come to prominence during discussions of the film after the screening, rather than during counterpoint dialogue that occurs during ritualised screenings such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or *The Room*. The discussions taking place between audience members before and after the screenings also offer the opportunity to exchange ‘inter-media’ knowledge about other film and popular culture objects of interest. Discussions of this type are a way of forging connections with other audience members and creating a community which shares resources and information – in my experience other group members are very generous with lending copies of films, CDs and other resources in which you may have a shared interest. These types of discussions with the Mu-meson Archives audience and organisers have been very useful during the writing of this thesis, especially when seeking out other cult films and cult film organisers in Australia. The audience’s understanding of the text on this level indicates the type of cultural capital discussed by Fiske (1992) and Czach (2010), and speaks also to the type of membership and belonging that Seymour (2008) concluded was representative of the participation ethos of cult film groups.

It is noteworthy that the films that gain the greatest reaction at the Annandale screenings were made in a similar time period. Some of the films achieving this

type of fervent reaction from the audience include those made in the 1980s, such as: *Hard Ticket to Hawaii* (1987), *Cool as Ice* (1991), *Never Too Young to Die* (1986) and *Won Ton Baby!* (2009). These 1980s films are notable for starring people who were popular at the time, but are now perceived to have camp or ironic appeal by the cult audience (i.e.: Vanilla Ice in *Cool as Ice*; Ronn Moss [of *The Bold and the Beautiful* fame] and several Playboy playmates in *Hard Ticket to Hawaii* and Gene Simmons from KISS in *Never Too Young to Die*). From observation, the films that gain the greatest response are those that were produced in the 1980s and early 1990s, and/or have large audiences of university students and regular attendees (as these two groups tend to be the most 'rowdy').

The appeal of films produced either during their youth (in the case of many regular audience members), or even before audience members were born (in the case of university students) is reflective of the '20 year rule' which suggests that music, and popular culture (of say the 1980s) comes back in to fashion 20 years later. This is driven on the one hand by those who lived through this time and are pining for 'the good old days', and on the other hand by the younger generation who 'discover' this 'retro' music and popular culture, which they find 'cool' (Juke, 2002). Pett (2013) also discusses the notion of nostalgia in relation to *Back to the Future* (1985) and audiences. Whilst I find her argument regarding the 'cult viewing' of blockbusters problematic, her discussion of nostalgia as a cultural style is important in terms of understanding how younger audience members feel nostalgia towards films produced before they were born (see Pett, 2013, 188-189). Having long-since observed this phenomenon amongst audiences, Miss Death now programs films from these eras more frequently to draw a bigger audience. She suggests that because the 'kids' remember the time when the film was produced, they are more likely to attend with a group and engage with the camp nostalgia (2004).<sup>75</sup> By engaging with their audience, organisers are able to establish the

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<sup>75</sup> 'Camp nostalgia' in this case is a 'camp' film, enjoyed because of a feeling of nostalgia towards it by the audience. For example, they remember the film from their youth. As defined by Sontag (1964), the central feature of anything 'camp' is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.



tastes of their audience and cater to their specific tastes when choosing what to program, in opposition to multiplex viewing where the audience has no input into the screenings.

## **6.2 Ritual or Routine? Reasons for attending screenings**

In order to document whether attendance at cult screenings was a ritual for audience members, specific questions were asked in regards to the routine of the audiences. In both Sydney and Melbourne, audience members were asked about their reasons for attending cult film screenings, and how the screenings fit into their weekly routines. At the Annandale group on the night the survey was conducted almost half of the respondents were first time attendees of cult movie night. This was an unforeseen discovery, but not surprising given that many viewers attended specifically to see the film that was screening, *Wake in Fright*, which at that time (in 2006) was only available on 16mm film. Other patrons were more sporadic in their attendance, varying from attending most weeks to attending for the “first time in ages”. Of those who were irregular patrons (did not attend on a weekly basis), one-fifth mentioned that they *would* like to attend more often, but the distance between home and the venue was a discouragement. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the reasons for staying away had little to do with cult movie night, or its content. Rather, the occasional audience members are affected by outside commitments, in spite of their overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the experience of Cult Cinema Tuesday. Given the amount of participant observation with this group, it seemed unusual that so many members of the audience on this night would be first time attendees because at least 50% of the group on any given night (by sight) were repeat attendees. Yet, aside from distorting the amount of regular attendance, the amount of first time attendees did not appear to skew the findings in a significant way.

Like the Annandale group, members of the Screensect group in Melbourne were asked about their attendance preferences to determine if they had any regular

patterns. The minimum level of attendance recorded was once a month, due to outside commitments that were preventing them from attending more regularly. Other responses varied from weekly attendance (25%) to most weeks (50%), indicating (albeit on a small scale) a level of dedication to attending. It is likely that more regular attendance was due to the availability of pre-paid membership, or as suggested above, because of the large number of patrons who had fewer family commitments due to their lower average age. At Screensect, most members are aged 18-35, whereas at the Annandale, members range in age from 18-60. The variance in attendance patterns at the Annandale could be due to greater family or work commitments of older viewers, as opposed to university students who comprised the bulk of the Screensect audience. Aside from myself, no newcomers were present at Screensect on the evening of the survey, another point of contrast from the Annandale group.

Patrons at the Annandale and Screensect are equally interested in the film on offer and the social benefits of attending. Thirty-two per cent of Annandale respondents really wanted to see *Wake in Fright* (the scheduled film on the night of the survey), giving this reason as their primary motivation for attending. Coming to see this particular film was, by far, the most popular response. This enthusiastic response towards a film that has been long out of print was simultaneously unsurprising, given how rare it was, and surprising given the apparent apathy audiences often feel for Australian films. This finding indicates a more complicated relationship between Australian cult audiences and Australian films than the mass media would have us believe.

In terms of their level of interest in local cinema, most audience members at the Annandale and Screensect expressed a positive attitude toward Australian films. That is, they both like and support Australian films, which was somewhat unexpected given the poor attendance of audiences at the cinema for Australian features. Indeed, at the time of the survey Australian feature films commanded only 4% of the total box office takings in 2007 (AFC, 2008, 1). From the attitudes

expressed in this survey, it is clear that cult film audiences do have enthusiasm for Australian films, and are keen to support rare and lost Australian genre films, such as *Wake in Fright*. Thus, it can be said that screenings of lost Australian films fulfil the need of cult audiences to view Australian films with new enthusiasm. As the surveys suggest, and further research could clarify, Australian genre films have the potential to excite a wider domestic audience, as cult film organisers contend – they simply require a *space* in which screenings can be held.

In explaining their reasons for attendance, members of Screensect also had a variety of reasons relating to the film content. Among half of all who indicated that the films were the exclusive reason for attending Screensect also indicated that they were motivated by the fact that the films being shown have been forgotten, or would not otherwise be seen elsewhere. This response was in keeping with their Sydney counterparts. Of the other film related reasons for attending screenings, 30% were interested in increasing the depth of their knowledge of screen culture. One respondent (Timothy) stated that he would not know as much about film if it were not for the screening nights (Timothy, 2007). Meanwhile another respondent (Justine) remarked: “These nights are important to encourage and support a greater appreciation of cult films. Without these nights many films would not be screened at all” (2007). This was a somewhat unexpected finding, as whilst the Screensect program contains films that could be described as cult, DVD is the chosen format used (by virtue of the equipment available at the venue). In contrast, the Annandale group focuses primarily on lost and neglected ‘fringe cult’ and underground films, especially those on 16mm film. The organisers collect these types of films and maintain an archive in this format while trying to share their collection at the screening nights. Despite the increased availability of many rare and cult films on DVD (and to a lesser extent, film) via the internet, the loss of many art house and repertory cinemas has meant that cult film screenings have replaced these venues as providers of a forum for the screening and discussion of film as art, a feature which is still valued by audience members.

The consensus between the both the Annandale and Screenshot audiences is that without cult screening nights, they would not otherwise have seen these films. Hence, the primary function of these screening nights is to offer material that attendees have not encountered before. In fulfilling this need for audiences, both sets of organisers have succeeded in their stated goals. In the previous chapter, both sets of organisers identified the experience of sharing new discoveries as one of the great joys of organising cult screenings. Adam Spellicy's motivation to run cult screenings stems from the fact that there will always be another rare gem to unearth, and the nights help to expose new generations of film lovers to brilliant but largely unsung films (Spellicy, 2007). Jay Katz hopes that in screening these lost films to a group of people, they will go out there and find other films and bring them back thus creating a community of interest (Katz, 2004). The desire to share these films that is evident in the motivation of organisers, and the reciprocal desire amongst audiences to view rare films with like minded viewers at public screenings, speaks to the unique nature of cult film screenings and a reason to attend them over numerous other screening venues such as the multiplex – that is, that they can offer films, and an experience that can not be had elsewhere.

A range of social reasons or benefits also impacted on attendance of cult film screenings. Popular responses at the Annandale night included the following reasons: an invitation from a friend (14%), to socialise (14%), or because the organisers had invited them (10%). These answers underline the social function of Cult Cinema Tuesday, as an event that encourages interaction amongst the audience. These types of responses also correlate with those of the organisers interviewed, who suggest that the promising social aspect of the event is a primary motivation for running the screenings in the first place. It is an opportunity to invite like-minded people to share in the experience together. Of those patrons who cite the film title as a reason for attending, a further 18% of responses reveal that they loved cult films – particularly since they were difficult to find at the local video store (Erin, 2006). There was also an appreciation for the surprise one gets by attending without knowing the film on offer (Respondent 6, 2006).

The social needs filled by cult film screening nights are also featured in the responses given by those attending the Screenshot group. For one respondent:

Cinema should be celebrated! I get to see movies I haven't seen before, or movies that I adore, I get to see again. I love the conversations that follow accompanied by booze. And I adore the small communal feel it has. Delightful! (Tammy, 2007).

The cult film nights also provide an opportunity to build connections with other members of the audience, leading to the feeling of community, as discussed further in chapter seven.

### **6.3 The Nexus of Public and Private Spaces**

The previous section examined some of the audience practices at Australian cult film screenings. From these responses, and from examining the literature in Chapter Three on different locations where people can view films, insights on how space and place influence film-going behaviour emerge. By reinscribing the voices of cult film audiences back into the cinema going picture, we can gain a clearer sense of the differences between the cult film experience with other modes of viewing, particularly, the multiplex.

A key observation from the audience surveys is that, unlike multiplex or art house screenings, finding out about cult film screenings in the first instance is challenging. As prominent theorists including Eco (1987), Catterall & Wells (2002), and Peary (1981) insist, word of mouth is a primary component in the accumulation of a devoted following around a cult film. According to the survey, promotion over online (email, blogs, websites, etc.) and offline (conversations over the phone and in person, as well as via print advertisements) social networks confirmed the importance of word of mouth publicity. About 61% of the Annandale patrons had found out about screenings in this way, most usually, through friends. The most effective advertising comes from patrons who have had a positive experience at Cult Cinema Tuesday. Simply put, they invite friends or recommend it to others. In

the case of Cult Cinema Tuesday at the Annandale, it seems that word of mouth promotion focuses on the experience of viewing in a relaxed, social atmosphere, at minimal cost and with the convenience of food and alcohol readily available. Many respondents mentioned this particular convenience as a great feature of the venue. Patrons can have a complete night of entertainment, which is seen to be distinct from the multiplex experience. For one participant (number 8): "The difference is at cult screenings you can have good food and drink; it's close by; I can discuss and talk to others without feeling like I am imposing on other patrons. All the comforts of a great pub!". Another participant (Don) also suggests the two experiences are very different: "[Cult movies] is cheap, you can get dinner and beer, there is better parking and easy transport, they show interesting short films [before the feature]. At the multiplex they show bland modern films with lots of previews". As patrons are predominantly spreading the word to friends, having a positive experience like those cited are likely to draw more patrons to the event. The cult film experience is thus held up as a more dynamic alternative to that of the multiplex, which is expensive to attend, fairly regimented (the audience is ushered in, seated in specific chairs and no hot food is allowed except in Gold Class). Moreover, little social interaction is perceived to take place at the multiplex (Jones, 2010) – therefore, cult film screenings present an appealing alternative where one can socialise with friends, have dinner and watch a film in one location.

Other forms of promotion also play an important publicity role. Cult movie nights are often discovered by way of the venue (The Annandale Hotel – 15%), or through the organisers indirectly (on their radio program or mailing list – 12%). An element of self-promotion is therefore part of the overall campaign. Several patrons are either invited by the organisers on FBi Radio program *The Naked City* or via the monthly program email from Mu-meson Archives. As Austin (1981) shows in the analysis of *Rocky Horror* fans, it is crucial that the audience feels they are creating the event, rather than being manipulated by advertising. Thus, word of mouth promotion continues to be effective, especially since the trail is now strengthened by advanced technology (social networking, email, text messaging).

It has been suggested by Hubbard that viewing films at the multiplex involves the consumption of place. In addition to those mentioned by Hubbard, for cult audiences, consuming films outside of the multiplex contains several additional elements regarding the consumption of place. Firstly, whilst Hubbard's participants insisted that "cleanliness and comfort" were paramount, cult film participants placed more emphasis on homelike features. For participant 22: "Locals treat the Annandale like an extra lounge room" (2007). Participant observation of cult audiences confirmed this opinion, as attendees tended to act as one might at home, – putting their feet up, lying down, sitting on armrests, and eating and drinking off laps. For cult screenings in both Sydney and Melbourne, the pub band room is filled with comfortable old couches, tables and chairs, bench cushions (which surround the raised 'mezzanine' section at the rear of the Annandale) and beanbags. Whilst the furniture is there to make the experience comfortable, if one arrives late to a popular cult screening, the floor is utilised for extra seating; such informal arrangements are clearly not permitted at the multiplex.

Secondly, the level of cleanliness stated by Hubbard as an important feature of multiplex viewing for his participants is not prominent in either the Annandale or Fitzroy venues. While there is no visible debris/litter, the floor is sticky and the typical 'aromas' of past drinking and smoking remain as the result of a lack of ventilation. In creating this particular type of 'home', patrons are made to feel comfortable in a way that is entirely distinct from the comfort of the multiplex, or the 'luxury' of Gold Class and other 'niche' cinema experiences.

Other independent cinemas in Australia have attempted to mark their difference by making the viewing experience more like home – such as Govindas Restaurant and Cinema in Darlinghurst, Sydney. This cinema has lounge chairs and other large cushions where one can recline as if at home, and having a small seating capacity (70 patrons maximum) it retains an intimate feel. The seasonal (summer) Rooftop Cinema in Melbourne, and Moonlight Cinema (in several Australian capital cities) also market themselves as a 'luxury' experience (with boutique wines, beers

and food), but with the comforts of a picnic (deckchairs and beanbags). A sense of irony exists in creating a 'luxury' experience that is similar to the comforts of a home living room; however, the comforts of home that are created differ from those at cult film screenings, as certain behaviours, such as excessive talking during the feature, re-arranging furniture/sitting in a place other than the assigned seat are still prohibited. While these experiences attempt to make patrons feel at home, there is still a level of formality, and certain expectations in terms of behaviour that are not present at cult film screenings such as exact starting times, allocated seating and most importantly, quiet is expected throughout the feature. In the example of cult film screenings, the feeling of comfort and home contribute to a feeling of community, as the experience is based on a sharing of space and experience.

The particular type of venue where cult screenings occur thus facilitates a set of completely different types of behaviours than can be observed at the multiplex. Both the Annandale and Fitzroy nights are held in pubs; a social environment by nature, with the added factor of alcohol consumption which may act to rid the audience of some of their inhibitions. Although few case studies exist for comparison, Long uses the example of reading groups and how they encourage participation and a sense of camaraderie amongst the group. These groups commonly met in:

... libraries, book stores, cafes ... group participation constitutes social identity and solidarity, [it] illuminated the moral and cultural dimensions of this process and indicated the kinds of innovative positions people take up vis-à-vis the literary institution and their own experience - cases of personal insight and collective cultural and critical reflection (1994, 198 – 199).

Long's proposition regarding a sense of belonging can be linked to Staiger's work on spectatorship which asserts that talk at the cinema – also a public place, is a way to construct networks of attachment particularly among minority groups. Thus, the setting of cult screenings is significant in that it shapes how people engage with one another. In this example, those with minority tastes come together to form a community of engagement, or an interpretive community.



Survey participants at cult screenings in both Sydney and Melbourne were asked their opinions about how the discourse of cinema behaviour affected the viewing experience at the multiplex.<sup>76</sup> Unsurprisingly, participants had strong views regarding expected cinema going behaviour. When asked if they believed there was a contrast between attending the multiplex and attending cult movies, 95% of respondents agreed. As identified in the literature on attending the multiplex, there is a shared concern within the cult film audience on the social aspect of attendance, as the responses of audience members indicate. For Carl, there were several key differences between the cult and multiplex film experience. For him, the cult film experience includes a sense of atmosphere, a social 'scene', friendly, informative and generous hosts, and most of all the joy of supporting something that, in his view, *deserves* support (Carl, 2006). Most notably, in outlining their support for cult film screenings, audience members articulated a political motive in using their influence as consumers to support a smaller 'community' event, in opposition to the corporate monopoly many associated with the multiplex.

The survey findings also reveal sensitivity to the spatial dimension, in that cult events encourage audiences to support a local business over a multinational corporation. Participant 3 stated that the biggest difference he noticed at cult screenings (as opposed to the multiplex) was that: "These films are shown because they are loved, not because they have any money making potential" (2006). Catherine stated that: "Cult = more personal social. Feels like a local event. Multiplex = impersonal, commercial" (2006). When Respondent 22 described cult film screenings, she emphasised that in opposition to multiplex attendance the experiences are: "So very different. Multiplexes are profit-driven, advertising-rife, anonymous, lowest common denominator behemoths. And no booze!" (2006). Kate suggested that her enjoyment of the cinematic experience depends not just on the movie, but the atmosphere as well, as her attendance: "It depends not just on the movie but the atmosphere as well. A lot of the reason as to why I come to

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<sup>76</sup> Given the accessibility of the multiplex, and the assumption that all cult film audience members had attended a multiplex before, the multiplex was offered as a point from which to compare the cult film experience, and any potential differences in question four of the survey.

cult movie night is because of the atmosphere at the Annandale and the people that the present the films” (Kate, 2006). Likewise, Tammy suggested that Screensect is more intimate than the multiplex, and the social aspect gives the feeling that patrons are attending for similar reasons, such as education and passion for film (Tammy, 2007). For Justine, cult screenings show obscure films not offered at the multiplex with the experience of cult screenings heightened by the informative introductions of the films (Justine, 2007). Finally, Paul highlights the disparity between the costs of the two types of screenings, where the multiplex costs \$15 for one ticket, while Screensect offers a yearly subscription for a mere \$5 (Paul, 2007). These respondents mention factors not only regarding the consumption of place and interaction, but the idea of using their power as consumers to support smaller, local events.

Patrons of Screensect in Melbourne also identify key differences between the multiplex and cult screenings, and like the Annandale audience, believed there to be a strong link between both the consumption of place and the social interaction. Justine says there is a: “Huge difference [between the two types of experience]. A multiplex would not show the obscure films or anything else interesting. Also I love [the organiser] Adam’s intro’s – informative and funny” (2007). For Tammy:

Screensect is more intimate, and there is a stronger focus on the art of the film, as opposed to just mindless entertainment. The social aspect is really nice too, there is a feeling that everybody attends for a similar reason: a sense of community, education and passion for film (2007).

Organisers and audiences of cult film have insisted that cult and lost films occupy a unique place within the canon of film, and the screening of these films can be distinguished from other types of film and film going practices because of the relationship the audiences have with the texts, and with each other. A lack of alternative screening venues necessitates the use of physical spaces which are not typically used in order to screen cult films, such as pubs, which in turn results in an experience with the comforts of home, but the social benefits of a night out. It seems that attending the cult screening nights is, for both groups, therefore a way

of engaging with others with similar tastes, whilst also demonstrating a desire for film options outside of the multiplex.

So why *do* people attend cult screening groups? The audiences in both Sydney and Melbourne were asked if they felt the existence of the cult film screenings they attended was important. The positive nature of the responses was striking, particularly given the variety of screening options now available to audiences. For a fringe activity with little advertising, responses from cult audiences in both Sydney and Melbourne showed a great amount of loyalty and affection for cult film nights. This fondness also illustrated the needs that cult film nights meet for audience members who attend regularly. These responses can be categorised in two key areas – screenings fulfilling social needs and also providing a sense of familiarity and comfort.

Respondents in Sydney indicated that cult movie night functioned largely as a shared social activity with friends, but also fulfilled a desire to experience films created outside or without the support of the mainstream media industries (Respondent 3, 2006). For another patron, their affection had been won over by the hitherto ignored movies, the comfortable surrounds, an inclusive crowd of all sorts of people, the knowledgeable commentary and projection skills (Respondent 8, 2006). Yet another stated simply that cult movie night was part of her weekly things to do, and had become a big part of her social life (Maria, 2006). In these examples, the importance of cult film screenings was in the screening of lost films, and the inclusive nature of the audience leading to a feeling of community.

The screenings at the Annandale and Screensect thus took on an additional symbolic function in the inner city as more people appear to be seeking social interaction away from the traditional familial unit which may not be available to them. From personal conversations with audience members at the Mu-meson Archives, it was apparent that many of the regular attendees of these events live alone and attendance at these events provides a way of being social in a

welcoming group.<sup>77</sup> Both groups thus agree on the role of cult screening nights in offering a valuable alternative to mainstream films, and the need to support lost or forgotten films, in addition to the role these nights play in creating a type of community amongst individuals that may not otherwise have met.

The regularity of cult film screenings heavily influences the level of activity of the group. As cult film groups meet weekly (or in the case of the Annandale and Mu-meson group, more often, if one attends their other films or events), they become part of a continuity of lived experiences for cult film fans. That is, the activities of the group are incorporated into everyday life – they become normalised and habitualised. Not only are there cult screenings, but special holiday triple/quadruple bill sleepovers (where audience members don pyjamas/sleeping bags at the Mu-meson Archives in preparation for a long night of screenings); and premieres/special events where filmmakers (both established and newcomers) show their work, and discuss/meet with the audience (such as American actor/filmmaker Crispin Glover, who appeared at the Mu-meson Archives to premiere his latest works before their season at the Chauvel cinema). The involvement of group members in each other's 'everyday life' also extends to invitations to personal milestones such as birthday parties, weddings, anniversaries and christenings. Whilst I am not arguing that other types of film fans do not form friendships, it seems that the regularity of meetings and a small to medium core of attendees (20-30 at the Annandale group) increases the intensity of the engagement between audience members.

Costello and Moore's research into the use of the Internet by television fans describes how online fan interactions frequently lead to the formation of lasting friendships:

... Rather than narrowing my experiences, my interest in certain shows has expanded my circle of friends and opened up my social life. ... A bunch of fans are a pretty diverse group ... but they are supportive of any member's ups and downs. We celebrate birthdays, weddings, bar mitzvahs, passing

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<sup>77</sup> Respondent 50, Personal communication, 2013.

exams, commiserate over taxes, divorce, loss, failing exams. The TV show may be the spark, but it's more than that! (2007, 134).

Although their findings described the activities of online television fan groups, Costello and Moore are able to explain how the online interactions of fans can grow beyond that of discussing the fan object, despite rarely meeting in person. In the case of the cult film fans studied here, engagement with other audience members also goes beyond the fan object into 'everyday life' – and the formation of a 'living community' (as described by Jay Katz). This is enabled by not only the commitment of the organisers, in spending their savings on collections and often opening their homes for screenings, but also the frequency of screenings and high level of involvement that audience members have in each other's lives.

The responses from audience members suggest that the social interactions available to attendees fosters the experience of 'membership' and 'belonging' which was noted with regard to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* spectatorship discussed by Seymour:

However strongly its fans hold on to the idea of membership and 'insiderness', though, the fact remains that *Rocky Horror* and most other alternative cinematic spectacles exhibit democratic, rather than exclusive ideals at their very core. The participation ethos, the destruction of various hierarchies that structure normal movie going, and the grassroots level at which *Rocky Horror* floorshow casts search for theatres and organise screenings, speak to its very egalitarian nature (2008, 134).

Whilst the literature on cult film posits that membership and 'insiderness' is spoken of as ways to exclude others (Hollows, 2003; Read, 2003), the organisers of the Annandale and Screensect cult screening nights take the opposite approach, and all are welcome. Although none of the survey responses explicitly stated that they valued 'membership' as part of their attendance at cult screenings, when asked whether they believed cult screenings were important, the primary social justification offered was that cult screenings enabled a connection to film culture and community (61%).

In surveying members of both the Annandale and Screensect cult audiences, 'community' was frequently mentioned as one of the key reasons why people chose to attend, especially when asked if they viewed cult film screenings as 'more than just an activity'. Statements such as that made by Respondent 22 reflect many of the reasons given for attending cult screenings, and the investment that the audience members have in the screenings:

I do see it [cult screenings] as much more than 'an activity', compared with say, attending a film session at a mainstream cinema. Jay Katz and Miss Death are preserving (and creating) something extremely important, and sharing it pretty much freely. It's not about making money, it's not about pushing an ideology. And by attending that myself, I'm sharing in and contributing to what they're doing. I'm choosing not to passively Hoover up mainstream culture, but instead connecting with people and sharing something rare and precious. ... I go to their stuff most importantly because I enjoy it, but also because I really respect and value what they do and the community they've created around them, and I want to be part of that community. ... I'd be extremely upset if anything happened to stop them doing what they do (2007).

This statement illustrates how cult film fandom may become an integral part of the identity of group members, as well as representing a way of making a political statement. It also illustrates Thompson's (1995) suggestions about the integration of fandom into the everyday lives of those in cult fan communities. Screening nights function at a number of levels for the members of the Annandale and Screensect groups: they enable the formation of fan identities by socialising with like minded members; they meet the nostalgic desire of their participants for that which has been 'lost'; and they provide a place for the development of community in the space of the alienating city.

A consensus appeared amongst the other respondents when asked what they gained from attending. Most indicated a positive response when discussing the prospects of socialising – as an incentive to attend. In addition, my own participation, and participant observation of the group revealed how the group engaged with one another both during the screenings and the attendance at trivia nights, nightclubs and art exhibitions hosted by the organisers. The participation

which is enabled by the release from the strictures that multiplex viewing enforces is also visible in the audience's ability to form friendships with the organisers, request films, gain assistance for their own projects and break down the barriers between public and private spheres when invited to screenings at the organisers' homes. In this way, the cult screenings discussed here illustrate the unique nature of cult film fandom and a very particular relationship to community and space.

#### **6.4 Other Spaces: Cult Viewing and Heterotopias**

As posited by Foucault in his article *Des Espaces Autres* (Of Other Spaces), cinema going can be described as heterotopic for its unusual relationship to space. For the purposes of this thesis, the term heterotopia helps to explain how cult film viewing operates in ways that are distinct from other movie going experiences. Essentially, cult screenings occupy an unusual position between 'public' and 'private' viewing.

Foucault (1986) describes heterotopias as: "... different spaces, of these other places. As a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (24). Although Foucault suggests six principles for explaining the nature of heterotopias, here I will only examine how heterotopia functions in terms of cinema. He suggests that:

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. ... thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two dimensional screen one sees the projection of a three dimensional space (1986, 25).

Here we can see how the cinema experience can be described as heterotopic, as film takes you to another space, despite being anchored to a physical place. Cult film groups create 'other spaces', spaces that are different from the multiplex. As revealed in this thesis, cult screening spaces function to recreate the comforts of home without being home. In other words, they stand *outside of* the home. This allows participants to enjoy the sociability of meeting with a 'taste community' (Bourdieu, 1984) while otherwise enjoying the comforts of home.

Foucault illustrates the link between other spaces and time by introducing the 'temporal heterotopia' of the fairground or the festival. Fairgrounds and festivals represent temporary spaces in which a whole village in miniature is created for a mere few weeks each year, before disappearing, as is the case with film festivals as examined in Chapter Three. As cult film screenings can be described as temporal heterotopias this adds a further dimension to their characterisation as such, particularly in their use of alternative places in which to screen films such as pubs and pop up art galleries in warehouses.

The fifth of Foucault's principals which relates particularly to cult film states that:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures (1986, 26).

This depiction of heterotopias reflects the rituals of official cult communities such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which enforces the rites that 'virgins' must observe at their first screening.

The final feature of heterotopias is that:

... they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. ... Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space ... Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. The later type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation... (1986, 27).

By creating their own physical screening place, the organisers of the Annandale cult film group are creating this latter form of heterotopia. The Mu-meson Archives can be viewed as a 'space that is other, another real space' which creates the 'perfect' environment for viewing cult films as they 'should' be viewed – with plenty of audience participation. The space created at the Archives also illustrates a 'heterotopia of compensation' as Foucault suggests – as the types of audience behaviour visible at the Annandale cult screenings are not permitted at the



multiplex, organisers are creating a space where these behaviours are not only welcomed, but encouraged.

More recently, theorists such as Johnson (2006) have revisited Foucault's work on heterotopias, to clarify the complex nature of translating the original work from French. In particular the difference between 'place' and 'space' must be clarified, as in the translation from French, the terms are often used interchangeably. Here, Johnson suggests Auge's definition which states:

'Space' is much more abstract than 'place'. The former term can refer to an area, a distance and, significantly in relation to Foucault's concept of heterotopia, a temporal period (the space of two days). The latter, more tangible term, refers to an event or a history, whether mythical or real (Auge, 1995, 81-4).

Therefore we can think of place as more tangible, or 'real', whereas space is a more abstract concept. For Johnson, heterotopias all refer in some way to: "... a relational disruption in time and space" (2006, 78) a point that Foucault illustrated with the example of the festival, which only appears at certain times of the year. Johnson also suggests that: "In contrast to these breaks or gaps in time, other spaces such as modern museums endeavour to accumulate and protect all time in one space" (2006, 79). The Mu-meson Archives illustrates this feature of the heterotopia, in that it is a physical place where Jay Katz and Miss Death can accumulate and protect all cult films available to them on 16mm film, yet the physical place also represents a heterotopic 'other' space.

Johnson makes two final points that are pertinent to the study of cult film groups as creators of other spaces. Firstly, he points out that:

... in describing generally the space in which we live ... Foucault refers to that which 'draws us out of ourselves'. This is crucial. Heterotopias draw us out of ourselves in peculiar ways; they display and inaugurate a difference and challenge the space in which we may feel at home (2006, 84).

This point is crucial to the understanding of the cult film groups that are under investigation here. The idea that one may feel at home in a heterotopic space outside of one's own home is one which resonates throughout the interviews with

organisers and audiences of cult film in Australia. This point also connects with the concepts which will be raised in the final chapter about nostalgia and the idea of belonging. In line with Jancovich's arguments about cult film existing only in opposition to 'mainstream' viewing practices, Johnson notes that: "There is no pure form of heterotopia, but different combinations, each reverberating with all the others. In a sense, they do not fully function except in relation to each other" (2006, 84). Indeed, the practices of cult viewing gain meaning by existing in opposition to the established audience behaviours at the multiplex.

By applying the concept of heterotopia to the research findings, we can conceptualise the influential roles that the organisers and audiences play in developing a desire for other spaces. These alternative sites of consumption and interaction are marked as distinct from 'mainstream' forms of viewing – because they allow a type of 'other' practice. Thus, heterotopia is a useful term because it explains the 'otherness' of cult viewing in a way that other theoretical frameworks do not. Ultimately, it is my intention to show how the cult screenings take place in a unique space, where a unique set of practices can occur.

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This chapter has introduced the voices of cult film organisers and participants into the discourse of cult film fandom. By including the voices of those most important to the designation of a film as 'cult', several themes emerged. Firstly, audience participation is heavily influenced by the organisers as 'opinion leaders' who mould opinion – by leading the way in talking back to the film, and taking part in other activities, the audience is empowered to indulge in behaviours which are not sanctioned in other viewing scenarios. A sense of nostalgia can be observed in the high level of participation during films of the 1980s and early 1990s – the eras in which many audience members were in their youth. The cult film audiences surveyed were also much more supportive of Australian films than the popular media and box office takings would have one believe. This finding emerged at the screening of Australian 'cult classic' *Wake in Fright*. The audience was so enamoured with this film which was, until recently, considered lost, that they

suggested greater opportunities for screening Australian ‘classics’ was needed, and space should be created for screenings of this type. This led to one of the main reasons for audience attendance, which was the belief that without cult screening nights, lost films such as *Wake in Fright* would not be shown; their enthusiasm for such rare screenings was illustrated in their continuing attendance. In keeping with the literature on cult film fandom, word of mouth spread is still the best way of discovering cult screenings, only now technology plays a role in promoting the events through outlets such as email, Facebook and Twitter.

Another significant finding was the influence of screening location on audience behaviour, considering that film viewing can also be considered a ‘consumption of space’. Despite attempts by commercial cinemas to replicate the comforts of home through Gold Class cinemas and other initiatives emphasising comfort, there is still a level of formality and various regulations that are not present at cult film screenings. Cult viewing seems to fracture the relationship between public and private – in screening in alternate locations audiences can enjoy the social benefits of public screenings, while behaving as if they were at home.

The most revealing aspect of the surveys and interviews was the reasons given for attendance at cult film screenings, considering there are so many other options available for film viewing. Cult film screenings provide a valuable alternative to the multiplex, and perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents expressed strong views about the difference between the two types of experience. Most responses focused on the benefits of attending cult screenings particular in terms of socialising and feeling like part of a group or community. This sense of belonging is important to continued attendance and involvement, and to understanding how cult film fandom is integrated within the everyday lives of fans – a ‘living community’ emerges from the initial shared interest in cult film. Audience members stated that attending cult screenings is more than ‘just’ an activity for them – this finding speaks to theories of identity and belonging to a group. Regular attendees are deeply invested in the screenings and the ideals behind them such as preserving Australian film culture

and footage, creating a welcoming space for people to view lost film, and nostalgia for a sense of belonging, leading to a formation of an active community of support for screenings and other activities such as filming their own features, craft groups, discos and other everyday activities.

Chapter Seven further illustrates the consensus amongst interview candidates in both Sydney and Melbourne that involvement in cult screenings, and activities with group members (such as craft and discos) leads to a nostalgia, or longing for community (and in turn, home) which is absent from other forms of film exhibition.

## **Chapter Seven – Cult, Community and Nostalgia**

“... cult movie viewership practices construct communities of admirers that connect people in intimate ways and provide ‘renewable sources of delight’” (Minor, 1995,16).

This chapter brings together the recurring themes that have emerged from the data gathered from Australian organisers and audiences of cult film – that is, the idea of cult groups as a form of community, and the feeling of nostalgia or longing for films, objects and activities of the past. In exploring these themes, it is apparent that cult film screenings occupy a unique position between the private and the public; in a heterotopic space. Cult screenings also seem to exist between the past – and the future. This strange position between past and present is illustrated by the fact that films often take time to mature into 'cult' films. Screenings make frequent use of 'old' technology such as film and video; and the figures from the past such as Ed Wood and Bettie Page are admired, whilst simultaneously new media is used to access cult films, and to spread the reach of these cult films and objects. By examining interview and survey materials, this chapter will expand upon how cult films are viewed, valued and enjoyed by cult film fans and how the formation of cult fan communities articulates both a nostalgic yearning for the past, and a way to express one's identity into the future.

### **7.1 Cult film and nostalgia**

This section of the chapter focuses on nostalgia and how it impacts upon cult fandom and screenings. The previous chapter dealt with how organisers of cult screenings create 'other spaces' where lost films, audience participation and other practices unique to these groups, are valued. Here I propose that the creation of other spaces is closely linked to nostalgia, or longing for a sense of home, and that this type of longing is connected to the desire to create a sense of community among audience members, which is discussed later in this chapter. In order to make the connection between cult film fans, nostalgia and longing, we must first discuss the use of the term 'nostalgia' in this context. Urban suggests that the

modern usage of nostalgia is one where memories are reflected upon as pure and idealised, and as such, the resultant sense of longing is for an inaccurate depiction of the past (2007, 325). Throughout this chapter other interpretations of the term 'nostalgia' will be investigated to further understand its application to studies of cult film fans.

Nostalgia as a term has its origins in seventeenth century medicine, when medical student Johannes Hofer coined the term: "to describe a pathological homesickness" (DeFalco, 2004, 27). Although nostalgia is no longer thought of as a medical term, the connections with the idea of home and longing persist. As DeFalco states:

Nostalgia (from [the Greek word] *nostos*- return home, and *algia*- longing) is a longing for home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement ... the evolution of the term to its current meaning of a more general 'longing for the conditions of a past age' ... that is, the nostalgic object's shift from place to time – make the object of desire irrecoverable, producing an inevitably frustrated longing (2004, 27).

For the interview candidates in my study, the desire to collect films from the past and gain a wider audience for these texts is tied to feelings of longing and nostalgia. As discussed in chapter five, many of the organisers want to recreate the old fashioned notion of a 'complete night of entertainment' that was popularised during the peak of the drive-in cinema. Many of the organisers have nostalgic feelings towards the film viewing of their past, and long to incorporate these viewing practices into the current audience paradigm. Events such as the double feature illustrate a desire to recreate childhood memories of Sunday afternoon matinees through screenings of their own (such as double feature screenings organised by Jay Katz and Miss Death which took place at the Chauvel Cinema during 2007). Jay Katz speaks of his frustration as a teenager that the matinee programs he had so relished as a child had disappeared. This sense of loss drives his wish to bring back a full program of entertainment to the public. Being unable to

purchase their own cinema, he and Miss Death decided the best way to keep this tradition alive was to conduct screenings in their own home. To open up one's private space in this way is no small task. As these types of responses indicate, a feeling of nostalgia, and regret that the film going practices of the past have been lost, are a powerful motivator for people to begin their own screenings.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, for cult organisers there is a relationship between lost films and lost technology – there is a feeling that both are worthy of a 'second life' (Telotte, 1991) and need simply to be exposed to an audience. Likewise, in his discussion of the growth of alternative film screenings in Melbourne, Rainforth mentions that: "Leaping obsolete technological barriers to preserve and screen what might otherwise be lost is a recurrent motif amongst these cinephiles" (2008, 1), suggesting a nostalgia not only for lost films, but technology of the past. Cult screenings represent an opportunity not only to screen and celebrate the films of the past, but also the technology (16mm film and projectors, Scopitone jukebox video clips, and videos) and film experiences of the past – such as double or triple features, late night screenings, and a 'full night of entertainment' with shorts, previews of future films to be screened and cartoons shown before the feature. For organisers of cult screenings, who are also often collectors, the screenings differ from other forms of alternative film exhibition in their personalised aspect.

The nostalgia for eras gone by is evident in the collections, and style of both cult film organisers and fans. At the Mu-meson Archives, evidence of this collecting is visible throughout the screening area, where Jay Katz and Miss Death display and store thousands of reels of 16mm film, film projectors, books and other items such as collectable cards and figurines of icons of the past, particularly pin-up girls such as Bettie Page, Lili St. Cyr, Gypsy Lee Rose and Tempest Storm. A preoccupation with the past is also visible in the way members of the group dress. This trend is

noticeable among the eclectic cult audience at the Annandale, but was also observed at the Fitzroy group. Many of the women participants at Annandale favour vintage clothing particularly of the 1950s and 1960s. In personal communications with myself, they describe both their work in fashion, or interest in fashions of this era, and attendance at some of vintage clothing fairs that take place in Sydney – in particular the ‘Fifties Fair’ held annually at Rose Seider House in Sydney – a heritage home which still has all of its original features and appliances from the 1950s. Both genders sport ‘classic’ and ‘old school’ tattoos, designs which were popularised during the 1920s through to the 1940s by artists such as Sailor Jerry, and brought to modern prominence by his protégé Ed Hardy. Popular motifs include anchors, ships, eagles, pin-up girls, swallows and hearts (Sailor Jerry, 2013).

Many other trends of the 1950s and 60s are popular with members of the Annandale group, both at screenings and in everyday life, such as vintage makeup (winged eye-liner, red lipstick, false eyelashes) and hair (beehives, blunt fringes and bandana head scarves; quiffs and large sideburns for men), and hobbies such as swing dancing, burlesque and pin up girl competitions. Whilst these clothing styles and activities are popular with many people, not just cult film fans, it is intriguing that these styles associated with a sense of nostalgia are visible in a group which exhibits a nostalgia for the film viewing practices of the past. The visual styles displayed amongst the audience (tattoos, vintage hairstyles and fashion) coupled with the admiration of the pinup girls appearing in cult films, reflect films of the period of production such as *Son of Sinbad* (1955), *Varietease* (1954) and *Teaserama* (1955).

Organising cult film screenings and other social activities have a link not only to nostalgic longings for the film-going of the past, but may also be interpreted as a



longing for a type of home or belonging. Seiden suggests that the longing for home is a longing: "... to repair two kinds of separations – one in place, one in time. A home lost to time is no longer there and cannot be" (2009, 195). It would seem, then, that the longing for home is also a longing for an 'other place' – for an idealised, or 'imaginary place' that exists only in the past, at a specific moment in time. For Seiden, no word other than 'home' is capable of catching the: "... associations, the mixture of memory and longing, the sense of security and autonomy and accessibility, the aroma of inclusiveness, of freedom from wariness ... Home is a concept, not a place; it is a state of mind where self definition starts" (2009, 191). By presenting screenings in their home, I would suggest that Jay Katz and Miss Death are providing not only 'another space' or heterotopia as Foucault suggests, but another kind of home for the audience. Here, their audience is able to enjoy the comforts of home, with the benefits of socialising with a like-minded group which in turn leads to a feeling of community.

Pickering and Keightley (2006) propose an articulation of nostalgia that is applicable to the study of nostalgia within cult film groups. Whilst the authors suggest that a condition of modernity is a feeling of loss, and therefore, nostalgia, it is their contention that nostalgia should be:

... reconfigure [d] ... in terms of a distinction between the desire to return to an earlier state or idealised past, and the desire not to return but to recognise aspects of the past as a basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future (Pickering and Keightley, 2006, 921).

Thus we could interpret feelings of nostalgia amongst cult groups in this fashion, as this form of nostalgia draws upon the beneficial aspects of the past and configures them to meet the needs of the self or the group in the present. For cult groups: Nostalgia may also be seen as seeking a viable alternative to the acceleration of historical time, one that attempts a dialogue with the past and recognises the value of continuities in counterpart to what is fleeting, transitory and contingent (Pickering and Keightley, 2006, 923).

The established pattern of activities at the same time and venue each week can be said to provide a touchstone, or a type of home for members of cult film groups who may not experience this sense of belonging outside of the fan group.

Organisers and audience members in Australia suggest that cult screenings have become politicised as an act, because attendance can act as a small token of rebellion in opposition to consumer/throwaway culture (i.e.: using media which has been discarded, such as 16mm film, in favour of DVD). This fits with observations made by other studies such as that of Jenkins (1992), in which fandom may constitute an alternative social community that critiques conventional forms of consumer culture. In addition to the cult film screenings, Jay Katz and Miss Death also organise other innocuous looking activities such as the monthly craft group, art exhibitions utilising recycled materials and a monthly nightclub that plays music from the 1960s and 70s with accompanying go-go dancers. For the organisers, these events serve a similar purpose to the screenings; as a way of organising a taste community around their own favoured activities. In discussing a renewed interest in knitting, Professor David Gauntlett states that: “Nowadays people feel a growing need to be creators of things, not just consumers” (Lewis, 2011). In an interview about the politics of craft, Miss Death:

... attributes the new interest in traditional crafts to a renewed environmental awareness and a reaction to the throwaway culture. [She says] 'Everything is so manufactured now and things fall apart. Before, we used to make everything ... it's so impersonal now – it's not made by your grandma, you just go out and buy it (Shanahan, 2008, 28).

Cult film groups serve to elevate activities (such as go-go dancing and knitting) and technology (16mm film, vinyl records) which have been abandoned by society at large. The organisation of a monthly craft group thus represents a desire for time set aside to catch up with friends, and to create something lasting, as a form of consumer resistance. As several sources suggest (Bauman, 2001; Delanty, 2003),

community itself is a nostalgic concept, based on romantic ideas of a lost utopia or a time where society was more cohesive and connected.

The nostalgic tendency of cult audiences is reflected upon by Mathijs and Mendik who suggest: "... a core feature of many cult films is their ability to trigger a sense of nostalgia, a yearning for an idealised past. The nostalgia can be part of the film's story ... But most likely it is an emotional impression" (2008, 3). It seems that cult film groups, as well as activities such as the knitting group and discos established by cult film organisers are part of a broader trend towards valuing the past.

Bauman's (2001) suggests that jarring world events such as 9/11, and the growth of interest in green products and the slow food movement intersects with a desire for a simpler time, or an 'idealised past'. Kasriel reflects on this trend, by identifying how: "... consumers are using modern tools [such as the internet] to look up the old wisdom. There is a resurfacing consumer respect for things past and the wisdom of older generations" (Kasriel, 2007). Ironically, the growing worldwide interest in knitting has been fuelled by the ease of access to patterns and tutorials enabled by the Internet, as Puxley (2012) suggests. In surveys conducted by The Craft Yarn Council of America it was found that there had been a growth of 150% between 2002-2004 in knitters aged 25-34, due in part to the ease of accessing information online. Members of Miss Death's knitting group thus display the articulation of old and new by searching for patterns online, before bringing them to the group for further discussion and assistance in construction.

Despite the usefulness of the digital media, Steiner (2007) considers such retro activities constitute a backlash against the constant bombardment of information in favour of 'analogue living'. This view is supported by Paiement (2006) who has blogged about the growth of 'geriatric hip', with Generation Y taking up activities such as lawn bowls and baking with gusto. Research in the United Kingdom has

shown a considerable interest in home baking, with the purchase of baking supplies such as pastry, experiencing a 25% growth in 2006. This growth has been attributed to:

... a certain nostalgia and sentiment associated with home baking, as it is something people remember from days gone by. The home baking sector has clearly experienced something of a revival, despite the image of 21st Century consumers being time-pressed, convenience food devotees (MINTEL Research, 2006).

A poll conducted in the U.K, coinciding with National Baking Week 2011 showed that 16-24 year olds: "... are six times more likely to bake something from scratch every day compared with any other age group" (Paxman, 2011). This trend has been attributed to the dual influence of high profile television chefs such as Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson; as well as a desire to save money and to know where food has come from by making it from scratch. This suggests that people are interested in reviving the traditions of the past and in the absence of the skills and knowledge passed down from family members, are using modern technology to access these.

Novel ways of reducing a reliance on excessive consumption are also demonstrated on a small scale by the Annandale cult film group. As an additional activity Miss Death began her own craft group, known as Miss Death's Stitch and Bitch, which began in 2002. The idea behind the group was to have a set time and place, at least once a month, where initially just friends but gradually film audience members as well could come together and catch up over a cup of tea. It also served as an opportunity for people to exchange skills, as patrons often asked Miss Death (who knits throughout all of the cult screenings) about learning to knit. Despite the name, knitting is not the sole craft conducted in the group – a diverse range of craft activities takes place including cross stitch, sculpting, painting, sewing, pattern-making and beading. Initially the group consisted of just (female)

friends of Miss Death by invitation, but the event is now on the monthly program of cult film screenings and the Mu-meson Archives website and is open to all.

Miss Death's Stitch and Bitch has its own routine, distinct from cult film screenings. Typically around twenty crafters will attend, but this number fluctuates, and includes women, men and children of attendees. As there is a greater opportunity for conversation (there is no screening to compete with), Stitch and Bitch offers more personal engagement in the lives of others. Information of all kinds is exchanged (from craft patterns, job offers, upcoming events and personal advice); help is offered (to move house, watch uncut film projects, baby-sit children, organise weddings); and skills are pooled (craft assistance is readily available at the group and other outside expertise often leads to the exchanging of phone numbers). Stitch and Bitch frequently runs longer than its two hour duration, with people coming and going throughout – it has often been the case that five hours passes before the last group member leaves. The idea of coming together as a group and creating garments that will last was characterised by Miss Death (in Shanahan, 2008) in terms of politicising craft as a response to excessive consumption of clothing from questionable origins. In addition to offering a way to express a desire to create rather than consume, Miss Death's knitting group is more about the articulation of traditional knowledge, and a sharing of skills, as well as a desire to create space for community events.

The emergence of the 'Stitch 'n Bitch' craft movement worldwide provides a framework for understanding the importance of craft events in people's lives.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Stitch 'N Bitch* is the name of a popular knitting book released in 2003; its author, Debbie Stoller began a knitting group of the same name in 2000 to share her love of knitting with others. Since this time, knitting groups describing themselves as 'Stitch and Bitch' groups have sprung up world wide, many of them utilising the Internet as a means to organise their groups. A web search for 'Stitch and Bitch' suggests that the phrase has been in circulation in reference to knitting/craft groups since the 1980s, although social craft groups have been recorded since the 1940s.

Minahan and Wolfram Cox (2007) reflect on nostalgia for traditional crafts not only as a response to global events, but also in terms of the growth of information technology. Firstly, for the groups they study, the use of this technology is vital in order to: "... develop their craft and life experiences in general" (7) and reflects a move:

towards a community focus that will build, not reduce, social capital. It is proposed that Stitch 'n Bitch reflects a wish for more self-expression of creativity and social connection at a community level through leisure (Minahan and Wolfram Cox, 2007, 8).

Secondly, whilst Stitch 'n Bitch is characterised as a "unique, cyber feminist phenomenon", Minahan and Wolfram Cox identify several trends relevant to the experience of cult film audiences and the creation of craft groups. They discuss how, in the craft groups they studied, women gather in a 'third place' away from the home or employment, and that: "... this place may often be the local pub, traditionally a bastion of masculinity" (2007, 10). They also identify a theme of resistance, in that they view the Stitch 'n Bitch movement as:

... using craft as a subversive vehicle for comment on gender as well as on the increasing commodification of society and technology. ... Globalisation, global fashion and mass production of apparel may be causes for protest for some groups, whose local production of single pieces of unbranded knitwear may be a small effort to refute the ubiquity of the Nike sweatshirt (Minahan and Wolfram Cox, 2007, 11).

This type of resistance is also relevant to cult film groups for their attempts to provide an alternative to mainstream screenings in which films are the commodity, by gathering in a 'third place' – at the pub or the Mu-meson Archives. By gathering in a place outside of their own homes, a type of heterotopic space is enacted where these activities can be conducted.

Drawing from other studies, Minahan and Cox comment on the restorative function of craft, suggesting that:

... Stitch'n Bitch may be understood as a nostalgic, conservative response to a world no longer present ... there is evidence of a nostalgia for an idealised past when people belonged to a harmonious community and spent time chatting with friends and neighbours (2007, 14).

While those attending Miss Death's group do value time chatting with friends during the gathering (based on personal communication), to reduce this activity to the suggestion that: "... that crafting is a conservative response to a world no longer present" (Minahan and Wolfram Cox, 2007), seems a little reductive. This is the case both in terms of the political awareness they suggested earlier in the article (knitting as a response to consumerism), and the behaviours observed at Miss Death's craft group which articulate the past with the present. This articulation can be seen in behaviours such as combining the Internet with real life tutorials on crafts (where crafters look up new skills on YouTube, then get real life assistance at Stitch and Bitch), to gathering support for various community (such as fundraisers for Reverse Garbage and TAFE) and personal ventures (such as art exhibitions, and live performances). For Miss Death's group, although nostalgia for a harmonious community was evident (and in fact mentioned as a reason for organising the group), the group does not idealise the past. For the Annandale craft group, Pickering and Keightley's (2006) description of nostalgia is more apt, as it represents a way of recreating the benefits of the past, whilst articulating these with the benefits of the modern (such as technology). In describing the activities of the Annandale craft group, whilst a sense of longing for certain elements of the past remains, this community is created through an articulation of past and present is achieved.

Analysis of online craft communities reveals many similarities in the way they operate, and share a sense of belonging. Russ (2008) has discussed the close bonds amongst virtual craft participants in terms of dialogue. For her:

...dialogue is not something *we do* or *use*; it is a relation that *we enter* into. Conversation, or merely talking with another individual, does not make a dialogue. Whilst conversation is an inherent part of dialogue, individuals participating in dialogue engage with each other at a higher emotional and interpersonal level than that which occurs in everyday talk (original emphasis, 99 – 100).

By examining the exchanges on the craftster.org website, Russ identifies four additional requirements for the online community to continue. These are: 1) Identity – where dialogue, that occurs when we allow our whole selves to be in the moment with each other, helps develop one's sense of self or identity (2008, 101). 2) Participation – “... for dialogue to occur there must be *participation*, or opportunities for engagement” (original emphasis, Russ, 2008, 102).

3) Commitment – Russ explains that:

The rule of commitment concerns the pursuit of intersubjective understanding, which may or may not result in agreement. When commitment occurs in dialogue, each individual joins with the other without losing any aspect of her individual self. To be successful, commitment must be threefold – to the dialogue, to the other and to the self (2008, 104-5).

And finally 4) Reciprocity – which must be present for a successful dialogue: “Since dialogue occurs in relation to another, it must occur with a sense of reciprocity, or a spirit of mutual respect and concern and must not take for granted roles of privilege or expertise” (2008, 106).

The four requirements that Russ identifies are illustrated in the activities of both Miss Death's craft group, and in the cult film group. Firstly, identity is of great significance to these groups, as it relates to cult fandom in terms of identity formation, where interactions with the group members help reinforce feelings of belonging that are not felt outside of the group, and dialogue is certainly a part of this. Secondly, in terms of participation, as this thesis has argued, participation and activity amongst cult film audiences is one of the key differences from other forms of cinematic fandom. The participation of group members is vital to the experience of viewing cult films with an audience, and leads to a sense of belonging and community, where the input of each member is valued. The dialogue that occurs among the cult fans observed shares the traits as put forth by Russ. Whilst passionate discussions, and sometimes disagreements occur, each member's individuality is respected, as everyone is allowed an opinion and a voice. The success of the group depends on the ability of its members to feel free to carry out



and have a commitment to creating a dialogue regarding cult film. Finally, despite the organisers of cult groups occupying the role of 'opinion leaders' in selecting the films to be screened and influencing the discussion of them by participants, the spirit of reciprocity to which Russ refers is present in the Stitch and Bitch collective through the sharing of knowledge and materials, such as DVDs, videos etc. It is clearly apparent that reciprocity exists at the monthly craft group in which information, skills and assistance are readily exchanged. Although Russ' study describe online craft groups, and these traits apply to Miss Death's Stitch and Bitch, they also provide a framework through which the behaviours observed at cult film night can be interpreted.

Using Russ' framework, it is possible to view the Annandale cult film and Stitch and Bitch groups as operating as a community in miniature – an unexpected finding considering the prior research into cult film fandom, depicting these groups as competitive and closed to outsiders.

## **7.2 Defining community**

The range of meanings that the term 'community' encompasses is diverse. For Delanty, the enduring appeal of community is: "...related to the search for belonging in the insecure conditions of modernity" (2003, 1-2). For him, a great many factors have influenced the development in thinking around community, particularly globalisation. Bauman also believes globalisation has created a greater desire for community, and he refers to community as a kind of 'paradise lost' – an idea or a kind of world which is for him, lost, and for which people yearn (2001, 3). This type of argument is closely linked to the concept of nostalgia for an idealised past, which is brought on by a desire for safety in an insecure world.

Addressing the broad range of representations community includes, Delanty acknowledges that expressions of community can vary: "... from alternative and

utopian communities to traditional villages and urban localities in industrial cities to transnational diasporas and virtual communities." (2). Delanty suggests that:

... a closer look reveals that the term *community* does in fact designate both an idea about belonging and a particular social phenomenon, such as expressions for longing for community, the search for meaning and solidarity, and collective identities. In other words, community has a variable nature and simply cannot be equated with particular groups or a place. Nor can it be reduced to an idea, for ideas do not simply exist outside social relations, socially structured discourses and a historical milieu (Delanty, 2003, 3).

This definition of community speaks to several key themes emerging from discussion from cult organisers and audiences; specifically the link between community, belonging and identity. Delanty also offers four approaches that one can adopt toward community. It is the second approach, which he describes as being characteristic of cultural sociology and anthropology that is most applicable to the cult film groups studied here. This approach depicts community as: "... the search for belonging and where the emphasis is on cultural issues of identity. In this approach, the emphasis is on community as self versus other" (2003, 3-4). In this effort to further describe community, Delanty's argument drives home the central thesis that he and Bauman (2001) share; that is, community is often imbricated in the notion of a utopian, traditional past which members of contemporary society seek to reclaim.

Finally, Delanty's (2003) discussion of community in terms of modernity speaks to several tendencies witnessed amongst cult film groups. For him, "...the modern discourse of community has been dominated by a theme of loss" (15). This feeling of loss can lead to feelings of nostalgia for that which is perceived as lost. Thus, he contends that:

The revival of community today is undoubtedly connected with the crisis of belonging in relation to place. Globalised communications, cosmopolitan political projects and transnational mobilities have given new possibilities to community at precisely the same time that capitalism has undermined the traditional forms of belonging. But these new kinds of community – which in effect are reflexively organised social networks of individual members - have not been able to substitute anything for place, other than the aspiration for belonging. Whether community can establish a connection with place, or

remain an imagined condition, will be an important topic for community research in the future (Delanty, 2003, 193).

While this thesis is concerned with place-based cult communities, it is important to consider how virtual communities impact upon the discourse of how people relate. Delanty's discussion of whether virtual communities can overcome the desire for belonging despite their lack of place based affiliation is an important part of this discussion, although it is his argument regarding the revival of community that is of most relevance to the cult film audiences in question. It seems possible to contend that a resurgence of interest in community by these cult groups coincides with a perceived crisis or lack in wider society. While space constraints do not allow for a rigorous examination of this contention regarding the desire for community, this is certainly an area that requires further research.

The designation of 'community' as an extinct form of utopia has led to its use within several branches of cultural studies. Studies of fan groups, in particular, have often applied the terms 'imagined community' and interpretive community, in references to the activities of these groups. Anderson (1983) coined the term 'imagined community' in relation to national identity, which he viewed as a construct. In terms of an imagined community, Anderson's term is useful in describing the idea of unity and feeling of belonging amongst those who have never met. The imagined community might also be described as a type of 'idealised' model of belonging – that is, this type of model can be tied to feelings of nostalgia that are present amongst the cult groups in question.

The idea of an 'interpretive community' is often applied to groups sharing distinct tastes and readings of particular texts. Both Costello and Moore (2007) and Carragee (1990) discuss the social nature of the interpretive community and how the members of said communities share: "...common traits like similar uses of media, similar practices, shared meanings and interaction about the texts" (Costello and Moore, 2007, 126). By assessing varied theoretical stances in

regards to community, we are able to gain a greater understanding of what it is that cult film groups mean to audiences.

### **7.3 Moving community research forward**

In order to understand cult film groups as a type of community, several key factors attributed to community groups will be examined – again, the Annandale group is used as the primary example, as most time was spent with this group.

#### **a) How people join**

As cult groups are not formal, and for the most part do not charge a joining fee, joining the cult groups studied is achieved simply by attending. Attendance is open to anyone. Despite the lack of barriers to attendance, attending the screening group is limited to a physical location, although the groups maintain an online presence. Frequent attendance of the screenings and other activities, such as trivia nights, craft group and Sounds of Seduction nightclub lead to the feeling of a community of practice – as the level of involvement in activities increases, thus the opportunity for engagement between members increases.

#### **b) Behaviours**

The behaviours of the group tend to vary slightly according to the activity. In cult screening situations, group members will sit together and converse before, during and after the film. They may have a meal together at the Thai restaurant at the rear of the Annandale Hotel prior to the film's screening in the band room. At the conclusion of the evening, group members may make plans to meet at one of the other weekly screenings/activities, or privately. Arrangements may also be made to swap or exchange films or other materials. Group members may then travel to their homes together on public transport, or carpool in private vehicles. At screenings and other activities which take place at the Mu-meson Archives, one is more likely to observe a fan community as Thompson (1995) has described, as regular

attendees are more likely to frequent these events. Due to the familiarity which exists between members, one is more likely to witness a: "... consciousness of group attachment to one another" (Adams and Smith, 2008, 16).

#### c) How Interactions are Moderated/Regulated

As suggested by Russ' (2008) discussion of craft groups, interaction amongst the Annandale cult film group also occurs in an environment of participation and reciprocity, where the voices of each member can be heard. In heated or enthusiastic discussions, the organisers will act as moderators to allow audience members to voice their opinion. In terms of the interaction, regulations are few, and apply mostly when the group activity (screenings, discos, exhibitions) is occurring at a venue away from the home of the organisers (Mu-meson Archives). In these cases, common sense rules apply where damage to property must not occur. Aside from the obvious, only behaviours which may impinge upon the safety or enjoyment of other patrons are regulated (i.e. Do not sit on the stairs, do not block the screen, but talking during the film is welcomed, if not encouraged).

#### d) Exit conditions

Being an informal group, with no strict membership, there are no exit conditions; one simply stops attending the group. In the event that members move away, or overseas, they are able to keep in touch via email or social networking pages (Facebook). From participant observation, amongst the core group of 20-30 regular audience members at the Annandale and Mu-meson Archives, people tend to stay in the group – of this core group of 20-30 are the same members who were attending when I began preliminary research in 2003. From these specific group features we can conclude that cult film groups form a community in miniature with their own specific behaviours which are closely related to the space in which they

occur. One could also suggest that a strong sense of belonging can account for the low turnover amongst group members.

Recent research on community has recognised other ways in which communities are formed, in contrast to the traditional views of Delanty and Bauman. Rheingold (1995), Adams and Smith (2008) and Brydon and Coleman (2008) all unpack the concept of community in terms of whether it is place-based or virtual. Although the cult film groups studied for this thesis are place based, it is important to acknowledge the growing importance of virtual communities, especially in terms of fan activities. Virtual communities can help overcome the isolation felt by fans whose interests are not shared or understood by those around them – this was illustrated throughout the documentary on Bronies as discussed in chapter two. Traditional place-based understandings of community can be broken into several components. Firstly, that the sense of 'belonging' attributed to community is possible despite distance. As research on virtual communities highlights, a feeling of belonging to a community is no longer restricted to geographical closeness. Technological developments, particularly those surrounding the increased use of the Internet, have resulted in the proliferation of research on the virtual community. Of this research, Rheingold's (1995) study represented the first significant inquiry into the ways that relationships and networks of people were created online.

Rheingold's study focuses on his participation on the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) message boards and the witnessing of its growth from a few hundred members, to thousands. His study is relevant as his participation and observations in many ways echo the experiences I have had whilst researching this thesis. For him:

The WELL felt like an authentic community to me from the start because it was grounded in my everyday physical world. By now I've attended real life WELL marriages, births and even a WELL funeral. ... One of the explanations for this phenomenon is the hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives ... the future of the Net is connected

to the future of community (Rheingold, 1995, 2-6).

This point effectively illustrates how a feeling of belonging to a community is no longer reliant upon physical occupation of the same locality. As my research responses suggest, the hunger for community, which Rheingold outlines, is, in the case of cult film participants, also linked to nostalgia for a time when the kinds of events that enabled community participation were more visible. Such a nostalgic desire for community thus inspires them to create their own events for participants who share this desire. As Rheingold suggests, community also involves a strong emotional connection (1995, 15-16).

Although Rheingold's description of his experiences represents a rather romanticised view of community, it closely resembles my own experience at cult film screenings in Sydney. At the risk of appearing biased, I have witnessed and experienced first hand how people support and care for one another at the Annandale group. This support and care is evident in the degree of involvement group members have in each other's lives outside of screenings, such as attendance of weddings, christenings, birthdays and celebrations; offers of help when moving, house-sitting, during sickness or family trouble etc. Therefore, what began as a social night out often leads to undertakings that were not achievable on an individual level,

The second key point that arises in relation to the function of virtual community, which is relevant to the operation of cult film groups as communities, is how they are essential to the formation of individual identity. Research conducted by Adams and Smith (2008) focuses on creating a division between communities and 'tribes' in their effort to advance Rheingold's work on virtual communities. The key difference is size – they argue a tribe is smaller than a community, yet shares the need for belonging. Their research is enhanced by their reworking of Gusfield's (1978) work on 'consciousness of kind', which Adams and Smith suggest reinforces the affinity of the group:

Consciousness of kind is the proclivity for members of a close knit unit to

construct a consciousness of emotional attachment toward one another and a corresponding sense of group difference from others who are notionally located outside the orbit of the tribe (2008, 16-17).

‘Consciousness of kind’ is evident in the cult viewing experience because this is a form of community forged through shared tastes.

The growth of virtual communities illustrates the broad range of activities that come under the banner of ‘community’. The creation of a type of community by cult film groups in Melbourne and Sydney illustrates the point made by Davies and Herbert (1993) that suggests that ideas of community have developed from being place based to being a mixture of place and interest based. Whilst allegiance to place continues, local communities are now portrayed as a ‘haven’ against the dangers of big cities, and the term ‘community’ is being mobilised by those interested in ‘grass-roots’ action through citizens grouping together (Davies and Herbert, 1993, 28 – 29). The growth of activities such as community gardens in the inner city further illustrates this trend. In Melbourne, groups like Cultivating Community support the community gardens which operate in open areas of public housing estates in the inner city (Cultivating Community, 2009, 1). Russ Grayson from the Australian City Farms and Community Gardens Network believes the trend can be attributed in part to the social aspect of the gardens: “These gardens allow us to meet our neighbours, which all helps to make a person feel safer in, and more part of, their local community” (Connolly, 2009, 18). In terms of cult film groups, their screenings provide an opportunity to socialise in the safe ‘haven’ of a group with similar taste cultures, and to mobilise against the homogenous nature of entertainment/film screenings available in both Melbourne and Sydney.

The assertion made by organisers during the interviews that cult film fandom is a *shared* experience – is rarely touched upon in other studies of cult film. Cult fandom need not be a closed group that forms in response to rejection or ‘outsider’



status during one's youth, as discussed by organisers such as Katz and Leavold; instead, as they suggest, cult films can open a dialogue amongst audience members. Participation with the action on screen leads to engagement between members of the audience, thus connections are forged with strangers through the medium of cult film. From this participation it can be suggested that a type of 'interpretive community' is formed and as Staiger (2000) has described, a process of exchange begins – trading of films and other artefacts, and socialisation outside of the screenings. Whilst Weinstock (2007) expresses scepticism towards broad statements about the instant formation of cult film since they fail to take into consideration actual audience dynamics, Australian cult film organisers agree that community is at the heart of their screenings. Miss Death has spoken of the cult activities she helps organise in Sydney, insisting that: "... everything we do is about community" Miss Death explains that, as organisers, eventually they get to know the people who attend the events and hopefully [the audience members] begin to feel like they belong, suggesting Percival's findings that this was: "almost like creating a village in the middle of a very large city" (2007, 26).

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In conclusion, the rearticulation of cult groups as a type of community motivated by nostalgia represents a way forward for research into cult film and community. My experience of cult film groups in Australia is that they are all about the building of community, coupled with a nostalgia for 'home' leading to the creation of new 'homes', as well as the 'other spaces' of their cult viewing practices. In a way, it seems that the cult films are merely an entry point to something more – in the words of the Annandale organisers, it is not just about the films, but a desire to connect, to create a group, where before there was only solitary fandom.

## **Conclusion – Where Cult Meets Community**

“The research process never ends with the resolution of the research problem; every answer is always a partial answer, just part of the truth. Research never ends, but it has to be ended” (Alasuutari, 1995, 175).

This thesis has examined the social and cultural dynamics which pertain to the experience of cult film fandom in Australia. This has involved a review of the existing literature on cult film, particularly that which characterises cult films as a distinct genre. Initial research exposed gaps in the existing literature on cult film – in particular, the omission of the voices of cult film audiences – and specifically, Australian cult film audiences. Research conducted for this thesis revealed a focus on the sense of community felt amongst audience members that emerged from interviews with the varying stakeholders (organisers, audiences, filmmakers and curators) in Australian cult film groups. In essence, this development exemplifies O'Reilly's suggestion (2005, 84) that ethnographic research is the method through which: “...we learn about aspects of people's lives from their own perspective and within the context of their own lived experience”. By studying Australian cult film groups from within the context of their own lived experience, deep insight was gained into the significance of cult film in the everyday lives of fans. Information gathered from these key stakeholders reveals readings of the terms ‘cult’ and ‘community’ that are particular to these groups, and these point to the way in which the screen culture landscape is constantly evolving and has changed since the first studies of cult film were carried out. These findings suggest that there are several key themes that need to be rearticulated in order to move the study of cult film forward.

Just as screen culture is constantly evolving, so too the term ‘cult’ remains difficult to define in any definitive fashion. In its incarnation as the ‘midnight movie’, the term was used to denote films that were so strange that they had no audience at all. At a time when the word ‘cult’ was imbued with anxieties about alternative religions and lifestyles, there was no chance of mistaking these films for anything resembling ‘mainstream’ features. By screening them at midnight, these arguably misunderstood films were finally able to gain an audience, as most famously was

the case with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In contrast, today the term cult is used to distinguish certain films from the more mainstream fare – the term being used as a marker of ‘cool’. The media is thus complicit in labelling films by certain directors (such as Quentin Tarantino) as cult before their release, based on the previous works of those directors. Companies like Troma attempt to reproduce what I have called a ‘cult aesthetic’ by using familiar signifiers found in other cult films and articulating them in new ways. However, the increasing profile of ‘cult films’ in the wider community has a trickle down effect. For pub owners hoping to fill their venues on quiet weeknights, cult film screenings are a way to increase their profile in the local community – this is a way in which they can ensure a loyal patronage, even if the numbers are small.

However, all of these examples lessen the value of the term cult in the eyes of ‘true’ cult film fans. For those I interviewed, there was strong agreement that cult films could not be ‘made’, even if cult conventions were used. For cult organisers in particular, a period of maturation is necessary. This entails a period during which the film is typically ignored or rejected when it is first released, only to later gain a following among a devoted audience who indulge in repeat viewings and the recital of dialogue. As Leavold (2004) insists: “You cannot purposely create a cult film. If you try to stick to a formula it will fail – the kind of otherness that is truly cult cannot be replicated”. The greater use of the term ‘cult’ in the public domain thus raises the question about the future of cult films, given their value has been measured in the past in terms of scarcity. Technological advances have also meant that the search for rare films is easier than ever due to fast Internet downloads. Despite these changes, groups such as the Annandale and Screensect group continue, because the experience of watching a cult film with a group cannot be replicated.

The exhibition of cult films is the domain in which the most change has occurred. The loss of numerous independent, art house and repertory cinemas has led to organisers and fans of cult film to become more creative in ensuring the survival of cult screening nights. In many locations, cult and underground film festivals have

rapidly expanded in number to take the place of regular cinema screenings. Cult film nights are now often held outside of cinemas in alternative venues- pubs and bars being most popular – with the growth of micro-cinemas becoming a noticeable trend particularly in the U.S. and U.K. The screening of cult films in peoples' own homes also highlights the blurred line between public and private exhibition. The proliferation of home theatres illustrates this blurring. For example when neighbours are invited over to a home cinema, there are still rules – as Kendrick (2005) suggested of home cinema enthusiasts, cinema rules are observed right down to correct aspect ratios, so ingrained is the discourse of film viewing. Existing research such as that of Klinger (2006) has focused primarily on the private *or* public screening, rather than the heterotopic space created when cult film screenings are held in private homes and attended by audience members looking for a home away from home – for a sense of familiarity and comfort that is also a social experience.

For the cult film groups studied for this thesis, the idea of community was very closely tied to their activities as fans. This was an unexpected finding given that much of the literature on cult film fans emphasises the exclusionary nature of cult film fandom, in regards to both insider knowledge (Sconce, 1995; Jancovich, 2002), and according to gender (Hollows, 2003; Read, 2003). As established in Chapter Seven, Delanty (2003) states that the continuing appeal of 'community' is that it appeals to the need for belonging in a modernised and often impersonal society, and that the modern discourse of community has been dominated by a sense of loss. It is Delanty's depiction of the need for community that most closely resembles the desire for belonging present in the cult film groups studied here. Community takes on a greater importance for many of the stakeholders interviewed as they have been previously excluded on the basis of their fan tastes. For organisers such as Jay Katz and Miss Death, the obvious solution to their problem of finding groups and activities with similar tastes was to start their own cult film group, and share their film collection. They insist that their cult fandom, and the community they have created is a 'shared experience' – that: "everything

we do is about community” (2007) – a point scarcely mentioned in cult film literature in which the idea typically refers to online communities rather than those which are location based (see Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, 19-22). Other cult organisers such as Leavold (2004) reinforced the significance of creating a community, arguing that there is no point in having a collection if it is not shared, and that sharing was the quickest path towards creating a community of like-minded people. The idea of Australian cult organisers sharing their collections is thus in contrast to the style of cult fandom to which Sconce (1995) refers, where individual collections are to be closely guarded, and used as a marker of status and rank within fan circles.

In the case of the Annandale group, the creation of a cult community is an attempt to redress the feeling of loss to which Delanty (2003) refers – for Miss Death, organising a craft afternoon once a month is another way to recapture a moment where friends had the time to catch up regularly for afternoon tea and conversation. She reasons that increased working hours have left people feeling disconnected, and by creating the opportunity of a particular time and place, people can drop in and catch up. The Annandale group also acknowledges that their screenings provide a sense of home for their audience members – being located in the inner city, the screenings offer an opportunity to feel connected with like-minded people and to feel a sense of belonging. The type of hub that is created by having regular screenings and events also suggests nostalgia for a time when people were imagined to be more connected with one another: when going to the movies involved a ‘full night of entertainment’ such as that experienced in the drive-in cinemas of the past.

This thesis has highlighted a need for policy makers to have a serious rethink about the issue of screen culture. The participants in this survey, as well as writers such as Riviera (2009), Sargeant (2010) and Kaufman (2010), all speak of the urgent need to foster a sense of screen culture in Australia, particularly in the form of dedicated spaces where film can be appreciated and engaged with, such as

ACMI in Melbourne. Of particular concern is the lack of alternative venues outside of the multiplex for the screening of non-mainstream features, particularly in Sydney. It is this lack of space that has led to cult film organisers screening films from home, and in other spaces outside of the cinema, such as pubs. As revealed in this thesis, the cult film audiences who were surveyed want to support Australian films, but they feel there is a lack of diversity, and a lack of support for first time filmmakers. The growing number of film festivals, in particular underground and alternative festivals around the country, proves that there is a large pool of filmmakers without distribution channels to have their works shown. Interviews with cult film organisers show clearly that they themselves are often filmmakers who initiate festivals as a way of venting their frustration with a lack of opportunities to screen their work, and to offer other filmmakers a forum to show their work to audiences. Clearly, this screen culture must be acknowledged so we do not risk losing another generation of alternative films due to disrepair, as was the case with *Wake in Fright*, a film which was lost for over 30 years before being remastered onto DVD. By fostering a healthy screen culture and enabling more diverse venues for screening a wide variety of films, audiences will have more opportunity to encounter a broader range of films than those which appear at the local multiplex.

The lack of space for screenings leads to a final point that policy makers need to rethink, and that is the re-use of space. Particularly within the inner city, there is a trend towards the local, the live and the 'authentic' (e.g.: the increasing popularity of farmer's markets and the slow food movement) as suggested by Alfrey (2010) and Weiss (2012). This has culminated in the reclamation of urban spaces for uses other than that originally intended. As part of plans for a makeover of drinking venues, Sydney has in recent years encouraged the growth of 'small bars'. For example the *MX Sydney* newspaper reported on the during the week beginning May 6 in 2013 that negotiations were underway with the local council for a small bar to open in an unused four-space parking garage in Clarence Street in the city. This is an example of a government attempt to initiate the re-use of space. However, as case of the Annandale Hotel proves in relation to its initiatives

regarding live music and alternative uses of the venue (cult movie night and pub markets to name a few) which (until recently) was opposed by local government, it seems appropriate to suggest that the use of public space is best managed without micro-management from government. Instead it might best be left in the hands of the people who are directly engaged with the local community.

The example of reusing alternative spaces, and institutionalising this process links back to an earlier point about the practice of viewing cult film – just how fragile and unstable it is. If you put too much pressure on it, or attempt to commercialise and market it, it loses any cache or value it might once have had. The challenges faced by Australian cult film organisers can thus be compared to the local independent music scene, where there is an ongoing struggle between remaining creative, staying true to your ideals and operating outside of the ‘system’ (supporting live music instead of installing poker machines) or operating within the system and making enough money to live. The case of the Annandale Hotel closure and subsequent change of policy by local council discussed earlier speaks to this conundrum – of being caught in a ‘Venus fly trap’ of economics, trying to balance ideals and commitment to the local community with the struggle to earn enough money to survive. This struggle is a constant for cult film organisers.

Finally, what emerges from this thesis is a sense of longing. This takes two forms: a longing for space and a longing for the past. In terms of space, this is both physical and metaphorical. Physically it involves a place to screen and watch cult films. Metaphorically it entails the space for a greater diversity of the kinds of films which are screened in public. Chapter Six discussed the way in which cult film groups utilise places which are not usually associated with film (i.e.: pubs). This chapter concluded that cult screenings in Australia involve a type of heterotopic space, as they provide a physical place for cult films to be shown, whilst also providing a more abstract ‘space’ where lost films, and participation at screenings are valued, in contrast to the ‘quiet absorption’ that the traditional discourse of cinema going demands.

In terms of a longing for the past, this includes a longing for some of the practices of the past which gave people more time to catch up and socialise, to form close knit communities. Thus, there is a sense of nostalgia for certain types of film viewing experience and group practices. This is reflected in the dress style of the group (vintage fashion, 'old school' tattoos, retro hairstyles), the activities of the group (double features of films; Stitch and Bitch craft groups and retro discos) and the collecting of artefacts from the past (16mm film; vintage cameras and film projectors; pulp fiction novels; vintage cars and clothing).

So how do cult film organisers and groups deal with this sense of longing? As Jay Katz and Miss Death suggest, the most effective way for them to address the sense of longing for film going and community practices of the past is to organise events themselves, and put them on in their own home. They suggest they can fill the void by putting on events of their own. They have demonstrated that by gathering together likeminded people in a group, and inviting them into your home, a feeling of community is recreated. And indeed the origins of most of the cult screenings can be traced back to the desire to share cult films which the organisers have collected, in the hope of fostering communication with a like-minded audience.

Several different theories of community have been analysed in order to provide a framework for the activities of cult fan groups. Gusfield has suggested that the affinity one feels to a group such as this can be reduced a 'consciousness of kind' or a proclivity for members of a group to form emotional attachments towards one another, in opposition to those outside of the group (1978). In terms of how this relates to the concept of fandom, I would suggest that while the line between the activities of other types of fans and cult fans are drawing closer, cult film fans go further than your average film fan by integrating their fandom into their everyday lives. The audience members studied for this thesis are involved with one another's lives, beyond the scope of cult film activities. Having refashioned their lives in order to accommodate their cult film activities, fandom therefore becomes not only



a project of the self but also a project which they share with members of a likeminded community.

This thesis has examined cult film fandom in Australia from the perspective of those involved with it on an intimate, daily basis – the audiences and organisers of cult film screenings. In the endeavour to incorporate existing fields of knowledge (genre, audience and film studies) with resources on cult film, a new direction is proposed which rearticulates these theories to take into account the vital role that the audience plays in creating film cults. These cult audiences exist not only to celebrate the films which have been lost or discarded, but to revive practices which have also been set aside, which are essential to the formation of a living community; that is – engagement with one another. This engagement, and the creation of a community in miniature, reveals that the word 'cult' cannot only exist as a text or genre; it encompasses so much more.

As the credits begin to roll, we all whoop and cheer for the film, and the experience we have shared. We bundle up in our winter coats, and head back out into the world, into reality; but we leave feeling a part of something bigger – our cult community, our home.

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## **Appendix A: Common Themes denoting Cult Films amongst Popular Writers**

- a fiery passion for the film amongst audiences – 4 (D.P; P. & K. F.; T.D; S.M;)
- audiences worship the films, carry out repeat viewings – 7 (D.P; P. & K.F; S.D; P.S; T.D; C.S; S.M;)
- audiences champion, have strong devotion towards particular films – 5 (D.P; P. & K.F; T.D; A.C & S.W; C.S;)
- cult films differ radically from Hollywood films – 2 (D.P; C.S.)
- the films feature atypical heroes – 1 (D.P.)
- the films contain offbeat dialogue/ unforgettable lines – 6 (D.P; P. & K. F.; S.D; P.S; A.C & S.W; C.S;)

### Legend

A.C & S.W – Ali Catterall & Simon Wells (2002)

S. D. – Steven Paul Davies (2001)

T.D. – Tim Dirks (2002)

P. & K. F. – P. & K. French (1999)

S.M – Soren McCarthy (2003)

D.P. – Danny Peary (1981)

P.S. – Paul Simpson (2001)

C.S. – Carol Schwartz (2002)



## **Appendix: B**

### **Full list of interview subjects, sites, details**

\*Aspasia Leonarder (aka. Miss Death), cult film organiser, Mu-meson Archives, face to face interview at Mu-meson Archives, Annandale N.S.W, 29/4/05.

\*Jaimie Leonarder (aka. Jay Katz), cult film organiser, Mu-meson Archives, face to face interview at Mu-meson Archives, Annandale N.S.W, 29/4/05.

\*Andrew Leavold, Owner Trash Video Brisbane/filmmaker. Interview over telephone, 12/9/05.

\*Richard Wolstencroft, Director MUFF/ filmmaker. Attempt at face to face interview during MUFF July 2005 aborted, interview completed via email August 2005.

\*Bill Mousoulis, filmmaker. Interview via email 08/05.

\*Gregory Pakis, filmmaker. Interview via email 1/12/05

\*Philip Brophy, filmmaker. Interview via email 3/12/05.

\*Dick Dale, organiser Trasharama film festival. Interview via email 7/12/05.

\*Andrea Beesley-Brown, organiser Midnight Movie Mamacita cult film night, Phoenix, Arizona, USA. Interview via email, 8/9/07.

\*Siouxsi Connor, Organiser SUFF 2007/ filmmaker. Interview via email 13/9/07.

\*Alex Kidd, organiser Duke Mitchell Film Club, London, U.K. Interview via email 09/07

Evrin Ersoy, organiser Duke Mitchell Film Club, London, U.K. Interview via email 09/07

Adam Spellicy, organiser Screenshot Film Club. Interview in person 11/07, and later via email 19/11/07.

Mike Walsh, academic. Short Interview via email (historical background re: alternative Australian film screenings/culture), 24/7/08.

Adrian Martin, academic. Short Interview via email (historical background re: alternative Australian film screenings/culture) 25/7/08.

Scott Murray, writer. Short Interview via email (historical background re: alternative Australian film screenings/culture) 26/7/08.

## **Appendix C: Survey Questions**

### **Survey – Annandale Hotel December 2005**

\*Please give as much detail as possible , then return to Renee. Thankyou!!

1. Why did you come to cult movies tonight? How often do you come?
2. How did you find out about cult movie night?
3. What, if anything do you gain from attending?
4. Do you think there is a difference between attending cult movie night and seeing a movie at the multiplex? If so, how are they different?
5. Do you think nights like this are important? Why/Why not?
6. What do you think makes a cult film?
7. For you, how does *Wake in Fright* compare to other Australian films?
8. What themes did you notice in *Wake in Fright*? Did these themes vary from other Australian films?
9. What do you think of Australian cinema? Do you think there are 'Australian cult films'?
10. Will you continue attending cult movie night? Why/Why not?

**Survey – Screensect Group, Bar Open, Fitzroy VIC November 2007**

\*Please give as much detail as possible, then return to Renee. Thankyou!!

1. Why did you come to Screensect/cult movies tonight? How often do you attend?
2. How did you find out about Screensect?
3. What, if anything, do you gain from attending?
4. Do you think there is a difference between attending Screensect and seeing a movie at the multiplex? If so, how are they different?
5. Do you think nights like this are important? Why/Why not?
6. What do you think makes a cult film?
7. What do you think of Australian cinema? Do you think there are any Australian cult films?
8. How do you feel when you attend cult films?
9. Do you participate in any other cult/ subcultural activities (eg. Other cult film screenings, trading/collecting memorabilia etc?)
10. Will you continue attending Screensect? Why/Why not?

## **Follow up Interviews – Annandale survey respondents (via email)**

**March 2008**

1. What other social activities do you participate in? Of those, how would cult film night rate in terms of importance?
2. Is cult movie night a routine/ritual for you? If so, what other routines/rituals do you have?
3. How does cult movie night fit into you Monday plans? What do you do before/after?
4. What has been your favourite/least favourite cult night/movie so far? Why?
5. Do you go to other events held by Jay Katz and Miss Death? Why/Why not?
6. Have you taken part in/ attended any other cult activities (e.g. Midnight screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, attendance at underground film festivals?). If so, how would you compare this to cult movie night?
7. Do you view cult movie night as anything more than an activity? Do you have more invested in it? Please elaborate.
8. Do you view yourself as being part of any particular subculture? Please elaborate.
9. If you had to generalise, what kind of people do you think attend cult movie night?
10. How often do you attend the multiplex? Is this more/less since attending cult movie night?
11. Has attending cult movie night effected what you watch in terms of film/television? What about other types of media (ie: internet/street press/zines etc)? Do you seek out alternative types of material?
12. Do you collect/trade films or other memorabilia? How does this fit into your viewing experience?

















