

the bohemian aesthetic

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cult of curiosity

commentary by stuart chait

published 15 april 2007

deleted scenes | volume 5 • number 6

With the release of Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino's *Grindhouse*, there's been an awful lot of buzz about cult films—especially the type that influenced the rise of these two pulpy cineastes. So begs the question: What *is* a cult film, exactly? Is it one like *Switchblade Sisters* or *The Warriors*? Or is it *any* type of quality cinema that develops a strong following amid a limited audience?

I submit that a cult film is the type of story that has a bit more going on beneath its surface while appearing to be exploitative, bizarre, or even commonplace genre fare. To the general population, these films seem to fulfill a fetish for a specific audience, when, in actuality, there's a psychological undercurrent just below the skin. A cult film is that dive bar or club with choice music, food, and patrons that's situated in the bad part of town: From the outside, it looks no better than the local mini-mart. But inside is where the best of times is waiting to be had. This month, let's consider films a bit rougher around the edges.

THE CLASSIC

PEEPING TOM

written by Leo Marks

directed by Michael Powell

not rated/runtime – 101 min./1960

Lost in the furor surrounding Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (and actually released a few months before), Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* can't outdo Hitchcock's masterpiece; but, as many have discovered, it holds up quite well on its own. Critically savaged on its initial release, the film made a 180° turn, thirty years later. Now part of the Criterion Collection, it's considered one of the most psychologically complex horror films ever made. Martin Scorsese even refers to both *Tom* and *8 1/2* as the two films which contain all that can be said about film directing.

Tom is precisely the type of film that fits my earlier definition of cult: on the surface is someone who kills people with a camera and films it. He's mentally disturbed, has a history of abuse, and lacks a firm grasp on reality. 'Doesn't sound that original or complex, right? Well, watching the film, its layers immediately begin to unfold.

The main character, Mark Lewis (Carl Boehm), works on a film crew, aspiring to make films, himself. He always carries his camera with him, claiming to be filming a documentary. But his

sinister purpose becomes all too clear when he finds himself alone with a girl. The psychological implications extend beyond Freudian conjectures about Mark's obsession to commentary on the language of filmmaking and the audience's indulgence in terror. When we watch Mark killing, we watch it through the veil of imagination, a buffer for the act. But we still enjoy it, pay for it, cheer for it. Where's the disconnect? At what point does murder become more than a fantasy played out on screen?

And there's more—the work of a director, the man behind the camera, the man orchestrating the very scene we're watching. When Mark kills, he sets things up very carefully—his movements, his set, his 'actress'. It's an acutely methodical (almost rehearsed) murder, and each detail must be in place for 'the scene' to play out correctly. And, perhaps, the most important psychological point of Powell's cult masterpiece is something I can't mention here, since it's a secret the *film* doesn't divulge until its latter acts. Suffice it to say that when you see the reason behind the look of terror on the faces of Mark's victims, a statement is being made about the very nature of enjoying onscreen murder.

A final note: The opening sequence is stupendous, utterly terrifying, and real, and pre-dates a famous slasher film's usage by almost twenty years.

THE CONTEMPORARY

NAKED LUNCH

based on the novel by William S. Burroughs
written and directed by David Cronenberg
rated 'R'/runtime – 115 min./1991

If we want to talk 'cult', we *must* mention the name David Cronenberg. Almost everything the Canadian filmmaker creates seems to come stamped with that label from its inception. But whether it's *Scanners*, *Dead Ringers*, or *A History of Violence*, none of his oeuvre comes close to matching the cult brilliance of his adaptation of William S. Burroughs' Naked Lunch.

To start, the film isn't even a straight adaptation of what many consider to be Burroughs' seminal work. It's more... 'inspired by' or, to use TV terminology, a 'spin-off'. What Cronenberg does with the 'unfilmable' novel is take its skeleton and repurpose it to tell the story of William Lee (a pen name of Burroughs, played by Peter Weller), an exterminator-slash-writer who discovers that his wife is using his bug powder to get high. He then learns he's a 'secret agent'; is ordered, by a giant bug, to kill his wife; and must travel to a place called 'InterZone' to hide from the authorities and complete his mission.

It sounds like the drug-induced ravings of a madman, but while recreational substances certainly play a part in Burroughs' writing, Cronenberg delves deeper, tapping into both the political and personal underpinnings that pervades all of Burroughs' writings. The character of Lee is a representation of Burroughs, but more as a writer than as the protagonist. The obsession of creation takes on literally monstrous proportions, as the typewriters that Lee and others use are

alive—large, disgusting insects that have control over the writers, telling them how and what to write. More disturbing is the psycho-sexual connection ascribed to the bug-writer relationship, and how it plays out through the rest of the film.

Ultimately, what makes *Lunch* so outstanding (and surprisingly coherent) is the personal relationship between Lee and the two Joans (both played wonderfully by Judy Davis), and the central examination of the muse and creation. Creation (in all forms) is a bestial, somewhat violent, and raw experience, and what Cronenberg does is tie it strongly to the machinations of a modern world (although it's painted with an exceedingly green and brown, neo-noir palette), and how the interference of outside forces can tarnish, and even dictate, both personal and professional pleasures.

Cronenberg's adaptation-biography hybrid combines the excesses of Burroughs and the compulsions of its writer-director, and emerges with a superb work which redefines 'cult'.

THE MUST SEE

JINDABYNE

April 27 (limited)

based on the short story "So Much Water So Close to Home", by Raymond Carver

written by Beatrix Christian

directed by Ray Lawrence

rated 'R'/runtime – 123 min./2006

Australian auteur Ray Lawrence's last film, *Lantana*, was a creeping thriller—drenched in character, steeped in atmosphere, and rich in emotional rewards. It was an uncanny indie film, a foreign offering that wasn't quite foreign enough and, despite numerous critical accolades, a story that couldn't quite connect with enough people. Or maybe it just seemed too odd. The mixture of *In the Bedroom*-style melancholy combined with classic noir-ish mystery wove a tale difficult to sell to a mainstream audience (Is it mystery...is it drama...is it both?). As always, films that defy a singular classification rise above, and Lawrence's newest, *Jindabyne*, looks to be no different. Even the best noirs can be petulantly nihilistic, but it takes gall to create a tale such as this; often, great characters are tangled up in an intricate mystery, but Lawrence likes to tangle up a great mystery within intricate characters.

LOOKING GOOD

BLACK BOOK

April 4 (limited)

written by Gerard Soeteman and Paul Verhoeven

directed by Paul Verhoeven

rated 'R'/runtime – 145 min./2006

If there's a contemporary precursor to the likes of Tarantino and Rodriguez, it's the man behind

Robocop, *Total Recall*, *Basic Instinct*, and *Starship Troopers*. Despite their box-office successes, the aforementioned all play like cult films—always on the edge, nudging the aberrant, and reveling in both sexual and violent deviance. Does that make Paul Verhoeven a brave (or even quality) filmmaker? Certainly not, but it does prove that the man isn't satisfied with the status quo. And if you peek back a little further into the Dutchman's filmography, you'll find *Katie Tippel* and *Soldier of Orange*, two movies that show a surprisingly more mature filmmaker at work, despite coming earlier in his career. In a sense, he's like Ridley Scott—successful and bold at the beginning of his career, interested in storytelling and its boundaries, only to be gleefully corrupted by the deep pockets and special effects possibilities in Hollywood. But his newest (since the disastrous *Hollow Man*) brings him back to those European roots, and it's raising a few eyebrows in the critics realm. Could Verhoeven be coming full-circle?

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THE TV SET

April 6 (limited)

written and directed by Jake Kasdan

rated 'R'/runtime – 87 min./2006

Son of the great Lawrence Kasdan, Jake is probably best known for his cult work—*Zero Effect*, “Freaks and Geeks”, and “Undeclared”. And it's not surprising that he's channeled his frustration with the oversight-happy process of creating television into an indie film that has the presence of *Office Space*. For me, Mike Judge's workplace satire is never quite as funny as it should be, but it still rings true, almost to a painful degree. I can see a similar situation happening with *The TV Set*, where the guffaws and belly laughs aren't plentiful, but the painful smile of commiseration remains firmly planted on the viewer's face. And for those outside of the industry, it may serve as an insight to an extremely painstaking process, one that tends to strip away much creativity, all in the name of mediocre success.

CURIOUS

ZOO

April 25 (limited)

written by Robinson Devor and Charles Mudede

directed by Robinson Devor

not rated/runtime – 80 min./2007

You can't get much more 'cult' than the likes of *Zoo*. Choosing subject matter that will have most people cringing at the mere hint of it, director Robinson Devor is a brave soul. Ditto for ThinkFilm, picking up a project with less commercial viability than a Carrot Top/Pauly Shore comedy vehicle. But for those viewers with an equal amount of bravery, the festival murmurs suggest that, without ever condoning, judging, or showing what many consider unthinkable, Devor is able to construct a portrait of colossal understanding. Instead of distancing ourselves from the outskirts of human behavior—ignoring them, reviling them—perhaps they're worth a closer look, not necessarily for the purpose of agreement, but of *comprehension*. And, after all, what (supposedly) sets us apart from the rest of the natural world is our capacity for thought, for reasoning; if we can't exercise that, then maybe the group Devor is exploring isn't so far off.

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PRIVATE FEARS IN PUBLIC PLACES

April 13 (limited)

based on the play by Alan Ayckbourn

written by Jean-Michel Ribes

directed by Alain Resnais

not rated/runtime – 120 min./2006

The title may be a mouthful (in French, it's simply 'Hearts'), but a Resnais film is never as pretentious as its title makes it sound. A cult-ish figure within the French New Wave movement (always in the shadow of icons like Godard and Truffaut), Resnais has a remarkably realistic approach to memory and recollection. Most famous for the short *Night and Fog*—one of the first (and, defensibly, the best) examinations of the Jewish Holocaust—he loves to play with timelines and perception, and can be considered one of the fathers of the inter-cut flashback, today a commonplace device on programs such as "Lost". Now much older, like Godard, he is in his twilight, but his work stays a curiosity, coming from a man who's not just in possession of great life and career perspective, but who's an innovator still striving to tell stories in a new way.

THE CULT PICK

HOT FUZZ

April 20 (limited)

written by Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright

directed by Edgar Wright

rated 'R'/runtime – 121 min./2007

If you haven't seen *Shaun of the Dead*, you've probably heard of it. And if you *haven't* heard of it, you'll be hearing about its filmmakers' newest endeavor, *Hot Fuzz*. Straight from the poster (a deliberate 'homage'...or is it 'mockery'?...of Michael Bay's *Bad Boys II*), anyone can tell that the creators have tongues firmly planted in cheeks. The unique detail about *Shaun* is this: It was no simple spoof film, nor a Johnny-come-lately *Scream*-type referendum on the classic zombie film. And *Hot Fuzz* won't be one for the action buddy flick, either. In an odd mix of deconstruction, self-aware commentary, and genre-shattering send-up, Pegg and Wright will make you laugh without every pushing you out of their wholly believable storyline. Only come the end (during the inevitable group discussion over what films it referenced) does the reflexive nature of the story become important. Where *Scream* and its hybrids waded knee-deep in their forefathers, showcasing a knowledge of them at every turn, Pegg and Wright are a fun-house mirror—a silly device so amusing, the image is distorted enough to create something new, never allowing us to see the same old boring reflections.

THE GUILTY PLEASURE

THE TRIPPER

April 20 (limited)

written by David Arquette and Joe Harris

directed by David Arquette

rated 'R'/runtime – 93 min./2006

Oh, boy. A Ronald Reagan-obsessed psychopath hunting liberal hippies on their way to a concert. Your culty, guilty pleasures really don't get much guiltier than this. Buzz on films like these is always difficult to gauge; either fan-boys overhype them beyond all credibility, or they're dismissed as utterly idiotic, and it's tough to cut out an hour-and-a-half of your life for something described as truly awful, even if it's just for fun. The rumor on Arquette's film, though, is that it's everything that *Snakes on a Plane* wanted to be, but couldn't—completely over-the-top, no-holds-barred, and with absolutely no conscience for true quality. If you embrace your pauper status in every way, sometimes it's enough to push you into that rare space—the GoodBad—and bring everyone along for a humorous diversion they love to talk about. Arquette may have a concept just crazy enough to pull that off.

AND FROM THE SMALL SCREEN...

THIS AMERICAN LIFE

created by Ira Glass

rated TV-14/Thursdays - 10:30 pm/Showtime

The cult NPR radio show hosted by Ira Glass finally (after years of nudging and...well...begging) makes its way to the small screen. Glass held out for a long while, despite pleas from producers to bring his quirky tales of mundane American realism to visual life. But Glass' response was always the same: "It's a radio show." Well, whether it was persistence, a change of heart, or just dumb luck, someone finally managed to convince him to give it a try. And the result is just as rich and eccentric as its counterpart. Glass and his team bring their singular sense of Americana to the documentary, and still pick all of their subjects with aplomb. The cinematography is exceedingly simple yet richly evocative; beautifully framed shots are mini-paintings that effectively capture feelings and moods. And the characters and their stories...whenever I watch (or listen) to this show, I *know* I'm hearing about the *real* America. There's something so authentic about not only the approach, but the *feel* of these stories, and there's something truly original about them, too. After twelve years on the radio, TAL's still coming up with quality material. If there's one choice on this list that I hope can evolve *past* 'cult' status, it's this one; no matter where you live or what your background, Glass knows how to strike the perfect emotional chord, mining a North American cultural consciousness that honestly explores this American life.

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And a little bonus (and self-promotion) for those interested in seeing what pays my bills:

CITIES OF THE UNDERWORLD

created by Sarah Wetherbee and Emre Sahin

rated TV-PG/Mondays - 9 pm/The HStory Channel

'Ever wonder what goes on in the world beneath your feet? Trust me, there's a lot more down there than you realize. This 13-episode series investigates the literal underworld that exists under some of the globe's biggest cities: Rome, Berlin, London, Paris, New York and more exotic locations which include Budapest, Romania, and Cappadocia. We've been working on this series since last July, and some of the things we've found are breathtaking. From the genius engineering pioneered by ancient civilizations to the seedier details of these cities' histories, there are some pretty good stories and discoveries buried by blankets of civilization. We start in Edinburgh, Scotland on Monday, April 23rd, and you can catch a replay of the original pilot, shot in Istanbul, on Monday, April 16th. It's really been a lot of fun (and a lot of work), and our aim is to make the entombed past come alive—for history buffs and laypersons, alike. So, come underground with us, and see cities as you've *never* seen them before.

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