

The background of the book cover is a stylized illustration. In the upper left, a devil with horns, a goatee, and a mischievous grin is depicted. Below him, two cheerleaders are shown from the waist up, wearing white crop tops and blue skirts. The cheerleader on the left has her arms raised and wears a top with 'PATTY' and a star emblem. The cheerleader on the right also has her arms raised and wears a top with 'CHRIS' and a star emblem. Behind them, a large, bright, starburst-like light source is visible. The entire scene is set against a backdrop of stylized flames in shades of red, orange, and yellow.

JEFFREY SCONCE, editor

Sleaze Artists

Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics

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Title page: Still from *Scum of the Earth*
(dir. H. G. Lewis, 1963)

Frontispiece: Still from *Strait Jacket*
(dir. William Castle, 1964)

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JEFFREY SCONCE

Introduction

In her 1968 essay “Trash, Art, and the Movies,” Pauline Kael devotes a great deal of copy to extolling the rather scandalous pleasures of American International Pictures’ hippie schlockfest, *Wild in the Streets* (1968), at one point judging it more interesting than that year’s achingly important *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). No doubt to the calculated shock of her *Harper’s* readership, she goes so far as to defend the right of teen audiences to prefer *Wild in the Streets* over the era’s allegedly more sophisticated art cinema. At least *Wild in the Streets*, she argues, “connects with their lives in an immediate even if a grossly frivolous way, and if we don’t go to movies for excitement, if, even as children, we accept the cultural standards of refined adults, if we have so little drive that we accept ‘good taste,’ then we will probably never really care about movies at all.”¹ The love of cinema, Kael argues provocatively, is in some sense both childish and based in the disreputability of the cinema’s origins in popular spectacle. “Movies took their impetus not from the desiccated imitation European high culture,” she reasons, “but from the peep show, the Wild West show, the music hall, the comic strip—from what was coarse and common” (103). While there have always been “schoolmarms” determined to transform this coarse and common medium into a more refined art, Kael champions (here at least) another tradition of cinephilia that, like so much cultural



FIGURE 1 In the goofy teen-pic allegory *Wild in the Streets* (1968), teen fascists force the elderly to drop acid at a new government re-education camp.

criticism in the twentieth century, seeks to rescue a once vibrant form from the banal trappings of middlebrow respectability. True cinephiles, she argues, always recognize one another's company at once because "they talk less about good movies than what they love in bad movies" (89).

Today many cinephiles still love to talk about "bad" movies, be they studio-era B-films, low-budget 1950s sci-fi, grindhouse porn and horror, or even wildly excessive contemporary summer blockbusters. "Guilty pleasures" lists remain a staple of popular film writing, allowing otherwise tasteful critics to temporarily escape the crushing responsibility of promoting a more artistically ambitious cinema to champion their own personal love of down-and-dirty genre pictures. On the DVD market, meanwhile, a proliferating number of companies scavenge through abandoned theater attics and drive-in closets for the most obscure, degraded, and unusual films of the past century, responding to an ever growing audience of "trashophiles." For better or worse, the entire oeuvre of Doris Wishman is now available on DVD while John Ford's is not. Elsewhere, the anthropological thrill of finding a jaw-droppingly implausible film on late-night television has been channeled into the prepackaged irony of television's *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and mock 1950s Z-films like *The Lost Skeleton of*

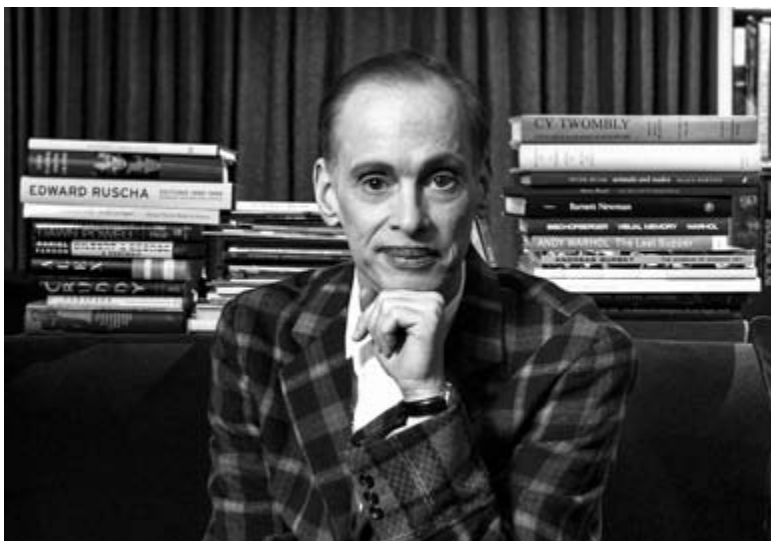


FIGURE 2 America's patron saint of sleaze: John Waters hosting *Art:21*, a PBS documentary series on art in the twenty-first century.

Cadavra (2001). Meanwhile, recent work in film scholarship has made exploitation, sleaze, and other “low” genres increasingly acceptable as objects of academic inquiry. Most shocking of all, the cinema’s patron saint of sleaze, John Waters, recently served as the host of *Art:21*, a PBS documentary on (consecrated) art in the twenty-first century. Indeed, Waters’s career trajectory—from director of sleazy staples of the midnight movie circuit like *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Polyester* (1981) to respected gallery photographer, exhibit curator, and contributor to *Art Forum*—testifies to the growing centrality of “sleaze” on all levels of the cultural imaginary.

All of the above despite Kael’s admonition that cinephiles should not “use their education to try to place trash within an acceptable academic tradition” (112). Ignoring Kael’s now comfortably distant and increasingly irrelevant warning, *Sleaze Artists* continues cinephilia’s ongoing conversation about the low, bad, and sleazy face of cinema by collecting a range of contemporary critical voices with a shared intellectual interest in the many questions posed by disreputable movies and suspect cinema. Writing in 1968, Kael was concerned that academics overly eager in their attempts to elevate popular movies into significant art would use auteurism, cine-structuralism, and good old-fashioned

textual explication to over-intellectualize and ultimately dissipate the mindless pleasures of films like *Wild in the Streets* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968). Happily, film studies has now expanded beyond the perpetual inferiority complex of its youth and thus no longer has to ape the interpretive excursions of New Criticism to find complexity and worth in every movie. Increasing intellectual contact with a wide range of historical, theoretical, and critical paradigms in the humanities has greatly expanded the scope of appropriate objects and significant questions that might fall under the broad label of “film studies.” No longer as concerned with questions of film’s aesthetic legitimacy, film studies has been able to enter into a wider dialogue with other voices in art, culture, and history. So, while *Wild in the Streets* may not be “great art” (by almost anyone’s criteria), as a pop parable of hippie fascism rendered in a uniquely AIP melding of go-go teen pic and ersatz New Wave, it is nonetheless a “great artifact,” one well worthy of critical attention on any number of fronts. The essays in this volume speak then, not only to the ongoing centrality of low cinema in all strata of film culture, but to the continued vibrancy of film studies itself as a diverse and diversifying discipline within the humanities at large.

As “sleaze” is less a definable historical genre than an ineffable quality—a tone that is a function of attitude as much as content—it by necessity evokes a whole range of textual issues, from the industrial mechanics of low-budget exploitation to the ever shifting terrains of reception and taste. Sleaziness is a presence that must be inscribed into a text by some manner of evaluation and critical labor; that is, sleaze is a feeling one has about a film (or television show, or book for that matter) that requires judging, if only in one’s imagination, that there is something “improper” or “untoward” about a given text. Often, sleaziness implies a circuit of inappropriate exchange involving suspect authorial intentions and/or displaced perversities in the audience. One could easily argue, for example, that hard-core pornography is not sleazy in that there is little subterfuge in terms of its production and reception. It is what it is—a textual contract sealed around the unambiguous “money shots” that give the genre its identity. *Mantis in Lace* (1968) or *Wanda, the Sadistic Hypnotist* (1969), on the other hand, are sleazy in the extreme, each attempting to motivate soft-core pornography across a weak narrative field of LSD, witchcraft, and other vaguely titillating horrors of hippiedom. No one would dare call *Psycho*



FIGURE 3 Imitation as a form of sleazy flattery: William Castle's *Psycho knock-off, Homicidal* (1962).

(1960) sleazy, and yet William Castle's clumsy (yet compelling) rearticulation of *Psycho*'s basic architecture in *Homicidal* (1961) is sleaze at its most brilliant, "unseemly" in both its crude financial opportunism and its ham-handed revisiting of Hitchcock's cross-dressing shock tactics. Herschell Gordon Lewis's oscillation between sexploitation "roughies" and gore-soaked drive-in horror in the 1960s is a sleazeography without peer, a body of work that confronts the entire spectrum of sensationalism with a uniformly leaden visual style. Finally, though the directors associated with Troma films try desperately to achieve sleaziness, their mannered gorefests fail miserably when confronted with the effortless sleaze of a Hollywood studio making a film about a husband worried that a psycho cop will break in to the house and rape his wife, and then titling the film *Unlawful Entry* (1992).

As a necessarily imprecise and subjective concept, sleaze in the cinema has always lurked at the ambiguous boundaries of acceptability in terms of taste, style, and politics. Indeed, as a fundamentally evaluative—indeed judgmental—concept, the very term *sleaze* demonstrates just how crucially intertwined issues of taste, style, and politics are in all film practice. That the "sleazy," "trashy," and just downright "bad" lie outside the borders of normative film practice is not

surprising. The fact that cinephiles—as Kael suggests—remain so enthralled by such cinema, on the other hand, remains a fascinating question and suggests that an enduring rift in film culture between encouraging “quality” and venerating “crap” remains wholly unresolved.

As Greg Taylor demonstrates in his elegant history of postwar film criticism, *Artists in the Audience*, the contrarian desire to champion the low over the high, the obscure over the known, the disreputable over the canonized has been a familiar gesture among the film intelligentsia for over fifty years now.² Taylor concentrates especially on the “vanguard criticism” of Manny Farber and Parker Tyler, crediting Farber as the most influential figure in the foundation of “cultism” and Tyler as a leading voice of “camp.” For many years, Farber’s aesthetic focused on finding redeeming details in an otherwise moribund cinema, cultivating the “cultist” impulse that even today allows certain cinephiles to argue that Edgar G. Ulmer is a more interesting auteur than Eliza Kazan, or that an obscure Monogram Noir is inherently more “cinematic” than a more traditionally canonical film. Tyler, on the other hand, used his early film writing as a means of reimagining and rewriting Hollywood cinema as the *Hollywood Hallucination*, taking the predicable mediocrity of Hollywood product and transforming it through “camp,” if only in very personal terms, into a more vibrant and playful textual field. Associated with aesthete gay subcultures dating back to the precinematic world of Oscar Wilde, camp found its most public discussion in Susan Sontag’s controversial 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” and it continues to resonate as a key strategy for engaging motion pictures.³

What is at stake in this ongoing debate over the high or low soul of the cinema? As the work of Pierre Bourdieu should remind us, to champion (but not necessarily enjoy) a particular film or cinema in opposition to another has less to do with any objective criteria for cinematic worth than with the social position and cultural status of the cinephile that chooses to weigh in on this question. Imagine, for example, two cinephiles debating the career of Steven Spielberg. Which is Spielberg’s greater achievement—*Schindler’s List* (1993) or *Jurassic Park 2: The Lost World* (1997)? Those who still hold hope for the cinema’s legitimacy as an important art form *must* by default choose the relentless artistic sobriety of *Schindler*. After all, it aspires to the status of a timeless classic in range, scope, and treatment, and by engaging the Holocaust, invokes per-



FIGURE 4 *Jurassic Park 2: The Lost World* (1997): Steven Spielberg's greatest cinematic achievement?

haps the single most profound subject matter of the twentieth century. Those who embrace the cinema's more accidental forms of commercial poetry, on the other hand, are rooting instead for the T-Rex that runs amok in San Diego at the close of *Lost World*. It is an unexpectedly inspired moment in an otherwise pedestrian film that reminds many of us of the vertiginous surrealism that brought so many to the cinema in the first place. Sure, it's merely a goofy homage to the Godzilla cycle—but in that gesture, Spielberg acknowledges that the entire *Jurassic Park* phenomenon, with all its sheen of quality and state-of-the-art effects, can still only aspire to the childhood joy of seeing men in cheap lizard suits stomping on Tokyo.

On a most superficial level this may seem merely a question of taste, but as so much recent work in cultural theory reminds us, taste is anything but superficial. Those who would champion *The Lost World* over *Schindler's List*, much like Kael praising *Wild in the Streets* over *2001* almost forty years ago, clearly understand they are making a calculatedly disruptive and scandalous choice, one that is explicitly political, whether confined to the arena of cinema poetics or engaging the larger ideological terrain of American popular culture. Similarly, those defending *Schindler's List* as “important” cinema do so from an equally entrenched sociocultural position with equally political implications.

Indeed, as Bourdieu's work would also remind us, if we were shown the living rooms, libraries, and wardrobes of the two people involved in this hypothetical debate, most of us could no doubt quickly match the cinephile with his or her accessories.

Yet jockeying for position in the eternal rat race of symbolic capital can explain only so much. In an earlier article, "'Trashing' the Academy" (1995), I relied heavily on Bourdieu's mapping of taste in *Distinction* to discuss the activities of "badfilm" fans in the 1980s, and in particular, this community's strategic shift from approaching these films with mocking derision to a discourse of outsider appreciation. I used the term *paracinema* to describe this sensibility, a viewpoint epitomized in fanzines like *Zontar*, *Psychotronic*, and *Film Threat*, and whose bible remains the Juno and Vale RE/Search volume *Incredibly Strange Films*.⁴ I think this approach is still very useful in considering how various audience factions view themselves on the cultural terrain, and how they enter into often fractious dialogue with one another over issues of cinema, taste, and art. Still, looking back, there is something missing in thinking about a passion for the bad, sleazy, or paracinematic simply in terms of symbolic economies and social trajectories.⁵ While providing an excellent template for understanding the positioning of fan discourses and their self presentation in a larger social field—be it the letters column of a zine or flame wars on a Russ Meyer website—Bourdieu's rationalist economies have less to contribute in understanding the issues of pleasure, affect, and even obsession that attend a sincere passion for deviant cinema.

Film culture's seemingly unending fascination with the low and sleazy, and its closely related critical competition among cultists and aesthetes to capture the essence of "true" cinema, suggests that fundamental contradictions attending the definition, practice, and appreciation of "cinematic art" remain wholly unresolved. Here we are probably better served, not by Bourdieu's rather clinical analysis of the cultural field, but by that other extreme in French aesthetic theory—Roland Barthes; especially the Barthes of *S/Z* and *The Pleasure of the Text*. In "Trash, Art, and the Movies," for example, Kael empathizes with the plight of fellow film critics who have simply given up out of boredom. "Many film critics quit," she observes, because "they can no longer bear the many tedious movies for the few good moments and the tiny shocks of recognition"

(93). To put this in Barthesian terms, critics who immerse themselves in any art form are bound to grow tired of the “text of pleasure,” the text “linked to the comfortable practice of reading.” Once a cinephile has mastered the Hollywood lexicon and has a reasonable grasp on what to expect from the various international schools of art cinema, it becomes increasingly difficult to have these “tiny shocks of recognition,” to find any film that truly challenges the stifling boredom of normative film practice and culture or, for that matter, the stifling boredom of normative “avant-garde” film practice and culture. As Kael puts it, “After all the years of stale stupid acted-out stories, with less and less for me in them, I am desperate to know something, desperate for facts, for information, for faces of non-actors and for knowledge of how people live—for revelations, not for the little bits of show-business detail worked up for us by show-business minds who got them from the same movies we’re tired of” (128–29). Kael’s search for the revelatory here is not unlike the Zontarian notion of the “badtruth”—that moment when the narrative logic and diegetic illusions of cheap exploitation cinema disintegrate into a brutally blissful encounter with profilmic failure.⁶ With its low-budgets, frequent incompetence, and explosive subject matter, sleazy exploitation cinema is probably the closest thing to “outsider art” possible in the capital and technology intensive world of cinema. As such, it remains our best hope for Barthes’s “text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis its relation with language.”⁷ Kael, Barthes, and Zontar may be writing for different audiences in different languages, but they are united in an increasingly difficult task of avoiding textual boredom. This desire for the shock of recognition, a random moment of poetic perversity, the epiphany of the unexpected, remains a major current in the cinephile’s seemingly unquenchable desire to “talk less about good movies than what they love in bad movies.”⁸

Very few of the films discussed in *Sleaze Artists* are at the top of conservation lists or are likely to replace canonical titles in the film studies curriculum. The essays themselves, however, present a range of new historical, industrial, po-

litical, and aesthetic questions that suggest exciting new avenues in examining the mechanisms of film practice and cultural production. The essays in this volume are divided into two sections. The articles collected in part 1 are the most explicitly historical in nature, although within this shared interest in excavating a cinema previously invisible to close historical analysis, the authors in this section pursue extremely different methodological and critical approaches in placing style, taste, and politics in historical dialogue. Part 2, meanwhile, is more concerned with the “afterlife” of low cinemas as artifacts circulating in various personal, formal, and subcultural imaginations. Here too, however, there is a sustained effort to understand this cinema in the historical context of memory, exhibition, or appropriation.

Part 1 begins with Eric Schaefer’s examination of the advertising strategies adopted by sexploitation producers in the early 1960s to promote the increasingly explicit cinema that was in the process of supplanting the era of classic exploitation. Responding to a very specific set of demands and restrictions on the limits of explicit sexual discourse, sexploitation advertising, Schaefer argues, had to employ advertising appeals based on humor, adventure, and experimentation, strategies that in turn increasingly associated the sexploitation patron as deviant and abnormal. As in his foundational study of classic exploitation cinema, Schaefer here combines close historical research with a discussion of these films (and their audiences) as objects presenting a crisis to the era’s normative (though changing) codes of respectability. The essay also provides a useful gateway to the other essays of part 1, all of which interrogate the 1960s and early 1970s as a particularly volatile moment in negotiating the appropriate boundaries of film practice and content.

Playing on Pam Cook and Claire Johnson’s landmark call for women’s “counter-cinema” in the early 1970s, Tania Modleski’s “Women’s Cinema as Counterphobic Cinema” provides a welcome new perspective on the work of Doris Wishman, the New York housewife turned sexploitation director of the 1960s who has become a major cult figure in bad cinema circles over the past decade. Modleski’s piece was actually written a decade ago but never before published due to the author’s own uneasiness with Wishman’s films, especially the “roughies” Wishman made during the mid-1960s. In a provocative rejoinder to the often unproblematic celebrations of Wishman as an iconoclastic

feminist subversive, Modleski challenges the school of feminism that would simply ignore Wishman's often disturbing but frequently fascinating work, as well as the Wishman apologists who embrace the filmmaker and yet ignore the often violent misogyny of the films themselves. In addition to providing a much-needed critical overview of Wishman within the contexts of American feminism, the article also offers a renewed dialogue with key issues in gendered spectatorship.

In "Representing (Repressed) Homosexuality in the Pre-Stonewall Hollywood Homo-Military Film," Harry Benshoff examines a cycle of films in the 1960s exploring homosexual desire in the military. Looking at titles like *The Strange One* (1957), *The Gay Deceivers* (1969), *Billy Budd* (1962), and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967), Benshoff argues these films offer "more complex and theoretically queer ideas about human sexuality" than the supposedly more progressive "post-Stonewall" cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. In narrativizing the ambiguous borders between homosociality and homosexuality in the military, Benshoff argues these films often end up indicting the *repression* of homosexual desire rather than homosexuality itself. Benshoff's article should also remind us that art and "progressive politics" are not necessarily always linked in a teleological march toward liberation and enlightenment; rather, he suggests, the possibilities for representing queerness—like all political struggles of signification—often advance and retreat independently of developments in the terrain of conventional politics.

Building on his extensive work in documentary forms, Chuck Kleinhans's "Pornography and Documentary: Narrating the Alibi" considers the strategies adopted by sexploitation filmmakers of the 1960s and 70s to integrate images and voice-over narration. Specifically, Kleinhans concentrates on the "slippages" between image and narrator in the infamous Mondo (and Mondo-inspired) documentaries of the era, arguing that the sleazy profile of these films stems from a disconnect between traditional documentarian strategies like voice-of-God narration and expert testimony and the wholly prurient and voyeuristic images offered the spectator. In addition to providing welcome close analysis of these important (yet often repressed) examples of documentary film, Kleinhans's article will also be of interest to anyone interested in that alternative "documentary" tradition stretching from the Mondo films to contemporary

reality television, a shadow tradition to the more canonized documentarians of the past three decades.

In his study of *El signo de la muerte* (*The Sign of Death*), Colin Gunckel examines the place of the “Aztec horror film” in larger political debates over creating Mexican national identity. Beginning with the cultural policy of *indigenismo*, an attempt in post-revolutionary Mexico to align Mexican identity with the country’s pre-Columbian heritage, Gunckel demonstrates how horror films like *El signo de la muerte* (1939) and *The Robot vs. the Aztec Mummy* (1958) provided a counternarrative to the romantic valorizations of Mexico’s indigenous populations and cultures found in so much Golden Age Mexican cinema. Employing Robin Wood’s work on the Other, “surplus repression,” and the horror film, Gunckel examines how the films bracket a period of immense social and cultural transformation in Mexico, replacing the “idyllic landscapes and tragically noble Indians” of the *indigenismo* tradition with “human sacrifice, decaying corpses, and maniacal scientists.” Routinely dismissed as inferior and incoherent copies of Hollywood horror, the Aztec horror cycle is instead for Gunckel a fascinating site for the negotiation of not only indigenous peoples and heritages, but also other period transformations in class and gender.

Kevin Heffernan’s “Art House or House of Exorcism?” ends part 1 by detailing the interesting industrial saga of Mario Bava’s *Lisa and the Devil* (1973), an ambitious art horror film that debuted to good reviews at Cannes but quickly fell into a distribution void, only to emerge after the international success of *The Exorcist* (1973) in a highly compromised and critically maligned form as *House of Exorcism*. By charting the film’s unusual journey through the highs and lows of art cinema, fringe television, grindhouse circuits, and the connoisseur DVD markets, Heffernan provides intriguing insight as to how both the reception and reputation of this troubled film were significantly affected by its various venues of distribution. Based in part on interviews with the film’s producer, Alfredo Leone, Heffernan offers a fascinating account of the complicated economics behind the surprisingly intertwined art house, television, and grindhouse circuits of the early 1970s.

Part 2 begins with Kay Dickinson’s interrogation of ambivalence and cinema poetics in “Troubling Synthesis,” a discussion of how the antiseptic, cold, and seemingly detached synthesizer scoring of Italian horror movies in the 1970s

and 1980s contributed to their later vilification in the infamous “video nasties” debates in England. Dickinson explores a double ambivalence at work in these films—the seeming disjunction between sound/music and image, and the conflicting cultural meanings associated with electronic, synthesized music in the 1970s and 1980s. In this way, Dickinson finds an innovative strategy for engaging the frequently formalist question of sound/image relations, arguing finally for maintaining the power of ambiguity, both in art and in academic criticism.

Building on many of the themes in her book *Cutting Edge*, Joan Hawkins’s contribution to the volume examines the “sleazy pedigree” of art-house favorite Todd Haynes. By engaging key Haynes films like *Superstar* (1987), *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), and *Far from Heaven* (2002), Hawkins examines the dialectical relationship between art and trash in Hayne’s oeuvre. As Hawkins argues, Haynes’s work epitomizes the increasing hybridity of high and low taste cultures in contemporary cinema, producing a form of art camp that, while every bit as self-conscious as the shock metacamp of a filmmaker like John Waters, speaks to a very different strategy for integrating camp history and aesthetics into contemporary cultural production. Indeed, filmmakers like Haynes who are increasingly veterans of the cinema’s high/low debates over the past twenty years can be seen as fashioning a new cinematic voice that seamlessly integrates the art and exploitation traditions rather than simply pitting them against one another.

Matthew Hills’s article on fans of the *Friday the 13th* series (1980–2003) sets out to complicate the idea of oppositionality in the taste wars between “trash” and “legitimate” cinema. As Hills points out, slasher films in general and the *Friday the 13th* series in particular remain a cinematic pariah—clearly beyond the aesthetic/taste boundaries of quality cinema and yet most decidedly not embraced by the aficionados of “paracinema.” Dubbing these films “para-paracinema,” Hills quite persuasively (and parodically) demonstrates that even a reading protocol devoted to “transgressive bad taste” has its limits and blind spots. Hills goes on to argue that slasher films are most frequently dismissed by critics high and low for their repetitive “formulaic” structure, but then demonstrates that this “formula fallacy” is often based on outright distortions, omissions, and misreadings of the texts themselves. Rarely seen by film critics, but nonetheless frequently commented upon, the *Friday the 13th* films become for

Hills a screen on which a certain critical sensibility projects its worst nightmares about the state of film art.

Expanding on themes encountered in his always intriguing explorations of “bad” cinema in *The Hermanaut*, Chris Fujiwara focuses here on the Italian horror film *Spasmo* (1974) to explore the various implications of boredom in the realm of film aesthetics. After considering a range of theorists on the relationship between boredom, diegetic belief, and cinematic identification, Fujiwara presents a close analysis of boredom as trope, tone, and technique in *Spasmo*. In a reading that incorporates Heidegger, the cinematography of immobility, and the peculiarities of Italian postdubbing practices, Fujiwara’s essay suggests that the indeterminacy and disinterest enabled by boring cinema makes it an ideal candidate for the Situationist practices of *detournement* and *dérive*. As the opposite of “entertainment,” the boring film suspends us not betwixt and between, but in a perpetual state of waiting, thus providing a useful tool in combating the powers of mass spectacle.

In “Pure *Quidditas* or Geek Chic?” Greg Taylor further explores the critique of Farberesque cultism he proposes in the final chapter of *Artists in the Audience*. Looking at such diverse venues of geek cultdom as D. B. Weiss’s *Lucky Wander Boy*, Chuck Klosterman’s *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, and the short-lived Comedy Central series *Beat the Geeks* (2001), Taylor unpacks the contradictions of cultists who pretend to marshal superior forms of aesthetic discernment as an oppositional force yet remain wholly unable (or unwilling) to confront and/or understand the basis of their own aesthetic evaluations. In *Artists in the Audience*, Taylor warns that unexamined cultist and camp approaches to the cinema work as a corrosive force on a still maturing art form. Expanding on that sentiment, Taylor here calls for the actual hard work to be done in understanding the mechanisms and criteria of what Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel identified forty years ago as “popular discrimination”—the ability of audiences to make informed aesthetic judgments about all manner of popular culture.

Sleaze Artists concludes with my own essay, “Movies: A Century of Failure.” This piece considers the recent emergence of what might best be termed “cinecynicism,” an adversarial form of cinephilia searching for a new critical language through which to engage the worst aspects of contemporary Hollywood cinema. Using Kael’s “Trash, Art, and the Movies” as a starting point, the essay

considers how a range of “bitterly comic” and “comically bitter” film writers have elaborated a now century old fascination in film culture with cinematic failure into a sensibility that *loves* movies and yet *hates* the cinema. Once seen as the most promising and revolutionary art form of the twentieth century, film’s early colonization by commercial interests and the accompanying (and ongoing) alienation of creative labor quickly made the medium a disappointing source of frustration and lost opportunity. Over the years, cinephiles have developed endless strategies for reframing the limitations of cinema into new textual games and possibilities. But what is one to do in a world where both art cinema and Hollywood blockbusters seem clichéd and bankrupt and where the A, B, and Z catalogues of Hollywood have been completely exhausted? What can be done when the jaded cinephile faces the depressing realization that no film on earth will ever again be a genuine revelation or even slightly surprising? The cine-cynics, I argue, create a form of pop-textual play where having a position on the movies is ultimately more rewarding than actually seeing them, abandoning the futile hope for cinematic art and replacing it instead with a fascination for a larger field of cinematic practice.

Notes

1. Pauline Kael, “Trash, Art, and the Movies,” *Going Steady: Film Writings, 1968–1969* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1994), 105.
2. Greg Taylor, *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).
3. Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1966), originally published in the *Partisan Review*, 1964.
4. V. Vale and Andrea Juno, *Incredibly Strange Films* (San Francisco: V/Search, 1985).
5. Most critics of the article have critiqued it for seeming to offer an unproblematic divide between “mainstream Hollywood” and “paracinema,” or for portraying this community as too homogenous and thus ignoring the turf battles within this group. That may be true, and it may well be in my own enthusiasm for films like *Robot Monster* and *Brainiac*, the article reads in places more like a manifesto than a sober description of a subcultural phenomenon. Still, I believe the language of the article—if read closely—takes great pains to describe these “boundaries” as self-perception and self-promotion within this community, most loosely defined, and not as an attempt to lay down the law about what is and is not “paracinema” (it is described as an elastic sensibility, after all). Perhaps such critiques are the product of working with Bourdieu’s scientific, taxo-

- nomic, and spatialized categories in the first place—drawing lines of taste, distinction, and counterdistinction inevitably leads to claims that one has not done so properly.
6. Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” *Screen* 36 (1995): 371–93.
 7. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 14.
 8. Kael, “Trash, Art, and the Movies,” 89.

1 ***Sleazy Histories***

ERIC SCHAEFER

Pandering to the “Goon Trade” Framing the Sexploitation Audience through Advertising

Sexploitation films have always been a disreputable form. As “adult” titles proliferated during the 1960s, even those films that maintained the gloss of European art cinema were seen as little more than streetwalkers, classed up with better carriage and foreign accents. That disreputability also extended to the audiences for the films, the filthy old men in rumpled raincoats who peopled the public imagination. Whether it was journalistic accounts of the growing number of theaters that specialized in “dirty movies,” snide asides in film reviews, or cartoons in the popular press, the audience for adult films was characterized as a shady collection of characters at best, deviant and potentially dangerous at worst. They were “the goon trade.”¹ I want to examine the way sexploitation films were advertised and consider the ways that advertising contributed to the stigmatization of their audience—despite the fact that in reality the audience was largely comprised of “respectable” citizens. This tacit framing of the audience for sexploitation—and later hard-core pornography—eventually led to bans on newspaper advertising for these movies in many cities across the country, a ban that had serious consequences for the production of adult films in the late 1970s.

Sexploitation films emerged around 1960 in the form of mov-

ing cheesecake pictures known as “nудie cuties” (e.g., *The Immoral Mr. Teas*, 1959), a new crop of nudist camp epics (e.g., *Daughter of the Sun*, 1962), and racy foreign entries often goosed up with additional inserts of nudity and sexually suggestive scenes (e.g., *The Twilight Girls*, 1961). Low-budget and unashamedly lurid, the movies initially played in urban theaters and other failing venues, programmed by product-starved exhibitors who wanted to keep their struggling operations alive. By the end of the 1960s, however, sexploitation movies were plentiful enough, and some sufficiently improved in quality, to cross over into the showcase theaters of established chains.

The Art of the Eye Stopper

Advertising for sexploitation films came in two primary categories: trailers and print. Although copy for radio spots was sometimes included in pressbooks and prerecorded spots were occasionally made available, radio seems to have been used only sporadically, and television advertising was almost nonexistent. Trailers were the most important for sexploitation films in the early years because they were seen by the clientele that regularly patronized theaters specializing in sexploitation product. But it was the print ads that appeared in newspapers and the posters slapped up in front of theaters that were seen by the largest numbers of eyes—people who went to the movies, as well as those who would never dream of seeing an adult film. Print ads for sexploitation films were placed on the same newspaper pages with mainstream films and offered sexploitation the most direct opportunity to differentiate itself from Hollywood movies and more conventional foreign films.

As the independent sexploitation films began to appear in the late 1950s and early 1960s, members of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) were still governed by the Advertising Code for Motion Pictures. The Code stated that “good taste shall be the guiding rule of motion picture advertising,” that “profanity and vulgarity shall be avoided” and that “nudity with meretricious purpose and salacious postures shall not be used.”² Yet the confirmation of First Amendment rights on the motion picture by the Supreme Court’s 1952 *Burstyn v. Wilson* decision, the gradual erosion of the Production Code and state and municipal censorship during the 1950s, and an increasingly adult slant in Hollywood films led to more provocative ads through the period.³ Whether

it was showing off Jane Russell's most famous assets in posters for films such as *Underwater* (1955) or presenting a thumb-sucking Carroll Baker sprawled on a day bed in posters for *Baby Doll* (1956), Hollywood movie promotion increasingly favored feminine pulchritude and provocative situations. Advertising for teenpics and films from low-rent outfits such as American International Pictures (AIP) often focused on suggestive scenes or revealing costuming that seldom appeared in the films themselves (e.g., *Naked Paradise* [1957], *High School Hell Cats* [1958]). By the time *Lolita* was released in 1962, with the infamous art showing a cherry-red lollipop resting between Sue Lyon's pouting lips, the early sexploitation films were already being given a run for their money by the majors. Thus, the low-budget sexploitation film was faced with a problem: how to convince ticket buyers that their movies were more suggestive, more revealing, and ultimately more "naughty" than the increasingly "adult" pictures coming out of Hollywood—not to mention the growing crop of frank foreign films.

In his classic 1957 exposé of the advertising industry, *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vance Packard wrote of "eye stoppers," those sexy images that can arrest the eye.⁴ There was certainly nothing hidden in the persuasive power of the earliest sexploitation advertising, which relied first and foremost on eye stoppers—images of scantily clad women. Ads for nudie cuties display a great deal of similarity to the burlesque films of the "classical exploitation" era that preceded them, and which were on the wane in the early 1960s.⁵ Such images could take the form of artwork or photographs. Like burlesque films, but unlike most classical exploitation movies that had preceded them, nudie cuties made no pretense of having any educational motives or material. This was made clear in their humorous taglines and joking titles. Humor can often be found in the titles of the films themselves, which at times relied on wordplay, alliteration, and a general sense of playfulness: *The Immoral Mr. Teas*, *The Ruined Bruin* (1961), *Mr. Peter's Pets* (1962), *The Bare Hunt* (1963), *Bell, Bare and Beautiful* (1963), *Boin-n-g!* (1963), *Goldilocks and the Three Bares* (1963), *My Bare Lady* (1963), and so on. In addition to humorous titles, an accompanying use of cartoons or cartoonish imagery in nudie-cutie advertising was also standard. For instance, all of Russ Meyer's earliest films were advertised with cartoon imagery. Ads for *Eve and the Handyman* (1961) included caricatures of star Anthony-James Ryan

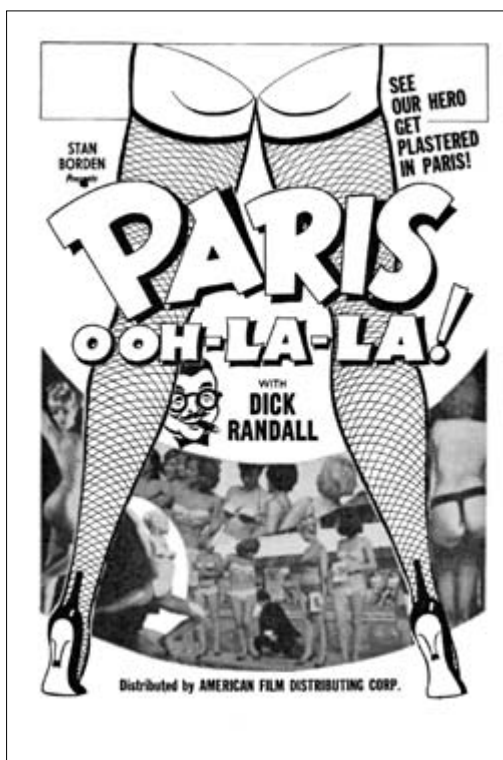


FIGURE 1 Advertising for the “nudie-cutie” *Paris Ooh-La-La* (1963) making use of humor and cartoon imagery in an effort to deflect accusations of appealing to a “prurient interest.”

wearing his handyman togs and toting a plunger. In one image he knocks on the glass door of a shower, behind which stands a curvaceous female silhouette. In other art he hauls a claw-foot tub, filled with bubbles and a smiling young woman. In each instance Ryan wears a sly smile. The ads for the film promised “You’ll NEVER See This on TV!” as a way of indicating the fare in the film was something not for general viewership. Another tagline was blatant in its dual-meaning, claiming the movie was “A Riot of Voluptuous Laughs & Sex! For the BROAD-minded adults only.” *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* (1961), David F. Friedman and Herschell Gordon Lewis’s first foray into nudie cuties, featured a cartoon Frenchman, complete with beret, ogling girls through binoculars. Not only were ticket-buyers offered “Delightful, Delectable, Desirable, Delicious Damsels Devoid of Any and All Inhibitions,” the film was served up in “Flesh-tone Color and Skinamascopé.” Similarly, AFD’s *Paris Ooh-La-La!* (1963), with Dick Randall, included a caricature of the grinning Randall along with the line “See Our Hero Get Plastered in Paris!”

The joking, fraternal nature of the advertising linked the films to traditional male smokers where stag films were screened. Just as joking and commentary served to diffuse some of the erotic tension in such homosocial situations, the cartoonish and playful strategy of nudie-cutie advertising served a similar function. To acknowledge sexual desire or the generation of lust in the ads would have been to admit that the films were made to appeal to prurient interest under the Supreme Court's *Roth* decision and thus potentially obscene. In that 1957 case, the Court held that protected expression included anything that contained "ideas" no matter how unconventional or controversial, and that the only expression that might not be accorded protection must be "utterly without redeeming social importance."⁶ Sexually oriented material was protected, according to the ruling, if it was not obscene, and obscenity could be determined only if, for "the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest."⁷ The vast majority of nudie cuties thus attempted in their advertising to displace direct erotic appeal with humor. Effective, perhaps, in avoiding censorship, such a strategy also left the films open to charges that they were juvenile, if not downright infantile, in their approach to both humor and sexuality. Writing about nudie films in 1962, David Moller described the plot of *Hideout in the Sun* as "so ludicrous that had it been intended for a ten-minute short it would have been one of the funniest, wildest ever. Spread over seventy minutes, it was like slow death."⁸ A Los Angeles critic sneered that *The Immoral Mr. Teas* "has much the same subtle, urbane wit to be found in any one of our undergraduate humor magazines."⁹ A Philadelphia judge who declined to find *Mr. Teas* obscene still said the movie was "vulgar, pointless, and in bad taste."¹⁰ Those who attended the films could also be singled out as being vulgar and having juvenile taste for their willingness to sit through such witless films. When the early nudie movies were reviewed—which was a fairly rare occasion—critics often commented on the childish nature of the films and their audience.

The two other major categories of early sexploitation, nudist movies and pseudo-art films, used other techniques to blunt potential criticism. Nudist films stressed "beauty" and "nature" in their ads. *World without Shame* (1962), for example, was the "fascinating story of young people who left civilization to commune with nature" and promised "Beauty as it was created." Topping

things off, the film was “In Beautiful Eastman Color.” *Let’s Go Native* (ca. 1962) presented “The Untold Mysteries of TRUE NATURE LOVERS!” and claimed to be “Beautiful . . . beyond comprehension!” Protected by a string of court decisions from the mid-1950s, the associations with beauty and nature provided a shield against charges that nudist films were salacious. Foreign films with an art slant, meanwhile, coupled suggestive imagery with nods to drama and emotion. Ava Leighton and Radley Metzger’s films for Audubon specialized in this strategy. Ads for the French film *The Twilight Girls*, released by Audubon in 1961, hinted at lesbian themes in the art while the taglines served up passion: “No longer children . . . not yet women . . . caught in the turmoil of their unformed emotions!” Although the ads for nudist and art films were somewhat more sophisticated than those for nudie cuties, the fact that all the films played in the same venues, often on double features, meant that they were aligned in the public’s imagination as often indistinguishable dirty movies.

Not surprisingly, most sexploitation ads in the period before the creation of the MPAA ratings system in 1968 stressed that the films were for “Adults Only!” Earlier classical exploitation films may have been pitched as “Adults Only,” but those with an educational imprimatur often permitted high-school- and junior-high-school-aged boys and girls to attend. The age of admission for sexploitation films may have varied slightly, depending on community tolerance, but seventeen or eighteen was generally the minimum age for admission. The lure of films made for adult eyes only was sufficient to set them apart from the pack of mainstream films, the bulk of which were still directed at as broad an audience as possible.

Just as sexploitation films ran the gamut from elegant European imports made in exotic locales to shabby black-and-white quickies shot in cold-water flats in New York, the ads also deployed a range of styles. Higher-end films from companies like Audubon, or movies that had crossover potential, tended to feature slick, well-designed art and copy, in many instances the equivalent of those from their major studio counterparts. David Friedman has commented that Harry Novak’s Boxoffice International often used the talents of Steve Offers. “His ads looked more like regular ads. I disagreed with that. I thought they should look like adult film ads. The art and the layout looked good, but not the copy.”¹¹ According to Joe Steinman of Boxoffice International, the company used “dif-



FIGURE 2 Sexploitation's appeals to "beauty" and "nature" in ad copy for *Let's Go Native* (1962).

ferent artists depending on the type of campaign that we are working on. The planning and inspiration behind these is always a joint effort. That is why we are able to achieve diversification in our campaigns, but the overall credit must be given to Harry Novak. He gives every campaign his personal attention."¹² Friedman's Entertainment Ventures, Inc. (EVI) and several other producers used the talents of Rudy Escalera, who made most of his money cranking out art for Azteca, a company that distributed Mexican films to Spanish-language theaters in the United States. According to Friedman, "He had great imagination. He worked from stills to create the artwork." Escalera's art is distinctive for its curvy women and use of heavy black line. Low-end companies often relied on staff at poster companies such as Consolidated in New York. Friedman claims, "They probably handled art for over 1,000 pictures."¹³

For promotional campaigns, sexploitation film producers tended to use the services of smaller accessory companies, such as Consolidated, Donald Velde, Louis Scheingarten, and Bartco, rather than National Screen Service. These

smaller companies generally offered a more limited range of promotional materials, usually restricted to trailers, one-sheets, stills, and pressbooks. In 1966 EVI joined with producers Bob Cresse and Armand Atamian to create United Theatrical Amusement (UTA), a company that produced one-sheets, pressbooks, and stills. Friedman explains, “The whole idea was to keep as much as possible under one roof.” EVI also operated a wholly owned subsidiary called Ultra Volume Photo, a photo processing operation that could crank out thousands of photos per day. “In addition to doing our stuff [EVI],” Friedman said, “they did all Cresse’s, Novak’s, UTA, Bartco, and some for Velde. They also did [Los Angeles] Dodger fan photos for a year.”¹⁴

Regardless of who produced or distributed the advertising material, as with sexploitation films themselves, the ads for the movies have a large degree of intertextual similarity. This extends from the images to the words used in taglines. Some words turn up over and over in the advertising for sexploitation films. Not surprisingly, “adult” is the most constant signifier, usually to indicate the intended audience either with “adults only” or “strictly adult.” Other words that recur repeatedly include “sex,” “erotic,” “passion,” “intimate,” “pleasure,” “love,” and variations on “lust.” “Daring,” “shocking,” “raw,” “thrills,” “lurid,” “orgy,” and “sin” also appear often. Finally, descriptors such as “exotic,” “abnormal,” and “bizarre” turn up with some frequency. Movies weren’t just in color, they were inevitably in “revealing” color (*Notorious Big Sin City* [1970]) or “throbbing” color (*Acapulco Uncensored* [1968]).

In 1966, the Supreme Court’s *Ginzberg v. United States* decision threw a new wrinkle onto the sheets in its determination that material that dealt with sex or erotica might not be obscene “in the abstract, but [could be considered] obscene when promoted by ‘pandering.’”¹⁵ The sexploitation business was on notice that even if a film itself might not be obscene, if its advertising “pandered” it could be *considered* obscene. Dual versions of ads and posters, “hot” ads for the more permissive markets and “cold” ads for the conservative ones, had been around from the earliest days of exploitation. Following *Ginzberg* they became an even greater necessity. Friedman notes, “When newspapers got too sensitive we had two sets of ads. *Thar She Blows* [1969] became *Thar She Goes*. We had ads for *Trader Hornee* [1970] with two *es* and ads with one *e*. *The Big Snatch* [1968] became *The Big Catch*. We just printed extra *Cs* that the exhibitor could substitute



FIGURE 3 The press book for 1968's *The Big Snatch* included an extra C so that newspapers in more conservative communities could promote the film as *The Big Catch*.

in the ads.”¹⁶ Boxoffice International's *Country Hooker* (1968) had ad cuts so exhibitors could substitute the title *Country Playgirls*. The pressbook for *Acapulco Uncensored* included substitute art so the film could be changed to *Acapulco Exposé* or *Acapulco Sex* “according to local tastes.” *The Daisy Chain* (1969) became simply *Daisy C.* in some ads, although they retained the image of the flower encircled by a chain to fill in those in the know. One-sheets featured either the flower and chain art at the center or a circular formation of eight nude men and women for less sensitive situations.¹⁷

Creating Appeals, Framing Patrons

By the mid-1960s ads for sexploitation films operated on two levels. At the most obvious, they were selling a single commodity, one particular film. As such, they had to intrigue potential ticket buyers with words and images, to set that