

**Review of *Cult Fiction and Cult Film:  
Multiple Perspectives*  
edited by Marcel Arbeit and Roman Trušník  
Palacký University in Olomouc, 2008**

Collecting papers read at a colloquium held at Palacký University in early September 2005, this handsomely-designed volume is an exciting contribution to cult studies generally and the cult fiction and cult film genres specifically. It includes contributions from renowned African Americanists Werner Sollors (Harvard) and Josef Jařab (Palacký) as well as other American, German and Czech scholars of American film and literary studies.

The collection begins with an erudite introductory overview of the concept “cult” and its shifts in meaning over time. Marcel Arbeit (Palacký) succinctly shows the intricacy in defining the term and universally designating a film to be cult, among other ways, by means of cult film reception, since DVD distribution has now made it a nearly impossible task to track cult film status. Arbeit sedulously reviews the critical stress in approaching cult film such as their “disjointedness” or their subversive nature, symptomatic of the innovative transgressions which meet the social needs of a postmodern subculture audience.

The question of the quality of cult films is addressed: “so bad they’re good,” that phrase aptly attests to the aesthetic challenges to the critic about the quality of cult films. Likewise cult fiction, Arbeit argues, offers critics impediments of such scope that there is no “generic [critical] approach” to this genre. Hence, this collection, comprising of fourteen illuminating essays with varied interpretations, is divided into five sections: 1) 19th Century Writers and Modernists; 2) From Camp to Cult; 3) Cult-Making and Politics; 4) Transgressions of Genre Stereotypes in Cult-Making; and finally 5) Theory and Practice of Cult: Futile or Useful?

Michal Peprník (Palacký) discusses the “myth” versus the “cult” of the noble savage in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, arguing that in *The Last of the Mohicans* Cooper transforms this myth into a cult. Without an investigation of the reception of his novels from the time of their publication, he reaches his conclusion by arguing for 1) the accurate way of reading certain passages of Cooper which are constitutive of cult;

2) the literal cult hero Uncas; 3) the crossing of dress codes and gender lines as another feature of cult fiction. As a Cooper specialist, Peprník partially succeeds in demonstrating Cooper's cult fiction writer status, but only with further research as to his reception in the first half of the nineteenth century may a more comprehensive and persuasive argument be made, as Peprník himself declares.

In the contribution of key note speaker Werner Sollors, the detached style of Ernest Hemingway, particularly his proclivity for parataxis, the elimination of subordinated ideas in sentences and an emphasis on using simple words produced hard-boiled prose of deceptive simplicity which introduced a culture of simplified colloquial speech James T. Farrell claimed was spoken on the American university campus. Hence Hemingway is positioned as a "cult" writer. Professor Sollors demonstrates how pervasive Hemingway's influence was on other writers as well as on Hollywood, particularly the film noir genre. Although Hemingway detractors show his weaker side in an era of multiculturalism, his influence was significant, and as Sollors argues, the most important of any modernist American writer.

In one fascinating essay, Bernt Herzogenrath (Goethe University, Frankfurt) not only retraces the career of the German-speaking Jewish director Edgar G. Ulmer (1904 - 1972) from Moravia to Vienna to Hollywood and Berlin (and back to Hollywood again) but employing both etymological roots to "cult" and a Freudian analysis he emphasizes the ritual worship characteristic of cult films, a characteristic continuing the tradition of the German *Schauerfilm*. Herzogenrath delves into Ulmer's (only nominally Poe-based) film called *The Black Cat* (1934) set in a Hungarian castle rendering deception in war, love and family in which the antagonist embarks on manipulation through black magic and is thwarted. In his *Bluebeard* (1943) critique Herzogenrath tells of Ulmer's uncompromising demands for artistic independence which came at the cost of his own personal finances. Convincingly linking the B-movie (of which "Ulmer was King") with cult film genre, Herzogenrath's absorbing article and his Ulmerfest conferences have undoubtedly revived critical attention to Edgar G. Ulmer's cinematography. Exuding an enthusiasm for the forgotten work of this underrated and neglected Olomouc-born movie director, this interpretation and biographical sketch point to Ulmer's influence on the more commercially-successful horror classics in Hollywood.

Professor Jařab's illuminating essay points out the contradictions about the U.S. government policy on drugs which both sponsored author Ken Kesey's experiments with narcotics and subsequently prosecuted and convicted him for carrying out these experiments. Jařab shows how his life "on the bus" made him a cult figure, not simply his enormously successful novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). In a 1992 interview Kesey emphasized two fundamentals of cult – ritual and magic – as human needs which Coca-Cola and Nike have cunningly usurped and corrupted. Significant if this volume undertaking multiple perspectives is Professor Jařab's recounting of the Czechoslovak reception of Kesey's novel and Forman's academy-award winning film version, the former translated and published in 1979, the latter banned. That Kesey was not committed to protesting the Vietnam War is consigned by Jařab to his abhorrence to following crowds.

The Canadian film director David Cronenberg, "a cult target of academic criticism," is the focus of an essay by Tomáš Pospíšil (Masaryk University). Given this select kind of popularity of Cronenberg, Pospíšil shows how critics have employed the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque, Kristeva's writing on the abject, selected attempts at reclaiming his Canadianness (which Pospíšil says are rather forced efforts) as well as Cronenberg's own attempts at visualizing McLuhan, Foucault and Baudrillard in his film *Videodrome* (1982). Cronenberg is shown to have "switched his cult audiences" from the punk teenagers at drive-ins to academics who note his more refined, less shocking though still monster-like characters. Academics particularly find his recognizable applications of cultural theory addressing their interests: "monstrous protagonists, excessive displays of violence, and portrayals of gross deviations." Pospíšil concludes that Cronenberg "give[s] us an opportunity to exercise our analytical and interpretive skills" and that makes his work appreciated by a select group of academic "worshippers."

Employing both the Internet sources for fan websites and a few books, but mostly his memory, Scot Guenter (San José State) describes personal cult film experiences as a participant in the 1970s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* phenomenon. He traces movie theatre audience members *en masse* shouting the lines of movie characters during performances of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – over the course of approximately a decade. I recall seeing this film just once as a teenager (a "virgin," as Guenter calls first-timers) and experiencing the disappointment - -

suppressed and long forgotten - - that I could not participate or “enjoy” the film because I did not know the words to the songs the audience all knew and sang, nor could I grasp at first sight any significance to the loads of fun rituals performed whiling watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. No one prepared me! Professor Guenter describes the accessories (rice – to be thrown at the wedding scene, toilet paper – to be thrown when the main character shouts “Dr. Scott!,” rubber gloves, confetti, uncooked hot dogs etc), in fact a list of thirteen props are listed and in some communities that list may not be exhaustive! All accessories have their specified place in the ritualized interactive screening of this film. Additional rituals included synchronized jumping, particular moves etc to “The Time Warp” dance choreographed by the movie actors. Audience members came specially dressed for the performance when I attended my one single screening. This first-rate article adds credibility to the “Multiple Perspectives” subtitle of this volume, for it shows the cult film experience from the perspective of an insider, something unique in an academic analysis.

Additional essays collected in this volume include articles focusing on particular cult directors such as Will Eisner, Sergio Leone, and Sam Peckinpah, and of course *Star Trek* receives deserved attention as a cult series in an essay well grounded in theory. The cult of love in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, the best first gay novel after Stonewall (Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*), the Hollow Earth motif as it relates to, among other works, Poe’s sole surviving novel, and a study of Cormac McCarthy’s commercially successful *Border Trilogy* round out the cult literature studies. This volume is a welcome addition to any library collecting material on American studies.

by Christopher Koy