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Response Paper 2

Cult Films 308

10/28/2014

Paracinema and distinguishing between high/low art films

Throughout the history of most commercial cinema it was always easy to distinguish between the world of the low brow and of the highbrow. When cinematic aesthetics were looked at as either too trashy, taboo or controversial to market to a mainstream market, such films would be listed under specific catalogs for several mail-order companies or various underground video markets. These generalizations and labels were called ‘paracinema;’ a named which was personally given by film buffs and film aficionados. Professor Joan Hawkins’s essay “*Sleaze Mania, Euro trash & High Art: The Place of European Art Films in American Low Culture*” explored the historical aesthetics on paracinema and what the specific attributes and requirements were which would label such a film.

Most commercial films that are released usually follow a conventional formula, and these formulas feel bland and uninteresting to the paracinema audience. Paracinema movies give its fans what they desire which is to witness something different, something fresh and something they had never seen before in a conventional Hollywood picture. “Paracinema consumption can be understood, then, as American art cinema consumption has often been understood, as a reaction against the hegemonic and normalizing practices of mainstream, dominant Hollywood

production” (Hawkins 7) . An easy way for the public to distinguish between the two types of films was to design a form of categorization and separate each film in a hierarchal system featuring various genres and sub-genres. Labeling such films within their specified genre or class was always a sure way to get a clueless moviegoer who hasn't yet seen the particular film a general idea on what kind of movie they were about to walk into.

What I found extremely fascinating about the Hawkins article was that many of the aesthetic elements that are found within low-brow cinema can also be found in high-brow cinema as well. Hawkins states that there was a time where art-house films like F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1931) were lumped next to drive-in cult movies like *Tower of Screaming Virgins* (1971) and *Jail Bait* (1955). Such flaws in this newly developed hierarchical system would use such popular genres like horror, melodrama and science-fiction as a way to unfairly label both low-brow and high brow films together as if they were one of the same kind of film. This categorical error within the film world would unfortunately leave many art-house classics undiscovered, unappreciated and lost in the shuffle, only finally being rediscovered and appreciated for its artistic merits decades later.

Because of the various controversial themes like promiscuous sex, stylized violence and explicit eroticism which were deeply explored throughout the European art films of the 1960's, many such art-house films like Roberto Rossellini's [*Open City*](#), Michelangelo Antonioni's [*L'Avventura*](#) and Pier Pasolini's *Salò: 120 days of Sodom* were all generalized as Eurocine-trash, and unfairly cataloged within several B-movie subgenres. “European art films are not easily located under separate catalog subheadings or listings. Many catalogs simply list film titles alphabetically, making no attempt to differentiate among genres or subgenres, high or low art” (Hawkins, 4). Essentially what this seems to say is that the specific labels put on movies have

less to do with the pure aesthetic craftsmanship of the film and more to do with the ‘affect’ that the film can cause to the spectator. Hawkins describes affect as: “the ability of a film to thrill, frighten, gross out, arouse, or otherwise directly engage the spectator’s body” (Hawkins, 4).

Rather than properly market each film separately on what each filmmaker intended their film to be, brilliantly crafted films like Tom Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), Georges Franju’s *Eyes Without a Face* (1960) and Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960) were unfortunately unfairly generalized simply because of their shocking and startling subject matter. Most films that emphasize on the attributes of the ‘affect’ are difficult for studios to market, so not knowing exactly what to do with such movies they usually tend to fall under the horror, exploitation, melodrama, porn or science-fiction genre; with the body-horror genre being the most popular and dominant among Paracinema fans (Hawkins, 5).

The one online retail store I decided to explore and scroll through was a website titled “*Sinister Cinema*.” From the looks of it the various movies the website seems to be promoting were mostly obscure B-rated titles, all with interactive links to unique categories that aren’t even listed in most basic movie stores. Much of the categorization throughout the site lists the products under genres that normally one would think would be labeled as a sub-genre: Arm-chair Fiction, B-Westerns, Drive-in Double Features, Forgotten Horror, Jungle, Juvenile Schlock, Kung fu, Poverty Row Collections, Sinister Serials, Spaghetti Westerns, Spies & Espionage and Sword and Sandal. The design of “*Sinister Cinema*” is slightly basic using mostly generic cover art from several of their B-movie advertisements. The site presents a 50’s monster movie design and with the use of its bold bright colors and flashy and tacky designs, it helps give the site a sort of nostalgic and playful character.

In many ways “*Sinister Cinema*” feels more like a 50’s time-capsule which is the perfect context for promoting several of their merchandise and memorabilia. The various principles of paracinema and of low brow cult films completely apply to the intentions of the website. The main audience that “*Sinister Cinema*” is obviously trying to attract are the paracinema crowd, especially since many of the movies are cataloged within the types of genres that cannot be found at any mainstream or popular movie site. But the most fascinating aspect of the site is that much of its media that it is selling seems to be in VHS format rather than DVD or even Blu ray. The reason this could be is because most of these B-movies are extremely obscure and rare, and so many of the titles are probably only available on VHS format. While scrolling through many of the movie titles on “*Sinister Cinema*” I began to wonder if any high-brow treasures could be somehow buried beneath much of the low-brow. Surely it happens more frequently than we believe as I pointed out earlier how it occurred with many of the European art films.

And yet Hawkins states in the article that the hierarchical system which was used to label both the low-brow and high-brow films as if they were one of the same has now dwindled off. Hawkins calls such a time ‘sacralization’ which is the unbiased mingling of both forms of art as one common culture. Could it be because of the technological advancements in social media and networking that certain obscure and unknown art-house films now have a greater chance of being discovered by the public, and what would have been stashed away as a forgotten cinematic classic thirty years ago would now have a better chance at being fully appreciated for what it truly is? Whether we like it or not, music, painting, opera, theater, and all art ultimately gets placed in a categorical hierarchy based purely on class, which Hawkins states is ‘the sacralization of culture’ (8).

And yet to generalize or label something as simply low-brow or high-brow is much too easy for something as complex as art. As I explained earlier with films like *Freaks*, *Eyes without a Face*, *Peeping Tom* or with the website “*Sinister Cinema*”; most unique works of art cannot be generalized in one simple genre or category, as the best works usually find themselves crossing over into many. “The categorical difference between low and high genres, body genres and elite art... both inside and outside the cinematic beltway is difficult to define. Even critics who make it their business to evaluate films on the basis of their artistic worth, intent, and merit sometimes find it hard to distinguish between low and high cinematic elements” (Hawkins, 7). Even critics can’t sum of the specific requirements on what makes a low brow and high brow film. No catalog is perfect and so it looks like I’ll have to keep my eyes open when entering into a video store like “*Sinister Cinema*.” How wonderful it would be to come across an undiscovered gem that is equally as high-brow and memorable as a film directed by Bergman or Antonioni.