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Cult Fiction & Cult Film: Multiple Perspectives

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Introduction

Cult Films, Cult Fiction: Plurality of Views

Marcel Arbeit

The word “cult” was originally reserved for systems of worship, religious rituals, and quasi-religious groups, as well as for devoted attachment to them. Later it extended its meaning to any object of admiration,¹ and in the 1990s it even found its way into glossy mainstream magazines, as well as onto billboards. New books and films by certain writers and filmmakers are labeled cult, even in pre-publication or pre-release advertisements, and when their works are finally presented to the public, reviewers play with the word as if it were a children’s balloon. “Cult” seems to be turning into another label devoid of any significance, an empty cliché, but there is a possibility that it is just gradually changing its meaning, becoming less elusive and more easily graspable. At the beginning of the 21st century we are far from a consensus in understanding cult in film and literature and valuing its usefulness. Nevertheless, its general overuse, together with the fact that it has become fashionable among literary and film scholars, is sufficient reason for trying to gain a deeper insight into it.

In the early 1980s, when some literary and film scholars reluctantly adopted the word “cult” into their arsenal, they used it in many different contexts, which was only partially caused by the different nature of written and visual media. Right up to these days, reader-response criteria prevail in the designation of what is and what is not cult, even though some theorists have asked the question whether some generic features characteristic for cult works could be found.

Danny Peary, who in 1981 published a book with the analyses of one hundred films he considered cult, gave only a vague definition in his foreword. In his opinion, cult movies require “controversy, in arguments over quality, themes, talent, and other matters,” and their fans, “cultists,” must discover in them “something . . . that the average moviegoer and critic have missed.”² It obviously does not matter whether the films were flops or box-office hits upon their release but a major condition is that they should not be currently distributed for a mass audience and should be shown, at most, for fans in film clubs or repertory theaters, or on

¹ See definitions of cult in *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, 3rd ed., 1988.

² Danny Peary, *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird, and the Wonderful* (New York: Dell, 1981) xiii.