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Figure 1. Grind houses on 42nd Street, ca. 1970. From *Times Square Sinema 1970,* a DVD extra accompanying *Scare Their Pants Off / Satan's Bed* (Something Weird Video, 2002).

From Exhibition to Genre: The Case of Grind-House Films

by DAVID CHURCH

Abstract: Boasting cheap tickets and lurid films, grind houses complicated Hollywood's hold on the distribution chain during the studio era. To manage this economic competition, grind houses were increasingly coded as "bad objects" through industrial and critical discourse, leading to the "genrification" of so-called grind-house films during the post-studio era.

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Today most commonly associated with the 1960s and 1970s, "grind houses" were independently operated theaters located in downtown or inner-city areas, showing double and triple features of exploitation films at all hours for a low admission price (Figure 1). Among cult film fans, grind houses are also associated with violence, sexual deviance, and cheapness—qualities reputedly shared by many of the films shown in such venues. In examining this phenomenon, I will sketch the history of these theaters to determine how and why the label "grind house" gradually expanded from a theater type to a generic term applied to a range of exploitation

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subgenres in the post-studio era. My goal is not only to complicate the current uses of the term "grind house" but also to suggest how non-normative exhibition sites are more likely to be coded generically in order to normalize Hollywood films and exhibition.

My argument proceeds from the assumption that genre is a categorizing tool emerging from historically shifting clusters of discourses; while texts may contain qualities that are associated with certain genres, it is a film's reception through culturally situated discourse that often determines its generic status. Building on Steve Neale's claim that "[c]inemas, cinema programming, and cinema specialization" are components in the "inter-textual relay" that institutions circulate to build and promote a generic framework, I argue that, as a specialized theater type, "grind house" was constructed as a generic term through industrial-critical discourses originally meant to contain the disruption of economic and cultural capital wrought by these non-normative exhibition venues.[1] While some grind houses were part of midsize theater chains (such as Brandt Theatres), they were generally operated independently of the major studios' theaters and did not enjoy the benefits of those theater circuits closely affiliated with the majors. Although their negative connotations primarily materialized during the Great Depression, the "genrification" of grind houses did not solidify until the 1950s and 1960s as theater owners, critics, and patrons positioned them as sites of non-mainstream consumption. While grind houses typically programmed genre films, the historical deployment of "grind house" as an overarching generic term linked to low culture reflects conflicts over the economic positioning of exhibition sites during and after the studio era, especially as the institutional bases of genre expanded with the rise of independent distributors. Such conflicts led to the ghettoization of grind houses in the past, though they have been viewed with nostalgic appreciation more recently.

Although primarily exploring trade and popular press discourse during the studio era, this essay will trace the term's evolution from its emergence in the 1920s to its later uses within fan culture. Since the grind house emerged from specific exhibition policies, exhibitors' publications like *Boxoffice* and *Variety* will be instrumental in determining what supposedly separated (or, in some cases, did not separate) grind houses from other theaters. Also, because New York's 42nd Street at Times Square—or "the Deuce," as it was affectionately dubbed—was long emblematic of grind houses in general, I will look at trends in how its theaters have been described in the *New York Times* since the 1920s. Finally, I will sample several decades' worth of *New York Times* display ads and several hundred archival marquee photographs (ca. 1935–1997) to determine what certain long-running 42nd Street grind houses actually played, finding a more diverse range of titles than one might expect.

Defining the "Grind" Policy. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines "grind house" as a "cinema showing a variety of films in continuous succession, usually with low admission fees and freq. concentrating on material regarded as of poor quality or little merit. Also: a burlesque theatre; a strip club." This definition suggests that the term has long connoted not only a specific site of exhibition but also films of dubious social worth. Rick Altman observes that "genre's capacity for positive identification [by

1 Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 40.

audiences and studios] is matched by a tendency to view certain genres, and thus genre production in general, as bad objects"—and, certainly, some genres are "worse" than others.[2] Tracing the historical connections between genre and grind houses will help clarify the etymology of the term "grind house," allowing us to follow the predominantly negative connotations that accreted around the term, marking grind houses as "illegitimate" places of spectacle.

The *OED* traces the earliest appearance of "grind house" to a December 1923 issue of *Variety.*[3] While *Variety* may have originated the term as part of its house slang for various kinds of theaters, the adjectival use of "grind" was most likely adopted from existing slang. The *OED,* for example, suggests that "grind house" may have derived from "grinder," meaning "a barker who works continuously in front of a single show." This connotation of "grind" can be used as both noun and verb, referring to the coercion of viewers into attending a performance through ballyhoo, as in "working the grind" or "grinding in front of the theater." Indeed, as Rialto impresario Arthur Mayer reveals in descriptions of his theater-front advertising displays and lurid retitling of films, grind houses often used garish ballyhoo.[4] Anthony Bianco also notes that in 1953–1954, "all fourteen grind movie theaters on or near 42nd Street . . . risked being closed down under the state's so-called decency statute unless they toned down their advertising displays."[5] With its connotations of sensationalized promotion and gimmickry, this definition of "grind" as coercion through ballyhoo most closely resembles the meaning of "grind policy," a common trade term that, judging from its undefined usage in the 1923 *Variety* article, probably dates from some years earlier. The term also crosses over from trade magazines to the popular press, which refers to grind houses, grind theaters, and so on. For example, a 1925 *Los Angeles Times* article reported on a labor dispute between a theater workers' union and a movie theater owners' association; the two parties eventually agreed to a pay raise of "$3 higher in suburban houses, $5 higher in downtown 'grind' houses and $8 in de luxe theaters."[6]

Underlying the central origins of the term "grind house" is the "grind policy," which refers to the screening of films continuously throughout the day and evening for cut-rate admission prices—a "grind scale" that often increased over the course of the day and peaked below the standard ticket prices of non–grind houses. On 42nd Street during World War II, for example, tickets started at twenty-five cents in the morning, eventually increasing to eighty-five or ninety-eight cents in the evening; prewar ticket prices at these houses averaged eleven to twenty-five cents.[7] By the 1930s, most 42nd Street grind houses offered midnight shows daily; common operating hours by the

2 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 113.

3 "Two-a-Day Policy Failure in Canadian Grind Houses," *Variety,* December 6, 1923, 19.

4 Arthur Mayer, *Merely Colossal: The Story of the Movies from the Long Chase to the Chaise Longue* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 174–177.

5 Anthony Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street: A History of America's Most Infamous Block* (New York: William Morrow, 2004), 133. See also "42nd Street Movies Bow to Good Taste," *New York Times,* October 23, 1954.

6 "Novel Picket Plan Foiled," *Los Angeles Times,* October 10, 1925.

7 "Grinds on 42nd Street Keep Wartime Prices," *Boxoffice,* June 18, 1949, 50-C. Photos show the Times Square Theater charging ten cents for morning shows and fifteen cents for matinee and evening shows in 1935, and the Apollo charging forty-five cents in 1962, fifty cents in 1963, and sixty-five cents in 1964.

1960s were 8 AM to 4 AM for many houses. These long hours also implied an all-day "grinding" of the projector and film prints, which caused significant wear and tear to these physical components. Somewhat uncommon during the 1920s, the grind business model assumed that higher audience turnover at cheaper ticket rates would be more profitable than the dominant, non-grind practice of offering less than half a dozen shows per day; this business model was especially different from the staggering of select seating prices at first-run picture palaces. The December 1923 *Variety* article differentiates "legitimate houses" from "grind houses," reporting that box-office returns dwindled in a Toronto grind house that tried reverting to two shows per day at higher ticket prices, because audiences used to paying grind scale for tickets did not adjust their buying habits accordingly. Furthermore, the article reports that in US theaters where "the two-a-day policy has been tried with pictures at $1.50 top in houses that have been playing a grind policy at a popular admission scale[,] the same story seems to be indicated," but "the pictures can go from a run in a legitimate house or a picture house that has a definitively established scale of $1.50 or $2 top, to a grind house and break records."[8] A 1929 *Washington Post* article also notes that twelve extended-run houses grossed $3,281,285 over a six-month period, while only eight "so-called 'grind' houses" took in $9,326,673.[9] Even from these early mentions, it is clear that grind houses posed potential economic threats to normative exhibition practices, which would become more apparent when theaters were forced to change tactics for survival during the Depression. Because of their potential profitability, grind policies were not exclusive to movie houses; such policies were also increasingly used in vaudeville and burlesque theaters beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s.[10]

Early Class Connotations of Grind Houses. The initial maligning of grind houses was partly linked to the low or mass cultural associations of cinema in general. This was especially the case when legitimate theaters facing economic peril during the Depression were converted into grind houses for movies and other "low" entertainments, marking the supposed illegitimacy of these latter tenants. A 1931 *New York Times* article, for example, laments how "the carnival spirit reigns high with burlesque shows at the Republic and the Eltinge, vaudeville at the Lyric, and a 'grind' policy of films at Wallack's. . . . What it all comes down to, if you ask for figures, is this: that of the seventy-six New York theatres recognized as being capable of playing legitimate productions, fourteen have been diverted to other uses."[11] More blatant in its awareness of the low-class connotations of the grind house is an "Elegy on Forty-second Street's Last Legitimate Theatre," which reads, "The announcement that the New Amsterdam Theatre has been sold for a 'grind' house is another indication that the old order

8 "Two-a-Day Policy Failure," 19.

9 Nelson B. Bell, "Behind the Screens," *Washington Post,* July 16, 1929. I lack figures for the comparative number of seats available in these two classes of theaters.

10 For example, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported in 1927 that vaudevillian Eddie Foy performed in Chicago "three or four times a day in one of the 'grind' theaters" (FD, "Theater," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* June 20, 1927, 17), while Bianco notes that several 42nd Street vaudeville and burlesque theaters adopted grind policies by 1932 (*Ghosts of 42nd Street,* 97, 109).

11 "The Truant Playhouses," *New York Times,* November 22, 1931.

has indeed changed. For the New Amsterdam was once the citadel of show business, aloof, aristocratic and rich."[12]

The economically undifferentiated seating in grind houses, allowing a greater intermingling of classes, may have also contributed to their eventual disrepute, as retrospectively suggested by a 1963 *Boxoffice* article on young suburbanites trekking back to the city for movies: "[T]he roadshow picture, the film that calls for reserved seats . . . like a legit stage show, gives the theatregoer a feeling of importance or status, unlike the grind show, where anybody can buy a ticket whenever he's willing to stand in line."[13] The sheer increase in patronage under grind policies arguably encouraged grind-house operators to view their patrons in terms of quantity over socioeconomic "quality," at least compared to exhibitors who prided themselves on running culturally higher establishments. For example, *Boxoffice* called for new and improved movie houses in 1940, noting that, because early 1930s "exhibitors were resting on their laurels and letting pictures do the whole job," audiences "could see pictures anywhere: in grind shops and dilapidated penny arcades if they wanted. But they had shown a preference for finer theatres and they still felt justified in favoring the finest."[14] The qualitative class differentiation between grind houses and legitimate movie houses was thus established early on, as when the *New England Film News* observed in 1932 that "[g]ood projection is just as important in a 10-cent grind house as it is in the luxurious de luxer."[15] However, despite this suggestion that audiences would opt for "better" theaters, grind houses remained profitable without drastically changing their business model or environs. Discussing the continuing success of his "all-day-grind policy," one theater manager remarked in 1943, "If we sold by the seats instead of general admission, we could give only a couple of shows a day and would have to charge more."[16] Even as grosses fell in 42nd Street movie theaters during the late 1940s, the area's ten grind houses could still afford to maintain their wartime admission prices.[17]

Cut-rate ticket prices, however, were seen as heralding cut-rate products fit only for low-culture venues. As Suzanne Mary Donahue observes, "Exhibitors rarely used cuts in admission prices to compete with other exhibitors, because the reduction in rates would lower the standard of their theaters. If third-run theater operators lowered admission prices to increase attendance, their theaters might then become fifth- or sixth-run theaters in the eyes of distributors."[18] Yet, this was often how grind houses lured patronage away from first-run theaters, though not without critical backlash. For example, a *New York Times* critic praised a handful of 1934 films for falling outside "the ordinary run of 'grind'-house mediocrity, the feeble-minded pap which the studio

12 Bernard Sobel, "New Amsterdam Lament: Being an Elegy on Forty-second Street's Last Legitimate Theatre," *New York Times,* July 4, 1937.

13 "Downtown Boston Theatres Regaining Patrons as Suburbanites Return," *Boxoffice,* January 21, 1963, NE-1.

14 Helen Kent, "In These Modern Showplaces There's an Answer to a Problem," *Boxoffice,* April 27, 1940, 56.

15 "Daily Duties of the Efficient Projectionist," *New England Film News,* November 24, 1932, 14.

16 Quoted in Emily Towe, "So That's the Movies' Trouble—There Just Aren't Enough Seats!" *Washington Post,* November 28, 1943.

17 "Grinds on 42nd Street Keep Wartime Prices," 50-C.

18 Suzanne Mary Donahue, *American Film Distribution: The Changing Marketplace* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1987), 13.

hacks manufacture like hamburger to fill exhibitor contracts." He observed that the profitability of these qualitatively exceptional films had caused the downtown grind houses at which they played to temporarily suspend their "customary weekly turnover policy," thus preventing the prints from playing in more upscale theaters on Broadway.[19] Because of the theaters' associations with "cheapness and deterioration," the programming of "quality" pictures in grind houses was consequently seen as potentially having an "undesired effect by mere association." According to one theater chain owner, "If it is a good feature, there is no good reason why it should at any time be contaminated by low-type policies which in effect imply that the pictures or the theatre or both are just postponing the last pangs of death."[20]

Grind-house operators, however, may have thought otherwise as they tallied their profit margins. As Rialto owner Arthur Mayer observed, "[C]heap pictures and poor ones have in the past been no more invariably synonymous than expensive pictures and good."[21] Mayer had purchased the failing Rialto from his mentor Sam Katz's Paramount Publix theater chain in 1936, remodeling it in a more minimalist style and adorning its entrance with outlandish ballyhoo for his horror and action double features. According to Tim Snelson and Mark Jancovich, Mayer's deliberately downmarket changes to the Rialto distinguished him from the Balaban and Katz model of high-class theater ownership that had gained mainstream acceptance by this period.[22]

During the studio era, the majors could limit the flow of their product that reached independent theaters by instituting long first runs and clearance periods. This meant that theaters unaffiliated with the majors had to find additional sources of pictures in order to remain solvent, which pushed them to turn to cheap genre and exploitation films. Although grind houses primarily played Hollywood films that eventually trickled down to them, they became increasingly associated with "low" genre films as concerns about class became more prominent during the Depression. Westerns are often cited as traditional grind-house programming, though musicals, comedies, and historical epics are occasionally cited as well.[23] The Brandt family's 42nd Street theaters were even loosely promoted by genre specialization by the 1950s: horror at the Rialto, westerns at the Times Square, action and adventure at the Victory, crime and suspense at the Empire, foreign imports at the Apollo, third-run films at the Liberty, and first-run films at the Lyric and Selwyn (Figure 2).[24]

19 Andre Sennwald, "Salute for a Brave Beginning," *New York Times,* October 21, 1934.

20 Quoted in "Ex-Michigan Allied Head Urges Change in Thinking About First Run Theatres," *Boxoffice,* November 17, 1956, 24.

21 Mayer, *Merely Colossal,* 246.

22 Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 137–138; Tim Snelson and Mark Jancovich, "'No Hits, No Runs, Just Terrors': Exhibition, Cultural Distinctions, and Cult Audiences at the Rialto Cinema in the 1930s and 1940s," in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies,* ed. Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Phillippe Meers (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). Mayer sold the Rialto in the early 1950s, and the Brandt family purchased it in 1954.

23 See Idwal Jones, "Archipenko on the Set," *New York Times,* November 10, 1935; Elizabeth Pallette, "Built by Horses," *New York Times,* February 2, 1947; and Edwin Schallert, "Carthay Hits New High With 'Ziggy,'" *Los Angeles Times,* November 29, 1936.

24 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street,* 125. See also 1954 flyer for Brandt's 42nd Street theaters, in the private collection of Jerry Kovar.

Figure 2. By the 1950s, the Brandt family's 42nd Street theaters were loosely promoted by genre specialization. Here, the Victory shows a monster double feature (source unknown, ca. 1952).

Marquee photos from the mid-1930s to late 1950s generally confirm this pattern, though exceptions flourished as films migrated from one house to another. In the 1939 article "Naughty, Bawdy, Gaudy," the *New York Times* reported on one grind house playing double features of "worthwhile foreign films" and another playing "those volatile Western 'quickies' that seldom reach New York." The films "continually being revived" along 42nd Street belonged to violent, male-oriented genres like gangster, adventure, action, thriller, horror, and western films. Titles cited include *The Big House* (George W. Hill, 1930), *Hell Divers* (George W. Hill, 1931), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1931), *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), *Viva Villa!* (Jack Conway, 1934), and *Crime Without Passion* (Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, 1934).[25] Likewise, photos exist showing *Crime Without Passion* and *The Scoundrel* (Ben Hecht and CharlesMacArthur, 1935) billed together at the Apollo circa 1950. According to Andrew Sarris, westerns by John Ford, Budd Boetticher, and Anthony Mann were hits in later years on 42nd Street, "[n]ot because the audience was especially esoteric or into John Ford, but because genre movies, action films by anybody, had become very popular there. The

25 Ezra Goodman, "Naughty, Bawdy, Gaudy," *New York Times,* July 23, 1939. The phrase "naughty, bawdy, gaudy" would become associated with 42nd Street for decades to come, as mentioned in theater owner Robert Brandt's 1980 letter to the editor of the *New York Times,* in which he resists urban renewal efforts while upholding Times Square's associations as a tourist attraction for adults ("On Times Square: How to Kill a Tourist Attraction," *New York Times,* August 4, 1980).

Figure 3. Garish theater displays for *The Grasshopper* (Jerry Paris, 1969). Pictured in *Times Square Sinema 1970,* a DVD extra accompanying *Scare Their Pants Off / Satan's Bed* (Something Weird Video, 2002).

audiences loved them, particularly the black audiences."[26]

Clearly, many of these films were at least moderately budgeted major studio fare, not just cheap exploitation and B pictures. James Naremore, for example, points out that film noirs like *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946) played in 42nd Street's grind houses, and that critics often saw such films as "inferior or disreputable" because their exhibition context was seen as sleazy, cheap, and potentially dangerous, indicating a conflation of film and theater that would continue to haunt grind houses thereafter.[27] This was partly due to the violent and provocative "advertising campaigns, posters, stills, and marquee displays" used by grind-house owners, which Neale identifies as elements of the "inter-textual relay" that circulates generic terms (Figure 3).[28] For example, license commissioner Edward T. McCaffrey's 1954 crackdown on 42nd Street film displays followed public complaints about advertising for "immoral crime and gangster pictures."[29]

Meanwhile, independent distributors like Astor Pictures, Realart Pictures, and Dominant Pictures not only dealt in B films and foreign imports but also purchased exhibition rights to (and sometimes recut and retitled) older A pictures for indefinite grind-house play. Operating from the mid-1920s to early 1960s, Astor Pictures initially specialized in westerns, then dabbled in B-grade science fiction in the early 1950s, and increasingly turned to foreign films and horror through the early 1960s. According to a *New York Times* profile of the company, major studios sold national distribution rights to Astor on a percentage basis, with president Bob Savini netting "from 10 per cent upward" by selling his "approximately sixty features and ten short subjects" in twenty-eight exchanges throughout the country. *Scarface,* for example, which "bobbed up every month or less . . . at one of the grind houses on Forty-second Street," was shown under new titles like *The Black Spider of Gangland* and *Wolves of the Underworld* for at least a decade after its release.[30] Archival photos show *The Black Spider of Gangland* and *Undercover Agent* (Howard Bretherton, 1939)

26 Andrew Sarris, quoted in Marc Eliot, *Down 42nd Street: Sex, Money, Culture, and Politics at the Crossroads of the World* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2002), 101.

27 James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 138–140.

28 Neale, *Genre and Hollywood,* 39.

29 "Hearing Is Slated on Film Displays," *New York Times,* October 7, 1954.

30 A. H. Weiler, "Life in the Old Ones Yet," *New York Times,* August 24, 1941. On the company's later attempts to market *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), see Kevin Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 113–133. In the mid-1950s, Dominant Pictures acquired rights to many 1930s and 1940s Warner Bros. gangster, action, western, and adventure films—such as *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931), *The Sea Hawk* (Michael Curtiz, 1940), *Dive Bomber* (Michael Curtiz, 1941), and *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946)—prior to their distribution on television.

sharing a double bill at the Lyric circa 1940, while the Victory paired *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932) with *San Quentin* (Lloyd Bacon, 1937), and *Marked Woman* (Lloyd Bacon, 1937) with *Each Dawn I Die* (William Keighley, 1939), as late as 1956. Titles exclusive to, or revived by, independent distributors increasingly set the tone for the genre types that would become broadly known as grind-house films.

Early Sexual Connotations of Grind Houses. On the grind house's reputation for immorality and sexual sleaziness, a semantic clarification should be made. Although terms like "grinding house" and "grind joint" are historical slang for brothels, of which Times Square had its fair share during the early twentieth century, it seems unlikely that prostitution considerably influenced the term "grind house."[31] Further, the widespread perception that the term derives from the phrase "bump and grind" (referring to the burlesque "grind" dance) is also largely incorrect, ignoring how theaters were commonly identified in the trade and popular press by their use of a grind policy. According to Bianco, the Rialto became the model that other 42nd Street grind houses followed when it began offering discount tickets to double features of subsequent-run films on an all-day schedule in 1929, two years before the first burlesque theaters even opened in the area.[32] Even if burlesque theaters sometimes survived on grind policies during the Depression, the grind dance bears little claim on, but has nevertheless (if erroneously) informed, the concept of grind houses.

Correct or not, this linguistic slippage became significant because movie and burlesque theaters were often in close proximity to each other by the 1930s, and burlesque houses often supplemented their live acts with films. By 1933, many 42nd Street movie, vaudeville, and burlesque theaters had adopted grind policies, while many legitimate theaters had gone out of business and been converted to movie or burlesque houses.[33] The Brandt family, for instance, would eventually own ten movie grind houses on 42nd Street by the early 1940s, acquisitions made all the more possible after a series of municipal efforts to stamp out burlesque between 1932 and 1942.[34] This conversion process arguably reinforced the confusion between movie grind houses and "bump-and-grind houses"—a connotation solidified in the popular imagination by 42nd Street's reputation since the 1930s as a place of sexual licentiousness.[35] In other cities, where burlesque

31 On brothels in Times Square, see Laurence Senelick, "Private Parts in Public Places," in *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World,* ed. William R. Taylor (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), 330–331.

32 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street,* 96. In *Merely Colossal,* Arthur Mayer claims he learned from his theater-owner mentors in early 1920s Chicago that "a 'grind,' in addition to being a lascivious dance, was also a theatre featuring continuous performances" (54).

33 James Traub, *The Devil's Playground: A Century of Pleasure and Profit in Times Square* (New York: Random House, 2004), 83.

34 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street,* 97, 99. See also Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 253–255; Traub, *The Devil's Playground,* 91; Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street,* 119; and Senelick, "Private Parts in Public Places," 338.

35 On the history of Times Square as "a sexual paradise" during the 1930s and 1940s, see Mark Jancovich and Tim Snelson, "Horror at the Crossroads: Class, Gender, and Taste at the Rialto," in *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema's First Century,* ed. John Cline and Robert G. Weiner (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010). On the area's place in the gay male subculture of later decades, see Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

was not under such intense attack, movie and burlesque grind houses continued to coexist in the same urban spaces until the 1950s and 1960s, when burlesque was replaced by more explicit forms of striptease.

Of course, the films shown in grind houses sometimes reinforced these sexual connotations; exploitation films, which were barred from studio-run theaters, found exhibitors in independent grind houses (and also some burlesque houses). Eric Schaefer observes that these theaters were "usually bordering the skid row neighborhoods of major cities," effectively existing "on the border between Hollywood product and the underground world of the pornographic stag reel."[36] Trade magazines played up the sexual associations of grind houses as well, as when a 1938 issue of *Boxoffice* described its suggested "selling angles" for the exploitation film *It's All in Your Mind* (Bernard B. Ray, 1937): "In the grind houses with mainly masculine patronage—which are the feature's natural outlet—the sex angle should be stressed, with semi-nude art studies featuring lobby displays and advertising."[37] Unlike mainstream cinema, exploitation films were screened for adults-only audiences, often in gender-segregated screenings if the films contained sexual content—helping create the impression that grind houses were places of sexual ill repute less suitable for women. Some exploitation films, for example, solely feature a series of filmed burlesque or strip routines.

But even though exploitation films were not the predominant pictures shown in grind houses, the theaters still became regarded as sites of gendered tastes through their programming of male-oriented Hollywood fare—especially during the 1930s and 1940s, when women constituted the majority of general moviegoers. As the *New York Times* reported, in 42nd Street's grind houses, "[a]ny opus with the Marx Brothers, Jimmy Cagney, Gary Cooper, George Raft, Spencer Tracy and the Dead End Kids is a practically infallible attraction, while Garbo, Rainer and the other languid ladies of the screen are greeted with profound apathy. Shirley Temple doesn't even cause a ripple at the box office."[38] Snelson and Jancovich argue that the Rialto's horror-heavy programming, for instance, positioned the theater "in direct opposition to a middlebrow leisure culture that was feminized through metaphors of consumption and domesticity." The theater's declared penchant for films about "mystery, mayhem, and murder" was linked to its rough-and-tumble ambience as a "dirty, ill-ventilated, uncomfortable" house—in other words, "a male paradise."[39] Such cultural distinctions would inform later conceptions of grind houses, particularly as 42nd Street theaters sought differentiation from other theaters on grind policies (and vice versa).

Increasing Ambivalence About Grind Houses. The denigration of grind houses in the trade press, subsequently picked up by critics in the popular press, was a way of distinguishing them from studio-owned theaters and independent theaters operating at higher admission scales—but this scorn was not always one sided, suggesting an

36 Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 6, 322.

37 "Exploitips: *It's All in Your Mind,*" *Boxoffice,* April 2, 1938, 72.

38 Goodman, "Naughty, Bawdy, Gaudy."

39 Snelson and Jancovich, "No Hits, No Runs, Just Terrors." Mayer promoted his theater this way in columns written for the *New York Times.*

ambivalence within the film industry about the role of grind houses. Lea Jacobs notes that theaters were classified by Hollywood "according to their location and the population they served, and were on this basis assigned a 'run' and a minimum ticket price, and thereby a place in the distribution hierarchy." Film reviewers in trade publications like *Variety* often estimated the length of a film's run, with the least marketable films consigned to perhaps "only a single day in what was called a 'grind' house."[40] Runs in grind houses were typically shorter than in other movie houses, lasting between one day and one week (though unusually popular films could be held over for weeks), and thus the theaters were seen as indiscriminately "grinding" through different pictures with little regard for their aesthetic value. Because these well-worn, subsequent-run prints were cheaper to rent than first-run prints, grind-house exhibitors could increase their own profitability and pay less to the studios; this would also allow them to compensate for the lower daily audience-turnover rate caused by the eventual institution of double features.[41] While seemingly unviable films sometimes premiered in grind houses in an attempt to quickly recoup production costs over a few days, more successful and respected films also gradually migrated to grind houses at the end of their theatrical runs, allowing Hollywood studios to mop up residual profits. This practice continued throughout the history of grind houses, giving them a subordinate—but still important—function in the distribution chain.

During the Depression, however, thrifty audiences began waiting until films moved from first-run theaters to grind houses, so several studios instituted restricted-release policies preventing their films from playing grind houses for approximately one year after release, in hopes that audiences would be unwilling to wait so long. To help compensate for the financial threat posed by grind houses, Hollywood sometimes road-showed its more expensive A films—touring the prints from city to city as heavily publicized "event" screenings, shown twice daily in legitimate theaters for significantly higher ticket prices—before eventually letting the films slide into grind runs.[42] As studio-affiliated theaters began adopting grind policies, studios could also fix above-average ticket prices (closer to road-show prices) for months after a film went from a road-show run to a grind run; after that period of restriction, independent theaters (like 42nd Street's grind houses) could then acquire the film for their own uses. For example, after *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941) played a road-show engagement on Broadway, Warner Bros. released it to the grind market with ticket rates of $1.10 instead of the usual grind scale of seventy-five cents, and they would not allow exhibitors to lower this price for one year.[43] On 42nd Street during the Depression, the Brandts convinced the major

40 Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 19. *Billboard* reported that the supposedly unmarketable *City Girl* (F. W. Murnau, 1930) would only be released into a New York theater described as a "home of double features and a 16-hour grind" (quoted in Janet Bergstrom, "Murnau in America: Chronicle of Lost Films," *Film History* 14, no. 3–4 [2002]: 447), while *Variety* described the B western *Ridin' for Justice* (D. Ross Lederman, 1932) as "best suited for the double bills or lesser grinds" ("*Ridin' for Justice*," *Variety*, January 5, 1932).

41 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street*, 101.

42 See Nelson B. Bell, "Cecil B. De Mille's New Historical Pageant, 'The Crusades,' Is Mammoth Work," *Washington Post*, September 25, 1935; Nelson B. Bell, "Glorified Exploitation Eliminates the Passé 'Road Show' Picture," *Washington Post*, July 16, 1939.

43 "Of Local Origin," *New York Times*, July 28, 1941.

studios to let them play first-run films in several of their grind houses, provided they did no advertising that could draw customers away from the higher-priced, studio-owned theaters. As Bianco notes, this arrangement profitably broadened the majors' Manhattan distribution without hurting their own theaters, while allowing the Brandts' Lyric and Selwyn theaters to bill themselves as showing first-run films.[44]

Adding to the potentially disreputable connotations of grind policies was the growing tendency of grind houses to show double features. According to Douglas Gomery, double features were still uncommon during the 1920s, but economic hard times during the 1930s caused audience expectations to change, leading to double bills filled out with subsequent-run A films, B films from the major studios and Poverty Row, and films from independent distributors.[45] Double features did not always dominate at grind houses, since single films sometimes played all day under a grind policy, but grind houses increasingly showed double features as they became the standard exhibition practice for most movie theaters by the late 1930s, and continued to do so long after the era of mainstream double features ended in the late 1950s.[46] Concerned about length and quality, some critics were skeptical about whether double features would help or hinder sales; said one in 1935, "The double feature is not the solution for better business. It is more likely that the double feature is responsible for the slump. Did you ever watch a guy come out of a double feature bill? He's a little punch drunk."[47] Although the public was also initially resistant to double features—Gomery cites a 1937 poll that found that "only one-fifth of those surveyed would attend a double feature when given the opportunity to go to a single feature"—audiences eventually swarmed to them in all kinds of theaters.[48]

Because of these industry-wide changes, the term "grind" occurred in both the trade and popular press in the 1930s with some regularity, accompanied by less explicit cultural biases in straight reportage, despite the continuing low-culture associations of grind houses. For instance, announcing the premiere of *Mata Hari* (George Fitzmaurice, 1931) at Grauman's Chinese Theater, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "Garbo has always played at the 'grind' theaters and has only had one big premiere of any kind in the center of moviedom during her career."[49] Although here clearly positioned outside the "center of moviedom," the marginalization of grind houses was complicated by the fact that more and more theaters were forced to reluctantly adopt grind policies and double features to stay afloat financially during the Depression years. Ironically, only three years after *Mata Hari*'s opening at Grauman's, the *Washington Post* reported that even "Grauman's Chinese, once a world premiere movie palace, is now showing double features on a grind policy."[50] Grind policies were thus not solely restricted to

44 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street,* 125.

45 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures,* 77–79.

46 The 1939 *WPA Guide to New York City* observed that 42nd Street's "famous theaters have been converted into movie 'grind' houses devoted to continuous double feature programs." Quoted in Brooks McNamara, "The Entertainment District at the End of the 1930s," in Taylor, *Inventing Times Square,* 186.

47 Sidney Skolsky, "Hollywood," *Washington Post,* May 31, 1935. See also Ben Shlyen, "The Double Feature Program," *Reel Journal,* June 26, 1926, 3.

48 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures,* 77.

49 Edwin Schallert, "Records Upset by 'Shy' Garbo," *Los Angeles Times,* January 20, 1932.

50 Skolsky, "Hollywood," 18.

independent theaters during the era of vertical integration. For example, Grauman's was part of National Theatres (affiliated with the near-bankrupt Fox) when it took up a grind policy in the mid-1930s, and New York's Astor Theatre was a Loew's house when it opened its grind policy with the upscale *Pygmalion* (Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard, 1938) in December 1938.[51] New York's Paramount Theatre had a grind policy prior to mid-1934, the removal of which would supposedly allow "only the cream of the photoplays" to be shown as long as public demand held out, "break[ing] up the deadening 'grind' policy of the large cinema cathedrals" and "automatically assist[ing] in improving the entertainment level of the Broadway film sector."[52]

How, then, did grind houses garner increasing disrepute if grind policies and double features became normalized in studio-owned theaters during the 1930s and 1940s? The growing ambivalence about exhibition traits most often associated with grind houses was accompanied by an intensifying industrial and critical scorn for independent downtown grind houses, which had to be posited as "bad objects" from which "better" theaters could be differentiated. Like the public debate over the "problem" of double features, such ambivalence inflected attitudes about the moviegoing experience beyond the realm of industrial discourse. The 42nd Street grind houses themselves also aimed at differentiation from studio-owned theaters (even as they capitalized on subsequent-run Hollywood films), whether by reviving violent, male-oriented films, by treating their creeping decrepitude as a positive mark of cultural distinction, or by playing exploitative films largely unavailable elsewhere. Like Mayer's scorn for the supposed feminization of films and exhibition sites, skepticism toward "mainstream" Hollywood marked the attitudes of some grind-house operators. In 1938, for instance, Harry Brandt, head of the Independent Theater Owners Association of New York, released ads "blasting the studios for their reliance on over-the-hill stars" like Fred Astaire, Joan Crawford, and Marlene Dietrich—all stars of films traditionally considered "feminine" and "box-office poison" in his family's grind houses.[53] Consequently, grind houses were increasingly seen in the trade and popular press as theaters "where programs must be sanguinary above all else."[54]

The press also singled out downtown grind houses for their moral laxity, focusing on the culturally lowest pictures screened and negatively coloring the more reputable films that did play there. For example, the *New York Times* observed in 1939 that the "general loosening of moral standards which always accompanies war was being discounted in advance by a grindhouse in West Forty-second Street, which was advertising the Balinese [*sic*] film, 'Isle of Paradise,' with the following blistering legend on the marquee: 'Hell Breaks Loose on an Island of Virgins.'"[55] According to Schaefer, such exploitation films "often gave the impression of resistant or alternative positions

51 "New Admission Scale at Astor Under Grind Policy," *Boxoffice,* December 3, 1938, 17.

52 Sennwald, "Salute for a Brave Beginning."

53 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street,* 99; and "Exhibitors Dare Big Stars to Sue," *New York Post,* May 5, 1938.

54 "Exploitips: *Black Dragons,*" *Boxoffice,* March 7, 1942, 275.

55 B. R. Crisler, "Bulletins and Comment," *New York Times,* September 17, 1939. *Isle of Paradise* (Charles P. Trego, 1932) was actually an American film exploiting Bali's supposed exoticism through the sexual objectification of its female "natives."

to mainstream films," becoming "constructed as 'renegade' movies by the mainstream picture industry and, to some extent, by the exploiteers themselves." Although exploitation films did not make up the bulk of titles shown in these theaters, the "regular 'home' for exploitation movies . . . was in grindhouses in the skid row sections of cities across the country."[56] Schaefer quotes Ruth A. Inglis's 1947 description of the so-called sex circuit as constituted by "cheap theaters in the downtown areas of large cities featuring horror pictures and sex thrillers for transients."[57] In collapsing several genres together as typical fare for "transients," the notoriety of grind-house content was thus also linked to lower-class connotations. Inglis was attacking not just the alleged cheapness of the films shown but also the character of the people who frequented the theaters. These connotations became more prominent with the ghettoization of inner-city areas during the post-studio era.

Grind Houses in the Post-studio Era. Unlike audiences for legitimate theaters, the "undesirables" who patronized burlesque theaters in the 1930s did not "spin off" trade to middle-class businesses on 42nd Street. Instead, they allegedly depressed the surrounding area's property values—a major reason why burlesque was eventually driven out of New York.[58] Similarly, grind houses were seen not just as objects of moral condemnation but also as a major impediment to Times Square's economic recovery and the return of legitimate theater during the postwar era.[59] In these years, however, 42nd Street's economy diminished not because of the presence of grind houses there, but rather because of the growth of television and, more important, because of "white flight," when many white people moved to the suburbs, while minorities increasingly moved to inner-city areas.[60] Subsequent efforts at urban renewal were often veiled attempts to gentrify these areas by forcing out minorities, such as the African American audiences who later made 1970s blaxploitation so successful in grind houses.[61] Revisions in Times Square's zoning codes in 1947 and 1954 further contributed to the area's ghettoization by allowing an influx of peep-show arcades and adult bookstores.[62]

Nevertheless, in a 1960 "Study in Decay," the *New York Times* alleged that the 1930s conversion from legitimate theaters to movies had led to 42nd Street's decline within less than five years. "Much criticism is directed at the ten motion picture theatres . . . known as 'grind joints,'" says the article. "Some of these theatres emphasize sex and violence in their street displays, and it is suggested that these displays tend to attract undesirables, especially in the late hours. Many contend that a woman alone is not safe in such a movie; that male perverts use them as places to meet and to misbehave, and that

56 Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!,"* 39, 119, 340.

57 Ruth A. Inglis, quoted in Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!,"* 119. See also Ruth A. Inglis, *Freedom of the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 42–43.

58 Allen, *Horrible Prettiness,* 252–253.

59 See Herman Wouk, "Proposal for Renewal," *New York Times,* September 10, 1961; and Arnold H. Lubasch, "Broadway Finds Builders Scarce," *New York Times,* September 30, 1962.

60 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street,* 123.

61 Blaxploitation films were sometimes dismissed under racially tinged reviews like "bone-headed black chop-socky pic for grind houses" ("*TNT Jackson,*" *Variety,* February 19, 1975).

62 Senelick, "Private Parts in Public Places," 339.

the general atmosphere of the theatres breed crime."[63] Such discourses about danger and criminality accentuated the gendered appeal of the male-oriented films shown in these "masculine" places. Indeed, Joanne Hollows argues that the cult fandom accruing around grind-house films (and films related to the phenomenon) in later years partly stemmed from their original exhibition in spaces considered unsafe and uncomfortable for women. Not only were the grind houses themselves coded as masculine spaces, but the theaters were located in the inner city and often in close proximity to porn-exclusive cinemas in the 1970s. Some years later, the male cultist could imagine himself a "manly adventurer" into an illicit, antidomestic world of sleaze—even if this access to cult films came via a VCR safely positioned in his living room.[64]

In sum, grind houses were increasingly coded as deviant places differentiated from other independent theaters following the end of Hollywood's vertical integration, furthering the stigmatizing discourses about grind houses that had appeared since the early years and leading to the increased use of "grind house" as a generic identifier. As Altman observes, "Only when compared to the exhibition system that sustains it does a particular generic configuration reveal its debt to exhibition institutions." Since "exhibition circumstances may destabilize generic identification," the adjectival deployment of "grind house" complicated earlier generic labels by offering an alternate means of categorizing genre films according to standards of quality, tone, and taste that were supposedly different from the Hollywood product and its now-threatened dominance over mainstream exhibition.[65]

Without guaranteed distribution through their own theaters, major studios had to scale back production quantity, necessitating the elimination of B films, while increasing their investment in fewer, but larger-budgeted, films, in hopes of creating blockbusters.[66] To make themselves seem a more economical choice to audiences than other theaters, grind houses retained double and triple features, inadvertently enhancing the apparent cheapness of their product. Arguing against what was increasingly seen as typical grind-house fare, critic Bosley Crowther complained in 1960 that with "so much blather about the only films made these days being 'big ones' or very sophisticated items," people had overlooked the growing threat "pouring into the cheap grind houses and some of the better-class neighborhood theatres": violent films with "the qualifications to give vicarious kicks to creeps and kids, despite the cheapness

63 Milton Bracker, "Life on W. 42nd St.: A Study in Decay," *New York Times,* March 14, 1960. While 42nd Street's photographic record dates from its earliest years as an entertainment center, nocturnal images of grind-house marquees feature prominently by the early 1950s, increasing over the next three decades. Men are often pictured crowding around the colorful posters and lobby displays, while women are scarce. Especially in later years, 42nd Street marquees became markers of crime and deviance in films like *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969), *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971), and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), and in a number of the exploitation movies filmed there, such as *Fleshpot on 42nd Street* (Andy Milligan, 1973), *The New York Ripper* (Lucio Fulci, 1982), and *Basket Case* (Frank Henenlotter, 1982).

64 Joanne Hollows, "The Masculinity of Cult," in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste,* ed. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 41. The proliferation of porn programming made 42nd Street emblematic of the evils of pornography for some feminist protest groups, as exemplified by Women Against Pornography's October 1979 march on Times Square.

65 Altman, *Film/Genre,* 91.

66 Neale, *Genre and Hollywood,* 242.

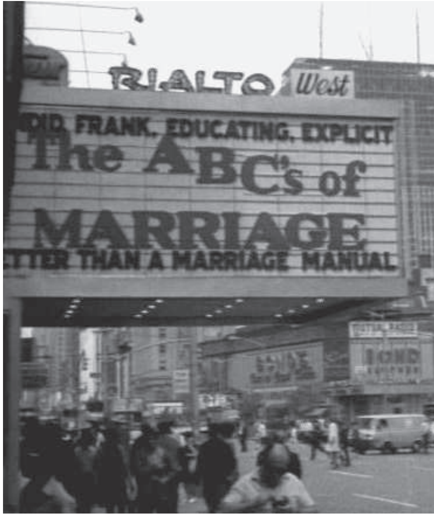

Figure 4. Sexploitation at the Rialto. Pictured in *Times Square Sinema 1970,* a DVD extra accompanying *Scare Their Pants Off / Satan's Bed* (Something Weird Video, 2002).

of their production and the inferiority of their quality."[67] He cites films like *Dragstrip Girl* (Edward L. Cahn, 1957), *A Bucket of Blood* (Roger Corman, 1959), *Diary of a High School Bride* (Burt Topper, 1959), *The Purple Gang* (Frank McDonald, 1959), *Vice Raid* (Edward L. Cahn, 1960), and *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* (Budd Boetticher, 1960).

Meanwhile, independent producers and distributors could operate in a much larger percentage of the marketplace, often targeting select audiences with films once impermissible under the now-faltering Production Code. With this increased permissibility, classic exploitation films ceased to be marketable, but more explicit subgenres like sexploitation took their place in grind houses over the next two decades.[68] Marquee photos, for example, show the Victory and Rialto turning to sexploitation programming around 1966 (Figure 4). Such films were seen as financially bolstering the "wrong" theaters and creating the "wrong" audiences; as one theater chain executive explained in 1970, "I believe we have been creating a new and specific audience which will continue to demand the stag [*sic*] films. I say, let them get their prurient kicks in the kind of grind mills which are springing up all over."[69] Indeed, Schaefer argues that "with advertising appeals based on excitement, adventure, curiosity, and experimentation, the profile of the sexploitation consumer was constructed as someone who was abnormal," and sexploitation was linked to anxieties about the negative effects of "urbanism" and the supposed "collapse of neighborhoods into cesspools of prostitution, crime, and decay"—despite sexploitation patrons actually being "'average' in almost every respect."[70] Supposedly catering to lurid tastes, the grind house became stereotyped as, in the words of *New York Times* theater critic Clive Barnes, "a semi-pornographic theater not considered worthy of a critic's attention, at least not a critic on duty."[71]

From the mid-1940s, however, grind houses increasingly played foreign films that sometimes overlapped with films shown in art-house theaters. Art houses were another

67 Bosley Crowther, "Lesser Evils: Considering the Cheap and Violent Films," *New York Times,* February 7, 1960.

68 Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!,"* 337–339.

69 "Exhibitors Urged to Combat Steady Flow of Sexploitation Releases," *Boxoffice,* November 23, 1970, K-2.

70 Eric Schaefer, "Pandering to the 'Goon Trade': Framing the Sexploitation Audience Through Advertising," in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics,* ed. Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 34–35.

71 Clive Barnes, quoted in "Arts in the 60s: Coming to Terms with Society and Its Woes," *New York Times,* December 30, 1969.

alternative exhibition context that became genrified in the postwar era through their supposed difference from mainstream Hollywood exhibition. These theaters were also clearly profit driven, however, with conversion to art houses used as a way for many theaters to stay financially afloat when "art-house films" became highly profitable in large cities.[72] As Barbara Wilinsky observes, "Grind houses, predominately run by independent operators, searched, like art houses, for inexpensive films to fill their screen time. Foreign films offered these theaters, like art houses, a practical alternative. Not surprisingly, these theaters tended to promote the sensational attractions of art films."[73] The theaters sometimes even retitled films to exploit the sexuality associated with exoticized European imports. According to Mark Betz, 1950s and 1960s European art cinema and American sexploitation were often similarly advertised, "condens[ing] high and low codes of visibility and identification" by making artsy imports seem more lurid than they might actually be.[74] For example, Arthur Mayer imported and distributed *Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945), which ran for a hundred weeks in the Times Square area, assisted by misleadingly sexualized advertising, before moving to first-run theaters elsewhere in Manhattan.[75] Such programming supports Jancovich and Snelson's observation that merely playing art films did not make a grind house an art house.[76] The Apollo, for example, played many prominent European art films but was still regarded as a grind house because of its immediate proximity to grind houses playing exploitation fare—and it eventually adopted such fare as well, retrospectively coloring its prior programming.

As the influx of foreign films continued, attempted concessions to cultural distinction continued on the part of some grind-house owners, even if using sex to sell tickets was still the bottom line. As Bianco notes, in the mid-1960s, the Rialto began programming "class sex" films—artsy foreign productions like *I, a Woman* (Mac Ahlberg, 1965)—while the cheaper American sexploitation it formerly showed moved to the Globe. Grind houses continued to be highly profitable during this period, with 42nd Street's ten theaters selling nine million tickets in 1965 alone.[77] Crowther described them as theaters "where one may find anything from a revival of a distinguished and esoteric French film to a 'nudie' or 'striptease' whatnot."[78] Film critic Judith Crist lamented this collapse of cultural distinctions, complaining that "grind movies" were only "American films . . . distinguished by their sub-Warhol cheap production, their technical and artistic ineptitude and their perpetual search for a moral overtone or conclusion after the depths of depravity . . . had been lovingly probed." By contrast,

72 Mark Jancovich, "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital, and the Production of Cultural Distinction," *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2002): 315–316.

73 Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 124.

74 Mark Betz, "Art, Exploitation, Underground," in Jancovich et al., *Defining Cult Movies,* 210.

75 Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters,* 111, 125–126.

76 Jancovich and Snelson, "Horror at the Crossroads," 122.

77 Bianco, *Ghosts of 42nd Street,* 148. See also "Bingo Brandt's 'Class Sex' Cellar as Mate for His One-Theme Rialto," *Variety,* April 10, 1968, 14; and "Lurid but Profitable 42d Street Hopes to Survive New Cleanup," *New York Times,* March 26, 1966.

78 Bosley Crowther, "Movies—a Never-Ending Flow," *New York Times Magazine,* April 19, 1964, 38.

Figure 5. Hard-core pornography was common on 42nd Street by the 1970s, as pictured in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (Columbia Pictures, 1976).

European imports like *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (Vilgot Sjöman, 1967) were, she sarcastically noted, seen as "high-class (i.e., subtitled and/or censorship-prone and thereby highly publicized) stuff that one cannot demean by [labeling as] 'grind.'" Frustrated that an exploitation filmmaker tired of being limited to 42nd Street could "dub his movies into Danish, Swedish, or possibly Esperanto, sub-title them, and make the better art houses," Crist implied that lurid European imports and homegrown sexploitation should be regarded by critics as synonymous.[79] A satirical 1970 *New York Times* article makes a similar suggestion, profiling a fictional exhibitor with a hired staff of "tweeny" writers who write the pretentious dialogue between sex scenes in foreign films; these "auteur" scripts are then smuggled to Europe, filmed, and imported as art films, which were seen as more philosophical, timely stuff than "the 'grind' movies shown along Eighth Avenue and the Times Square area."[80] By and large, film critics typically understood the films playing in grind houses as culturally low, because of the alleged cheapness and sleaziness of the venues, even if potentially "art-worthy" films may have occupied those spaces, albeit reframed as sleaze. These connotations were aided by the early-1970s transition from soft-core sexploitation to hard-core pornography in and near some grind houses (Figures 5–6).

Meanwhile, some Hollywood films continued to play in grind houses at the end of their theatrical runs throughout the post-studio era, especially if those films fell into male-oriented genres. As United Artists' advertising and publicity director said in 1952, the average movie played first-run theaters for one week, moved to neighborhood circuits for approximately another week, and then "goes into the cheap 'grind'

79 Judith Crist, "Bumping the Grinds," *New York Magazine,* March 10, 1969, 54–55.

80 Arnold M. Auerbach, "How to Tweeny Up Those Orgy Scenes," *New York Times,* January 11, 1970.

Figure 6. *Taxi Driver* highlights the pornographic titles playing in theaters on 42nd Street (Columbia Pictures, 1976).

houses and in six months it's dead."[81] On 42nd Street, the Brandts often paired subsequent-run Hollywood films according to the male stars they featured (pairing two Jimmy Stewart films, two John Wayne films, two Bowery Boys films, and so on). They might also capitalize on current showbiz scandals, pairing *Elephant Walk* (William Dieterle, 1954) with *Bundle of Joy* (Norman Taurog, 1956) at the Empire, for example, when news of the Eddie Fisher–Elizabeth Taylor affair broke in 1959. Consequently, actual grind-house programming was considerably more diverse than was often supposed, but critics still focused on the cheapness, luridness, and inferiority of films (Hollywood produced or not) that were more likely to spend the majority of their theatrical run there. According to Altman, "[P]erhaps the most important tactic in the genre world consists in naturalizing one's own discursive claims . . . by attributing to the text itself goals and functions proper to producer, exhibitor, spectator, or critic."[82] If so, then the genrification of grind-house films rests on such reductive interpretations of typical grind-house programming, marking films and theaters alike as somehow different from acceptable, mainstream consumption.

As in the studio era, male-oriented genres continued to be popular in grind houses, but now coexisted with other genres and subgenres introduced through increased importation of foreign pictures that were not necessarily art films (spaghetti westerns, kung fu, and chambara films), and through loosened censorship restrictions that allowed films to seemingly enter the American marketplace with no greater aim than to make money by appealing to the basest instincts (such as sexploitation and mondo films). Hollywood films ending up in grind houses were not automatically deemed "grind-house films," though films relegated to grind houses for their violent, cheap, or lurid content more likely were. As Kevin Heffernan argues, the immediate post-studio

81 Rick Altman, quoted in Stanley Frank, "Sure-Seaters Discover an Audience" (1952), in *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition,* ed. Gregory A. Waller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 257.

82 Altman, *Film/Genre,* 101.

era of the 1950s saw production shortages that imperiled small independent theaters. Because the major studios' overall output had drastically dropped, small theaters turned toward booking (and even began financing) cheap genre pictures to fill their programming schedules. This allowed companies like American International Pictures and Allied Artists to capitalize on the product shortage by producing exploitation films that would help set the standard for grind-house programming as years went by.[83]

With these connotations of aesthetic, moral, and economic poverty, the term "grind-house film" became synonymous with the postclassical "exploitation film" in both fan and popular discourse, increasingly operating as a generic adjective by the late 1960s.[84] Of course, so-called exploitation films in the post-studio era of increased permissibility and distribution were not as formally distinctive as classical exploitation had been.[85] "Exploitation" is an overarching generic label loosely applied to various genre products, though it usually classifies films on the basis of budget, style, and sensibility. Exploitation films are popularly seen as cheap, excessive spectacles in bad taste, often directly appealing to the (male) viewer's body; likewise, they are typically assumed to be shown in cheap, sleazy places like grind houses, drawing audiences through spectacularly lurid advertising. Sensationalized subject matter was often used to help compensate for a low-budget film's lack of bankable stars because, as Heffernan notes, "[t]he aging actors from the studio era were only slowly being replaced by younger performers with box-office appeal for younger audiences." This meant that "without a star name even a moderately budgeted film was treated like a programmer [i.e., a supposedly undistinguished film that could be indiscriminately slotted into any theater's bill] in the marketplace."[86] While excess and low production values may be discernable textual qualities, the genrification of those qualities as "exploitation" was largely determined by reception, including where the films were shown. This conflation of theater type and exploitation product was also shared by drive-in theaters, another alternative exhibition context often disparagingly used as a generic signifier ("drive-in movies") in the postwar era, arguably in reaction to the rise of drive-ins as a lucrative, nonmainstream market from the 1950s to 1970s. For example, *Variety* deemed *Messiah of Evil* (Willard Huyck, 1975) an "arty, badly-plotted horror film. For grind houses and ozoners [drive-ins]."[87] There was no clear transition between the noun "grind house" and its adjectival use as a genre—especially given coexisting variants like "grinder" and "grind film," used haphazardly to describe both theaters and films. I have also found no evidence that producers or distributors publicized their own offerings as "grind-house films."

83 Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold,* 64–72.

84 Noteworthy books that treat "grindhouse" and "exploitation" cinema as synonymous include Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford, *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square* (New York: Fireside, 2002); and Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris, *Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of "Adults Only" Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996).

85 On the formal and stylistic traits of classical exploitation, see Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!,* 56–95.

86 Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold,* 95.

87 "*Messiah of Evil,*" *Variety,* April 30, 1975.

Though not marketing exclusively to grind houses, independent distributors largely fueled grind-house programming during the postwar explosion of independent production and international imports, dominating the grind-house market more than similar companies had in the studio era. After fronting money to distributors for test marketing, subdistributors purchased prints of successful films.[88] Independent distributors supplied the majority of titles today generically labeled "grind-house films," operating primarily during the supposed 1960s–1980s heyday of grind-house cinema, when "grind-house film" solidified as an overarching generic epithet for various exploitation genres. Major distribution companies included American Film Distributing, Aquarius Releasing, Bryanston Distributing, Cambist Films, Cannon Film Distributors, Cinemation Industries, Continental Distributing, Crown International, Dimension Pictures, Distribpix, and Embassy Pictures.

Other distributors were also prolific production companies in their own right, marketing their own and others' product into grind-house circuits; these companies included American International Pictures, Audubon Films, Boxoffice International, Entertainment Ventures, and New World Pictures. Moving into low-budget exploitation production was seen as easier than sifting through films that other distributors had already rejected, and it offered a means of competing with the spectacular genre pictures increasingly made by the major studios—though Donahue notes that these producer-distributors often initially "ask[ed] for a large acquisition price from a major by using self-distribution as the threatened alternative" if an independent film seemed potentially profitable.[89] And just as subsequent-run Hollywood films crossed into grind houses, more typical grind-house fare could also move into more respectable venues—with grind houses still posited as the "threateningly" alternative exhibition site. Bryanston Distributing, for example, achieved notable crossover success with *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), two films seemingly destined for grind houses which nevertheless found considerably wider audiences in more mainstream theaters.

According to Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford, even though each 42nd Street theater maintained exploitation subgenre specializations, "the same triple feature could end up ping-ponging up and down the street, through three different grindhouses, in one week."[90] Marquee photos and newspaper ads indicate that there were indeed specializations for several theaters—westerns still dominated at the Times Square, the Apollo maintained artsy imports, and the Victory mostly played sexploitation—but most theaters' programming blurred into a mishmash of westerns, horror, action, martial arts, sexploitation, hard-core pornography, and subsequent-run Hollywood product. Exploitable generic elements remained especially attractive for distributors

88 Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express,* 66; Donahue, *American Film Distribution,* 216.

89 Donahue, *American Film Distribution,* 214, 216–217. Donahue also profiles a number of the independent distributors mentioned in the text (219–244).

90 Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express,* 4. Subgenre specialization allegedly included sexploitation and "porno chic" films at the Globe; exploitation and subsequent-run Hollywood hits at the Lyric; gore, gender-bender, and foreign spy films at the Anco; horror and sexploitation at the Rialto; westerns, kung-fu, and mondo movies at the Times Square; "roughies" and women-in-prison films at the Harris.

and exhibitors; as one distributor involved in the transition of exploitation films to home video said, "If it's an action movie, a thriller, a horror picture, we buy it sight unseen. If it's some kinda drama, some picture with a lot of dialogue, we might want to look at it first to make sure it's not all talk."[91]

While Landis and Clifford's emphasis on exploitation films oversimplifies the range of films shown at these theaters, it suggests the public visibility of certain subgenres that have gained prominence in the fan imagination, thus reflecting the popular parameters of subcultural appreciation for "grind-house cinema" that intensified in the home video age. Although grind-house movie fans may celebrate the soft-core antics of sexploitation, they tend to acknowledge but downplay the hard-core porn that increasingly occupied grind houses during the 1970s "porno chic" era, which led some grind houses to permanently convert to porn programming. While detractors often conflated porn-exclusive theaters and other grind houses, many fans distinguish between grind-house films and hard-core porn films, the latter of which were typically distributed by different companies.[92] With the grind-house marketplace increasingly dominated by porn, exploitation producers and distributors were further wounded by competing in an atmosphere of growing industry-wide advertising costs, while audience tastes shifted toward the major studios' blockbuster genre films.[93] As Roger Corman said upon selling New World Pictures in 1983, "It's very difficult to persuade an audience to pay money to see a $1,000,000 film when they can pay the same amount of money to see a $20,000,000 to $30,000,000 film."[94]

Grind-House Films in the Post-Theatrical Period. Grind houses ceased to be viable in the 1980s, largely because of the growth of home video. Influential fanzines like Michael J. Weldon's *Psychotronic Video* (1980–2006) and especially the late Bill Landis's *Sleazoid Express* (1980–1983, 1999–2007) sprang up as the exploitation titles formerly played by grind houses were quickly released by video distributors struggling to fill their release schedules. Meanwhile, writing on behalf of the Brandts, sociologist Herbert Gans observed that the 42nd Street Development Project's urban renewal plans aimed "to move out lower-income citizens and taxpayers and to replace them with more affluent ones," to say nothing of the conspicuously nonwhite and homosexual populations to be displaced (Figure 7).[95]

With not even pornography able to keep them afloat in the video age, most grind houses on 42nd Street and elsewhere closed by the late 1980s, spurring fannish nostalgia for this lost experience. Director Frank Henenlotter exemplifies this view:

> I'd much rather see films in a movie theater with a group of people, especially in the kind of run-down fleabags that played them—somehow the more peel-

91 Ken Hartford, quoted in Donahue, *American Film Distribution,* 218.

92 Alan M. Kriegsman, "Tarnished Palaces: Downtown Theaters Hold On by the Skin of Their Flicks," *Washington Post,* February 14, 1971.

93 Donahue, *American Film Distribution,* 215–216.

94 Roger Corman, quoted in ibid., 228.

95 Herbert Gans, quoted in Lynne B. Sagalyn, *Times Square Roulette: Remaking the City Icon* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 87.

Figure 7. Warhol superstar Jackie Curtis roaming 42nd Street, as pictured in Dusan Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (Neoplanta Film, 1971).

> ing paint, the more smell of urine, the more exciting it seemed to be! . . . It's a strange concept: all these obscure films that I would have risked injury and death to see (literally, in some of these theaters) are now available at your local clean video store! . . . I'm still not used to the fact that these films that I spent my whole life trying to see are now *consumer items*.[96]

Although Vincent Canby remarked in 1975 that "promoters of such films are well aware that they aren't dealing in things that will be hailed as gems by even the maddest movie nuts," he admits that titles like *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975) "represent a subculture that people who do their movie-going on Third Avenue are seldom aware of."[97] Then, as now, grind-house fare was increasingly adopted by an alternative taste culture oppositionally prizing the cheap and exploitative as an anti-mainstream aesthetic, marking an early instance of what Jeffrey Sconce calls "paracinema."[98] Still, it should be remembered that grind houses like the Rialto encouraged such cultural slumming as early as the 1930s and 1940s.[99]

Grind-house nostalgia grew in cult film communities during the 1990s and 2000s, marketed by companies like Something Weird Video and Grindhouse Releasing, and

96 Andrea Juno, "Interview: Frank Henenlotter," in *Re/Search #10: Incredibly Strange Films,* ed. Andrea Juno and V. Vale (San Francisco: V/Search, 1986), 8; emphasis in original.

97 Vincent Canby, "Now for a Look at Some Really Bad Movies," *New York Times,* November 30, 1975.

98 Jeffrey Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 371–393.

99 Snelson and Jancovich, "No Hits, No Runs, Just Terrors."

also encouraged by "grind-house film festivals" held in several large cities. This nostalgia reached its apotheosis with *Grindhouse* (Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, 2007), composed of two feature-length pastiches of exploitation subgenres, accompanied by fake trailers and advertisements, and even real theatrical material announcing "our feature presentation." Yet, with so much historical (and cultural) distance from existing grind houses, contemporary audiences had to be educated in the generic meaning of "grind house." Condensing exhibition context and exploitative content, the film's trailer began with a definition (subsequently adopted by many reviewers): "GRIND HOUSE (*n*): A theater playing back-to-back films exploiting sex, violence, and other extreme subject matter." In aligning their own work with exploitation films, Tarantino and Rodriguez attempt to differentiate themselves from the mainstream; furthermore, as Hollows argues, cult film fans' antimainstream stance opposes the supposed feminizing, "politically correct" effects of mainstream culture, so the two directors' celebration of "grind-house film" as a generic synonym for exploitation films apparently protests the replacement of dangerous, male-oriented, inner-city theaters with safe, suburban multiplexes and video stores.[100] Indeed, Caetlin Benson-Allott calls *Grindhouse* a "digital homage to both a bygone platform (celluloid) and a bygone genre (the exploitation film)." Because it was released to home video as the separate films *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof,* sans trailers and ads, one cannot recreate the *Grindhouse* experience at home using standard DVDs. The filmmakers thus hammer home their nostalgia for a certain kind of theatrical exhibition that is lost forever.[101] Yet, the complete theatrical version of *Grindhouse* has since been released exclusively on Blu-ray, ultimately suggesting less of a resistance to technological change than complicity with it and its attendant market demands.

Jockeying for subcultural capital, however, cultists debated the authenticity of *Grindhouse* in comparison to "real" grind-house films, suggesting anxieties over the film's co-optation of the generic label for mainstream consumption. As *Grindhouse* special makeup effects designer Greg Nicotero noted, "The grindhouse concept aside, you could cut this movie together and release it and it would be just as equally satisfying as a mainstream horror film."[102] Online fan discourse attempted to define and describe "grind-house films" as synonymous with the postclassical exploitation film, accompanied by lists of titles demonstrating subcultural cachet. Because the exploitation film is less a distinct genre than an aesthetic style or sensibility, websites like The Deuce: Grindhouse Cinema Database (operated by the Quentin Tarantino Archives fan site) sprung up around *Grindhouse*'s release, trying to make sense of the diversity of grind-house films by organizing them by year and subgenre, though largely focusing on either the most well-known or notorious titles. Meanwhile, capitalizing on *Grindhouse*'s release, independent companies like After Hours Cinema, Synapse Films, and BCI released DVDs containing "grind-house" double features

100 Hollows, "The Masculinity of Cult," 37.

101 Caetlin Benson-Allott, "*Grindhouse:* An Experiment in the Death of Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2008): 23–24.

102 Greg Nicotero, quoted in Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez, *Grindhouse: The Sleaze-Filled Saga of an Exploitation Double Feature,* ed. Kurt Volk (New York: Weinstein Books, 2007), 105.

and trailer compilations; the Independent Film Channel began a weekly "Grindhouse" programming slot devoted to cult films; and the documentary *American Grindhouse* (Elijah Drenner, 2010) featured interviews with notable exploitation actors and filmmakers.

These uses of "grind house" as an overarching generic label indicate its flexibility in becoming a highly sellable commodity, especially in a post-theatrical era in which the grind house as historical referent has vanished from the physical landscape—an absence glossed over by the "Disneyfication" of Times Square. Since many of today's film viewers have no experience in actual grind houses, the genrification of "grind house" increasingly works these films back into the bourgeois social fabric with which grind houses historically had such a tenuous relationship. Yet, in Jancovich's words, "rather than true individualism, it was precisely the commercial conditions of many of the films . . . which encouraged their more outlandish features and it is often the very banality or incoherence of their political positions which marks them out."[103] Grind houses and Hollywood were never mutually exclusive, despite the discourses that often promoted them as such. Consequently, in positing these theaters' apparent difference from the "mainstream," such discourses reinforce Hollywood as American cinema's economic and cultural standard-bearer—not only enabling an alternative market for exploitation films but also enhancing the profits made by Hollywood and grind houses off subsequent-run Hollywood films. While the marginalization of grind houses as an alternative exhibition site may have been both sought by and imposed on grind houses from their earliest years, perhaps it is fitting that the struggle for (sub)cultural capital surrounding their genrified films now exposes itself as the struggle for economic capital that it always was. Consuming mass-marketed signifiers of the "grind house" to support their ostensibly oppositional stance, today's predominantly middle-class fans ultimately do little to question the normalization of mainstream Hollywood as the good object with which the grind house has finally been economically reconciled. ✻

For their research assistance and suggestions for revisions, many thanks to Mark Jancovich, Tim Snelson, Jerry Kovar, the anonymous Cinema Journal *reviewers, and especially Gregory Waller.*

103 Jancovich, "Cult Fictions," 314–315.