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22

DRIVE-IN AND GRINDHOUSE THEATRES

David Church

The antecedents of cult film consumption are to be found as far back as the birth of movie fandom itself, but audience predilections for niche tastes in certain stars, genres, or cinematic variants have long been tied to specific theatrical exhibition spaces as well. From the lavish picture palaces whose opulent environs allegedly fostered a "cult of distraction" by mirroring dominant cinema's own luxurious illusionism (Kracauer [1926] 2008), to the lowly storefront nickelodeons whose unruly urban spaces proffered immigrants, women, and other marginalized patrons an alternative public sphere (Hansen 1991), specialized theatres have long connoted specialized experiences for viewers variously perceived as distinctive, distracted, or subaltern. The 1970s-era exhibition of midnight movies, commonly associated with urban repertory theatres and university film societies, may hold an especially privileged place in cult film history for segregating esoteric films into less accessible viewing contexts, but drive-in and grindhouse theatres also occupy a significant place in the annals of cult spectatorship. Moreover, these alternative theatrical markets, primarily remembered today for their undisciplined audiences and exploitation film programming, continue to serve as (sub)cultural touchstones for the recirculation of cult cinema on home video and beyond.

The origins of grind houses and drive-in theatres, however, predate their respective associations with exploitation and cult films. Contrary to the oft-repeated belief that grind houses owe their name to the "bump-and-grind" of burlesque dancing, the term actually originated in the early-twentieth-century industry slang "grind policy," referring to the continuous all-day exhibition of films for a low admission price (a "grind scale") that increased incrementally over the course of the day. Unlike the then-standard industry practice of offering a handful of daily shows at graduated seating prices (akin to attending the legitimate theatre), grind policies delivered discounted, undifferentiated seating to capitalize on the sheer quantity of daily audience turnover instead of the socioeconomic "quality" of potential patrons (Church 2015). Much as representatives of the mainstream film industry similarly denigrated "serial houses" for indiscriminately "grinding" through both films and viewers (Smith 2016), grind houses soon became associated in both the trade and popular press with unruly, undiscerning moviegoers who supposedly cared little for which films were screened. These anxieties about independent theatres deliberately catering to the déclassé viewer only became more pronounced during the Great Depression, when many former first-run theatres were forced to adopt grind policies to survive.

As an exhibition policy that did little to combat cinema's generalized disrepute as a populist entertainment above all else, it is little surprise that independently owned theatres operating on grind policies earned special scorn as potential economic threats to studio-established exhibition practices. The film establishment's denigration of grindhouse patrons' supposed tastes (or lack thereof) was, however, rooted in the very restrictions imposed upon such theatres by the studio-era monopoly on film distribution. The major Hollywood studios were generally reluctant to release their films to such houses (except as a final stop for subsequent-run films already on their way out of circulation), for fear that exhibiting their films at discount theatres would lower the cultural standing of the films themselves. Hence, apart from scraping up Hollywood's sub-run offerings, grind houses generally had to make do with an eclectic mix of films distributed via the states' rights market, including the exploitation films that would later proliferate in the more open and independent post-studio era.

Although Hollywood-made films dominated grindhouse screens until at least the 1950s–1960s, these theatres' willingness to luridly advertise a variety of violent genre films and adults-only exploitation fare in dilapidated, male-dominated environs made them targets for urban renewal from the 1930s onward. Unlike more conventional theatres, they were reputed to attract a variety of male "undesirables," including criminals, perverts, drunks, and the homeless. Furthermore, the gradual transition of the term "grindhouse" from a specialized theatre type to generic shorthand for exploitation cinema did not predate the 1950s–1960s, when grind houses, art houses, and drive-in theatres all became profitable alternatives to more traditional exhibition venues. During the 1960s, for example, European art films and American sexploitation fare shared space in both grind houses and art houses because readily exploitable for their sexual content (though less commonly programmed at drive-ins, due to concerns about underage viewers and distracted drivers on nearby roads). Once hard-core pornography profitably exploded on their dilapidated screens in the 1970s, grind houses became all the more emblematic of both physical and social decay, a perversely attractive and repulsive blight screaming for urban renewal (Gorfinkel 2011: 60). It was therefore no coincidence that the names of all three exhibition contexts became transmuted into reductive generic terms ("grindhouse movies," "arthouse films," "drive-in movies"), naming these theatres and their purported fare as somehow different from the mainstream industry's unmarked norm (Church 2015).

If grind houses generally flourished in downtown urban areas where constant foot traffic brought high volumes of transient viewers, such as New York City's 42nd Street at Times Square, drive-in theatres once thrived in open, rural spaces. Although experiments with outdoor film projection for car-bound viewers had existed since the 1910s, Richard M. Hollingshead Jr. first patented the drive-in theatre (his innovations included the rows of earthen humps for cars to park at a vertical incline for less obstructed screen views) in Camden, New Jersey, in 1933. Further experiments with drive-ins continued over the next two decades, but drive-in theatres did not become a major part of the cultural landscape until the post-World War II boom in American car culture (Segrave 1992). Often located on the outskirts of towns and cities, where land prices and property taxes were generally lower, these theatres quickly populated roadside America, peaking at over 4500 screens nationwide by the late 1950s (Austin 1985: 64). These boom years also saw drive-in theatres spreading to Canada, Australia, and other nations with high rates of car ownership relative to the low population density necessary for cheap acquisition of undeveloped land (e.g., Goldsmith 1999).

Driven by a combination of postwar prosperity, infrastructural investments (such as the Eisenhower-era interstate highway system), and "white flight" to the suburbs (which meanwhile ghettoized the inner-city areas that grind houses called home), drive-in theatres joined drive-in diners and other auto-friendly businesses catering to the mid-century explosion of car

ownership. The total number of US drive-in screens and attendance fluctuated over the decades, dipping over the 1960s and recovering in the 1970s, until a long industry collapse over the 1980s (Horton 1976: 236; Austin 1985: 64).

Indeed, drive-ins' fluctuating fortunes partly reflected consecutive trends in the youth-driven car cultures that ended up parked before their screens – as further reflected in the films they screened. Drive-in theatres' late-1950s peak coincided with a rash of American International Pictures exploitation films about hot-rod culture (Stanfield 2015: 113–114), for example, while drive-ins' brief 1970s resurgence accompanied Crown International Pictures' exploitation cycle about teenage van culture and a generalized trend toward rural-set car-crash movies and soft-core comedies (Waller 1983; Nowell 2016). Much as the sex-and-violence-heavy films increasingly shown at grind houses during these same years seemed to eliminate the boundaries between onscreen thrills and off-screen misbehavior, the automotively inclined audiences at drive-ins appeared to similarly blur the boundaries between cinematic and lived spaces in potentially disreputable ways.

Dubbed "ozoners" by the trade press, drive-ins were first promoted for their novelty, convenience, and family-friendly ambiance, especially appealing to viewers who might otherwise feel marginalized in "hardtop" (indoor) theatres – such as the young, disabled, non-white, female, obese, or parents with young children. Although drive-ins largely catered to families at first, then, the actual commingling of much more diverse and even unconventional audiences earned these spaces a continuing notoriety as "passion pits" for amorous teenagers, not unlike how urban grind houses were similarly denigrated for their supposedly class-less and degenerate viewers (Morley Cohen 1994: 478–479). Moreover, the largely rural settings and low admission costs (e.g., a double or triple bill for the price of one indoor film) of so many drive-in theatres enhanced their popularity with country-dwelling working-class viewers – a demographic that increasingly attended drive-ins from the 1960s onward, and thereby helped cement popular associations between these theatres and blue-collar audiences. Compared to indoor theatres, drive-ins generally earned a larger percentage of their revenues from concession sales, since a full evening's entertainment might include dinner and snacks for the whole family; and it was common for drive-ins to build playgrounds and other attractions for children to enjoy while under their nearby parents' gaze. But as industry-wide censorship restrictions fell throughout the 1960s, exploitation films increasingly pushed out drive-ins' family-friendly and general-release fare, with more sensationally "adult" content more likely to draw crowds.

The novelty of engaging in less disciplined behavior (e.g., eating, talking, playing, smoking, making out, etc.) in the semi-privacy of one's own vehicle was especially compensatory, because drive-in theatres faced many of the same programming restrictions that were imposed on grind houses during the studio era. The vast majority of drive-ins were independently operated, and therefore had little access to first-run Hollywood features until after the 1950s, instead making do with a mix of sub-run studio films, B movies, and exploitation product. Owners of indoor theatres often accused drive-ins of siphoning away their viewers, and the major studios generally sided with the former, not least because drive-ins' seasonal operating schedules gave them less leverage in negotiating for newer or bigger films. Much as the major studios did not want their films tainted by associations with drive-ins' less conventional audiences, they also resented the technological limitations of drive-in exhibition, including the substandard picture and sound quality created by outdoor spaces (Church 2015: 34–37). Ambient light pollution and the unconventionally long distance between projector and screen created dim, washed-out images, while improvements in sound quality only came with the gradual shift from loudspeaker towers to detachable in-car speakers to short-wave AM/FM radio transmission. Drive-in theatres' design flaws thus inspired complaints similar to grind houses' associations with a

creeping decrepitude that might detract from the films themselves, even as these same déclassé traits have inspired fond remembrance among future generations of cult film fans.

Despite their year-round exposure to the elements, the small profit margins gained from seasonal operation meant that many drive-in owners were hesitant to invest large sums in regular maintenance. Because the number of newly opened drive-in screens peaked in the late 1950s, these venues thus found themselves falling into disrepair by the 1970s–1980s. The outward spread of nearby suburbs had also increased land values by this period, so many drive-in owners opted to sell their once-cheap tracts – many of which were subsequently developed into shopping malls with multiplex theatres – instead of investing in overdue refurbishment. Small wonder that an Australian film like *Dead End Drive-In* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1986) would depict a decrepit drive-in as a post-apocalyptic concentration camp, trapping unemployed youth, forcing them to live in their cars, and keeping them docile on a steady diet of junk food, drugs, and exploitation movies (Johinke 1999). If drive-ins increasingly looked like post-apocalyptic relics of an earlier time, it is not difficult to see why the more fantastic representations of these largely bygone venues as a teenage wonderland/wasteland would be so nostalgically appealing to today's cult cinema fans.

Meanwhile, back in the major cities, the gradual gentrification of downtown areas closed many grind houses – many of which had switched to exclusively hard-core porn programming with the 1980s advent of video projection – and these urban spaces were similarly refashioned by a shopping-mall aesthetic. In the Times Square area, for example, moral panics over the AIDS and crack cocaine epidemics shuttered many grind houses, while zoning regulations against adults-only businesses combined with eminent domain seizures to force out many theatre owners, enabling the urban renewal efforts funded by major corporate interests like the Walt Disney Company. Overall, though, audiences for both drive-ins and grind houses fell away with the rise of a 1980s video rental market in which exploitation films were some of the most populous early titles, filling shelves during the major studios' reticence to release their movies to the growing non-theatrical market.

Moreover, drive-in and grindhouse spectatorship each foreshadowed the very modes of domestic film consumption that would eventually decimate these specialized exhibition venues upon the rise of home video. Both venues fostered distraction-prone viewing over rapt attention, with unruly neighboring viewers liable to become an added part of the show. The all-hours programming and generic diversity found at grind houses modeled home video's time-shifting capabilities and flexible viewing options, while the audiovisual inferiority and semi-privacy of in-car spectatorship at drive-ins permitted a combination of active sociality and more isolated "mobile privatization" (Morley Cohen 1994: 479; Church 2015: 46). These television-like dynamics were literalized by the "Autoscope," a short-lived variety of drive-in theatre in which each car had its own small, individual screen; parked in a circular formation around a central projector booth, the film would be beamed through a refracting lens and mirror array, bouncing the image onto each screen via rear projection. Indeed, much as certain aspects of the drive-in experience, such as individual control over sound levels, more closely resembled television spectatorship than traditional moviegoing, the 1950s boom in drive-in attendance may have helped offset the sheer number of postwar ticket receipts lost to television (Austin 1985: 67).

Overall, then, both grind houses and drive-ins encouraged a curious admixture of pleasurable distraction and rapt attention, providing spaces of physical immersion where generic thrills could seemingly bleed outward from the movie itself into the audience. Memoirs of attending such theatres (McDonough 2001; Landis and Clifford 2002; Stevenson 2010) have been especially influential here, though these remembrances are infused with confirmation bias, whether by vastly overstating the proportion of exploitation films to sub-run Hollywood films shown

in such theatres or disproportionately focusing on audience misbehavior over more anodyne viewing experiences. The blend of ironic distance (e.g., heckling and shouting at the screen) and sincere appreciation (e.g., the epiphanic experience) associated with such theatres has since become reproduced in the very contours of cult film reception, from the ironic mockery-cum-celebration of "paracinema" (Sconce 1995) to the non-ironic enjoyment of exploitation films whose original appeals transcend their historical datedness. These sometimes-contradictory tendencies in cult film reception find a spatial home in memories of the drive-in as a site where rural "redneck" patrons eagerly consumed the populist genre thrills of exploitation movies, even as latter-day subcultural elitisms require cult film fans to somehow distinguish their own enjoyment of those same thrills from the taint of populist unsophistication. In other words, the latter-day nostalgia for drive-ins and grind houses among cult film fandom may provide certain pleasures as culturally bygone exhibition sites, but their remembrance remains riven by anxieties over how closely to imaginatively identify with such venues' historical patrons without compromising one's own subcultural capital (Church 2015: 52–53).

As these venues gradually became endangered species, period-era films depicting grindhouse and drive-in theatres have increasingly informed their selective remembrance by cult cinema aficionados, from the urban anomie vividly captured in Martin Scorsese's now-canonical *Taxi Driver* (1976) to a slew of minor titles figuring them as spaces of cinephiliac fantasies for today's retrospective viewers. Whereas *Taxi Driver*'s portrait of 42nd Street in decline visually echoes Travis Bickle's degenerating psychology, affording cult film fans a vicarious experience of cultural slumming, the teenpic *Times Square* (Allan Moyle, 1980) paints 42nd Street as a lawless realm of anarchic possibility for two runaway teenage girls. Having escaped together from a mental hospital, Nicky and Pamela make Times Square their home, eventually forming an underground punk band called the Sleez Sisters, which performs atop the marquee for the eponymous Times Square grind house in the film's closing scene. Mental illness tropes abound here as well – they stop to mock a marquee advertising *House of Psychotic Women* (Carlos Aured, 1974) at one point – but their parents (one of whom is a Times Square redeveloper) had unjustly committed the girls for average teenage behavior. Unlike the psychopathic Bickle, then, the girls find well-deserved freedom within the déclassé grindhouse milieu, their adventures propelled by a similar punk/new-wave aesthetic seen in *Dead End Drive-In*'s youth subcultures. It is not difficult to see how latter-day cult fans would invest grindhouse nostalgia with related fantasies about rebellion and subcultural distinction.

In contrast, however, Bette Gordon's film *Variety* (1983) depicts grind houses as much more ambivalent, and even potentially dangerous, spaces for women. When Christine takes a job in the ticket booth of Variety Photoplays, a real-life porn-driven grind house, she begins hesitantly imagining herself up on the pornographic screen, and begins entering adults-only theatres and bookstores where male patrons give her a wide berth, as if the presence of women disrupts these privileged spaces of masculine fantasy. Unlike *Times Square*'s teen-friendly vision of Nicky and Pamela as urban rebels, *Variety* thus presents a more mature, circumspect analysis of gendered tensions within and around grind houses. Today, the overwhelmingly male demographic of cult film fans tends to uphold masculinist fantasies about drive-ins and grind houses as gender-limited territory, imagining these venues as distanced from the "feminizing" taint of domesticity and easy accessibility associated with more mainstream cinema. A female viewer must effectively become "one of the boys" to avoid seeming out of place within the latter-day fandom of exploitation films associated with screening at such exhibition spaces (Church 2015: 88–91). Also complicating such masculinist nostalgia is the prevalence of homosexual cruising associated with grind houses. Unlike the lesbian romance between *Times Square*'s protagonists that was left on the cutting-room floor, some films depicting grind houses, such as *The Back Row* (Jerry

Douglas, 1972) and *A Night at the Adonis* (Jack Deveau, 1977), directly (and pornographically) documented the importance of such spaces for fostering post-Stonewall queer communities (Cante and Restivo 2004; Capino 2005). Present-day cult fans may cathect around the perpetually unfulfilled promises offered by lurid grindhouse advertising, but for queer patrons, these spaces could offer an almost utopian (sexual) fulfillment rooted in cross-racial and cross-class intimacies later destroyed by the heterosexist/capitalist forces of gentrification (Delaney 1999).

It is precisely the disappearance of actual drive-ins and grind houses from the physical landscape that has paradoxically fueled their selective remembrance, allowing these venues to gain subculturally heralded meanings that may be largely unfettered from reality. Although some repertory theatres may host "grindhouse"-themed nights, few (if any) former grind houses operate today as they once did. Drive-ins have been somewhat more fortunate, though the relatively few remaining US theatres have typically sanitized their environs through associations with 1950s-era Americana (a differently tinged nostalgia than exploitation film buffs tend to hold) – their rarity marking a return to their original novelty value and family-friendly ambience – even as they primarily play double features of first- and second-run Hollywood movies today. Some have survived as multi-purpose spaces – home to flea markets by day and movies by night – though their latter-day dependence on Hollywood films has proven a mixed blessing, since the mid-2000s Digital Cinema Initiative forced many drive-ins to close if unable to invest in new industry-standard digital projection.

With grind houses vanished and drive-ins now aligned with multiplex programming, these sites have become especially vital for cult film fans to nostalgically recall in a post-theatrical age in which home video consumption predominates. Imagining oneself in the shoes of the urban *flâneur* or cruising drive-in patron – an experience now recalled by playing through "grindhouse"-themed trailer compilations like the *42nd Street Forever* DVD series – has become a mnemonic realm of subcultural refuge, particularly now that so many exploitation films are readily available on DVD and Blu-ray (often in restored versions), more easily accessible now than ever before. In effect, the exploitation films so often associated with drive-in and grindhouse exhibition have themselves become "cleaned up" and "renewed" for officially sanctioned economic purposes, not unlike the lived spaces these theatres once inhabited. Nostalgia for bygone theatrical spaces like drive-ins and grind houses has thus become more important since the 2000s as a reaction against anxieties about exploitation film fandom's own obsolescence when the once-obscure films that one previously had to be subculturally "in the know" to obtain (via VHS-era fanzine and bootleg markets) can now be easily purchased online and in pristine condition on mass-produced DVDs/Blu-rays. "Grindhouse-quality" artifacting (e.g., scratches, discoloration, jump cuts from missing frames, etc.) – those signs of wear and tear created by all-day "grinding" through the projector – has become a subcultural signifier of value at a cultural moment when shooting and screening on celluloid has itself become increasingly obsolete. Indeed, these "authentic" signs of celluloid decay can also be digitally simulated as ersatz dilapidation, as seen in Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino's 2007 omnibus film *Grindhouse*, released in the United States as a theatrical double-feature event. This film and its many "retrosploitation" imitators popularized the idea of "grindhouse" less as a historically distinct exhibition context than as a transmedia concept subsequently applied to a wide variety of DVDs, short films, commercials, video games, and other media texts exhibiting a retro-styled pastiche aesthetic. To capitalize on this late-2000s trend, independent distributors increasingly re-released exploitation films on "grindhouse"- and "drive-in"-themed DVDs: often double features of public-domain films, intermingled with trailers and other theatrical paratexts meant to collectively evoke the grindhouse/drive-in experience. Overall, then, the actual erasure of these venues has allowed their symbolic import to more easily circulate as a marketing label – a

pop-culture mythology drifting free from historical specificity – much to the chagrin of some exploitation film fans (Church 2015).

Although recent research in exhibition studies has focused on separating the historical facts from the mythological import of such theatres, directions for future research would include fine-grained empirical analysis of exhibition contexts beyond New York's iconic 42nd Street. Detailed studies of the grind houses that proliferated in Los Angeles (Broadway), Chicago ("the Loop"), San Francisco (Market Street), Seattle (First Avenue), Boston (the "Combat Zone"), New Orleans (Canal Street), and elsewhere are largely yet to be written. Moreover, drive-in theatres continue to occupy underexplored territory, whether due to their working-class audiences' presumed political conservatism (Herring 2014) or film studies' overwhelming bias toward studying urban exhibition contexts over rural or small-town ones. Because drive-ins and grind houses originated in the United States, international variations or equivalents that specialized in exploitation cinema are also sorely understudied – including British "fleapit" cinemas (and their intersection with private cinema clubs like London's Scala), Japanese "pink film" theatres (some of which are still operating to this day), and European movie theatres located in transient areas near major railway stations. As the post-Tarantino popularization of one selective vision of "grindhouse" history recedes into the past, space will emerge for more nuanced histories of specialized exhibition venues and the equally specialized subsets of cult film fandom that keep their memory alive.

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23

BLOOD CULTS

Historicising the North American "shot on video" horror movie

Johnny Walker

Introduction

In an article recently published in the *Journal of Film and Video*, Daniel Herbert (2017) examines the curious phenomenon of "VHS distribution in the age of digital delivery", surveying a range of independent companies which, over the last five years or so, have issued several horror films on videocassette for contemporary fans of cult film. Herbert, chiming with other scholarly interventions into the relationship between video technology and cult cinema (Hawkins 2000; Egan 2007; Church 2014a; Walker 2014), argues that independent North American distributors such as Intervision, Massacre Video and MPI, and the customers they serve, "appear to long for an imagined 'golden age' of VHS". Through exclusively releasing obscure horror and exploitation films, such companies, Herbert maintains, "reformulate the cultural meaning of VHS technology by yoking it solely to cult movie texts" (2017: 8). In many instances, such "cult" movies also happen to be horror movies and include such no-budget titles as *Sledgehammer* (1983), *Black Devil Doll from Hell* (1984), *Tales from the QuadeaD Zone* (1987) and *Things* (1989).

Herbert's analysis resonates with two recent documentaries about video collecting, *Adjust Your Tracking: The Untold Story of the VHS Collector* (2013) and *Rewind This!* (2013), both of which profile practices within contemporary American video collecting communities and which almost exclusively align these "cult" practices to marginal horror product. Central to these documentaries are the video collectors themselves. The documentaries show how these collectors – affectionately referred to in the fan community as "Videovores" (Schafer 2013) – seek to keep the memory of obsolete VHS and associated exploitation films alive in the twenty-first century by collecting tapes (and associated ephemera such as posters and cardboard standees) and, in some cases, displaying their wares on shelving units in their homes to recreate the "material character" of small-town video rental stores (Herbert 2014: 123). Particularly desirable among these communities are horror movies which in all instances bypassed theatrical distribution, going *direct to* video (DTV) and, in other instances, were *shot on* video (SOV) as opposed to celluloid film.

While Herbert's article and the aforementioned documentaries succeed in offering a fairly well-rounded picture of US video collectors and the legacy of SOV horror films in the twenty-first century, they are less concerned with the industrial contexts that birthed the SOV horror phenomenon in the 1980s. The present chapter seeks to shed some light on these overlooked