

Grinding out the Grindhouse: Exploitation, myth and memory

Introduction

Grindhouses once existed, but grindhouse cinema and grindhouse films, as they are imagined today, never did. To put it less starkly, the term grindhouse has been used in the United States at least since the 1930s, but its transnational cultist aura is of fresher vintage, and for that we may have to thank or blame Quentin Tarantino, the most prominent propagator of grindhouse mystique. The cultification of grindhouse took a while. In the 1980s, the foundational texts of exploitation film fandom in the United States conferred no special value on the label. Michael Weldon's foreword to his *Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film* noted that the cinemas of New York's 42nd Street specialised in exploitation films¹, but the term grindhouse was practically absent from the book. One of the key early sites for popularising mainly North American exploitation films as cult treasures was the 1986 volume *Incredibly Strange Films*, a compendium of interviews and subgenre overviews edited by Jim Morton. The term 'grindhouse' is a scarce signifier in Morton's book: the filmmaker Frank Henenlotter, for example, reminisces about the drive-in cinemas and "sleaze theaters"² of the 1960s and 1970s, but of grindhouses he makes no mention. Even as the 'paracinema' cult solidified in the 1990s, the grindhouse myth was barely nascent. The 1995 catalogue for Something Weird Video – a key company in the shaping of current definitions of cult American exploitation film - advertised myriad low-budget movies on tape across a variety of genres, but it only labelled striptease and burlesque films specifically as grindhouse, as part of a series of compilations titled *Grindhouse Follies*. Similarly, in the pages of fanzines such as *Videoscope*, *Cult Movies* and *Dreadful Pleasures* advertisements for exploitation specialists like Something Weird, Video Vault and Sinister Cinema were apt to promote 'sleaze', 'retro', 'trash' and 'psychotronic' products rather than what we now call grindhouse. That the term was not as widely adopted by cult communities of the 1980s and 1990s as it has been in the years since Tarantino and Rodriguez' *Grindhouse* project (2007) suggests that the notion of grindhouse cinema as it presently circulates in global consumption circuits is a recent invention.

Grindhouse desire

Even in countries where other terms play a similar role—such as Great Britain, where 'fleapit' is (or was) the nearest equivalent—'grindhouse' resonates with fantasies of cinematic mischief and glamorous squalor. To take just one example, a showing of Jess Franco's *Venus in Furs* (1969) at London's Barbican Centre in 2015 was advertised as "a winning combination of softcore grindhouse and avant-garde techniques". As a Briton (typifying the arguably still hegemonic demographic of the cult film viewer as described by Jeffrey Sconce³, Barbara Klinger⁴ and Jacinda Read⁵, gazing across the Atlantic to images of 1970s Times Square and similar locations, I find the grindhouse a seductive fantasy. Rather than perpetuate it, however, this chapter uses a handful of cultist texts to consider how the mystification of grindhouse mediates a craving for an age of exploitation cinema, and of 'cinema' as such, presumed lost. As arenas for film consumption multiply online, the 'golden age' of American grindhouse cinema—particularly in the 1970s—is idealised in forms of what David Church calls grindhouse nostalgia⁶. Yet, what this moment of origin comprised, and why its seeming disappearance

¹ Michael Weldon, *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film* (London: Plexus, 1983), x.

² Andrea Juno, "Interview: Frank Henenlotter", in *Re/Search: Incredibly Strange Films*, ed. Jim Morton (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1986), 8.

³ Jeffrey Sconce. "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style", *Screen* 36 (4), 1995, 371-93.

⁴ Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2006).

⁵ Jacinda Read, "The Masculinity of Cult: from Fan-Boys to Academic Bad-Boys", in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 54-70.

⁶ David Church, "From Exhibition to Genre: The Case of Grind-House Films", *Cinema Journal* 50:4 (2011).

might matter, is not settled. Historiography and memory alike narrativise partial versions of the past, and the cultist narration of grindhouse history is part of a widespread commodification of “imagined memories”⁷. What counts as cult, what constitutes grindhouse and what is considered memorable, are mediated by the production of texts and commodities, and by the maintenance of niche markets; as Barbara Klinger points out, the home cinema “collector’s trade” in deluxe reissues encourages fan attachment by promoting mass-produced DVDs and blu-rays through ideas of scarcity and connoisseurship⁸; though committed to an ostensibly non-elitist film culture, grindhouse fan websites and blogs likewise deal in a specialised discourse of auteurism and arcane knowledge which invents and sustains grindhouse cinema as a discrete object of devotion.

Cultist viewing practices – such as reading what was hitherto dismissed as trash as a kind of counter-culture – arguably furnish contemporary grindhouse fans with a safely ‘knowing’ perspective from which to enjoy exploitation cinema’s ambivalent fascination with images of otherness. But wistful longing for the ‘original’ grindhouse experience is not necessarily, or only, reactionary; as Huyssen remarks, nostalgic desire may involve resistant impulses⁹. Grindhouse cult rhetoric may, for example (however disingenuously, ambiguously or inconsistently) present itself as resistant to censorship, to globalised mass entertainment conglomerates, or to normative representations. In any case, the ideological ramifications of grindhouse cultism cannot simply be read through a generalised theory of grindhouse or exploitation cinema; it depends on what aspects of the present are opposed, what supposed aspects of the irretrievable cinematic past are idealised, why, by whom, and through which cultural intermediaries. The academic field of memory studies demonstrates that acts of remembering are staged at an intersection of discourses both personal and public¹⁰. Where performed memories of grindhouse cinema are concerned, this intersection includes: the images and texts presented in grindhouse-focused books, fanzines, blogs and websites; grindhouse ranges on DVD and blu-Ray; grindhouse film trailer compilation discs; fan conventions; neo- or meta-grindhouse films; and documentaries such as *Schlock! The Secret History of American Movies* (Ray Greene, 2001) and *American Grindhouse* (Elija Drenner, 2010). Faced with all this grindhouse revivalism, we should ask, as Paul Ricoeur does in a very different context, “of *what* are these memories? *Whose* memory is it?”¹¹.

Confirming Tarantino’s influence, *American Grindhouse* is narrated by Robert Forster, one of the stars of Tarantino’s *Jackie Brown* (1997), a film replete with nods to 1970s American exploitation films. According to the blurb on the back of its DVD sleeve, Drenner’s film provides a “hidden history” of “illegitimate cinema”. Such hyperbole is designed to attract cultists for whom disreputability is a badge of honour, but, far from clandestine or out-of-bounds, the field has long been legitimate and ‘overground’. Indeed, as one of a virtual subgenre of documentaries throwing light on once-obscure corners of low popular cinema, *American Grindhouse* contributes to the ossification of a cult-exploitation canon. The film’s entertaining historical account (written by Drenner with British horror genre scholar Calum Waddell) offers a standard run-through of subgenres, and reheats many familiar anecdotes. Just as classical exploitation films often used educative formats as pretexts for the partial display of ‘shocking’ spectacle, so *American Grindhouse* uses authoritative talking heads to frame a cavalcade of clips from what the back cover optimistically calls “salacious and uproarious” films. In addition to Forster’s narration, the clips are contextualised by a combination of eyewitness testimony from veteran industry insiders - such as the film-makers Herschell Gordon Lewis and John Landis – and scholarly reflection, notably from Eric Schaefer, the preeminent historian of classical American exploitation cinema.

These textual strategies exemplify the tensions involved in any attempt to circumscribe grindhouse as both a type of film and a type of venue. A montage early in the film mixes clips of gimmick king

⁷ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 17.

⁸ Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, 67.

⁹ Andreas Huyssen, “Nostalgia for Ruins”, *Grey Room* 23 (2006), 6-21.

¹⁰ Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* trans. Steve Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 23.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur. *Time and Narrative*, Vol 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.

William Castle with, among others, horror, beach party, drug warning and juvenile delinquent films. The DVD sleeve similarly collages together publicity images for an assortment of items from *The Incredible Two Headed Transplant* (Anthony M. Lanza, 1971) to *Truck Turner* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1974) and even *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). Schaefer appears on screen to bring taxonomic order to the generic chaos, insisting on the distinction between grindhouse and exploitation, just as in *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919 – 1959*, he draws a clear line between classical exploitation cinema and the more protean variants which filled drive-ins and inner-city venues in the 1960s and 1970s. But he is fighting a losing battle: grindhouse and exploitation are used interchangeably, and the field's 'evolution' is presented as a sequence continuing smoothly from the 1920s to the 1970s. If this wide compass increases *American Grindhouse's* potential audience, it also illustrates the methodological trouble which can be stirred by the cultural mobility of the films themselves, many of which cross venue, cultural category and audience.

Siting (the) grindhouse

Since others have mapped the history of North American grindhouse cinema far more extensively than I am able¹², I touch on it here only to highlight some of its classificatory frictions and uncertainties. The grindhouse/exploitation nexus is problematic because grindhouse is often used as a shorthand label for otherwise heterogeneous films; the ambiguities are compounded by the fact that, depending on what definitions are brought to bear, not all exploitation films played only at grindhouses and not all grindhouses exclusively showed exploitation films. Schaefer points out, for instance, that reputable cinemas would sometimes "run an exploitation program to generate some extra action at the box office"¹³. Contrary to the mythology surrounding them, grindhouses were often nothing more or less prosaic than second-run cinemas: besides exploitation films, many also showed art films, Poverty Row efforts, and larger-budgeted Hollywood features after they had completed their first run (whether such categories mattered to contemporary audiences remains for now a moot point). Meanwhile, movies and theatres changed hands; some venues showed different genres at different times of the day; box-office failures would be pulled without warning and replaced without fanfare. If most grindhouses steered clear of the films of the American underground, they would show 'adult' foreign art films, while viewers shy of grindhouses could see erotic films at more respectable arthouses. *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932) exemplifies such cultural mobility. Defined by *American Grindhouse* as a classical exploitation film, Browning's film has a cult reputation attributable to its controversial subject matter and its one-time outlaw status. Having been disowned by Hollywood, *Freaks* was re-released on the exploitation circuit in the 1940s and '50s by Dwain Esper. It then enjoyed a new lease of life as part of the Midnight Movie cult of the 1970s, gradually being canonised as a major work by one of the horror genre's auteurs¹⁴. That categories such as exploitation, Midnight Movie and 'classic horror' are not mutually exclusive reminds us that the overarching term 'cinema' belies a diversity of sites, practices and modes of attention.

Given this diversity and fluidity, it is perhaps inevitable that claims about impact and affect are inconsistent. At some points *American Grindhouse* echoes industry self-mythologisation by assuming a model of consumer demand and producer supply, whereby grindhouse cinema is guilty of nothing worse than "giving 'em what they want" (as the tagline has it) by showing allegedly taboo images. The

¹² See, especially, David Church's *Grindhouse Nostalgia: Memory, Home Video and Exploitation Film Fandom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). It is a matter of regret that Church's informative and theoretically astute book only came to my attention just as I was completing this chapter.

¹³ Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films, 1919 – 1959* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 119.

¹⁴ J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), 295-297.

supposed needs and wants of a seemingly uncritical audience foreclose further analysis of the films' aesthetic interest, or social significance. At other moments, the very *failure* of grindhouse exploitation to satisfy desire seems cause for a possibly vaguely camp but unquestioned celebration of the relationship between cultural production and the market; Schaefer points out that the exploitation trade "never delivered" the goods, while John Landis delights in the "sheer hucksterism" of the "shysters" in the business whose products fell short of audience expectations. Indeed, the very abundance of edited moments of bodily spectacle, while demonstrating cultist fetishisation of cinematic fragments, may remind some viewers of how dismal many of the films are when seen in their entirety.

Thus cultist texts tend to vacillate between overblown and self-serving declarations of the subversiveness of grindhouse exploitation and disingenuous claims about its joyous vacuity. Although these two positions are not incompatible, *American Grindhouse* is typical in lurching arbitrarily from one to the other, so that "absurd and ridiculous" sexploitation films are applauded for revelling in a "true exploitation spirit" held to be "completely devoid of any socio-political subtext", while a select group of American horrors of the 1970s are revered (in terms that have become axiomatic) as angry, "guerrilla-style" responses to the war in Vietnam. John Landis takes the incontrovertible view that "movies are certainly influential, but ... it's called 'the business'. They want to sell tickets, so they will make anything ... if it makes money", but there is little enlargement on the issue of how social commentary flourishes under exploitation cinema's nakedly market-driven economy. Instead, the cultural memory of grindhouse is cherished nationalistically (the presence of European films on the American exploitation circuit is often assiduously marginalised) as part of the tradition of carnival attractions and ballyhoo most famously associated with P.T. Barnum's showmanship. Tales of the misadventures and sharp practices of 'pioneer' filmmakers at popular cinema's lurid fringes also resonate with a combination of Wild West fantasies and the myth of the American Dream. While Frankfurt School critics like Adorno disdainfully compared Hollywood genre output to Fordist and Taylorist modes of production, grindhouse mystique by contrast often includes semi-ironic, national pride in a supposed pre-corporate stage of entrepreneurial capitalism which enabled the self-made, rugged individualism of the exploitation shyster-as-auteur. By blithely conflating the red-in-tooth-and-claw profit motivation of the Forty Thieves and other industry characters with a discourse of subcultural oppositionality and lawlessness, grindhouse cultism makes an ideological equation between free enterprise and creative freedom, as though exploitation cinema's economically determined conditions unproblematically gave rise to direct expressions of desublimated desire.

It is not surprising, in light of the mercurial quality of grindhouse cinema, that many cult texts have an equivocal relationship to a supposedly mainstream Other against which they are often pitched. On the one hand, despite the formulaic character of narrative and spectacle in most exploitation films, they usually subscribe to the delusion that grindhouse was "a stark 180° from the mainstream ... the insane anything-can-happen answer to the predictability of a studio picture"¹⁵. On the other hand, *American Grindhouse* illustrates the fringe interference between these fields by citing films as dissimilar as *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), and *The Passion of Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) as examples of 'mainstream' exploitation. A comparison between Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963) and *Psycho* is meant to reveal both how exploitation influenced (or was co-opted by) Hollywood, and how exploitation's graphic gore provided more direct, confrontational thrills than dominant cinema could dream of. Blurring distinctions further, Schaefer appears on screen to point out that, at least as far as the promise of forbidden spectacle is concerned, "exploitation is as old as the movies themselves". Such category-confusion is justified, but contradicts the cultist insistence on grindhouse as a form and experience of cinema which inherently diverges from a purported Hollywood norm. A similar point is made inadvertently in Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford's book, *Sleazoid Express*: on page 3, the author declares that the grindhouses in and around Times Square in the 1970s and '80s "were showcases for the wildest and most extreme films in cinematic history"; on page 2, an illustration of the area at night shows (nestled among video rental stores, live sex shows and fast food outlets) a marquee sign

¹⁵ Josh Hadley, "Burning Down the Grindhouse", *Grindhouse Purgatory* 1 (1) (2013), 3.

advertising the barely “wild” Arnold Schwarzenegger sword and sorcery epic *Red Sonja* (Richard Fleischer, 1985).

Similar category issues bedevil the relationship between grindhouse cinema and other forms of erotic entertainment; a necessarily brief discussion of burlesque, stag films and hardcore pornography will indicate the tensions and slippages involved in trying to construct grindhouse as a clearly bounded cultural category. There are several reasons why burlesque and grindhouse sometimes overlap in the cultural imagination. Many erotic shorts were shot in burlesque theatres in the 1940s, as producers increased their profit margins by distributing films rather than touring live shows¹⁶. As *American Grindhouse* points out, performers would put on a show for the camera, after which their services were often no longer required: by the 1960s, many burlesque houses showed films rather than live performances, and burlesque reels were sometimes projected at single-screen theatres in American towns which lacked a specialist burlesque venue. The two kinds of establishment also had similar profit-maximising strategies. The term grindhouse originally referred not to ‘bump ‘n’ grind’ dancing – although this association was commonly made later - but to a programming policy of the 1920s according to which films would be shown, or ground out, continuously while the price of tickets increased throughout the day¹⁷; likewise, all but the top-billed artistes had to perform “three, four, or even five or more shows per day”¹⁸. The gruelling, alienated labour of non-unionised performers suggests Marxian as well as feminist connotations of ‘exploitation’ downplayed by most exploitation fan texts.

Stag films are normally included in American histories of pornography, sometimes in histories of grindhouse cinema and only rarely in accounts of exploitation film, but they occasionally migrated from brothels and private clubs to be edited in with burlesque shorts and strip films as loops in peep booths – locations which, according to some fan publications, constituted part of the metropolitan experience of ‘original’ grindhouse consumers. Yet, despite trumpeting the transgressive and graphic qualities of exploitation fare, many fan and academic cult film texts keep hardcore at arm’s length. Among the few grindhouse publications to have stretched their ‘cult’ remit as far as hard porn are *Sleazoid Express*, *Fleshpot*¹⁹ and, perhaps in cognizance of the rise in ‘porn studies’, *Peep Shows*²⁰. *Sleazoid* in particular celebrates a kaleidoscopic urban collage of arthouses, strip bars, adult bookstores, arcades, massage parlours and what Stevenson calls “old inner-city grindhouses ... decrepit vaudeville barns and opera palaces ... converted to exhibit porno”²¹, and other enticements which manifest a fluid, multi-media proliferation of sexual entertainment. D.N. Rodowick has asked whether “moving-image media have special affinities with specific viewing environments”²² and where exploitation films are concerned, the answer is affirmative: memories (or memories by proxy) of insalubrious establishments are important to the fantasies of many grindhouse cult texts. This is not, however, to say that particular films have always been exclusively attached to particular apparatuses. For Klinger, “home theater acts to displace the specificity of the film being screened”²³, and Rodowick agrees that the consumption of films via digital media constitutes a “decentering of the theatrical film experience”²⁴, supplanting the ‘pure’ cinema of big-screen projection. But the urban experience of adult entertainments in the supposedly halcyon 1960s and ‘70s was in many ways already ex-centric and impure. The cornucopia

¹⁶ David Church, “From Exhibition to Genre: The Case of Grind-House Films”. *Cinema Journal* 50 (4) (2011), 201.

¹⁷ Church, “From Exhibition to Genre”, 202.

¹⁸ Andrea Friedman, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909 – 1945*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Jack Stevenson, ed., *Fleshpot: Cinema’s Myth Makers and Taboo Breakers*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Headpress, 2002).

²⁰ Xavier Mendik, ed., *Peep Shows: Cult Film and the Cine-erotic* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2012).

²¹ Stevenson, *Fleshpot*, 243.

²² D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 33.

²³ Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, 48.

²⁴ Rodowick, *Virtual Life*, 39.

of bodily spectacles promised by the marquees, booths and arcades of 42nd Street and similar sites suggests the coexistence of old and new viewing apparatuses, environments and technologies rather than an unbroken procession of obsolescence and novelty.

The geographic, if not affective, proximity of grindhouse to pornography makes the borders circumscribing the ‘home’ of grindhouse cinema ever more indistinct, but similar category problems have long been bones of contention. Joan Hawkins²⁵ and Mark Betz²⁶ have looked at how, in the 1960s, ‘art’ and sexploitation films often appeared at the same cinemas and sometimes on the same bills. In fact a degree of border-crossing between sex and art cinemas was acknowledged, albeit disapprovingly, by the middlebrow film establishment of that decade. For example, in 1969 *Films and Filming* published “Underground USA and the Sexploitation Market”, in which James Lithgow and Colin Heard debated crossovers between the American underground and sexploitation cinema. (Apart from a few sites like the Cameo-Royal in Leicester Square, or ciné clubs like the Compton and the Dilly in Soho, Britain had no equivalent scene, which may be why some Britons are fascinated by American grindhouse memories). Lithgow observes that sexploitation producers mobilised the word “underground” as a lure, but maintains that while the avant-garde refuses “to knuckle under to the commercialism of the ‘studios’”, sexploitation filmmakers – for all their similarly raw production values – take advantage of the new “permissiveness” in the mindless pursuit of profit²⁷, an assessment with which few sexploitation filmmakers or fans would disagree. Heard more sympathetically wonders whether the inexplicit “titillation film”, as distinct from “the indoor sports practised on the Times Square circuits”, might have some value as expressions of sexual permissiveness. Predating the work of Hawkins and Betz, Heard notes how advertisements for sexploitation and underground films not only shared pages in the countercultural press, but were alike enough to cause “confusion” between, say, *Flaming Creatures* and “42nd Street ‘skin trade’ films”²⁸.

Grindhouse cultism demonstrates that “temporality and spatiality are necessarily linked in nostalgic desire”²⁹ by yearning for a mythological lost place situated in an abjected entertainment ‘underbelly’ beyond the mainstream purview and prior to a fantasised ‘Disneyfication’ of culture. But attempts to define the nature of the exhibition site touch on a “geography of the practices of viewing”³⁰, and generate a psychogeography of film consumption. Schaefer points out that “if there was a regular ‘home’ for exploitation movies it was in grindhouses in the skid row sections of cities across the country”³¹ but that “if” implies that this home is built on shifting sand, and the discursive construction “skid row” is at once vague and value-laden. As Schaefer and others discuss, in its original – and some would therefore say correct – usage, grindhouse is a North American term for a low-rent, single-screen, independent cinema, which from the 1930s to the 1980s (periodisations vary) specialised in showing exploitation films at all hours. Although smaller towns had also hosted independent cinemas where—rather like drive-ins—exploitation films, B-movies and second-run major features might be shown, venues clustered in urban districts such as Hollywood Boulevard (Los Angeles), Times Square (New York City), First Avenue (Seattle), Canal Street (New Orleans), and Market Street (San Francisco). Frequently located near bus or railway stations, these shoestring operations were sometimes also known as ‘flop-houses’, perhaps because they showed films that flopped elsewhere, or perhaps because they sometimes provided unofficial overnight accommodation for night-hawks, transients and the poor. This

²⁵ Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

²⁶ Mark Betz, “Art, Exploitation, Underground”, in Mark Jancovich et al, eds., *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 202-222.

²⁷ James Lithgow and Colin Heard, “Underground USA and the sexploitation market”, *Films and Filming* (August 1969), 19.

²⁸ Lithgow and Heard, “Underground”, 25.

²⁹ Huyssen, “Nostalgia”, 7

³⁰ Mike Crang, “Rethinking the Observer: Film, Mobility, and the Construction of the Subject”, in Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon (eds.) *Engaging Film: Geographies of Mobility and Identity*. New York and Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield, 2002, 18

³¹ Schaefer, *Bold!* 119.

coming together of transient audiences, interstitial exhibition sites and risqué or marginal genre films enables grindhouse cinemas to be framed as “memory places”³² which bolster contemporary cultists’ sense of their own alterity.

In many ways the idealised memory of grindhouse cinema transcends geographic particularity, not least because the ‘true’ place of the object of nostalgic desire is unstable. In *American Grindhouse*, John Landis reminds us that different narrations of the past point to different locales as the ‘spiritual home’ of grindhouse when he says that, for him, the term grindhouse most strongly evokes memories of 1970s Hollywood Boulevard. Nevertheless, as the title of the book you are now reading attests, West 42nd Street on Times Square in the 1970s is now the paradigm of grindhouse cinema, partly because of its notoriety as a red light district, and its traditional association with gaudy attractions. As a string of cinemas known in fan publications as ‘the Deuce’, this area has often been represented as ‘beyond the beaten path’ of Times Square’s legitimate theatre district, while the market-capitalism-on-parade licentiousness of its “spectacularization of urban space”³³ has long attracted curiosity-seeking tourists, theatre-goers and filmmakers. In filmic terms, its accumulation of neon signs and garish billboards serves as an instant signifier of the city as a theatre of distractions offering commodified sex, metropolitan decadence and glamorous alienation, hence its iconic place in the mise-en-scène of *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969) and, especially, *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976). Additionally, New York City was in the 1960s and early 1970s a centre of sexploitation filmmaking by the likes of Doris Wishman, Michael Findlay and Andy Milligan, whose films sometimes directly portrayed the 42nd Street environs in which they would be shown. One scene in Findlay’s *Wet and Wild* (AKA *Virgins in Heat*, 1976) provides a snapshot of how dominated by porn the area was. Accompanied on the soundtrack by the Harry Warren and Al Dubin song “42nd Street” (from the 1933 Warner Bros musical of the same name), a mock-portentous voiceover delivered by the director invokes the mythic opposition between the bright lights of Broadway and “the seamier 42nd Street” a stone’s throw away. In a piece of self-aggrandising reflexivity we see one large marquee sign advertising *Snuff* (1976), partly made by Findlay himself, and another promoting *The Story of Joanna* (Gerard Damiano, 1975). The Rialto 2 plays *Nympho’s Divine Obsession* (Lloyd Kaufman, 1976), the Victory advertises a hardcore triple-bill, and the Joy 42nd theatre offers no fewer than “five porno hits”. Other establishments glimpsed in the sequence include adult bookstores, the “all nude” Roxy Burlesk theatre and The Harem with what it promises is “a steamy jungle of unfettered sex”. Amateur footage of the area in the same period, sometimes uploaded by Youtube users, similarly documents a miscellany of Mini-Cinemas: 16 mm storefront cinemas advertising all-night quadruple-bills of erotic shorts, and other adult entertainment outlets. Both touristic and cinematic representations of 42nd Street contribute to its role in mediated memory as grindhouse cinema’s quintessence, and are testament to its attraction as a photogenic icon of disreputability and of the blatant commodity fetishism of market capitalism in the raw.

Narratives of decline, revival and recollection

The haziness of its contours is such that grindhouse cinema can be given no precise date of death. The establishments petered out at different rates in different places, but even by the early 1980s many exploitation films were reissued on home video, and are still sometimes revived for theatrical release on cult networks, raising the question of the difference between contemporary cult viewing practices and ‘original’ viewing protocols. Depending on where borders between exploitation and pornography are drawn, the finger of blame is pointed at many culprits: everything from home video to crack cocaine, mainstream co-optation, hardcore, feminist anti-porn protests, ‘political correctness’, Reagan-Bush New-Right moral crusades and gentrification are said to have contributed to grindhouse’s demise. In an elegy to 42nd Street penned in 1989, Jack Stevenson noted ruefully that a combination of “herpes and Aids”, billionaire property development and crime crackdowns at the behest of Mayors Ed Koch and Ray Flynn had fatally sanitised “the atmosphere” of the district³⁴. Other commentators differ from

³² Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman,, Trans, Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-8), xvii.

³³ Crang, “Rethinking the Observer”, 19.

³⁴ Stevenson, *Fleshpot*, 234.

Stevenson in regarding hard X as a nail in the culture's coffin, and propose teleologically that 'porno chic', followed by adult video rental outlets and preview booths, destroyed the 'softer' sexploitation market. Muller and Faris, for example, see the rise of porn in the 1970s as the start of a slow death completed later by the VCR, which "rewound and erased all traces of grindhouse"³⁵. In 1986, Frank Henenlotter similarly saw hardcore as villain rather than victim, and bemoaned the fact that "when I was growing up on Long Island ... there used to be lots of sleaze theaters that played horror films. One of my favourite ones is now just hardcore porn"³⁶.

If videotape ushered in a shift from public, if furtive, spectatorship to home viewing, the transformation of urban sleaze flâneurs into domestic consumers and collectors was no overnight occurrence. Embryonic forms of 'home cinema' had long existed in both television broadcasts and abridged versions of films on 8 and Super-8 mm reels for home projection. Indeed, the possibility of the home as a site for watching sex films was discussed even in the early days of 'porno chic'. An article in a 1973 edition of the UK *Penthouse* investigated Teldyne Packard Bell's new Cartrivision TV cartridge system, a "long-awaited technological breakthrough" thanks to which "erotic movies can appear on your own TV set in the privacy of your own home"³⁷. Despite its potential, too few consumers were prepared to part with £400 for the necessary equipment, so Cartrivision never caught on. Rodowick asserts that for analogue-era cinephiles, "the only way to see a film was to see it projected"³⁸, yet the manufacturer's investment and the porn trade's interest in technologies of home viewing suggest that as early as what is often sentimentalised as porn's golden "age of irresponsibility"³⁹, the industry was keen to venture into markets beyond theatrical display. Although the eventual rise of home video played its part in the demise of what is now seen as grindhouse culture, by the mid-1980s many fans conceded that, while armchair viewing was a comparatively impoverished experience, the availability of old exploitation films via 'mom and pop' video stores or mail order catalogues, rather than "erasing" grindhouse films, thankfully made them available again. In *Incredibly Strange Films*, Henenlotter ruminated on "what 42nd Street used to be – now they're getting rid of it", and suggested that his *Basket Case* (1982) was conceived partly as a tribute to that milieu just as its gentrification was becoming imminent. Henenlotter declares that exploitation reissues on tape are his only solace, and implies that the act of collecting videos is haunted by a kind of cultural morbidity: "I hate going back to Long Island because everything I used to love is dead"⁴⁰.

Whether the agent of destruction was hardcore, new technology or moral campaigning, it is widely agreed that grindhouse cinema was extinct by the end of the 1980s. New York-based fan publications began celebrating, commemorating and mythologizing it somewhat earlier, as Times Square appeared endangered. Since Times Square was the most spectacular (and therefore most represented) icon of the adult entertainment trade, its 'clean-up' came to stand for the victimisation and ultimate extinction of grindhouse cinema *tout court*. Looking back on the area in its pomp, Bill Landis recalls how determined he had been in the early 1980s to "document it all" in *Sleazoid*⁴¹. Other publications, like Michael Weldon's *Psychotronic* and Jim Morton's *Trashola* had a similar air of pre-emptive melancholia; their editorial voices all routinely expressed a cultist combination of defiance and wistfulness in their sense of an era passing into yore and a lifestyle under siege. Pondering the incipient decline and equally ruinous 'rehabilitation' of his favourite entertainment area, Weldon suggested that it would be "great if

³⁵ Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris, *That's Exploitation! The Forbidden World of 'Adults Only' Cinema* (London: Titan Books, 1996), 8-9.

³⁶ Juno, "Interview", 8.

³⁷ Jeffrey Robinson, "Good Evening – Here are the Nudes", *Penthouse* Vol 7 no. 12, 1973, 88.

³⁸ Rodowick. *Virtual Life*, 26. Thorough histories of the 'home cinema' industry can be found in Joshua Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (MIT Press, 2010), and Paul McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries* (London: BFI, 2008).

³⁹ Robert C. Sickels. "1970s Disco Daze: Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* and the Last Golden Age of Irresponsibility", *Journal of Popular Culture* 35 (4) (2002), 49-60.

⁴⁰ Juno, "Interview", 8.

⁴¹ Bill Landis, and Michelle Clifford, *Sleazoid Express* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 2002), xvi.

we could start a ‘save 42nd Street Committee’”⁴². At the same time, the self-designated exponent of the “cinema of transgression”, Richard Kern, made his elegiac travelogue *Goodbye 42nd Street* (1986). Naturally, processes of documentation, preservation and fetishisation often begin as absence looms.

Narratives of grindhouse’s extinction are often connected to narratives of passing youth. Puchalski looks back to a time “before the drive-ins I used to haunt during my college years were turned into mini-malls”⁴³. *Psychotronic* was founded when Weldon was in his late teens, and the publication concentrated on films he first watched when he was “growing up in Cleveland”; a family friend owned a cinema, and Weldon often played “hooky” to see films there, with the result—so he felt compelled to recount in the updated *Psychotronic Video Guide*—that he failed his exams⁴⁴; Bill Landis was forever “skipping classes” at University to get his “real education” from 42nd Street⁴⁵. Missing school or sacrificing education for cinema is a common refrain because as well as locating grindhouse experience in the remembered affective intensities of adolescence, it resonates with notions of misdemeanour. This entwining of grindhouse memories with recollections of youthful erotic epiphany is doubtless connected to the fact that exploitation cinema capitalises on fetishistic curiosity about ‘forbidden’ sights, a connection which reminds us that, as Svetlana Boym puts it, the bittersweet pangs of reminiscence can involve “a romance with one’s own fantasy”⁴⁶. Bill Landis, for example, recalls visiting Times Square as a teen in the mid-1970s. Detaching himself from his bourgeois parents (according to Freud, juvenile sexual investigations are carried out with a sense of alienation from the family) the young Landis explores the seamier side of the cinema district while they watched “tourist trap plays” on Broadway. Landis presents his youthful self as an adventurer whose voracious spectatorship took him far from the sightseer’s perfunctory gaze; seeking out the exploitation films he had seen advertised in the *New York Post* in his youth, he instead found himself overwhelmed by posters for hardcore films like *The Devil in Miss Jones* (Gerard Damiano, 1973).

Traces of Places

References to grindhouses, flop-houses, arthouses, drive-ins and so on evoke distinct spaces of exhibition and consumption but they are also architectural figures for a classed hierarchy of taste. Similar strata come into play when cult texts navigate the topographic nuances of downtown, midtown, inner city, skid row, poverty row, red-light districts and the rest, with the grindhouse projected as a site of otherness with which fans may align themselves. The totemic value of grindhouse cinema therefore lies in the mediated memory of a marriage of film type, place and experience, as much as in the professed qualities of the films exhibited there. The memories narrated in cultist publications are often almost Proustian: dank lobbies, sticky floors, sweating but distracted patrons and the odour of disinfectant are as likely to be evoked as the movies themselves. In an attempt to ground the grindhouse image in the real, one text waxes romantic about 42nd Street’s “unsurpassed array of porno booths, convulsive junkies and gorgeous old theatres stinking of Lysol and vomit”⁴⁷, while another summons “spilled malt liquors, piss, smoke, BO, and Pinesol”⁴⁸, thereby suggesting extracinematic corporeal and ambient affects distinct from but enmeshed with the mental afterimage of the films. Other tropes try to stabilise the slippery grindhouse referent through narratives about spectatorial risk. In *American Grindhouse*, the director Bill Lustig recalls how grindhouses always carried “an ever present sense of danger”. Perhaps Lustig imagined this air of threat to be the ideal atmosphere in which to absorb the grimy misogyny of his slasher film, *Maniac* (1981). The air of menace felt to permeate Times Square and its environs was similarly played upon, and similarly displaced onto the bodies of female characters, in Lucio Fulci’s slasher film *The New York Ripper* (1982); Fulci’s film offers several contemporary

⁴² *Psychotronic Encyclopedia*, xi.

⁴³ Steven Puchalski, *Slimetime: A Guide to Sleazy, Mindless Movies*. Revised and Updated Edition. (Manchester: Critical Vision/Headpress, 2000), 9.

⁴⁴ Michael Weldon, *The Psychotronic Video Guide* (London: Titan Books, 1996), x.

⁴⁵ Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express*, xii.

⁴⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books Press, 2001), 132.

⁴⁷ Puchalski. *Slimetime*, 9.

⁴⁸ Pete Chiarella, ed., *Grindhouse Purgatory* 1 (1) (2013), 7.

glimpses of the area's cinemas and 'live sex' theatres (among them the Lyric, Cine 42 and the New Amsterdam) as sites of sordid allure, especially for the Ripper's female victims. In a similarly grubby vein, the author of *Sleazoid Express* aspires to a blend of Hubert Selby Jr. and Travis Bickle in his descriptions of audiences made up of "depressives ... sexual obsessives, inner-city people seeking cheap diversions ... people getting high ... pickpockets"⁴⁹, while the casually homophobic fanzine *Grindhouse Purgatory* creates a vivid picture of "ominous darkness" filled with an "army of winos, dustheads, faggots, pick pockets and other assorted lowlives"⁵⁰. In *American Grindhouse*, Joe Dante fondly remembers sitting in a grindhouse audience one night in the 1970s as a murder was committed: "the police came in and turned on the houselights", but the screening continued and Dante's enjoyment of the film was not spoiled.

Foregrounding edginess enables grindhouse cult discourse to project an image of down-at-heel or lawless audiences, while diverting attention from the middle class film cultist also sitting in the auditorium. Thus grindhouse intermediaries associate themselves with the passion of the "obsessives" and the transgressivity of the "lowlives", while situating themselves as astute observers of the grindhouse milieu, not unlike Walter Benjamin's evocation of the flâneur who perceives the modern city as a fragmented "theatre of purchases" full of encounters with strangers⁵¹. This self-presentation as resident of a liminoid site both inside and outside the 'original' audience allows the cultist to present grindhouse cinema simultaneously as a bastion of counter-normative impulses, and a wretched shelter for the dispossessed. The notion of grindhouse cinema as a space for misunderstood mavericks (in the auditorium as well as on screen) is of course a ritual of distinction for a 'paracinematic' taste discourse which paints itself as an affront to both bourgeois aesthetic norms and avant-garde elitism. As Sconce argues of the classed subject-position of paracinematic audiences, the current grindhouse cult is not simply a 'bottom up' phenomenon, even in an age of media convergence which has supposedly seen "the withering of traditional gatekeepers"⁵². It has gatekeepers of its own. If in the late 1970s and early 1980s the grindhouse gatekeepers were fans who could covertly use office photocopiers, today it includes documentary film-makers, academics, festival programmers and others with the requisite cultural capital.

Bill Landis personifies the intricate relationships between social position and reading protocol. Between 1977 and 1982, Landis divided his time between working as a projectionist for cinemas in Times Square, editing his *Sleazoid* fanzine, and arranging exploitation screenings at Manhattan's 8th Street Playhouse, and "hipster nightspots like Club 57"⁵³. Landis negotiates his plural access to cultural space by suggesting that his involvement in "the Times Square universe" rendered him both an uncouth "outsider to straight society"⁵⁴, and a swashbuckling troublemaker for the cultural elite. Landis reviles the "snobs who populated the art/underground film world"⁵⁵, reporting that Jonas Mekas was "livid that I'd once left *Sleazoid* flyers at a screening of *Chelsea Girls* at his Anthology Film Archives"⁵⁶. As well as displaying his membership of that community by name-checking everyone from Warhol to Fernando Arrabal, Landis remembers distributing his fanzine at *Artforum* magazine events and the Times Square Show of 1980⁵⁷. Although Landis fashions himself as a gate-crasher in the art world, the bohemian consecration of 'trash' was already a firmly established tradition. Fanzines like *Sleazoid* and *Psychotronic* built on a fondness for 'grade z' cinema whose roots can be found in the surrealist love of 'delirious' low culture, Sontag-style camp aesthetics, Warholian pop, the work of film critics like

⁴⁹ Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express*, 3.

⁵⁰ Chiarella, *Purgatory*, 8.

⁵¹ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*. (Berkeley: university of California Press, 1993), 49.

⁵² Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York and London: New York University Press (updated ed.,) 2006, 21.

⁵³ Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express*, xiii.

⁵⁴ Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express*, xv.

⁵⁵ Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express*, 5.

⁵⁶ Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express*, xiv.

⁵⁷ Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express*, xii-xiii.

Manny Farber and Parker Tyler, the Midnight Movies cult, and many other factors. At the same time, 'B movie', exploitation and drive-in cinema—already often self-parodying—was widely referenced in pastiches and tongue-in-cheek homages like *Hollywood Boulevard* (Allan Arkush and Joe Dante, 1976) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975). All of this meant that the cultural conditions were in place for The Times Square show to have welcomed copies of *Sleazoid* into its gift shop. The art critic Kim Levin described the exhibition as a seminal statement of what the doyen of modernist art criticism, Clement Greenberg, called postmodernism's "new-fangled philistines of advancedness"⁵⁸, a description equally befitting the grindhouse cult. The show also chimed with burgeoning grindhouse cultism by being installed in an "abandoned massage parlor"⁵⁹ (the building also housed a stationery shop, a fast food retailers and an adult bookshop), and exhibiting art which reflected the frisson of "urban decay" and "Forty-second Street come-ons and other assaults"⁶⁰.

The interconnectedness of exploitation, porn and art worlds should not be overstated; but their coexistence in the same urban environs entailed some sharing of personnel, management and audience, and sometimes made them joint targets of both right-wing and feminist censorship campaigns. Anti-porn marches in Times Square in the late 1970s, along with Andrea Dworkin's conflation of pornography and snuff⁶¹, were galvanised by the cheek-by-jowl availability of hardcore and sexploitation films, 'snuff' loops, sadomasochistic live acts and prostitution in the same zone. Apart from occasional snide references to "the feminists, with their endless yakking"⁶², such protests are largely excised from grindhouse cult discourse, but are part of the fabric of grindhouse cinema history, including the history of its representation and self-representation. At any rate, if nocturnal strollers like Landis were fascinated by the gaudy "come-ons" and "assaults" of a Dionysian, carnivalesque marketplace, anti-porn protestors took a different view: one installation at the Times Square Show consisted of the feminist slogan "women – take back the night" scrawled through the site in lipstick⁶³.

The grindhouse afterimage

According to Nora, memorial acts and objects are motivated by a dread of amnesia, while Jacques Derrida proposes that the archival impulse to collect, itemise and preserve is bound up with the death instinct or "destruction drive"⁶⁴. Something similar can be said of contemporary grindhouse cultism, from the making of documentary paeans to the building of home exploitation film libraries. The packaging, marketing and mythologization of grindhouse ascribe relevance and vigour to the field by self-consciously reproducing the florid tone of exploitation cinema advertising. Yet these proclamations of vitality are haunted by a discourse of death and disappearance. As David Church explores, although many grindhouse DVD and blu-ray ranges are no-frills, other more prestigious fan-oriented products are loaded with supplements, touted as definitive transfers and marketed through a rhetoric of connoisseurship and auteurism that is alien to the throwaway practices of an opportunistic industry; pristine, supposedly complete editions similarly run counter to the tatty condition in which many exploitation films were originally screened. In recognition of this contradiction, grindhouse disc packaging, menu design and so on often emulates the look of the original film publicity materials and the imperfections of degraded film stock. Many discs include scratched trailers suffering from frame loss and replications of 'old style' intermissions, while their sleeves imitate the texture of creased movie posters. In *American Grindhouse*, scene and chapter transitions are accompanied by simulated projector noise and faded, even melting celluloid. Manifesting what Wolfgang Ernst has described as "media

⁵⁸ Kim Levin, *Beyond Modernism: Essays on Art from the 70s and 80s*. (Harper Collins, 1989), 197.

⁵⁹ Levin, *Beyond Modernism*, 198-9.

⁶⁰ Levin, *Beyond Modernism*, 197.

⁶¹ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), 71.

⁶² Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express*, 137.

⁶³ Levin, *Beyond Modernism*, 198.

⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever", in Charles Merewether, ed. *The Archive* (Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2006), 77.

awareness of different modes of textually or visually processing the past”⁶⁵, such ‘decay’ compensates for digital media’s perceived lack of physical presence by hypostatizing a lost moment of authenticity. Faux patina connotes a tangibility felt lacking in digital images.

In as much as it reifies film’s past through a digital poetics of arrested entropy, grindhouse mystique echoes film theorists from the “prevideo cinephile generation”, for whom the analogue-to-digital shift is tantamount to the death of “cinematographic specificity”⁶⁶. For Rodowick, pre-digital film theorists – not unlike grindhouse cultists – treasured the particularity of cinema’s haptic qualities and signifying practices because prints “had to be chased down in commercial theatres, repertory houses, and film societies”⁶⁷. Much as the thrill of this ‘chase’ hints at pleasures beyond the immanence of ‘film itself’, so cult grindhouse texts often eulogise the urban film fan’s ambulatory gaze, which includes but also extends beyond the “celluloid strip with its reassuring physical passage of visible images”⁶⁸. In a process of technological disavowal, digital emulations of projector noise and celluloid frangibility function like artificial ruins, memorialising - or retrofitting - a structure of feeling thought absent in private home viewing. One fanzine editor muses, “I miss the raincoated perverts ... I miss seeing Times Square grindhouse patrons impatiently flick lit cigarettes at the screen ... and coming out of the theater squinting into the blazing sunlight”, before inviting his readers to “hurry into your seats. The lights will be going down soon”⁶⁹. The ‘home’ of grindhouse is, then, discovered in a fetishised notion of ‘cinema’ itself. (This passion for seemingly lost presence has recently embraced obsolescent VHS tapes, and vanishing video retailers, now seen in hindsight less as threats to, and more as part of, grindhouse’s cultural space). Thus grindhouse’s disappearance, alongside its continued, supposedly derealised, digital life, equates in the cultist imagination to the death of ‘real’ cinema understood as a multidimensional, even multisensual corporeal encounter between spectator, audience, image, city space and material apparatus. As one cultist text puts it, “battered, burned and riddled with splices, these films were the lifeblood of the grindhouses and they are all that remain of the wildest era we have ever known”⁷⁰; simulations of the cinematic apparatus both produce and compensate for a sense that the (remembered) experiential plenitude of grindhouse’s ‘original’ moment is irrecoverable.

According to Pierre Nora, “memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists”⁷¹, which is to suggest that recollection brings memories into being in the very act of narrating them. In its clinging to idealised memories of sticky floors and cultural detritus, grindhouse cultism involves a sense of “the irreversibility of time: something in the past is no longer accessible”⁷². Both the interiors of specific venues and street-views of urban spaces become symbolic loci of a cinematic heritage around which cultists can perform their taste affiliations. Hence Steven Puchalski describes the collection of exploitation film reviews in *Slimetime* as “a glimpse into a time long gone”⁷³; Josh Hadley, a conflicted contributor to *Grindhouse Purgatory*, laments the fact that “we have lost a culture as well as a significant piece of film history. No one who was not actually there ... can appreciate what this era of film was, myself included”, while confronting the makers of “kitschy” grindhouse “throwbacks” – such as *Death Proof* (Quentin Tarantino 2007), *Machete* (Ethan Maniquis and Robert Rodriguez, 2010) and *Disco Exorcist* (Richard Griffin, 2011) – with what he sees as a harsh truth: “the grindhouse is gone, accept it”⁷⁴. One such revivalist is Jeremy Katzen, a filmmaker who shot a remake of Herschell Gordon

⁶⁵ Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: university of Minnesota Press 2013), 37.

⁶⁶ Rodowick, *Virtual Life*, 19.

⁶⁷ Rodowick. *Virtual Life*, 26.

⁶⁸ Rodowick. *Virtual Life*, 8.

⁶⁹ Mike Accomando. “Editorial”, *Dreadful Pleasures* 11 (1996) 3.

⁷⁰ 42nd Street Pete, “A Lost Saturday Night at the Venus”, in P. Chiarelli, ed. *Grindhouse Purgatory*, 2013, 9.

⁷¹ Nora, *Realms*, 1.

⁷² Huyssen, “Nostalgia”, 7.

⁷³ Puchalski, *Slimetime*, 9.

⁷⁴ Hadley, “Burning”, 5.

Lewis's *Wizard of Gore* in 2007. In *American Grindhouse*, Katzen suggests that he can "remember" something about the exploitation scene of the 1960s and 1970s, then corrects "remember" to "imagine", since he "wasn't there". Katzen explains that "it's hard for us to imagine, those of us who weren't alive, what it must have been like to see people eviscerated in a movie ... Herschell was the genius that first did this". Hadley similarly muses that "by the time the grindhouse was over I was not even out of high school yet, so I missed most of this"⁷⁵. In these ways, grindhouse cultism almost acknowledges the phantasmic nature of its own references to "lost" times "long gone" being "missed" by fans who "weren't there", suggesting not simply that grindhouse cinema left behind an ersatz shadow of its former self in Tarantinoesque pastiches and revivals, but also that the grindhouse era as presently understood and marketed is a product of collective desire.

To this extent, grindhouse memories are, to borrow a Lacanian phrase about trauma, a missed encounter with the real, and that 'real' often takes the form of a chimeric 'home' assembled from mediated recollections of cinema experience. Hadley extravagantly compares what he imagines was the thrill of original grindhouse cinema to the disappointment of contemporary pastiches: "the redo is never as good as the first time. Fuck all your life and it will never feel as intense as that very first orgasm"⁷⁶. The further the "first time" recedes into memory and myth, the more significant it appears. Yet it was never unproblematically present in the "first" place: there is no original moment of plenitude unmediated by fantasy, representation and self-presentation. For example, the exploitation producer David F. Friedman may have published his autobiography, *A Youth in Babylon: Confessions of a Trash-Film King* in 1990, shortly before his back catalogue was re-released on tape by the Seattle-based Something Weird Video, but he had begun curating his legacy and managing his reputation considerably earlier. Around the same time that Findlay's *Wet and Wild* captured the marquees and storefronts of 42nd Street, Friedman was documenting the pre-hardcore exploitation scene in an unfinished film called *That's Sexploitation*⁷⁷. In *Psychotronic*, Weldon remembered old drive-in and 42nd Street movies through the filter of having watched them again on cable TV. When the intrepid young Bill Landis first entered Times Square, it "looked just like I wanted it to"⁷⁸, having seen sensational cinema admats in the press as a boy, and having seen it represented in *Midnight Cowboy*; such mediated afterimages may intensify rather than diminish the potency of the grindhouse myth in the cultist imagination. Perhaps if we approach grindhouse on the basis that it never uncomplicatedly existed, we might arrive at a fuller understanding of why we wish that it did.

⁷⁵ Hadley, "Burning", 3.

⁷⁶ 75. Hadley, "Burning," 3.

⁷⁷ David F. Friedman, Untitled interview with Doris Wishman, *Something Weird Video Catalogue* # 1, 1995-6.

⁷⁸ Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express*, xi.