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Exploiting Exploitation Cinema: an Introduction

David Roche

- 1 What is exploitation cinema? Exploitation cinema is not a genre; it is an industry with a specific mode of production. Exploitation films are made cheap for easy profit. “Easy” because they are almost always genre films relying on time-tried formulas (horror, thrillers, biker movies, surfer movies, women-in-prison films, martial arts, subgenres like gore, rape-revenge, slashers, nazisploitation, etc.). “Easy” because they offer audiences what they can’t get elsewhere: sex, violence and taboo topics. “Easy” because they have long targetted what has since become the largest demographic group of moviegoers: the 15-25 age group (Thompson and Bordwell, 310, 666). The exploitation film is not a genre, and yet it is often described as such.¹ This is, no doubt, because these movies do, as a group, share common semantic, syntactic and pragmatic elements that, for Rick Altman, make up the “complex situation” that is a film genre (Altman, 84).² Semantic characteristics include excessive images of sex and violence, bad acting, poor cinematography and sound; syntactic characteristics include taboo themes, and flat characters or basic character arcs. Evidently, these can mainly be put down to the mode of production. The arguments for considering the exploitation film as a genre are, then, mainly pragmatic: fans and critics often speak of the “exploitation film” as if to designate a specific genre. That these movies have often been exhibited in similar venues—grindhouses, drive-ins and today direct-to-DVD—reinforces their commonality. Exploitation is not a genre, then, but a label.
- 2 Cinephiles, film critics (Ken Knight, Richard Meyers) and scholars (Pam Cook, Thomas Doherty) tend to associate exploitation cinema with a specific period: the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. For Doherty, exploitation cinema as we know it emerged in the 1950s with the advent of low-budget teenpics. In the mid-1940s, exploitation designated “films with some timely or currently controversial subject which [could] be exploited, capitalized on, in publicity and advertising”; the A-feature *The Pride of the Yankees* (Samuel Goldwyn / RKO, Sam Wood, 1942) is one such example (Doherty, 6), though one could

argue that producer Darryl Zanuck's taste for the "headline type of title story" was already exploitative in that sense (Bourget, 99). In 1953, still, a musical like *The Band Wagon* (MGM, Vincente Minnelli), as Sheldon Hall kindly pointed out to me in an email, could be promoted as "the exploitation picture of the year" simply because it promised to be highly successful [Fig. 1]. So it wasn't until the mid-1950s that "exploitation" came to mean both "timely and sensational," and came to have such a "bad reputation" (Doherty, 7).

Fig. 1

Wednesday, July 8, 1953

GET ABOARD THE EXPLOITATION PICTURE OF THE YEAR!

THE BAND WAGON
M-G-M TOP TECHNICOLOR MUSICAL

MOST PUBLICIZED!
Just the beginning, coming and current publicity: Cover on Life, Full page in Life. Cover on Newsweek, big story inside. N.Y. Times Magazine (feature) (extensive) publicity spread. Collier's, song lyrics. Sunday Mirror (extensive) (extensive). Movie of Week issue. Screenplay cover. Ladies' Home Journal, photograph and copy. Associated Press, publicity layout. Look, cover, inside story. Photoplay, photo layout. American Magazine, colored photo. Cosmo, full page. Movie of Week. Tempo Magazine, 2 page layout. King Features Syndicate, feature and art. Motion Picture Magazine. Modern Screen. Movie Spotlight. Screen Stars. Movie Play, all carry stories and art. Space does not permit more detailed what will be the greatest publicity barrage of the year!

BIG AD CAMPAIGN!
Sensational new paper display ads. Exciting covers. Full Magazine full page in all leading publications. Picture of the Month column in 9 top national magazines. Full page in Look. Other advertising, including ads in connection with Song Contest.

SONG CONTEST!
A big National Contest tied in to local level. Blazes America with 80 top radio stations (and some TV promotion). One week of phony records from "Band Wagon" album. Contest with instant writing in their favorite song and in 25 words or less why they want to see the picture. Prizes for disc jockeys, radio managers, public. One of the most complete contests ever staged by MGM, with special promotional players, star and songwriter interviews.

"BAND WAGON" ALBUM!
Available for 49¢. 16,000 dummy covers of M-G-M Records Album. 30¢. 100,000 ads and more. Distributors' window contests. Full page trade ad in Record Review. 250 Albums for disc jockeys.

FRED ASTAIRE STUDIOS!
Posting special photos in all studios nationwide. New York Bandparties has sent camera ideas to its affiliates, has purchased hundreds of sets and is using "Band Wagon" numbers in ads.

OTHER MUSIC TIE UPS!
Dummy sheet music covers for window display. Other record companies will assist with their own recordings.

NBC BROADCAST!
NBC on Sunday, July 13th from 3 to 3:30 on "What's The Story" will broadcast full half hour of songs from the M-G-M Records Album of "The Band Wagon." Carried on more than 100 stations. Tie in with this locally. Many more stars and personalities on Radio and TV, such as Sonk Club, Windell, Ed Sullivan. Also, girls in costume visit disc jockeys.

WINDOW DISPLAYS!
For Music Hall Promoters in New York many exciting window tie ups arranged, which can be duplicated everywhere.

DIETZ-SCHWARTZ TOUR!
"The Band Wagon" song-writers will make tour of cities for publicity, appear on radio, TV, etc. They have recorded special interview pictures for use everywhere otherwise.

SONG WRITERS' SALUTE!
More than 25 of America's top song writers have given permission to use their names in the following example: "Bring Back the good old days of THE BAND WAGON" marking the 25th Anniversary of Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz."

TEASER, REGULAR TRAILERS!
Sensational Technicolor teaser and full-length trailers. Use them as far in advance as possible.

NEW SEASON IDEA!
Many theaters plan to use the phrase: "Get Aboard The Band Wagon" as a slogan for their whole lineup of new season shows, even though they may not play "Band Wagon" itself. The phrase is a refreshing change from the usual "New Season Film Festival, etc." Those who play it as a part of their new Fall Movie Season will not only sell "Band Wagon" but it's a perfect springboard for the whole program.

PRESS SERVICES!
Special service of Art and movies to Key City papers through M-G-M press representatives. Special direct-mail of color art and features on list of editors.

ACCESSORIES! PRESS BOOK!
Special accessories, including set of color stills, lobby banner, window display pieces in two sizes. The 24-sheet provides two exceptional scenes. For the complete side-strengthening plan on "The Band Wagon" see the showmanship press book, containing a wealth of material to assure a well-promoted engagement.

Advertisement for *The Band Wagon*

© Variety (July 1953)

- 3 Both Felicia Feaster and Brett Wood's *Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of the Exploitation Film* and Eric Schaefer's "Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!" A History of Exploitation Films trace the history of exploitation cinema even further back by examining a body of lesser known films of the 1920s-1950s that Schaefer calls classical exploitation films. The emergence of this industry on the margins of the U.S. film industry filled a vacancy left by the latter in the 1910s. With Hollywood desperately trying to improve its image (the Thirteen Points were issued in 1921), studios like Universal and Triangle stopped making films about sex hygiene and the white slave trade; the enforcement of self-censorship, with the Don'ts and Be Carefuls of 1927 and the Production Code of 1930, confirmed that imagery and narratives involving sexuality, homosexuality, drug use and miscegenation were inappropriate. Exploiters thus stepped in to profit from an existing market for sex hygiene films, drug films, vice, exotic and atrocity films, and nudist and burlesque films. With the exception of burlesque, all these genres were meant to be simultaneously sensational and educational, some of the sex hygiene films having been solicited by the state or army (Schaefer, 27-28). Posters promised nudity and often stressed the topicality

of the film by drawing on headlines, using words like “exposé” and “story” and asking questions audiences would expect the film to answer (Schaefer, 106-9, 114) [Fig. 2]. Because of their emphasis on spectacle rather than on narrative, these films, Schaefer argues, owed more to the “cinema of attractions” of early silent cinema, as analyzed by Tom Gunning (2004) (Schaefer, 38). Thus, “the classical exploitation film was a form firmly rooted in modes of representation, financing, production, distribution, and ideology left behind by the mainstream movie industry after WW1” (Schaefer, 41). Indeed, these films changed very little from the 1920s to the 1950s and could sometimes be re-released with a new poster and title as long as ten years after their initial release—this was the case of *Midnight Lady* (Chesterfield, Richard Thorpe, 1932), re-released as *Secret of the Female Sex*, and of *Polygamy* (Unusual Pictures, Pat Carlyle, 1936), re-released as both *Illegal Wives* and *Child Marriage* (Schaefer, 59-60). The ballyhoo surrounding the event was instrumental in drawing audiences: exploiteers suggested local displays, sold themed books, included nurses and strippers, and invited so-called specialists to give lectures (Schaefer, 118, 126-27). Audiences probably saw these movies just as much to learn about shameful taboo subjects as to enjoy the sexual titillation and carnivalesque atmosphere of the show: they “were encouraged to look on their attendance at an exploitation film as an experience with multiple dimensions, one that would arouse, thrill, entertain, and educate” (Schaefer, 110).

Fig. 2



Advertisement from press book for *The Desperate Women* (1954)

Public domain

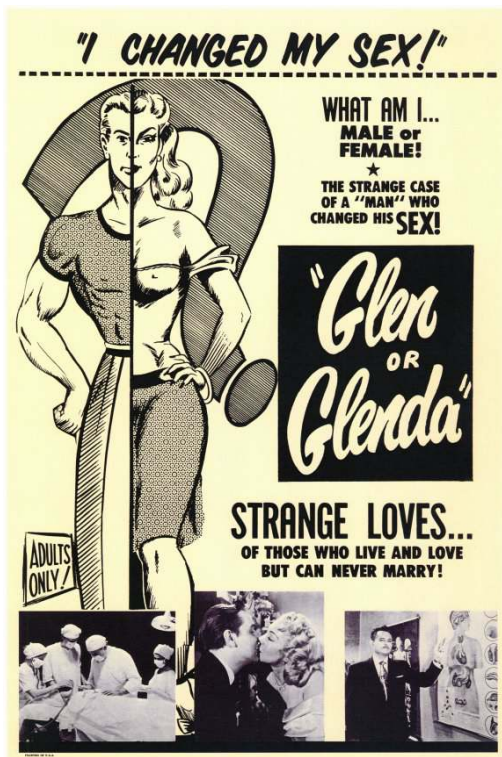
- 4 Schaefer attributes the disappearance of classical exploitation cinema both to the retirement and death of the first generation exploiteers, and to the fact that the Hollywood industry, because of competition from television, increasingly explored

forbidden topics in order to draw a more mature audience (Schaefer, 326-37). Classical exploitation made way for sexploitation. Historically, there are some connections between the two. Russ Meyer was initially asked to make a classical exploitation nudist film when he directed *The Immoral Mr. Teas*, which Schaefer considers to have largely contributed to initiating sexploitation (Schaeffer, 338). And the infamous Edward D. Wood, Jr. launched his career with *Glen or Glenda* (1953), a movie about tranvestites that retains the educational intent of classical exploitation [Fig. 3], before moving on to horror (*Bride of the Monster*, 1955; *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, 1959) and sexploitation (*Nympho Cyclor*, 1971). But sexploitation distinguished itself from its predecessor because it had no claim to educate and adopted an ironic tone:

Sexploitation films can best be described as exploitation movies that focused on nudity, sexual situations, and simulated (i.e., nonexplicit) sex acts, designed for titillation and entertainment. Such films no longer required explicit education justification for presenting sexual spectacle on the screen—although they often made claims of social or artistic merit as a strategy for legal protection. (Schaefer, 338)

- 5 The pictures made by Allied Artists, DCA, Howco and AIP (American International Pictures) have, Schaefer argues, more in common with the B-movies the Hollywood industry stopped making in the 1950s (Schaefer, 330-31), namely that they are narrative films. So like their predecessors, the new exploitation films filled a vacancy within the mainstream industry.

Fig. 3



Poster of *Glen or Glenda* (1953)

Public domain

- 6 They also testified to the industry's growing awareness of the significance of the youth market. In the 1950s, consumer society started not only to target teenagers directly, but

attempted to address them differently; teenage advice books, for instance, were no longer written from the superior perspective of the parent or teacher, but provided insight on how to become popular at school (Doherty, 47). In *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*, Doherty links the rise of the exploitation teenpic to the opportunity to profit from the youth audience (Doherty, 12), either by creating genres dealing with issues and topics they were interested in (the rebel or rock'n'roll movie), or simply by integrating youthful characters in pre-existing genres (like horror and sci-fi). With its hero who fails to “adjust” and its gratuitous song and dance scenes, *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Sunset Productions, Gene Fowler, Jr., 1957), one of the top grossing films that year, does both (Fig. 4) (Doherty, 131).

Fig. 4



Advertisement for *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (1957)

Public domain

As a production strategy, the 1950s exploitation formula typically had three elements: (1) controversial, bizarre, or timely subject matter amenable to wild promotion (‘exploitation’ potential in its original sense); (2) a substandard budget; and (3) a teenage audience. Movies of this ilk are *triple*ly exploitative, simultaneously exploiting sensational happenings (for story value), their notoriety (for publicity value), and their teenage participants (for box office value). (Doherty, 7)

- 7 In spite of these differences—the target audience, the educational claims or lack thereof, the emphasis on spectacle or narrative—the North American exploitation film has always addressed topical issues and resorted to exploitative images snubbed by the mainstream industry in order to exploit the concerns of a specific market. In a sense, the overt topicality of classical exploitation cinema made way, in *sexploitation*, to more diffuse but just as pregnant themes, while *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Vortex, Tobe Hooper, 1974) prove that the tabloid title remained effective. Moreover, one of the main strategies Schaefer identifies in classical exploitation cinema—the recycling of stock footage or images from previous films—was just as central to later exploitation films (Schaeffer, 56-57). Clearly, exploiting exploitation cinema entails not only the economic exploitation of an audience and subject matter, though it is its primary

concern, but also the repeated exploitation of the form: in both cases, this exploitation is deliberately excessive in order to make up for its (chiefly economic) lacks, and it is, I would argue, in its excesses that potential disruption of the mainstream lies.

- 8 I started by noting that the use-value of the “exploitation film” is the main reason it is sometimes considered as a genre. It is, in fact, the “uses” made of exploitation cinema that will concern us here. As Pam Cook has noted,

There is also a challenge for film-makers in the necessity of shooting fast and cheaply, in displaying ingenuity and in injecting ideas that do not entirely go along with hardcore exploitation principles. In other words, the director can also exploit the exploitation material in his or her own interests, and have fun at the expense of the genre. (Cook, 57)

The paradox of “exploit[ing] the exploitation material in his or her own interests” is, in effect, at the heart of many of the political and ethical ambiguities that this issue will draw attention to. We aim to explore the extent to which specific filmmakers, producers, actors and viewers have exploited exploitation cinema as both an industry and a cinematic form characterized by high economic constraints and, at least in some respects, by a greater degree of latitude because of the necessity to display taboo imagery and topics. In other words, to what extent do some filmmakers and screenwriters turn the necessity to exploit transgressive material into an opportunity to produce a subversive subtext and/or aesthetics, one that challenges dominant and potentially oppressive discourses and practices?

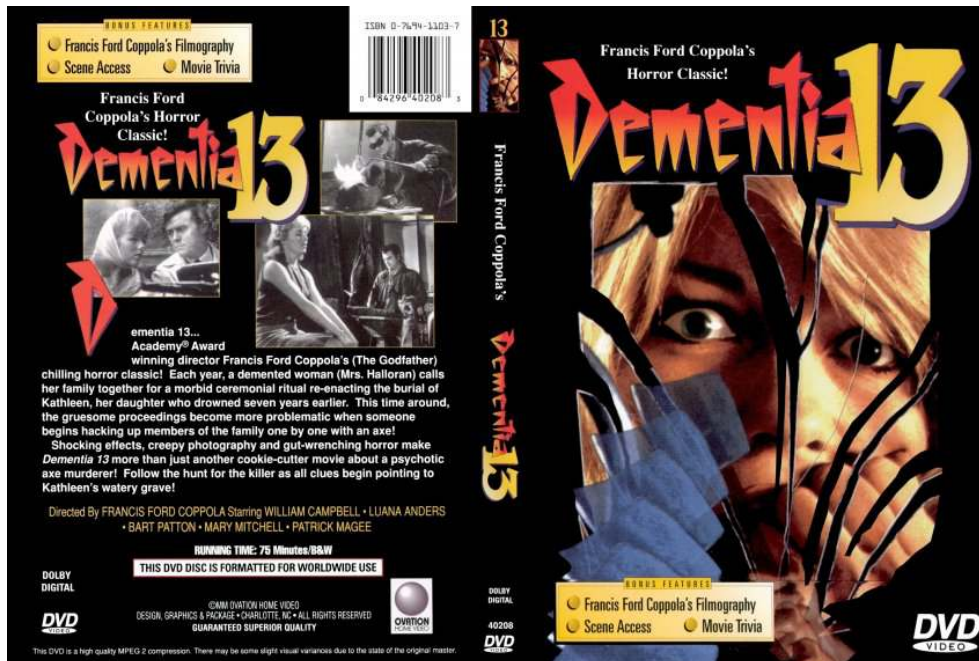
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- 9 Before the rise of the film school generation of the 1960s and 1970s, the exploitation industry was a viable training ground for many filmmakers and actors. Director/producer Roger Corman was to boast the “discovery” of many of the big names of the period. His company, Filmgroup Productions, founded in 1959, distributed the first movies starring Jack Nicholson—*The Wild Ride* (Harvey Berman) and *The Little Shop of Horrors* (Roger Corman), both released in 1960—and produced *Dementia 13* (1963) [Fig. 5], written and directed by Francis Ford Coppola, who had started out making nudie pics (*The Bellboy and the Playgirls*, Defin Film/Rapid Film/Screen Rite Picture Company, 1962). As a producer and director for AIP, founded in 1954, Corman cast Robert De Niro in his own *Bloody Mama* (1970), one of the actor’s first parts, and produced Martin Scorsese’s second feature film, *Boxcar Bertha*, in 1972, and Brian De Palma’s *Sisters* in 1973. With New World Pictures, which Corman founded in 1970, he launched the careers of Joe Dante (*Piranha*, 1978), Jonathan Demme (*Crazy Mama*, 1975) and Jonathan Kaplan (*Night Call Nurses*, 1972). AIP and New World Pictures were the major players of U.S. exploitation cinema, also producing some of the most successful blaxploitation films, *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974), both starring Pam Grier and directed by Jack Hill, and distributing exploitation fare from Australia (*Mad Max*, George Miller, 1979), Canada (*The House by the Lake*, William Fruet, 1976), Sweden (*Thriller*, Bo Arne Vibenius, 1973), Italy (the films of Mario Bava), Japan (the Godzilla movies of the 1960s and 1970s) and Great Britain (many Hammer films of the late 1960s and 1970s). The exploitation industry also provided opportunities for women directors like Stephanie Rothman, “produc[ing] some fascinating feminist films, which remain relevant” (Cook, 64). Many of these exploitation films have retrospectively gained a legitimacy they lacked upon release because fans and critics now view them not

just as exploitation films, but as early works evidencing the talent and sometimes even personal signatures of major actors and directors. In short, they have been salvaged by auteur theory, which has long been integrated in both production,³ marketing and cinephile practices (Saper, 35; Verevis, 9-10; Roche, 2014, 13). Most of the articles in this issue confirm this trend by recuperating auteurism to study specific filmmakers.

Fig. 5



DVD cover *Dementia 13* (1963)

© Ovation Home Video

- 10 The transformation of some exploitation films into auteur films was facilitated by the fact that many were independently produced. Fourteen of Russ Meyer's films—from *The Naked Camera* (1961) to *Cherry, Harry & Raquell!* (1970)—were produced and distributed by Eve Productions, co-owned by his wife. David F. Friedman and Herschell Gordon Lewis founded their own company to produce *Blood Feast* (1963) and *2,000 Maniacs!* (1964), as did George A. Romero for *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and Kim Henkel and Tobe Hooper for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Wes Craven's debut *The Last House on the Left* (1972) was produced by his friend Sean S. Cunningham's company. And unlike many of the blaxploitation films that imitated it and that were produced by exploitation companies like AIP and sometimes even by major studios (MGM for *Shaft*, Gordon Parks, 1971), Melvyn Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) was produced by the director himself who sought to arouse the interest of African American investors (most famously Bill Cosby).⁴ These films were then distributed by companies specialized in exploitation and sometimes pornography (Bryanston Distributing, which distributed *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, had distributed the hit *Deep Throat* in 1972). Though usually not directly associated with exploitation cinema, John Waters operated very much like the exploiters of classical exploitation cinema (Feaster and Wood, 194-95), as **Elise Pereira-Nunes** shows in this issue, producing and distributing three films from *Pink Flamingos* (1972) to *Desperate Living* (1977) through his company, Saliva Films. Many of the exploitation films

of the period that have since garnered the recognition of fans, critics and scholars are, in fact, independent films.⁵

- 11 This explains, at least in part, the relative freedom the filmmakers had to experiment artistically and sometimes to ground exploitative imagery in radical political subtexts. In the early 1970s, many filmmakers integrated techniques initiated by the French Nouvelle Vague and/or 1960s underground cinema.⁶ Pam Cook notes that the “drug-induced fantasy scenes” in Rothman’s *The Student Nurses* (New World Pictures, 1970) are “more in line with European art cinema than the rough and ready codes of exploitation” (59) [41:01-45:10; 61:23-62:22]. *Sweet Sweetback’s* contains many scenes edited in jump-cut (when a white cop fires at Sweetback on a bridge [70:30-70:58]), a scene with the hero running that utilizes the split screen technique to portray a character trapped by the city and the police [64:47-65:34], and ends on a freeze frame of the hills where the black man is now lurking [96:04], recalling the end of another ode to rebellion, François Truffaut’s *Les quatre cent coups* (1959).⁷ Waters’s *Female Trouble* (1974) similarly ends on a freeze frame of Dawn Davenport’s distorted face as she thanks her wonderful fans while being electrocuted on the electric chair [96:37]. Coming from the underground movement (Muir, 90), the penultimate scene of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the mad dinner party, orchestrates an escalation of extreme closeups of the victim’s (Sally Hardesty’s) face edited in jump-cuts [74:50-76:40] (Thoret, 73; Roche, 2014, 200), so that, unlike the famous shower scene in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) which also utilizes jump-cuts, the editing does not mimic the physical violence (no one is stabbing her yet) but effects the psychological violence of the scene; the sense of anxiety that permeates the film is forcibly rendered by the physicality of the concrete music score, composed and performed by Wayne Bell and Hooper himself (Roche, 2014, 191-201). Filmmakers could also play with generic conventions. Pam Cook argues that exploitation films “parody rather than emulate” the mainstream productions they exploit (56). This explains the ironic tone noted by Schaefer that can then be negotiated from a camp perspective. In his analysis of *The Toolbox Murders* (Dennis Donnelly, 1978) included in this issue (“Unnatural, unnatural, unnatural, unnatural unnatural” . . . but real? *The Toolbox Murders* and the Exploitation of True Story Adaptations”), **Wickham Clayton** analyzes the consequences of Donnelly’s placing the famous “based on a true story” trope of exploitation horror at the end of the film, unlike the famous opening carton of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*; here, the exploitative claim to timeliness provides an excuse for both the film’s ambiguous politics and incoherent narrative.
- 12 Early defenders of independent horror of the 1970s, however, were mainly interested in its political potential. Robin Wood famously stated that it became “in the 70s the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism—in a period of extreme cultural crisis and disintegration, which alone offers the possibility of radical change and rebuilding” (76). As a Marxist and gay activist, Wood was interested in how films like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* attacked capitalist patriarchy (Wood, 82; Williams, 2014, 188, 194). North American horror films of the 1970s have often been said to reflect or address some of the cultural anxieties of the time, including the Vietnam War, the state of the economy, the civil rights movement and the women’s movement (Waller, 12; Worland, 231; Roche, 2014, 28). A director like Wes Craven encouraged this reading of the violence of his first film *The Last House on the Left* as an expression of “the newsreel footage of the American carnage in Vietnam playing on television every night” (Robb, 24), a sort of way to “bring the war home,” as the slogan

went. Canadian director Bob Clark's *Dead of Night* (aka *Deathdream*, 1974) tells the story of a Vietnam veteran who, on his return home, becomes a ghoul addicted to violence, his monstrosity clearly operating as a metaphor for PTSD. If Romero discouraged reading Vietnam into *Night of the Living Dead* (Fig. 6),⁸ his fourth film, *The Crazies* (1973), which depicts a military quarantine in a small town turning into a fascist regime, relies on imagery of guerilla warfare and human bonfires (like the monks in 1963) that audiences would have associated with the war [47:42-50:29].

Fig. 6



Screen grab from *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)

Public domain

- 13 Romero's second zombie movie, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), set in a mall, delivers a critique of consumer society, the line between the living and the dead appearing increasingly thin as both have internalized the drive to consume (Williams, 2015, 91). Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg had previously recycled Romero's zombie imagery in order to assault the capitalist structures—the apartment building in *Shivers* (1975), the clinic in *Rabid* (1977)—that repress basic drives and thus fashion the subject into a consuming body (Roche, 2006, 165-70). In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, the cannibal family's economic status—several members have lost their jobs while others operate a gas station that is out of gas—is a synecdoche for the nation in which energy is lacking, and yet the cannibals are driven to waste energy in their pursuit and destruction of human bodies (Roche, 2014, 22-24). All these films exploit the taboo of cannibalism as a perversion of consumerism, its most quintessential expression, and contain it within a microcosm (a family house) that metonymically represents the macrocosm (U.S. society).⁹ The paradox in this political exploitation of exploitation cinema is, of course, that it critiques the economic system that sustains those very films that are, above all, made to be exploited.

14 The subtexts of these particular films are exceptionally coherent, yet this is not the case of the majority of exploitation films whose politics are far more ambiguous. Nowhere is this more patent than in the portrayal of female characters and the treatment of race, sexuality and gender. The most obvious and famous example is probably Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965), which exploits a trio of bombshell pinups twofold by fetishizing their bodies and depicting their sadistic violence on normative society (the couple, the family), an attitude that is later justified by the patriarchal family that legitimizes rape. In the end, order is restored, as Linda avenges her previous boyfriend (Tommy) and saves her new one (Kirk) by slaying Varla.

15 Cook claims that

many of these films were made in response to public demand for more woman characters, and Jack Hill's *The Big Doll House* (1971), or Joe Viola's *The Hot Box* (1972), celebrated a popular version of "Women's Lib". In spite of the potential here for more active roles for women, these sexual role-reversal films generally cast super-aggressive women as mirror-images of men, without questioning those images too much. (61)

She-Devils on Wheels (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1968), which **Kristina Pia Hofer's** "Exploitation Feminism: Trashiness, Lo-Fidelity and Utopia in *She-Devils on Wheels* and *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls*" analyzes in this issue, initially seems to prove Cook right: the bikers "treat men like they're slabs of meat" [7:30], have contests to determine who will get first pick and reject members who want to commit to a relationship [28:20-33:42]. That said, if the female characters basically do unto men what they would do unto women, unlike Meyer's pussycats, the Maneaters form a heterogeneous group both in terms of physique and social class (not, however, in terms of race), accepting a newbie who rides a mere scooter! The characters' bodies are not fetishized—a shower curtain and towel are used to conceal Karen's body when she steps out of the shower [48:49]—only the male victims' in gory close-ups [43:24-48:48]. This utopian matriarchy is a microcosm in a world of men (pointedly, they are the only female biker gang in the film, they fight a male car gang for turf and the police is comprised of men). The end of the film can be read as a reversal of *Faster, Pussycat!*, as Karen gives up the possibility of founding a family and thus integrating normative patriarchy to stay with her sisters [75:00]. The film's feminist potential, which the music reinforces, Hofer argues, is an exemplary case of exploiting exploitation cinema, and may have something to do with the female screenwriter's (Allison Louise Downe) appropriating man's (Fred M. Sandy) highly original idea.¹⁰

16 *The Big Doll House* (Jack Hill, 1971) exploits a genre that has existed since the 1930s: the women-in-prison film. These films seem to cater to the heterosexual male fantasy of spying on women who are all alone, offering glimpses of beautiful women taking showers and sharing close quarters. The film shamelessly fetishizes the prisoners, keeping the promise in the title. Some of the women pleasure themselves and each other in the shower [31:20-37:22]. One of the main characters (Alcott), however, rejects lesbian sex and prefers to perform for a male character (Fred) peeking at them through a window. Fred, here, embodies a stand-in for the male spectator. The irony is that he abandons the voyeuristic position when the female character ceases to act as a passive performer and returns his gaze. In other words, he is scared off by her desire to share in the pleasure. Logically, then, the following scene has Alcott enacting the male characters' fantasy by trying to rape Fred in the storeroom, demanding that he "get to work," skip foreplay and that he "get it up or [she]'ll cut it off." Clearly, Alcott's sexual assertiveness is phallic, castrating, "masculine," confirming Cook's argument. Another limitation to the film's

sexual politics is that lesbian sexuality is typically imagined as a mere replica of heterosexuality: the character of Grear, who calls her girlfriends “baby” and says she likes “being on top” [7:43], mistreats them just as men mistreated her [22:25], almost behaving like a pimp [64:15]. Yet *The Big Doll House* is more ambiguous and hesitant in its gendered terms. The prison is first presented as a matriarchy run by Miss Dietrich and her female guards; patriarchy is soon introduced as the overarching frame when we find out that Miss Dietrich works for Colonel Mendoza, a man who only comes to watch the women get tortured. In the end, Mendoza turns out to be Miss Dietrich in disguise. In other words, the sadistic male gaze was a sadistic female gaze all along, a revelation foreshadowed by the utilization of a POV shot when Lucian, the female guard, looks at her victims through the bars [61:00-61:52]. Thus, four years before Laura Mulvey’s famous “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *The Big Doll House* offers counter-examples to the equation between male and camera gaze, replacing the “male” with the “masculine female.” The sensationalistic exploitation of heterosexual male fantasies thus leads, quite unexpectedly, to subvert the conventions of classical cinema.

- 17 Jack Hill’s later and more famous films, *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, which exploited the success of *Sweet Sweetback’s* and *Shaft*, are particularly ambiguous because their basic premises—a beautiful black woman uses her body to get revenge—allow them to indulge in sex and violence on a background of identity politics involving gender, race and class. For one, the fetishization of the female body for the male gaze is dramatized within the film as a strategy to manipulate the diegetic viewer. In *Coffy*, for instance, the heroine’s body is displayed in a slow frontal zoom-in when she undresses to seduce one of her future victims, King George [38:20-38:59]. Typical of exploitation cinema’s ambiguous politics is the all-girl fight scene [42:52-45:11]. To draw the attention of an Italian mafioso, *Coffy* starts a fight with a group of white prostitutes, thus performing the racist stereotype of the “wild animal” the white man desires. The scene inverts the outcome of the mudfight scene in *The Big Doll House*, with the black woman coming out victorious thanks to the razor blades concealed in her afro. Yet this figure of beauty, power and cunning also enables the film to cater to the audience’s desire for nudity, as she neutralizes her opponents by tearing off their clothes. *Foxy Brown* is, in this respect, far less exploitative: the brief glimpse of Foxy’s naked body in the shadows in the opening scene turns out to be a false promise [6:00-6:15], and the film systematically distinguishes scenes where Foxy is performing the aptly named “Misty Cotton,” a racist and sexist stereotype she has constructed to seduce her opponents (usually wearing a wig and a sexy dress or gown) from scenes where she is herself (wearing more casual clothes with her hair done in a afro or wrapped in a turban). On the surface, *Foxy Brown* further develops the racial politics when the heroine allies herself with a local group of Black Panthers; in the scenes where she visits their headquarters, Foxy is even framed with portraits of Angela Davis in the background to underline the physical likeness [73:31-74:10]. Yet I would argue that this only serves to reinforce the divide between black and white in a manner typical of blaxploitation. Indeed, the representation of the criminal world in *Coffy* is more complex as a site of intersectionality between gender, race and class: *Coffy*’s journey takes her from a black pimp to the Italian mafia to a black politician, confirming what her friend Cater, a black policeman, had told her from the outset [11:56]. On this level, at least, *Foxy Brown*’s increased coherence diminishes the film’s political potential.

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- 18 We have already noted that a few exploitation films have been acknowledged as promising works or even masterpieces through auteur theory, even when the movie happens to be by far a director's crowning achievement (this is clearly the case of Tobe Hooper and even, to some, of Wes Craven). But it is, no doubt, the ambivalent politics of the exploitation films of the 1960s and 1970s, combined with the ironic tone noted by Schaeffer, that explains, at least in part, why many still enjoy cult standing today. If these movies often targeted young heterosexual rural white males, the audiences for these films have diversified. As **Anne Crémieux** explains in this issue in "Exploitation Cinema and the Lesbian Imagination," some of these films, in spite of their predominantly sexist and homophobic attitudes, have been recuperated by contemporary LGBT audiences for whom negative representations are less problematic than they were in the 1960s and 1970s. Members of these communities single out specific moments for celebration. At festivals notably, audiences can negotiate images of strong women, lesbian and (albeit less frequent) gay characters from a camp perspective.¹¹ This is especially true of lesbian communities who can tap into an abundance of fantasies initially tailored for young heterosexual males—Michelle Johnson's *Triple X Selects: The Best of Lezsplottation* (2007) even tries to salvage the Canadian nazisplottation *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975)! Thus, one of the pleasures provided by exploitation cinema is akin to that provided by genre films: audiences often seek in them "an increasingly intense counter-cultural genre pleasure" which then "create[s] an invisible bond among fans of the same genre" (Altman, 155, 165).
- 19 Some of these fans went on to make films. The tradition of low budget exploitation continued well into the 1980s, as Kristina Pia Hofer's piece on *Blood Orgy of the Leather Girls* (Michael Lucas, 1988) shows. TV shows like *Charlie's Angels* (ABC, 1976-1981), Crémieux points out, bear the influence of the strong female characters of exploitation cinema. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Twentieth Century-Fox, Jim Sharman, 1975) taps into both the transgressive potential of exploitation horror and the utopian potential of the musical¹² to propose a world free from oppressive heteronormalcy. An early example of a fan of exploitation cinema exploiting his influences in a very personal way is, no doubt, John Waters. Elise Pereira-Nunes's "Sex, Gore and Provocation: the Influence of Exploitation in John Waters's Early Films" shows how he appropriated imagery from the nudies pics of Russ Meyer, the gore movies of Herschell Gordon Lewis and the Mondo Film tradition from Italy in his films of the 1960s and 1970s. Each influence operates on a specific level in terms of politics: the subversion of gender and sexual identity, by modeling the persona of Divine on Meyer's bombshells, and the implication that Americans are essentially primal animals like any other. More generally, celebrating these lower forms is, of course, a provocative act in itself and largely participates in the assault on propriety that is at the basis of Waters's aesthetics, an aesthetics which appealed to student and gay audiences of the 1970s and contributed to the emergence of a camp sensitivity.
- 20 Exploitation films of the 1950s-1970s have also had a direct influence on the films of contemporary American filmmakers, including two of the most famous: Tim Burton and Quentin Tarantino. The imagery we often describe as Burtonian is a mix of Disney animation, the classic monster movies of the 1930s, and exploitation horror and scifi of

the 1950s-1970s. The presence of Vincent Price in the short film *Vincent* (1982) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) pays tribute to the films of Roger Corman, while specific shots—the low-angle establishing shots of the Inventor’s castle [4:30, 8:55] or the high-angle shot of artificial hands [81:30] in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), the medium closeup of the Corpse Bride unveiling her face in the 2005 film [16:30]—cite, as Sarah Hameau (2015) has noted, *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Hammer Films, Terrence Fisher, 1957). I would argue that Burton’s integrating exploitation imagery and material in mainstream films is, in effect, an aesthetic project with political implications: it celebrates the “lower” form by evincing its poetry. This project is notably carried out across three films made back to back: *Ed Wood* (1994) is a celebration of the creative energy of the man who is said to have made the worst movie of all time, *Mars Attacks!* (1996), a parody of 1950s sci-fi like *Invasion of the Saucer Men* (AIP, Edward L. Cahn, 1957) and a political satire of the 1990s U.S.; *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), both a remake of Disney’s 1949 adaptation and Burton’s “love letter to Hammer, Corman’s *Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), and Mario Bava’s neo-baroque *La maschera del demonio* (*The Mask of Satan*, 1960)” (Carver, 121).

- 21 Tarantino’s project is similar to Burton’s but more radical insofar as his films celebrate lower forms that have yet to be redeemed. Like Burton, he refers to exploitation cinema by casting actors associated with it (Pam Grier, David Carradine), recycling specific characters (Pai Mei in *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, 2004), citing specific motifs (in *Kill Bill*, Elle Driver wears an eye patch like Frigga, the heroine of the Swedish rape-revenge film *Thriller*, Bo Arne Vibenius, 1973), and using music from Italian exploitation films (often composed by Ennio Morricone). In his article for this issue entitled “Quentin Tarantino: du cinéma d’exploitation au cinéma” **Philippe Ortoli** argues that Tarantino’s exploitation of exploitation cinema is not just fannish; it is grounded in a view of art as repetition with difference, which, in *Django Unchained* (2012), is incarnated in the exchange between Django and the character of Franco Nero, the original Django of 1966 who spawned a host of others: exploitation cinema, a form founded on the recycling of spectacular images, would thus epitomize this view. Tarantino’s approach is more comprehensive not only because he taps into exploitation cinema on an international level and across various genres (Italian Westerns, martial arts movies), but also because it explores the political ambiguities of exploitation cinema Burton tends to ignore. This is most obvious in *Jackie Brown* (1997) and *Death Proof* (2007). The first is a critical homage to blaxploitation that simultaneously invokes blaxploitation (via Grier, Ordell Robbie’s look and the music Roy Ayers composed for *Coffy*) and counters the ambiguous politics of these films by making Jackie a strong woman who achieves her goals without resorting to sex and self-fetishization; by portraying an interracial romance, Tarantino’s film also rejects what Crémieux calls “the schism between blacks vs. whites” blaxploitation films antagonized. As the second part of *Grindhouse*, *Death Proof* invokes one of the modes of exhibition of exploitation cinema, but the film proposes to revisit various exploitation genres (the slasher, rape-revenge, the car movie) through the prism of feminist film theory: in so doing, it reveals that generic conventions are gendered, and thus that subverting these conventions can potentially deconstruct binaries like “male”/“female” and “masculine”/“feminine,” revealing them to be constructs (Roche, 2010); the scene where Stuntman Mike takes pictures of the girls in the airport parking lot, in particular, undermines the Mulveyan equation of male gaze by opposing image and sound, as the music, “Unexpected Violence” (Morricone), is borrowed from *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (*L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo*, Dario Argento, 1970), a movie in which the stalker is a woman [65:33-66:31].

- 22 Other filmmakers have basically followed Tarantino's lead, especially in the horror genre. Directed by Robert Rodriguez, *Planet Terror*, the first part of *Grindhouse*, is a zombie movie in the Romero tradition: the ensuing chaos reveals how dysfunctional existing institutions (the army, science, the family) are and ultimately promises a brave new world with Cherry Darling at its center; the limitation, however, is that the matriarch's power stems from the phallic machine gun the hero (Wray) has endowed her with. Eli Roth's recent *Knock, Knock* (2015) falls into similar trappings, as this inverted rape-revenge fantasy—Keanu Reeves gets raped by two beautiful young women—seems to prove the sexist point that all men are essentially the same (at least so far, as one of his tormentors says). In other words, roles are reversed, but underlying structures are maintained. Roth's earlier films, *Hostel I and II* (2005, 2007), pursue the critique of capitalism of 1970s exploitation horror while retaining one of its main ambiguities, since "the film can be read as the critique of its main selling point" (Ortoli, 437, my translation). *Hostel II* is, in my opinion, more intelligent than the first installment, not so much because it counters the sexism of the first by focusing on female characters, but because the Final Girl survives by inverting the villain/victim binary through capital: the film's ultimate statement on the state of global capitalism is that the only reason she survives is that she can lay out more money than her oppressor; in other words, capital, not the torture devices, is the real weapon of choice. Thus, *Hostel I and II*, **Pierre Jailloux** argues in his article for this issue entitled "Quentin Tarantino : du cinéma d'exploitation au cinéma," dramatize how actual bodies and their virtual images have become indistinguishable in a hyperreal globalized world where reality has dissolved into images. The films, I would contend, not only represent unlikely examples of Gilles Deleuze's "crystal-image," i.e., an image for which it is impossible to tell the actual image and its virtual image apart (Deleuze, 93-94), but they suggest that our "reality" has become a "crystal-image."
- 23 The films of Rob Zombie also pursue the critique of the family and capitalism of independent horror of the 1970s, but also seek to rehabilitate the figure of the redneck by emphasizing their status as social victims in American society and by eliminating racial oppositions between black and white—through the friendship between Captain Spaulding and Charlie Altamont in *The Devil's Rejects* (2005). In this respect, Zombie pursues the exploration of social class effected in the films of Romero. His remake of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) is particularly illuminating as a critique of the politics of the original film, endowing the character of Michael Myers with a pathology and celebrating the assertive sexuality of all the female characters (Roche, 2014, 112-13). Zombie's animation feature, *The Haunted World of El Superbeasto* (2009), as **Pierre Floquet** demonstrates in this issue in "The Haunted World of El Superbeasto: An Animated Exploitation of Exploitation Cinema," is perhaps less coherent both in terms of politics and aesthetics. On the one hand, Zombie mixes genres like Tarantino in *Death Proof* (in this case, the wrestling movie, the zombie movie, nazisploitation, the biker movie) and depicts a female superheroine (Suzi X) like Cherry Darling in *Planet Terror*, but on the other, Zombie shamelessly fetishizes Suzi X who ultimately serves to reinstate order. In the end, Zombie fails to tap into the animation medium's potential for flexible bodies to subvert essentialist conceptions of the body. Rodriguez, Roth and Zombie have in common that they are somewhat aware of the ambiguities of the exploitative material they themselves exploit, but they do not always succeed in consistently resolving these ambiguities, perhaps because they remain fascinated with the spectacle itself, or perhaps because these

ambiguities remain as unresolvable as the paradox of creating a consumer product that criticizes consumer society.

- 24 In any case, each article in this issue attempts to pinpoint and address those very ambiguities and how they can be “used.” As I have attempted to show in this introduction, these ambiguities can be viewed as limitations imposed by the imperatives of exploitation cinema, but they also have the potential to be appropriated by filmmakers and audiences who, by recycling transgressive images, sounds and, more generally, exploitation conventions, can make them resignify through irony, parody, a camp sensitivity, sometimes all three, and can, in the process, invent an aesthetic, personal or group identity founded on the practice of recreation. It is this practice that can, in effect, be subversive and contribute to changing the normative discourses and practices. Exploiting exploitation cinema is not just about making money, learning one’s craft or launching one’s career. It is a recognition that the potentials within the constraints are endless because the industry and form are founded on the very process of recycling. This, no doubt, explains why the ambiguities of exploitation cinema remain even when filmmakers and audiences strive to work through them. It also entails that exploitation cinema, as Tarantino’s films suggest, is, by its very excesses, the quintessence of cinema: both an industry and a medium founded on recycling forms and images with variation.

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NOTES

1. For instance, one fan's blog speaks of "[t]he exploitation genre" (See <<http://popcornhorror.com/exploitation-film>> accessed on 2/25/2016). Another describes exploitation film as "[t]his film genre" (See <<http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/10-noteworthy-exploitation-films.htm>> accessed on 2/25/2016). The wikipedia page speaks of "this genre" (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploitation_film> accessed on 2/25/2016).
2. The semantic refers to "linguistic meaning, i.e., the meaning in the dictionary, the syntactic to "textual meaning," i.e., meaning derived from the structure. Semantic elements might be common topics, shared plots, key scenes, character types, familiar objects or recognizable shots and sounds," while syntactic analysis focuses on "deeper structures," such as "plot structure, character relationships or image and sound montage" (Altman, 79). Pragmatic analysis addresses the "use factor" and "must constantly attend to the competition among multiple users that characterizes genres" (Altman, 210).
3. In Roy Frumkes's documentary *Document of the Dead* (1985), producer Richard P. Rubinsten explains that he and Romero functioned in a European fashion and followed auteur theory.
4. *Baadasssss Cinema*. Dir. Isaac Julien. Independent Film Channel, 2002.
5. Thompson and Bordwell include companies like AIP and NWP and directors like Meyer and Romero in independent cinema (491).
6. Wes Craven was directly involved in the New York avant-garde (Becker, 44).
7. Van Peebles has always denied the influence although he lived in France in the 1960. <<http://www.culturopoing.com/cinema/entretien-avec-melvin-van-peebles/20090212>> Accessed on February 16, 2016.
8. Critics like Sumiko Higashi (1990) and Tony Williams feel that the "grainy black-and-white still images" at the end of the film recall photos of World War II concentration camps or Vietnam [89:17-95:38] (Williams, 2015, 30).
9. This is equally true of the Australian film *The Cars That Ate Paris* (Peter Weir, 1974), which delivers a "comic but unflinching critique of capitalism and consumerism as cannibalism and murder" (Rayner, 102). Its opening credits, like those of *Shivers*, resemble a commercial.
10. Apparently, it was also Downe who "got real women bikers as actresses" (Quarles, 37).
11. These are nonetheless based on homophobic stereotypes. In *Blacula* (AIP, William Crain, 1972), for instance, the gay couple, Billy and Bobby, are coded gay, notably because they talk with a lisp and are incapable of defending themselves, and their death eliminates "a threat to heteronormative masculine identity" (Novotny, 112-13).
12. See Richard Dyer (1992).

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