

# Neo-exploitation

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*Nostalgia for horrific wonders*

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## Introduction

In the first decade of the new millennium, a section of the horror genre was not looking to the future, but instead drew inspiration from the past. A number of filmmakers looked to the exploitation films of the seventies and made films in the same mold. These films proudly wear their inspiration on their sleeves. The most well-known example of these films is *GRINDHOUSE*, a 2007 film directed by Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino. This film aimed not only to recreate the exploitation films of the seventies, but to recreate the entire film going experience, by offering a double feature with trailers and appropriately 'damaged' film prints. As a film *GRINDHOUSE* drew the most attention, due to this unique perspective and due to Quentin Tarantino's involvement.

*GRINDHOUSE* is the most visible of a movement starting earlier, with films such as *CABIN FEVER* (2002), *HOUSE OF 1000 CORPSES* (2003), *HAUTE TENSION* (2003), *THE DEVIL'S REJECTS* (2005), *SLITHER* (2006) and *WOLF CREEK* (2006).

These neo-exploitation films were made by fans of the horror genre, by directors who identify themselves as fans of the genre. They are filled with a sense of nostalgia for the seventies and the genre films that were made in this era. But the films were made by people who were born too late to have actually lived through this era of filmmaking. As such these films work with an idea of the seventies that is based on the films of this era and on the fan discourse which has developed through the years. What this article wants to address is how neo-exploitation films represent and influence the cultural memory of exploitation films.

This article will first investigate how nostalgia and pastiche can identify and legitimize a genre. Horror films have had an active fan community, but academic research into them has been sporadic. Through exploration of research on fan culture this article will map how fan culture's discourse has evolved from the seventies until now. By analyzing neo-exploitation films this article shall then investigate how fan culture has informed neo-exploitation films. I would like to argue that the horror fan has been in a struggle for a position that's defined in opposition to the mainstream cinema as well as in search of recognition by the mainstream media. Neo-exploitation films reflect and address these concerns.

## Exploring exploitation and nostalgia

Exploitation film can loosely be seen as a generic label, though it can include several different genres. It usually implies a low budget film, independently shot, with an emphasis on excessive elements such as violence and sex. They often contained subversive subject matter. Successful films would often generate brief film cycles that would disappear when their audience appeal wore off. These cycles could include such diverse genres as spaghetti westerns, student nurse films, WIP (Women in Prison) films, blaxploitation, nunsplotation, nazisploitation, mondo films and horror films, including such subgenres as rape-revenge and zombie films. The films made between 2000 and 2010 that identify themselves as exploitation films are mostly horror films. These films revise the traditional idea of what exploitation films entailed and reconstruct it in their own mold. These films can be seen as what Pam Cook calls a nostalgic memory film.

“The nostalgic memory film conjures up a golden age, which is both celebrated and mourned, providing an opportunity to reflect upon and interrogate the present. Past and present are conflated, as contemporary concerns are superimposed on earlier historical periods in the process of reconstruction. Despite all their claims to authenticity, nostalgic fictions depend on a slippage between current styles and period fashion in order to draw audiences in to the experience.”<sup>1</sup>

The conflation of past and present is one of the most striking features of recent exploitation films. Most of these films exist in a present that’s ripe with anachronistic touches, whether they are in music, clothing or setting. Such pastiche practices are present in all new exploitation films. Using film noir as an example, Richard Dyer claims pastiche can play a vital role in the legitimation and identification of a genre.

“Pastiche contributes not only to fixing the perception of the genre that it pastiches but to identifying its very existence. Moreover, in the case of neo-noir, it contributes to making the case for something whose existence is in fact problematic. Noir is notoriously hard to pin down, so many supposed instances seeming not to fit: unquestioned noirs turn out to be lacking a feature you’d think indispensable. Yet neo-noir assures us that there was such a thing as noir and that this is what it was like.”<sup>2</sup>

Exploitation film, as a loosely defined genre, has a similarly problematic existence as film noir. By making new films that reassemble elements of the exploitation films of old, neo-exploitation

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<sup>1</sup> Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London: Routledge, 2007), 129.

identifies the exploitation film as a genre. It reconfigures the elements characteristic of exploitation film. In shaping a genre, pastiche imitates the idea of that which it imitates. It does not provide a direct copy of the elements the original provides. "A pastiche imitates what it perceives to be characteristic of its referent, perceptions that are temporally and culturally specific."<sup>3</sup> The films made between 2000 and 2010 which owe a clear debt to 1970s exploitation cinema, thus do so from a specific temporal and culturally specific era. In the early 2000s the exploitation film had at various stages been available as theatrical film, videocassette and DVD. In these various guises, its status had shifted from low budget schlock to cult classic. The next chapter will explore how this came to be through fan discourse and the implications this has on the films.

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<sup>3</sup> Dyer, 128.

## Exploring horror fan culture

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE, THE HILLS HAVE EYES, LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT, DAWN OF THE DEAD. All these films are considered classics of 1970s horror cinema. All these films have a cult reputation. The experience of watching these films as they premiered for the first time cannot be created anew. Within cult fandom there is an aura of mystery around this period in time. Film fandom has changed from the seventies till now. In the seventies, the only way to see a film was in theaters. This period in time has been mythologized due to publications such as J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum's *Midnight Movies*, which has become a classic case study of the phenomenon of film screenings at midnight. Written in 1982, this book eulogizes the end of an era. Even though it is about the films that drew an audience at midnight, its focus lies mainly on the content and production of the films. Their audience reception is mostly left unexplored, with one notable exception; THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW. As a cult film, this movie drew particular attention due to the audience participation its crowds created. It became a dress up event for adoring crowds who yelled at the screen and went night after night. The particularity of THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW was a one of a kind phenomenon. The other films discussed in Hoberman and Rosenbaum's book, such as EL TOPO, NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, PINK FLAMINGO'S and ERASERHEAD were successful in their own right, but lacked the eccentric audience participation. Much less has been written academically about the relationship between these films and their particular viewership. The phenomenon of THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW drew attention as it was the most visible of cult movie fandom. This has slanted the academic debate towards a debate on the merits of camp and ironic detachment. Horror film fandom in its current manifestation came to prominence after the theatrical showings of exploitation films had declined and the video market had appeared in the 1980s. As I'll show by an examination of writings on fan discourse, the relationship between horror films and their audience seems to be both an honest appreciation of the films and an ability to laugh at their sensibilities.

Raiford Guins gives a brief overview of the introduction of VHS recorders in The United States in his article *Blood and Black Gloves on Shiny New Discs*. According to figures stated in his article 11.8 million home video recorders were sold in the United States in 1983. These were accompanied by an increase in the number of video cassettes sold, with 11 million registered in the United States in 1983. According to *Midnight Movies*, THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE was the highest selling cassette of the year.<sup>4</sup> By 1987 the sales numbers had risen to 72 million cassettes sold in that year.<sup>5</sup>

Exploring Italian horror films released on video in The United States, Guins gives an impression of the way exploitation films were available on video. As he notes, in the late 80's more

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<sup>4</sup> J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* 1983 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 290.

<sup>5</sup> Raiford Guins. "Blood and Black Gloves on Shiny New Discs: New Media, Old Tastes and the Remediation of Italian Horror Films in the United States" in *Horror International*, ed. Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005): 15-32, 18.

films from different historical periods and national regions became available than at any time before the rise of VHS. Many Italian exploitation films were available for the first time on US soil. These exploitation films tended to feature provocative cover art, which in many cases ensured them to share shelf space with pornography in video stores. Using the films of Dario Argento as an example Guins paints a picture of films that were released on video without much regard for the films as valued originals. This manifested itself in title changes and cutting significant sections of film. Dario Argento's 1975 feature PROFONDO ROSSO was released by HBO video under the title DEEP RED HATCHET MURDERS. Its running time was cut down from 126 minutes to 100 minutes. Its cover art consisted of two separate film stills crudely edited together. Guins also notes poor dubbing as a process that often plagued these video releases. This process was a common practice in the 1980s video releases. He also provides Argento's 1982 film TENEBRE and his 1985 feature PHENOMENA as examples of video releases practices. Their titles were changed to UNSANE and CREEPERS respectively. When released on video in 1986 the former was cut from ten minutes of footage, whereas the latter had twenty eight minutes of footage removed. Some of these cuts were due to censorship by the MPAA, though most of these appear to be in narrative sections, disrupting the plot.

With the rise of video distribution and consumption, a new phenomenon in the appreciation of cult film came to prominence: the rise of the horror fanzines. These publications were made by aficionados of horror films, dedicated to spreading the word about films the mainstream media paid little to no attention to. The magazines were independent, non-commercial and amateur productions. Being essentially labors of love, they were published irregularly, were only available through mail and often crudely stenciled. Their titles reflected their sensibilities, notable publications being among others *The Gore Gazette* (1981-1991) *Trashola* (1981-1984), *Subhuman* (1986?-1989), *Temple of Schlock* (1987-1991) and *Samhain* (1986-1997). Horror film fanzines are considered to be mostly a phenomenon of the 1980s to mid-1990s. *The Site of Movie Magazines* lists 162 horror fanzines, of which only 34 are still in publication.<sup>6</sup> This list seems far from complete, as David Sanzjek's 1990 article *Fan's Notes: The Horror Film Fanzine* and Jeffrey Sconce's 1995 article *Trashing the academy: taste, excess and an emerging politics of cinematic style* mention several publications not featured on this list. Most fanzine's irregular publication and independent nature makes it hard to track a definitive timeline of their existence, as many of them feature no publication dates and appeared at irregular intervals between issues. According to David Sanzjek the fanzines distinguish themselves from professional magazines as *Cinefantastique* and *Fangoria* by their content. These tended to focus mainly on current films and mainstream productions, whereas the fanzines rooted

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<sup>6</sup> *The Site of Movie Magazines* 30-05-2012

<http://moviemags.com/magsall.php?country=%25&type=%25&genre=Horror&status=%25&letter=%25&submit=Go>

through all VHS tapes made available, which included material from every era of filmmaking. They featured more international material than the mostly North-American centered professional publications. It should be noted that some fanzines became professionally produced magazines over time, some proving surprisingly durable. One example of such is *Film Threat*, which started as a fanzine in 1985, ran as a professional magazine from 1991 till 1997, then re-emerged as a website that is still active today. Another such example is *Psychotronic Video*, which started out as a review column then became a magazine that ran from 1989 till 2004.

Relatively little has been written academically on these horror fanzines. David Sanzjek's 1990 article *Fans' Notes: the Horror Film Fanzine* reads mostly as a reconnaissance of the different areas of interest the fanzines cover, as well as the different style of discourse they possess. The common characteristic of most fanzines is an appreciation of uniqueness of vision in film. Sanzjek notes that some of these fanzines take on an archivist role, showing an encyclopedic knowledge of film and giving detailed attention to work of directors such as Mario Bava. However, a high number of these fanzines offer a sarcastic perspective of horror films. "The sarcastic fanzines' jocular tone is often laced with self-conscious misogyny, racism and sexism."<sup>7</sup> Often featuring gory illustrations or stills from the films they featured, these fanzines more sensationalist subject matter tended to draw attention. This is reflected in the academic discourse on fanzines.

Looking at the treatise on Italian horror provided by fanzines, Guins sees a movement that subsumes the Italian horror film into a larger project concerned with redefining horror movies as splatter movies. Combined with their poor presentation on home video this has placed a cultural status on these films as low objects.

"The fan discourse active in enunciating Italian films as splatter and gore coupled with the low quality associated with Italian films on video-cassette together work to define and position them as gore-objects. Like the visceral effects so prized by gut slingers, the visceral of the videocassette – it's dubbed and cut prints, along with its butchered surfaces – mark Italian films in ways that have only recently begun to shift on account of another set of discursive practices, as well as a new medium."<sup>8</sup>

In his 1995 article *Trashing the academy: taste, excess and an emerging politics of cinematic style*, Jeffrey Sconce analyses several fanzines. He lists such diverse titles as *Psychotronic Video* (1989-2004), *Zontar* and *Pandemonium*. Taking into account the diverse body of work these magazines tended to feature Sconce argues that their subject matter might best be termed paracinema. This category "would include such seemingly disparate subgenres as 'badfilm',

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<sup>7</sup> David Sanzjek. "Fans' Notes: the Horror Film Fanzine" in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (London: Routledge, 2000):314-323, 319.

<sup>8</sup> Guins, 24.



splatterpunk, 'mondo' films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography. Paracinema is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter –aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus.”<sup>9</sup>

His most prominently featured publication is a magazine called *Zontar*, which he describes as “a Boston-based fanzine devoted primarily to the promotion of badfilm”<sup>10</sup> He derives from this a highly ironic reading sensibility, which he considers a defining feature of paracinematic culture. According to Sconce, “what makes paracinema’s reading sensibility unique is its aspiration to the status of a ‘counter-cinema’. It seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic ‘art’, aggressively attacking the established canon of ‘quality’ cinema and questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthete discourses on movie art.”<sup>11</sup> Sconce claims paracinema aficionados directly challenge the values of aesthete film culture and a general affront to the ‘refined’ sensibility of the parent taste culture. “In cultivating a counter-cinema from the dregs of exploitation films, paracinematic fans, like the academy explicitly situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents.”<sup>12</sup> “Paracinematic taste involves a reading strategy that renders the bad into the sublime, the deviant into the defamiliarized, and in so doing, calls attention to the aesthetic aberrance and stylistic variety evident, but routinely dismissed in the many subgenres of trash cinema.”<sup>13</sup> Sconce compares this reading strategy to the way art films such as the cinema of Godard can be read, where the innovative structuring of a film can provide another level of interpretation.

This focus on an ironic reading of these films glosses over the fact different fanzines had different tones and interests. The emergence of catalogues for mail order companies which distributed alternatives for the official but cut releases show a fan culture dedicated to restoring these films to their authorial intent. David Sanzjek notes the emergence of this practice as early as 1990.

“those fanzines which have begun to market videotapes, including not only titles in the public domain but also others sometimes surreptitiously obtained from foreign sources, underscore their devotion to authenticity of expression by emphasizing that their copies are uncut or recorded in the proper letterboxed, widescreen format.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, “Trashing the academy: taste, excess and the emerging politics of cinematic style” *Screen* 36.4 (1995): 372

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, 371.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 374.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 381.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 386.

<sup>14</sup> Sanzjek, 318

These tapes were of bootleg quality. The films were often printed on consumer tapes, with minimal to no artwork and only the title provided. The tapes themselves often had muddy picture quality, depending on the source of the master copy. Joan Hawkins provides a more thorough examination of these catalogues and how they speak to the paracinematic reading sensibility. In these catalogues those films considered high art and trash are often featured on the same pages indiscriminately. Hawkins proposes that this sheds light on the way “high culture trades on the same images, tropes and themes that characterize low culture.”<sup>15</sup> These catalogues feature not only exploitation films, but also the works of Godard, Fellini and Antonioni. “Negotiating paracinema catalogs often calls, then, for a more complicated set of textual reading strategies than is commonly assumed. Viewing/reading the films themselves – even the trashiest films - demands a set of sophisticated strategies that, Sconce argues, are remarkably similar to the strategies employed by the cultural elite.”<sup>16</sup> “Because Sconce is mainly interested in theorizing trash aesthetics, he doesn’t take the ‘high’ art aspects of the catalogs’ video lists into account. So he does not thoroughly discuss the way in which the companies listing of practices erase the difference between what is considered ‘trash’ and what is considered ‘art’, through a deliberate leveling of hierarchies and recasting of categories.”<sup>17</sup>

Mark Jancovich provides a further critique of Sconce’s reading of the paracinematic attitude. “In this way, what Sconce calls ‘paracinema’ is a species of bourgeois aesthetics not a challenge to it. Indeed, far from serving as a reminder that ‘taste... is a social construct with profoundly political implications’, paracinema is at least as concerned to assert its superiority over those whom it conceives of as the degraded victims of mainstream commercial culture as it is concerned to provide a challenge to the academy and the art cinema.”<sup>18</sup> While asserting themselves in opposition to mainstream films, most writings also seek acceptance of these films through the aesthetics of mainstream and art cinema. Peter Hutchings research in the reception of Dario Argento’s films confirms this idea.

In his article *The Argento Effect*, Peter Hutchings provides an analysis of the fan reception of Dario Argento’s films in fanzines and on the internet. His findings contrast with Guins in their content. According to Peter Hutchings, the dominant approach to Argento in fan writings is an auteurism, concerned with raising the cultural status of Argento’s work. Much of the writings by fans have been concerned with establishing their status as ‘good objects’, made by a director with a

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<sup>15</sup> Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Jancovich, “Cult fictions: Cult movies, subcultural capital and the production of cultural distinctions” in *The Cult Film Reader* ed. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open university Press, 2008): 149-162, 154.

unique vision. Moreover, he states that these fan responses have been “remarkably consistent from the fanzines and fan-centered publications from the 1980s through to the websites dedicated to Argento currently on the internet.”<sup>19</sup> This contrasts with Guins’ assertion that the status of Italian horror films has only recently begun to shift through discursive practices. Guins and Hutchings focus on Italian horror films, but the fan’s attitudes depicted are representative for horror fans across the genre.

To Guins, the shift in perception of Italian horror films is directly related to the introduction of DVDs. “Italian horror films on DVD mark an attempt to repair the low status (and low quality) afforded their initial presence on videocassette as well as an effort to exchange the sophomoric fanzine nomenclature that overdetermined the object during its initial mass mediation.”<sup>20</sup> DVD players were introduced in the United States in 1997. By 2000, 12 million households reportedly owned DVD players. In 1997 there were 900 titles available on DVD. By 1997 this number had risen to 10,000 titles in the United States. Many older titles were being rereleased and remastered on DVD. Again referring to works of Mario Bava and Dario Argento Guins notes how these films are now released with a remastered 2.35 widescreen transfer, with extra’s such as interviews, picture galleries, trailers and extensive booklets filled with information. “The Italian horror film on DVD is not the same film, and does not command the same set of meanings, as it did when first released on videocassette. Its status has shifted. A set of meanings has been refashioned through DVD technology and the aesthetics of its new design (packaging, liner notes, booklets, etc.) Equally, this refashioning made possible by a new medium attempts to correct prior meanings and values associated with the medium of videocassette and the discourses first speaking of a relationship to Italian horror.”<sup>21</sup> Besides being an analysis of this shift in perception of Italian horror films, Guins’ article reads as an assertion that these films actually are worthwhile. In his condemnation of the VHS market of the 1980’s and the fan writings, Guins himself seems to be reasserting the status of these films as ‘good objects’ as much as the articles Peter Hutchings discusses.

The common thread in fan writings has been the appreciation of unique visions in cinema. The fans define themselves in opposition to mainstream cinema. Mainstream cinema in this respect is a vaguely defined term. In order to define themselves against mainstream cinema, one has to be familiar with the tastes and practices that define mainstream cinema. As such, fanzines are as Jancovich calls it a species of bourgeois aesthetics, not an opposition to them. Different articles claim an opposition between the ironic reading of paracinema fans and those fans that do take these films

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Hutchings “The Argento effect” in *Defining cult movies: The cultural politics of oppositional taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Rebol, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003): 127-141, 134

<sup>20</sup> Guins, 25

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 27

seriously. But are these truly oppositional? Sconce, Hawkins and Jancovich have argued that these attitudes require the same reading strategies as art cinema does. As Hutchings and Guins have shown, there is also a drive within fan communities to be taken seriously. These attempts to be taken seriously use the same reading strategies as art cinema does. In its celebration of unique visions in cinema, fan culture uses both an ironic appreciation and the serious side of film critique. These are not oppositional forces. A horror fan can both laugh at *DAWN OF THE DEAD*'s oddly blue-colored zombies and appreciate the storytelling prowess displayed on screen. These features do not exclude each other.

## Exploring neo-exploitation

The exploitation film as a film genre is a hard to define category. It's a species of film defined by the circumstances of its production. The horror film itself is a hard to define category, as it's a genre defined by the affect it displays over its viewer and as such can feature elements of almost any genre, as long as its intentions are to scare. It is also a disreputable genre. Consequently its fans can either be in constant defense of the films they love, making an argument for their artistic merit, or be in a state of defiance of mainstream taste. As indicated earlier in Richard Dyer's ideas on pastiche, pastiche can help define a genre. New films made in the mold of older styles assure us that there was such a style before and that this is what it was like. New horror films made in the style of seventies exploitation horror ensure us what these exploitation films entailed. In doing so they legitimize the genre. Neo-exploitation films are made by directors who identify themselves as fans of the genre. Therefore, these films ensure us what the genre is like from a fan's perspective. These films are made through the prisms of thirty years of fan culture. Neo-exploitation films thus reflect the attitudes expressed in fan culture. Neo-exploitation films are made in appreciation of unique visions in cinema. The films define themselves in opposition to mainstream culture, while their aesthetics of taste are simultaneously a species of bourgeois aesthetics. The films present both ironic and non-ironic instances of the genre, sometimes simultaneously. The films express an attitude opposing mainstream taste, while simultaneously making a bid for mainstream acceptance.

## Redefining a genre

Neo-exploitation redefines the exploitation genre in its own terms. Most of the films that identify themselves as films with a debt to 1970s exploitation film are horror films. These films limit themselves to a particular aspect of exploitation films and thereby recreate the genre from the current cultural perception of this genre. No film seems to have been as widely influential on neo-exploitation as *THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE*. This 1974 film tells the story of five college kids who cross paths with a cannibalistic family in rural Texas. When distilled to the premise of protagonists run across rural psycho families, the films that share its storyline include *HOUSE OF 1000 CORPSES*, *THE DEVIL'S REJECTS*, *CABIN FEVER*, *WRONG TURN*, *HAUTE TENSION*, *CALVAIRE*, *SHEITAN*, *FRONTIÈRE(S)*, *WOLF CREEK*, *STORM WARNING* and others. A film with the title Texas in its name would appear to be an American affair, but the most striking thing about *THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE*'s influence is its international appeal. For *HAUTE TENSION*, *CALVAIRE*, *SHEITAN* and *FRONTIÈRE(S)* the locale has changed from rural America to rural France, whereas *WOLF CREEK* and *STORM WARNING* play out their scenarios in the Australian outback. By appropriating the basic elements of this exploitation film, this premise has become a subgenre of the horror film in itself.

These films vary in tone and content. *THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE* is a relentlessly vicious film, but shows surprisingly little onscreen gore and violence. Most of it is implied. The general bleak atmosphere and the viewer's imagination do most of the work. This approach is upheld in *CALVAIRE* and *WOLF CREEK*, which both maintain a slow build-up to a finale in which violence and psychological terror are equally important. As such, these films appeal to the art house aesthetics of horror fans. In an homage to the father of the genre, they mimic its approach. *THE DEVIL'S REJECTS*, *HAUTE TENSION*, *WRONG TURN* and *FRONTIÈRE(S)*, do show graphic depictions of violence. These straightforward horror films reaffirm this particular exploitation horror genre as a gory endeavor. *HOUSE OF 1000 CORPSES*, *SHEITAN* and *CABIN FEVER* have both a comical tone and a serious streak. They also show graphic depictions of violence. Their comic tone offers an opportunity for ironic appreciation, while their violence may appeal to the straightforward reading of horror fans. At times, their tone is frustratingly inconsistent. *HOUSE OF 1000 CORPSES* has a kinetic editing pace during a sequence when police officers are attacked by the psycho family, yet slows down for a single high angle long shot of the last officer getting executed which gives it a most art house feel. The film strives to be funny, except when it suddenly strives to be disturbing. These jarring tonal shifts appear to be an attempt to please all aspects of horror fandom at the same time. *SHEITAN* strikes a similar divisive tone with its depiction of a satanic incestuous family played for laughs as often as it is played for grimness.

Where exploitation included a wide variety of different genre tropes, neo-exploitation narrows this scope by emphasizing those elements revered by horror fan culture. By redefining these elements as a genre, the exploitation genre gets legitimized. As a more clearly defined genre, these films can become a part of mainstream cinematic culture. By making films within the mainstream cinematic system, the horror fan's appeal to take the genre seriously has been answered. The films still define themselves in opposition to mainstream taste, but are an expression of certain aesthetics of mainstream culture. In the same way that the aesthetics of fanzines are a species of bourgeois aesthetics, neo-exploitation is a species of bourgeois taste. *GRINDHOUSE* and *CABIN FEVER*'s wide variety of influences and styles demonstrate this aesthetic.

## **GRINDHOUSE**

*GRINDHOUSE* holds an exceptional position in neo-exploitation. It consists of two films, which each give their own vision of exploitation films. *PLANET TERROR* is a humorous zombie film, whereas *DEATH PROOF* is a more serious-minded slasher film laced with car movies. In this way *GRINDHOUSE* encompasses both attitudes held by fans towards horror films. *PLANET TERROR* represents the ironic appreciation, whereas *DEATH PROOF* represents the exploitation film which can easily be read with an art house aesthetic. *DEATH PROOF* moves at a leisurely pace, offering lengthy talky sections and two major action set pieces. *PLANET TERROR* provides nearly nonstop action and over the top gore. These two films were

presented to the same audience, in one movie going experience, giving clear weight to the idea that the makers of these films, themselves horror fans, consider other horror fans to be perfectly capable of assessing horror films on both an ironic level and a serious-minded level.

## **CABIN FEVER**

Cabin Fever tells the story of five college students who spend spring break in a secluded cabin in the woods. After getting infected by a flesh eating virus, the kids turn on each other in an attempt to quarantine the infection. In a search for help, they tangle with each other and distrustful locals. In a last attempt to contain the outbreak, local law enforcement has the infected killed and their bodies burned.

Eli Roths first film is a clear example of pastiche, which borrows liberally from various sources. In this attempt to pull together various influences, CABIN FEVER sometimes feels disjointed. At the same time there's a clear restoration of various elements of 1970s horror films going on. The basic premise, which sees five college kids travel to a secluded cabin in the woods, is a staple of horror films, most famously THE EVIL DEAD (released in 1981, shot in 1979). The hostile hick locals who live in the area resemble those of THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE and DELIVERANCE. When the group of friends turn out to be their own enemies in an attempt to stay free of the infection, it resembles NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD in the way the arguing inside the farm proved more deadly than the zombies outside. When the last uninfected survivor gets killed by a sheriff's posse and subsequently burned amid the infected bodies, this is a direct lift from NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD as well.

Besides the more obvious story elements which function as homage to exploitation classics, CABIN FEVER provides a number of references which would only be noticeable to fans of exploitation cinema. Three songs which originally appeared on the soundtrack of LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT, Wes Cravens 1972 rape-revenge thriller, appear on the CABIN FEVER soundtrack. These references provide an in-joke to the horror community as well as a reinstatement of long forgotten songs as worthy objects, their artistic merit proven by their inclusion. It thus reaffirms LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT as a classic film worth referencing and states CABIN FEVER itself as a film in that tradition, even though there is very little further likeness between them. In this way CABIN FEVER shifts the perception of what exploitation films are, by aligning itself with the classics yet providing a slanted view of them.

CABIN FEVER also references in its cinematography. There's a moment in CABIN FEVER where the protagonists try to find a working phone, in the houses nearby. This scene closely resembles a similar scene in THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE where the protagonists explore a house. Particularly the shot where the girl tentatively walks closer to the house is similar. In THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE, the camera assumes a low angle, presenting the female in a long shot, showing a white house obscured by trees in the background. CABIN FEVER replicates this shot, presenting a similar



**Figure 1: Screenshot from CABIN FEVER (Lions Gate Films, 2002)**



**Figure 2: Screenshot from THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE (Bryanston Distributing, 1974)**

white house, obscured by trees, showing the girl in a low angle shot from the back. This shot seems to serve a double purpose. By replicating a particularly striking shot from THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE, CABIN FEVER reminds the viewer that these films were skillfully made, capable of creating tension by good cinematography. At the same time, this shot gives us a particularly good view of the girls' ass, confirming the idea of these films as having a sexual content. CABIN FEVER has no qualms showing either violence or nudity, reaffirming these things as necessary qualities of exploitation films.

CABIN FEVER draws attention to several unique qualities of a number of different exploitation films and incorporates them all in the same film, yet in doing so assimilates them in mainstream culture and diminishes the aspects which made them unique. Where George A. Romero's NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD packed a punch and a political statement in having its last (black) survivor wiped out by a redneck posse, CABIN FEVER plays this aspect for wry laughs. The ironic application of this aspect confirms the genre as one in which no one is safe, yet simultaneously renders its power moot, by making this feature simply another cliché aspect of the horror genre. Neo-exploitation expresses its appreciation of films with a unique cinematic expression by emulating them. Yet by recreating their unique elements, these features are rendered commonplace.



## IRRÉVERSIBLE

The spirit of exploitation films lingers on, yet its aesthetics are perhaps best expressed by films which do not identify themselves as exploitation films. One of the most reviled aspects of 1970s exploitation was the rape revenge picture. It's most well-known examples were *LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT* and *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE*. Especially the latter was condemned for its depiction of a lengthy rape scene. The French film *IRRÉVERSIBLE* tells the story of a woman who is raped after a party and the violent revenge her boyfriend gets on the rapist. Its high production values do not resemble exploitation filmmaking, but its storyline and excessive depiction of violence and rape do so indeed. Told in reverse chronological order, the film starts with an extremely graphic violent scene, in which a man gets his head bashed in with a fire extinguisher, shown in excruciating detail. Through its reverse chronological order, the viewer learns the reasons for this act of violence only later. Its extreme violence makes an impact that looms over the film. The rape scene similarly is an eight minute long scene that proves very hard to watch. As far as excessive violence and repulsive sexual content is concerned, *IRRÉVERSIBLE* tops nearly all seventies exploitation films. At the same time, it clearly is made with an art film state of mind. The cinematography throughout the film is impeccable. The camera floats seemingly effortless through space. Its reverse chronology makes it impossible to cheer on the repulsive violence when it first occurs, yet makes it easy to understand when its motivations become clear, even though the viewer might not approve, showing a clear subversive streak.

Neo-exploitation films identify themselves with a genre which has a lingering cultural status as low object. In their attempts to recreate and redefine an obscure genre, they provide it with an aspect horror fans have long desired for: appreciation. In doing so, the unique visions which first drew attention to these films are diminished to common features of this genre. Fan culture of exploitation film has always celebrated unique visions in cinema. This very aspect is lost in neo-exploitation. *Irréversible* incorporates elements of exploitation film, but presents itself as a film without the cultural baggage of neo-exploitation. Its cultural status is free to be interpreted. It is clear of any discourse on ironic and non-ironic appreciation. It employs an aspect of exploitation cinema, yet it repurposes it in favor of its own unique cinematic quality. In doing so it represents the fanzines attitude more than the films which claim to represent fan culture. By not referencing the seventies, it represents the spirit of the seventies as celebrated by fan culture more than any neo-exploitation film.

## Conclusion

The status of 1970s exploitation films has shifted significantly since their release. Were they once regarded as low budget schlock, some of them are now seen as cult classics, providing thrills not found in mainstream cinema. Fan discourse has played an important part in creating this status. Films were being kept alive in midnight showings, through endless viewings on video, through fan writing and the search for uncut bootleg versions, to ever higher quality copies appearing on DVD and Blu-ray discs. The academic debate on fan discourse has often foregrounded the idea that horror and exploitation films were mostly appreciated ironically. The dedicated search for uncut materials and restoration, along with an ongoing quest for recognition of certain horror directors as auteurs show that there is also room for non-ironic appreciation of these works. The reading aesthetic required for appreciating high art and low culture, as argued by Joan Hawkins and Mark Jancovich, has proven to be quite similar. Both are a species of bourgeois aesthetics. The differences between high art and low art can thus be erased. Within the horror community, a similar reading aesthetic as used in high art argues for the appreciation of horror films as art. At the same time, the horror community differentiates itself from the mainstream. The ironic reading of horror films and appreciation of them as valued objects does not exclude each other. These practices can be active simultaneously, which is reflected in the neo-exploitation films made since the year 2000. These films entail a respect for the art of the genre and an appreciation of their low brow sensibilities. By making new films in the same vein as old exploitation films, these neo-exploitation films raise the status of the films they homage and give the genre a new sense of legitimation. In this practice, the elements which are perceived to be unique to the genre are highlighted and recreated. By recreating the characteristic features of the original exploitation films, neo-exploitation films reduce these one of a kind features to staples of the genre. Paradoxically, by expressing their love for the unique visions of the genre films of yore, these visions are rendered commonplace. The neo-exploitation film is created from within the mainstream Hollywood system, yet still presents itself in opposition to mainstream taste. Its oppositional tastes have been assimilated to become a part of mainstream aesthetics. Neo-exploitation films confirm Mark Jancovich' assertion that the aesthetics of oppositional taste are a species of bourgeois aesthetics, not a challenge to them.

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