

# **Heresies on film : the religious dimension of the cult film phenomenon**

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At first glance, it would appear that the cult film phenomenon has at least *something* to do with religion, if only for the word *cult* itself. But scholars have not always been keen to admit that there is, in fact, a religious dimension to be found in that phenomenon. My objective, today, will be to engage in this debate. I will first try to shed some light on what the expression “cult films” means. This inquiry will not be as simple as it might seem, because the expression has been overloaded with significations over the years. Given this multiplicity, our first task will be to brush away the most problematic use of those terms. Only then will we be able to envision the phenomenon’s possible ties to *religion*.

## **1. What does the expression “cult film” mean?**

Unfortunately for us, the most problematic use of the expression “cult films” is also the mostly widely spread one. It is often used in a *very* loose fashion, going so far as to encompass extremely wide groups of films, and even entire genres (science-fiction and horror being the most obvious examples). A category this wide is not a very useful research tool...

To further clarify our exposition, we can begin... at the beginning. The origins of the cult film phenomenon can be traced back to the 1970s, and to such American films as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and *Eraserhead* (1978), among others. Those films did several things to warrant the label of *cult films*. Content-wise, they dared challenge the accepted criteria of what passed as « cinematic entertainment » in the United States; but, even more importantly, they escaped the usual roads of distribution and ended up being celebrated, and even *worshipped*, by a small but excessively enthusiastic group of fans. It is this latter aspect that makes them cult films in the strongest sense of the word. Some of them were even projected several times in a row, sometimes for an entire day. As we shall see a little bit later, cultic activity is often *extreme*...

While the expression « cult films » was not used as such before the 1970s, it does remain applicable to older films as well. Many films from the 1930s or 1960s, for instance, could fit perfectly in the mold of what would later be called « cult films ». We must understand that the important thing, here, is less the actual *content* of the films themselves than the intricate *link* that is established *between the viewer and the film* – this is a crucial point to which we will come back again and again over the course of this presentation. A film’s content alone is *not* enough to make it a cult film; this is why the label « cult film » should *not* be limited to science-fiction or horror films, the two genres that are usually thought of when one speaks of cult movies. In a way, the « cult film » is an overarching genre that can find a place in more specific cinematic genres, from thrillers to horror, psychological dramas, comedies and the like.

As an example, one could convincingly argue that – say – Alain Resnais’ controversial *Last Year at Marienbad*, a so-called *repertoire* or « art-house » film, qualifies as a *cult film* as well. This work belongs to neither science-fiction or horror, at least not explicitly, but it famously divided critics and viewers following its 1961 release, with some hailing it as a masterpiece, and others finding it incomprehensible; it was kept alive but a small but devoted group.

## **2. The cult film phenomenon and religion**

But now, what about a possible link between cult films and... religion?

Its very denomination seemingly alludes to some sort of religious undercurrent, however tenuous it might be. After all, the word *cult* is spontaneously linked to religion. *Cult* was originally a « neutral term », in that that it didn’t carry any sort of judgement, positive or negative : it mainly served to identify the gestures and rites of a given tradition; thus, we could speak of the Christian cult, the Islamic cult, and so on. But the word came to acquire markedly negative connotations (especially in English, it would seem) over the years. Nowadays, the word cult tends to designate religious groups which are opposed to well-established traditions. *Cult* has thus become a synonym of *sect*... and countless books about the dangers of cults have been written.

Even though the word cult has a commendable « religious charge », so to speak, the cult film phenomenon has always had a troubled relationship with religion and scholars are often weary of

recognizing it as being *truly* religious. When they do recognize some sort of religious dimension in the phenomenon, it's only with extreme caution.

In a way, this should not surprise us. After all, such a point of view merely follows various dictionaries that clearly distinguish between two definitions of the word cult :

1) The first definition could easily be labelled the *religious* or *sacred* definition. In that sense, cult implies a devotion or an homage to a God, a divinity, a saint, etc.

2) The second definition could be described as a *cultural*, or *profane*, definition. The link between *cult* and *culture* thus goes a lot further than the etymologic kinship that brings the two words so close to each other. According to this definition, the work that attracts a cult is « something which elicits the enthusiasm of a generally small public ». This is where cult films are commonly placed – not necessarily *in opposition* to religion, but at least *apart* from it. The emphasis on the *small* public should not be overlooked. Immensely popular works like the *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and *Matrix* series are often singled out as cult material even though they attract millions of fans worldwide. That's because a small, exceedingly devoted following exists *within* that larger group; fans that take their interest to extreme levels, meet in gatherings, discuss in Internet chat rooms and the like.

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Such a distinction between the *religious* and the *cultural* definitions of the word cult seems to be « natural »... but is it really the case? In fact, we could argue that the distinction only makes sense if we choose to uphold the strict equivalence between religion and the traditional religious institutions. If religion is restricted to specific traditions, then cinema, which is an overwhelmingly *laicized* artform, would appear to have little in common with religion.

But then again, there *are* alternatives. The very existence of the event that brings us together, here in Germany, points toward the fact that the equivalence between religion and religious traditions *can* be questioned. And it has been questioned by many influential scholars over the past few

decades, from Roger Bastide to Edward Bailey. With that in mind, we can explore further the religious undercurrents of the cult film phenomenon...

### **3. Into fiction: cult films according to Julio Cortázar**

In the final section of this presentation, I will refer to a short story written by the Argentine author Julio Cortázar. Cortázar's works have been adapted for the screen several times, but his stories and novels often deal with film in one way or another. In "We Love Glenda So Much", he details the genesis and evolution of a small group of people whose rallying point is the love they have for an actress named Glenda Garson. The narrator is himself a member of that select club. Cortázar wrote that story in 1980 – only a few years after the expression "cult films" came to be used regularly...

The nucleus is initially very small, as it only features two people. Without being completely conscious of the shift, those people come to form an "alliance" (p. 9). But the group begins to grow, and its members feel that "it was growing at an almost unbearable rate" (p. 9) : that is, unworthy people (people whose love for Glenda was artificial) hope to jump on the bandwagon, destroying the true spirit of the group.

It becomes necessary to devise a way to test potential newcomers so that only the *true* lovers of Glenda can be chosen. The group decides "not to admit anyone without a test, without an examination" (p. 9). Glenda's most enthusiastic admirers can no longer freely get together as friends wanting to have a good time; a new kind of rigor is required to maintain the group's purity. This takes the form of tests, riddles, challenges that, if successfully completed, can make one an *initiate*.

The group's members are not too happy to see it grow. Members of a select club would rather prefer it to stay small, unknown. And that its cult figures be not *too* popular (earlier, we noted that cultic groups tend to be small). When Glenda was an underappreciated actress loved by only a few, her biggest fans had the impression of sharing a very marginal passion. But as she became a star... "her success broke the dikes and created a momentary enthusiasm that we never accepted" (p. 10). And if they never accepted it, it's precisely because it was *momentary*: whereas the

enthusiasm of the nucleus is permanent, absolute complete. Moreover, Glenda's growing popularity tends to relativize their own position. Nothing is worse for a group that defines itself by its very marginality! The only way to avoid this danger is for the group to tighten up even more, to "close ranks" (p. 12) and reaffirm its radically marginal status.

As years pass, the nucleus dares to admit that Glenda's films are not perfect. When someone adores an icon, that icon and his or her work *must* be perfect. And the group finds a strange way to perfect Glenda's work. The members aim to correct the mistakes of Glenda's films by, first, acquiring (or stealing) all copies of a given film, and then, by correcting the faulty sequences. If a film's conclusion does not do Glenda justice, it can thus be... repaired. The fixed film is then sent back to the public, as if nothing had happened.

Once all the faulty sequences have been corrected, Glenda's films are perfect, true to the group's desires. Her work (and theirs) is complete. When Glenda announces her retirement, the group couldn't be happier: since she won't shoot any more films, there's no possibility for new imperfections to turn up, and their own vision of Glenda will endure. But Glenda soon changes her mind and announces her return to the screen. This return threatens the perfection of her work – of the *group's* work. Releasing a new film entails releasing further imperfections, and begs for more alterations...

... but if Glenda won't retire by herself, what is there left to do? *To retire her*. Literally. And finish what was began. With "fearsome drive" (p. 15), the group has decided to *kill Glenda*. "it's the only thing left to do" (p. 15). This will prove to be the group's ultimate action : after that, they will never meet again since it would be impossible to go further; but "it would be the only way that the nucleus could remain true to its *faith*, could silently guard the finished work" (p. 16).

Concerning the link between religion and cult films, we should note that Cortázar's use of a religiously charged word like *faith* is not uncommon over the course of the story; he frequently uses terms closely associated to religion, and especially the Judeo-Christian tradition : by killing Glenda instead of letting her tarnish her own memory, they "save her from the fall" (p. 16); when he tells of the group's attempts to correct Glenda's films, he repeatedly terms them the group's *mission* (p. 11, 12 and 13); the very act of going to the movies is described as a "ceremony"

(p. 8), and the pact between the group's members is an "alliance" (p. 9). The story also comments on the complex relationship between *orthodoxy* and *heresy* in cultic groups. Cortázar alludes to violent arguments *within* the nucleus; arguments so dangerous that they could lead to a "schism" and "diaspora" (p. 14). In the case of the group's final gesture, one might say that killing the object of desire and admiration is the ultimate heresy... while in fact, it is as *orthodox* as it gets: after all, the murder enables the group to realize its ultimate goal – protecting their idol's perfection by making her unreachable.

This truly shocking conclusion helps us to understand why fiction can be useful for scholars interested in the cult film phenomenon. Fiction enables Cortázar to go very far in the way of consequences. Few cultic groups have opted to murder the object of their infatuation; by choosing to end his story like this, Cortázar points out the peculiar relationship between the "human" and the "idol" at play here. As we can clearly see, the "true" Glenda has not much of a role to play in the infatuation : the Glenda who is loved by the nucleus is less the *woman* than the *screen figure* she has become. The "real", human Glenda is not quite the same as the icon they made her to be – she is *disposable*; she must ultimately be destroyed so that Glenda the idol can live forever, with nothing to tarnish her perfection. As Ilan Stavans writes, the group "retain[s] her presence on the silver screen by destroying her real persona<sup>1</sup>". There is a *substitution* at play, here; and this substitution must be taken into account if we are to understand what really happens in such cultic groups.

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<sup>1</sup> *Julio Cortázar. A Study of the Short Fiction*, Gordon Weaver, Oklahoma State University, 1996, p. 56.