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Doctor Vornoff's Corner

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14 June 2004 | 3171 words

"One is always considered MAD, if one discovers something others cannot grasp!"

So, what do we call these weird films and where do they come from? Well, it's a long story, and as this column progresses, we will examine some of the issues and history that surround low-budget film industries and cult films—essentially non-commercial film productions that appeal to a specific, unique and sometimes fetishistic audience. Critic and scholar Jeffery Sconce has labeled these types of films as "Paracinema" [1].

He describes paracinema as being less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus (372). The paracinema can contain any film so long as it adheres to the requirements of its counter-aesthetic. Sconce's work, now nearly ten years old, is a solid foundation for academic interest in paracinema. His call for academia to acknowledge that paracinema is slowly being accepted and institutions are gradually addressing issues that surround these films. But his work is also a cultural warning of sorts; his articles (perhaps unintentionally) split paracinema between the historical period of low-budget film production, on the one hand, and contemporary film and television productions that have adopted the counter-aesthetic of the past and brought it into the mainstream flow of our contemporary mediascape, on the other.

It is not difficult to see evidence of the paracinema's counter-aesthetic in such films as the new crop of Slasher/comedy films, martial arts-stunt based films like THE MATRIX TRILOGY (1999-2003) and Tarantino's KILL BILL (2003), MTV's reality films CANDID CAMERA (2003) and THE REAL CANDIDATE (2003), all of Takashi Miike's films, and direct to video productions (like GIRLS GONE WILD and BUMFIGHTS). And let's not forget the plethora of television shows that have adopted a paracinematic counter-aesthetic, usually mixing it with a heavy dose of self-conscious style (THE SOPRANOS, QUEER AS FOLK, SEX FIRST, UNDER, WHITE TRASH, just to name a few), or the so-called reality programs that dabble in it as well (EXTREME MAKEOVER, AMERICAN IDOL, FEAR FACTOR, etc.).

In addition, we could add webcams, sex tapes and other visual displays to the mix. Although Sconce linked the adoption of paracinema audience's ironic reading strategy to many avant-garde and mass culture filmmakers, he fails to note the full scope of the unchecked mainstreaming of the paracinema's counter-aesthetic (373). What once was considered cultural detritus has undergone a reinvention, and paracinema has been repackaged with a new marketing campaign. The old paracinema is now resold to consumers as edgy, sophisticated, and hip, without acknowledgement of the transgressive counter-aesthetic of paracinema. Nowhere is the purpose of this column is not to explore the visceral aesthetics of today's cultural detritus. Instead this column will focus upon the ancestry of our contemporary cultural world in order to create a better understanding of how the hell we ended up here in the first place. In other words, my mission is to examine the past, the historical context of the paracinema, its counter-aesthetic, and ultimately the shift from subcultural sensibility achieved mainstream consideration.

For those of us who have served as the old guard of paracinema, this mainstreaming currently underway has been a bonanza. So many previously unavailable titles and even never-before-released films are now within easy grasp. Moreover, this growing access has provided the opportunity to examine the aesthetic principles of this 'movement.' As Sconce has stated, the paracinema is far from a distinct body of films: it includes 'bathtub,' splatterpunk, 'mondo' movies, sword and sandal epics, Nazi films, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to softcore pornography (372).

"This isn't hardcore, and it certainly isn't arousing. It's just plain weird!

For Sconce, this meandering body of film locates its counter-aesthetic through the viewing practices of its fandom, what he calls a type of reading protocol. To a certain extent, Sconce is right: paracinema has been maintained by the ironic reading strategies of its audience, who revel in the transgressive assault of "bad" films. However, this approach to paracinema is limited, for it can only account for the reception of its audiences. These films were not produced for the "sophisticated" viewing practices demanded by WESTERN SCIENCE THEORY. 3000; they were meant to shock, thrill, and titillate. Therefore, we must look at this body of films and question what it was that brought audiences into the drive-ins and grind houses, to stay up late for a midnight movie, and (much later on) to go to video stores looking for paracinema.

If we glance at the brief survey of paracinematic films drawn by Sconce, we will find that there is in fact one theme, trope, or characteristic that defines the counter-aesthetic. The vast array of films that qualify as the paracinema can present such diverse images as the confused orientation of the singing cowboy; a guy running around Griffith Park in a in rubber ape suit with a fish bowl on his head; the incomprehensible drawling of a bloated drug addict calling himself "King of Rock 'n' Roll;" the morbid frigidity of Annette Funicello; the syphilis ridden body of a U.S. Navy sailor; leather-clad lesbians smashing school rooms; topless flower children chasing a drunken Ed Wood around a Hollywood mansion; and thousands of strange, lurid, disturbing, and (at times) simply 'bad' subject matter. However, all of these paracinematic examples, and thousands of others, are all unified by one commonality: the human body as spectacle. Certainly, Sconce is correct in stating that paracinema has been maintained by the ironic reading strategies of its fandom, but at the root point of production, paracinema can be defined by and orientated around the spectacle of the human body. This can take the form of a heroic, sexual, grotesque, violent, monstrous, deviant, or distressed body, but it is always the body as center stage which has united paracinema.

Therefore, if we begin to examine paracinema through its presentation of the body as spectacle, we can see an uncommon image formed; one that is not differentiated by the usual conventions of nationalism or artistry, but one separated by its reliance upon the visceral, lurid and transgressive. Moreover, it is the fetishization of the body that has caused paracinema to maintain its underground position and limited accessibility. Distribution and exhibition of these films has been relegated to grind houses, drive-ins, nocturnal TV broadcasts, and the 8mm and 16mm (and later videocassette) home market. We might therefore look at paracinema as a separate, even an autonomous film industry, one that has thrived and prospered for decades in the shadows of Hollywood, art films, and academic discourse. The paracinematic industry is nocturnal, transient, and solitary. It is a cinema unto itself, populated by its own cast of actors, artists, and con-artists. It is its own unique form of low-budget, late-night capitalism.

Meg Myles c. 1950

There is no doubt that Meg Myles is the spectacular body in the film. She struts, she sways, she teases relentlessly: all the men in the club desire her. She even has a suggestive (albeit discrete) skinny-dipping scene. And when she performs the song "Deadlier than the Male" clad in a leather outfit and brandishing a whip, WOW! She has total control of the film, demonstrating well that she really is "Satan in high heels." In addition to the sultry song stylings of Meg Myles, the film features several other nightclub performances that are fascinating glimpses into the lost world of New York's nightlife during the early 60s. However, the film could be criticized for being overly melodramatic, the performances coming off like dinner theatre soap operas (it's not surprising that Miles and co-star Grayson Hall spent the remainder of their careers working in daytime suds-era).

Amongst the detritus of historical paracinema, there resides many undiscovered treasures and truly bizarre films, not to mention a whole lot of shit. One of the shining lights is the recent DVD release of SATAN IN HIGH HEELS (1962) by Something Weird Video. This is truly a late-night film, exhibited only in urban grindhouses and Southern drive-ins whose sole purpose is the presentation of the spectacular body. Meg Myles stars as the sultry, slutty, husky-voiced super-bitch Stacy Kane. This girl is hot stuff and she certainly lives up to the film's title. Stacy starts the film as a carnival burlesque dancer, stripping for nickels and dimes in front of slack-jawed yokels. But Stacy has greater ambitions: she beats up her junkie husband, steals his roll of cash and heads for New York. Once in the big apple, she lands a job singing in a nightclub, where she has an affair with the club owner (and his son!). Stacy tries to manipulate everyone around her until her web of lies and deceit inevitably collapses: the end of her two tumultuous relationships aptly coincide with the return of her junkie husband and his switchblade.

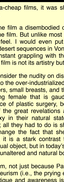
SATAN IN HIGH HEELS (1962) STARRING MEG MYLES AND GRAYSON HALL

The DVD of SATAN IN HIGH HEELS and its accompanying special features have been digitally remastered, and while they are of the best possible quality, this does not mean that the films are free of imperfections. Remember that these films were not intended to survive over the years, and very few producers saved master copies; there are times when the image is scratchy or grainy. But these imperfections only add to the trashy sensation of these films, preserving a bit of that grind house authenticity.

The special features on this DVD keep with the theme of the spectacular body. Something Weird Video provides their usual plethora of trailers and slide show of 60s sexploitation/exploitation art. In addition, there are two short subjects. The first is a 40s-era arcade loop. Perhaps a brief history is necessary. Arcade loops were short films that were viewed through old Mutoscopes at Penny Arcades, amusement parks like Coney Island, and traveling carnivals.

Sometimes, these short films would be strung together and shown in Burlesque theatres or distributed in 8mm to watch at home or at the Legion hall. Often these films were single Burlesque routines or naughty nudie pictures. The one provided by SWV is NEW AND THE WEIRD, a cross between a novelty act and a strip tease. A dancer, wearing a puppet of a devil in one hand, swings around while the puppet removes her costume. "Oh! The devil made me do it!" It may seem a bit silly or naive from our perspective, but back then, this was hot stuff!! The other short subject is titled LATEX SHE-DEVILS. A man dressed in S&M gear enters a room to attack two women as they make out, but these crafty lesbians quickly turn the tables on the intruder and make of him the victim, subjecting him to a seemingly endless spanking. Although sleazy, its pretty tame stuff (even quite boring, I'd say), but don't fret— this isn't hardcore, and it certainly isn't arousing. It's just plain weird!

The true gem on the DVD is the extra-added attraction, the 1962 nudie film THE WILD AND THE NAKED, undoubtedly one of the strangest films ever made. Shot in Texas (although the film claims it was made in Latin America), we see a day in the life of a French Model named Paulette. While taking a break from her nude photo shoot, Paulette falls asleep by the pool, and enters into a perilous, surreal, nightmare. THE WILD AND THE NAKED is a remarkable film for a number of reasons. First, like many ultra-cheap films, it was shot silent and then given voice-over narration, music and sound effects later.



The post-sync sound gives the film a disembodied quality; Paulette's voice maintains at a strange distance from the events of the film. But unlike most films produced in this silent/voice-over fashion, this one maintains its silent feel. I would even put forward the opinion that the filmmaker, Stan Roberts, was inspired by the desert sequences in Von Stroheim's GREED (1924). The use of long takes, natural shadows, and the constant grappling with the harsh landscape is quite remarkable. But of course, the main object of the film is not its artistry but simply the depiction of nude young women.

It is interesting to stop and consider the nudity on display here. Paulette is a fairly attractive woman, but she does not come close to the over-industrialized standards of sexuality that we are accustomed to today. She has big shoulders, small breasts, and thick thighs. In fact, she is the absolute contrast to the 'contemporary sexual young female that is gaudily flaunted in contemporary popular culture. Moreover, there is no evidence of plastic surgery, body sculpting, or personal trainers. Paulette is 100% natural. This is one of the great revelations about nude films: the nude women were considered beautiful and sexy in their natural state. They did not need plastic surgery or any alterations to be a sex object; all they had to do is show a little skin and the male audience's blood would boil. This does not change the fact that she is being objectified (a fact amplified by the disembodied voice-over), but it is a stark contrast to the sexual norms of today. She certainly retains her spectacle as a sexual object, but in today's light, she is a spectacular body not because of her nudity but because of her unaltered and natural body.

As stated, this is a strange film, not just because Paulette runs around au naturel, but because the film plays with the idea of voyeurism (i.e., the prying eyes of the mainly all-male audience). Although it is possible that this self-critique and awareness is unintentional, the film goes to great length to create an endless array of staring eyes. Throughout the film, Paulette is leered at. She arrives at a photographer's studio where the camera's stare is relentless. Even as she is dressing, the unattended camera continues to stare at her. As she relaxes by the pool, a delivery man gawks at her. The film suggests that these voyeuristic acts have driven poor Paulette into a psychotic dream-state, a relentless nightmare of objectification. Once asleep, she finds herself in front of a nightclub and, throughout her voice-over narration, she proclaims that she finds herself in a state of confusion. She has a cocktail in the nightclub and then dances with a man who makes unwanted advances upon her. She flees the club only to find herself hitchhiking at the side of a highway, again stating "I don't know how I got here." A car stops to pick her up; she enters only to find it is the creep from the club. He drives the car to a secluded place and attempts to rape her. She runs off into the trees, where the branches tear at her clothes until she is completely nude.

She eventually finds herself on the sandy banks of a river. There, she is observed by a wild hermit who watches as the would-be-rapist pursues her. Paulette eludes the creepy guy, only to be attacked by the crazed hermit. This leads to the film's first fetish sequence: Paulette and the hermit fall into a mud hole and wrestle until Paulette is covered head-to-toe with mud. She is able to escape only because the rapist has caught up with her, and he begins to fight with the hermit.

Fetish sequence number two: skinny-dipping. Feeling safe as her two pursuers fight, Paulette bathes in the river. We watch as she relaxes and washes off the mud. However, the hermit, who has escaped the rapist, is now watching her skinny-dip. As she suns herself on the beach, the hermit sneaks up and (with a convenient) placed piece of rope) ties her up.

Fetish sequence number three: a bondage sequence. The hermit binds Paulette's hands, and then stakes her to the ground, but he doesn't rape her. Instead, he dances foolishly and throws sand at her. Fortunately, someone else is watching Paulette. The hero, who has been observing the hermit's dance from his motorboat, and like all good heroes, promptly shoots the hermit in the head and rescues Paulette.

Together they flee in his boat, going ashore to drink whisky and make love. But this too is being watched, this time by an ape-man high in the trees. Noticing the ape, Paulette runs off into the bush. Our hapless hero follows but — get this! — he's being watched, too, by a group of nude women with tree branches tied around their waists. These earthy nature girls waylay the hero by dancing around him in a circle. He is unable to flee the nature girls who are in turn also being watched by another bush-nudist. The film eventually returns to Paulette still lost in the woods, where the hero finds her and the two depart to safety in the motorboat. Paulette awakens by the side of the pool.

I don't like providing such a detailed synopsis of a film, but in this case I feel it is necessary to completely understand all the levels of voyeurism that are going on here. Paulette is under observation throughout the film, more often than not from bestial sources: the rapist, the hermit, the ape-man, and the nature girls. Now consider that, originally, this film would have been done in some sticky-floored grind house, or in a smoke filled men's club basement at some bachelor party. This denunciation of bestial voyeurism becomes slightly subversive, albeit only slightly because the film still provides ample female skin and fetish sequences. Despite its overt objectification of the female body, there is this strange, conflicting social commentary in the film, which makes THE WILD AND THE NAKED a truly bizarre cinematic experience.

SATAN IN HIGH HEELS and THE WILD AND THE NAKED are far from cinematic masterpieces, but the low budgets work to their advantage. Certainly the acting is not very good and some of the performances are genuinely amateur, but these deficits actually create a certain air of honesty, as though the actors were playing themselves (and of course, some of them are). The budgetary limitations also pushed the filmmakers to shoot on location; again this has a positive effect, as it gives the proceedings a sense of naturalness and authenticity. These elements, combined with the constant lurid and sleazy atmosphere of the overly objectified female body, reveal these films for what they actually are— good (sleazy) fun.

Dr. Eric Vornoff

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[1] Sconce, Jeffrey. "Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style." Screen 36.4 (Winter 1995): 371-93.

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ISSN 1715-7641
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