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## CONFERENCE REPORT

# 'Cult Cinema and Technological Change'

Aberystwyth University, 15–16 April 2014

Rebecca Bartlett

This conference took place at Aberystwyth University over two days, with 21 papers delivered, as well as two keynotes and a special screening of *The Creature From The Black Lagoon* (1954) in 3D, shown in association with Abertoir, Wales' International Horror Festival. The conference emerged as part of the ongoing AHRC-funded project, 'Global Cult Cinema in the Age of Convergence', which aims to consider how technology has affected reception and distribution of cult cinema, with particular emphasis on the wider global context. Panels covered a wide range of topics including, but not limited to, fandom and technology, informal cultism, and cults, subcultures and the mainstream.

The variety of papers delivered indicates not only the ongoing vitality of cult studies but the vast array of films that can be, and are, considered cult. The various ways in which concepts of technology were addressed also demonstrates how broad and productive an area of investigation this is. The conference opened with an entertaining panel consisting of three case studies: the marketing of Pete Walker's 'Terror' films from original posters to contemporary DVD and Blu-Ray; the ongoing debates about the authenticity of certain VHS sleeve art for notorious 'video nasty' *Snuff* (1976); and the transgressive and immersive nature of the short-lived but significant rise of 3D in the 1950s. Parallel panels considered issues of technology, fandom and reception. The impact of social media, arguably one of the most important contemporary issues surrounding cult studies, was addressed in various papers throughout the conference. The example of *Sharknado* (2013) was given as a film that achieved 'instant cult' status as a result of fan networks developing on social networking sites, while the relationship between online fan communities and cult status was discussed with regard to *The Final Programme* (1973). In contrast, a paper also considered how promotional material for martial arts star Jackie Chan limited cult appeal, creating a more mainstream, female fanbase instead. The relevance of actor and activist David Webb's personal archive was discussed, emphasising the importance of accessibility and the potential issues that are raised as a result. Online fan interaction was also discussed in terms of fan 'crafting' – that is fan-made memorabilia – with issues of copyright, ownership and authorship being highlighted, while a paper examining fan-authored 'slash' writing raised interesting points regarding gender, sexuality and canonicity.

Prior to Barbara Klinger's keynote address at the end of the first day, the preceding panel considered various ways in which cult films can be re-contextualised: a new soundtrack added to 'classic' silent films, altering the film's status to cult; recycled footage poorly integrated into new narratives impacting on the final film's aesthetic and narrative coherence and its subsequent reputation as 'bad'; or screening films in unconventional spaces, emphasising feelings of nostalgia and home. Klinger's talk also addressed the evolving reputations of cult films. Fittingly, considering the conference's theme, she delivered her paper from her office in Indiana University via online video chat. Considering how longevity affects cult reputation, she offered *Casablanca* (1941) as a case study, examining its pre-cult, cult and post-cult development. Emphasising how varied cult films actually are, the first day of the conference ended with a very enjoyable special screening of *The Creature From The Black Lagoon*, shown in newly-added polarised 3D – not the anaglyph 3D that many expected, thus serving as a somewhat ironic reminder that the current saturation of so-called 'new' technologies in film-making are often firmly rooted in classic techniques.

The second day of the conference opened with another keynote address, delivered by Mark Jancovich. His engaging and interesting talk centred around the now-demolished Rialto Theatre in New York. Using this as a case study, he addressed the contradictions at play in cult fandom, particularly regarding approaches to technology – the dual privileging of technological advances that enable increased distribution, such as VHS, and of ‘anti-technology’, such as visible scratches, blurs or ‘low-grade’ quality – while also considering the importance of exhibition spaces. As he argued, such spaces are key elements by which cult fandom is created as illicit and separate from the perceived mainstream.

The following panel directly addressed questions of unauthorised distribution, with an engaging and particularly relevant examination of online video sharing communities. ‘Informal enterprises’ – unregistered, fan-owned companies that create and sell artefacts – were also considered, and the panel concluded with a fascinating discussion of the ways in which the BBFC’s classification system has developed over the last eight years as an alleged consequence of the explosion of technology and the resulting increase in accessibility of extreme content.

Throughout the second day in particular, some very productive and lively discussion sprang from the various panels. Papers addressed the rise of zombie culture, paying particular attention to *Pontypool* (2008) and the relationship between zombification and the transmission of language. The relatively recent counter-culture movement known as Steampunk was also considered, and the subgenre’s increased mainstream, commercial success was acknowledged. Using the example of big-budget flops such as *Howard the Duck* (1986), the final paper of the panel very directly addressed the ongoing issues surrounding cult, particularly regarding aesthetics and definitions. Indeed, throughout the conference the distinctions between cultdom and fandom were continuously blurred – several panellists acknowledged their own fan status before delivering their papers, and the discussion that followed this panel in particular directly addressed the difficulties in defining cult in a way that adequately encompasses the vast number of varied texts described as such.

The final panel of the conference featured three papers that perfectly complemented each other, each one considering online crowdfunding. Questions were raised concerning accountability, failed campaign strategies and subsequent issues of ownership and authority, while the panel concluded with a very interesting paper offering a possible theoretical framework, that of ‘affective economics’, by which the rise of crowdfunding, through websites such as Kickstarter, can be understood. The discussion that this provoked provided evidence that technological developments have offered many new ways in which cult fandom in particular has expanded, and it was clear that the conference achieved its intended goal – to provide a lively, informative and engaging forum for scholars to interact and to discuss the various roles played by technologies across the broad and varied area of cult film studies.