Madman, genius, hack, auteur?: Intertextuality, extratextuality, and intention in 'Ed Wood films' after Plan 9 From Outer Space

(Becky Bartlett)

Edward D. Wood, Jr's position as a 'romantic' cult auteur (Sexton & Mathijs 2012, 68) was initially established in the 1980s, and has since been solidified through repetition in academic and fan-authored literature, as well as other exegetic texts including Tim Burton's biopic *Ed Wood* (1994), adapted from Rudolf Grey's excellent, and far more comprehensive, biography *Nightmare of Ecstasy* (1992). Through these texts and others, the 'character' of Wood (Routt 2001, 2) has been constructed as a sympathetic outsider, a 'unique' auteur with a distinctive vision. He is also, as is well known, the 'worst director of all time,' having been awarded the title after his fourth directorial feature, *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) was voted the 'worst film of all time' in a readers' poll for *The Golden Turkey Awards* (Medved and Medved 1980).

On the surface, these identities might seem incompatible. Andrew Sarris proposes 'technical competence' as the first criterion through which auteur status is established, because a 'great director has to be at least a good director' (Sarris 2000, in Sitney 2000, 132). This conception of the auteur suggests a certain level of identifiable – or, at the very least, assumed – authorial intent. The cult activity surrounding Wood, therefore, seems to 'stand auteurism on its head' (Graham 1991, 108): he has been valued for his technical *incompetence*, whereby deviations in classical film form are understood to be due to 'the effects of material poverty and technical ineptitude' (Sconce 1995, 385). Yet this is reasonably typical of approaches within cult authorship, which tend to prioritize extratextual information, a filmmaker's biography, and reputation over competence (Sexton and Mathijs 2011, 68).

Wood's 'eccentric' cult auteur status (Hunter 2014, 486) also, however, reflects a broader romanticist tendency in cult circles to celebrate the 'lone, heroic figure battling against the odds' (Sexton and Mathijs 2011, 68). Over the last forty years, the critical discourse surrounding Wood has shifted from 'bemused derision to active celebration' (Mathijs and Mendik 2008, 388). He is now praised for his 'individual vision and quirky originality' (Juno and Vale 1986, 5) and even considered an 'accidental artist of the avant-garde' (Hill 2015, 173). Increasingly, in fact, the cult activity surrounding Wood has adopted a relatively traditional auteurist approach: the filmmaker is recognized as a 'distinguishable personality' whose films exhibit 'certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature' (Sarris 2000, 562). Bill Warren argues, for example, that 'as bad as Ed Wood's films are, it's not likely that, once having seen one, anyone would ever mistake one of his films for the work of anyone else' (Warren 2010, 663).

As this article demonstrates, such claims are often based on a limited selection of Wood's filmography. Furthermore, Wood's inconsistent, haphazard approach to filmmaking means that auteurist signatures, if they are to be located at all, often appear to emerge accidentally – despite his intentions, rather than because of them – and thus require similarly inconsistent approaches on the part of the viewer. This is evident in the variety of reading strategies adopted by fans and scholars alike to ascribe authorial significance to 'Ed Wood films', and in the ambivalent, even contradictory, approaches taken to Wood's intentions. For example, Hill concedes that 'Wood's intentions are lost to us now' (Hill 2015, 179) while also claiming that his films 'deliberately' (i.e. intentionally) challenge Hollywood norms or are 'conscious constructs' in which such attempts are 'clearly' evident (179–180). While this article does not reject Wood's position as a cult auteur, it does challenge the implication that an authorial signature can be identified in any consistent manner across his body of work.

Far more is known about Wood today and, significantly, more of his movies are also available. He was a prolific filmmaker, directing at least 12 feature films and over 30 shorts, and writing around 40 more screenplays and up to 75 predominantly pornographic novels. Despite this, Wood's status as both the 'worst director of all time' and an auteur who blurs the lines between fact and fiction is based on a notably partial view of both his films and life, typified by the plot of *Ed Wood*. Having spent almost 2 h relaying the slapdash production of *Glen or Glenda* (1953), *Bride of the Monster* (1955), and *Plan 9* – entirely omitting his second feature, *Jail Bait* (1954), in the process – the biopic closes with intertitles stating that 'mainstream success' eluded Wood and that 'after a slow descent into alcoholism and monster nudie pictures, he died in 1978.' Although loosely accurate, this downplays what were in fact the two most productive decades of Wood's career, and sanitizes the less palatable realities of his later life and career trajectory. As Michael Adams notes, were Burton to have depicted Wood's life after *Plan 9*, his biopic would have 'taken on a far more bruised pallor' (Adams 2010, 70). Despite this, some efforts have been made to expand on this limited approach. Rob Craig's book *Ed Wood, Mad Genius* (2009) includes chapters on four films Wood contributed to after *Plan 9*, as well as a chapter on his pornographic movies (though all receive substantially less attention than the better-known, pre-1960s films), while Joe Blevin's ongoing blog series, 'Ed Wood Wednesdays,' offers one of the most comprehensive examinations of Wood's career to date. Adams also provides short reviews of a selection of the filmmaker's pornographic features, suggesting they offer a 'bulwark against the easy glamorisation of [Wood's] "outsider" life' (Adams 2010, 69). In contrast, the academic scholarship on Wood – of which there is far less than might be expected, considering his cult significance – has effectively perpetuated what Robert Birchard claims to be the 'romanticized fable' surrounding Wood (Birchard 1995, 450) by continuing to focus on his best-known badfilms (e.g. Hill 2015) and prioritizing his pre-1960 career.

It is necessary, therefore, to redress this balance. This article examines a selection of what have become known as 'Ed Wood films,' and interrogates Wood's status as a cult auteur. The 1960s and 1970s films now attributed primarily, if not exclusively, to Wood form an inconsistent, disparate body of work that can present a challenge to the long-established perception of him as a sympathetic, eccentric artist and auteur. Any attempt to find a single analytical approach to his films as a unified body of work is difficult, given Wood's inconsistent approach to filmmaking, and the various forms and levels of his involvement in the process. Nevertheless, looking beyond *Plan 9* allows for a more complete, though not necessarily *coherent*, understanding of the filmmaker than the widely accepted, constructed cult 'character' of Edward D. Wood, Jr. can provide.

Badfilms, the category Wood is most associated with, are often appreciated for their failings in ways that demonstrate fans' 'ability to appreciate texts in "unintended" ways' (MacDowell and Zborowski 2013, 4). This is true of some of the ways Wood's films tend to be most commonly appreciated, but not necessarily all. Wood's films are often assumed to be a 'mirror of his own life' (Hoberman 1980, 10), as demonstrated by the documentary *Ed Wood: Look Back in Angora* (Newsom 1994) – which uses footage from Wood's films to illustrate his life – and by the tendency among fans and academics to use biographical details, anecdotes, and other trivia to contextualize his movies. This can, however, result in what William Routt refers to as a 'bonehead auteurist' approach in which the 'badness of the life is taken as evidence for the badness of the work' (Routt 2001, 2). Wood's auteur status is also reinforced through intertextual readings, in which connections are identified among his various creative works. Viewed as a collection, Wood's movies do certainly demonstrate the filmmaker's tendency to repeat, recycle, and repackage previous ideas, enabling the identification of recurring themes, characters, and plots. However, while this fact is often used as evidence of an authorial signature, this article will argue that biographical and intertextual interpretations of Wood's films are inconsistently encouraged by the films themselves, offering an example of the way badfilms can productively be read in both seemingly unintended *and* apparently intended ways.

Intertextuality is a 'crucial' feature of cult cinema generally (Mathijs and Mendik 2008, 3). In the case of Ed Wood, it appears to be useful in establishing commonalities within a group of films that might otherwise 'virtually defy classification' (Hill 2015, 172). Wood's movies include exploitation, horror, science-fiction, crime/noir, documentary, jungle adventures, prehistoric sex fantasies, westerns, comedies, and pornography. They vary in terms of genre, aesthetics, tone, narrative content, technical competence, and even the filmmaker's involvement, with Wood taking on various roles including director, writer, producer, editor, and actor. There are stylistic and narrative disparities in even his best-known films: *Bride of the Monster*, Hill argues, is 'unremarkable' but has become cult entirely because of its status 'as an "Ed Wood film"' (181). Although this fails to adequately

consider either *Bride*'s aesthetic badness or its potential significance as cult star Bela Lugosi's final speaking role, the identification of the category of 'Ed Wood films' indicates one way to establish continuity between Wood's varied works through their purported intertextuality. This is not unusual: Jim Morton's article on the filmmaker is included in *Incredibly Strange Films*' 'genre' section among articles on biker movies, beach party films, mondo pictures, and others (1986, 158-159). This category of 'Ed Wood films' is inherently tied to the perception of Wood as auteur, suggesting that because Wood is what unites the films, the filmmaker's personality and authorial signature ought to be locatable within the 'genre.'

Wood's films do often appear designed to speak to and about one another, creating opportunities for intertextual readings that seemingly support his auteur status. Intertextuality is most explicit in *Night of the Ghouls*, a patchwork film that combines footage from other projects and recycles characters and themes. It is intentionally positioned as a sequel to *Bride of the Monster* but also makes vague references to *Plan 9*, primarily through comments made by the recurring character Kelton (Paul Marco), who bemoans the 'Monsters! Space people! Mad doctors!' he has faced since becoming a policeman. Other characters' comments suggest the events of *Bride* occurred on the grounds of the house now occupied by the mysterious Dr. Acula (Kenne Duncan), while Tor Johnson reprises his role as henchman Lobo, who apparently survived the atomic bomb in *Bride*'s conclusion. An intertextual reading therefore appears to be encouraged, whereby the events of all three films occur in a single, fictional space, indicating fairly unambiguously that Wood expected – or hoped – viewers would be familiar with his previous movies, despite their limited releases.

Accounts of Wood's approach to writing, however, begin to suggest why his work's 'intertextuality' may not always be evidence of an aesthetic strategy. Anecdotally, his writing style was chaotic: he could write a book or screenplay in an afternoon (Barry Elliott, Buddy Hyde in Grey 1992, 139); often juggled multiple projects simultaneously (Marco in Grey 1992, 140); wrote 'erratically, whenever the mood struck him' and was 'too impatient' to do research (Kathy Wood in Grey 1992, 141); and 'wouldn't rewrite or proofread' (Hyde in Grey 1992, 141). These comments are supported by the textual evidence, in which his lack of research or self-editing becomes evident his screenplay's numerous mistakes, contradictions, and repetitions. In *Ghouls*, for example, the implied shared fictional space with *Bride* is both created and dismantled through Wood's inability to allude to his own narratives consistently. In *Bride*, Vornoff (Lugosi) conducts his experiments in Willows House on Lake Marsh; in *Ghouls*, events take place in and around the 'old house on Willows Lake.' While the lack of visual markers to indicate a shared space between the two films could be explained by the explosion that, presumably, destroyed Vornoff's home, the space is explicitly identified as the same *and* different through dialogue, throwing continuity into disarray.

Other connections between *Ghouls* and Wood's earlier films are equally confusing. Kelton and Lobo, for instance, are explicitly intended to be recognized as recurring characters, but the appearance – or reappearance – of others is more ambiguous. A character called Captain Robbins features in both *Bride* and *Ghouls* but is played by different actors – Harvey B. Dunn originally, then Johnny Carpenter. Replacing actors is not uncommon but, given that Dunn appears in *Ghouls* as an entirely different character, there is no obvious reason for the switch. The two Robbins are united solely through their job description rather than any commonality in either appearance or characterization; for example, the character's pet parakeet, a focal point of the Captain's introduction in *Bride*, is entirely absent in *Ghouls*. Indeed, it is unclear whether Robbins is intended to be recognized as a recurring character – it is equally possible that, just as Wood failed to adequately recollect the name of the films' supposedly shared diegetic space, he also forgot that a character called Robbins already existed within this fictional world. Simultaneously, therefore, Wood reflects back on his previous work and encourages the viewer to do the same, while also creating intertextual incoherence by appearing to misremember, or misrepresent, simple details.

Other casting decisions raise further issues concerning the status of intertextual references between Wood's films. Wood was known for using the same actors in his films, though perhaps none are used in such strange ways as hack radio psychic Criswell, who appears in the opening scenes of *Plan 9* and *Ghouls*. In both, he appears to reside in an extradiegetic space and provides seemingly omniscient voice-over narration. Although he maintains this position in *Plan 9*, in *Ghouls* he rises from a coffin, introduces himself as 'Criswell' and appears to reprise his previous role until the film's final moments when he appears within the diegesis as the leader of the dead, intent on punishing Acula, who has been exposed as a conman. As Routt notes, this obliterates the distinction between actor, character, and narrator and suggests Wood occasionally consciously experimented with filmic structures (Routt 2001, 6). However, given that Kelton's previously noted reference to space monsters implies *Plan 9* and *Ghouls*' narratives occur in the same diegetic space, the inclusion of Criswell raises questions: are we meant to identify him as a recurring character, presiding over and residing within both narratives? Was he also the leader of the undead in *Plan 9*? The film offers no answers. Notably, Criswell also features in the Wood-scripted *Orgy of the Dead* (Stephen C. Apostolof, 1965), billed as The Emperor despite again declaring himself to be *Criswell*; as before, he addresses the viewer directly in the opening scene, this time rising from a coffin clearly situated within the diegesis to repeat his *Ghouls* dialogue almost verbatim before adopting a more conventional character role for the remainder of the film's meagre narrative. The explicit and implicit references to other movies through Criswell, therefore, further exposes the inconsistent, haphazard application of seemingly intended intertextuality throughout Wood's films; as well as

indicating intertextual authorial intentions, the films' inter-diegetic incoherence also exposes the filmmaker's incompetence.

Another productive way of approaching the question of intertextuality in Wood's films is via his deployment of recycled footage. Like several of his low-budget contemporaries, Wood regularly exploits recycled footage as a cheap source of spectacle; in particular, his repeated use of thunder-and-lightning stock shots has been identified as a 'signature' (Craig 2009, 180). In *Glen or Glenda*, stock footage usually lacking an (obvious) inherent meaning is recontextualized through montage and/or voice-over narration, offering a precursor to the avant-garde principles of iconic decontextualization that collage filmmakers like Bruce Conner became celebrated for a decade later. While this enables psychoanalytical readings (e.g. Emin Tunc and Prescott 2003), Wood's later use of recycled footage is more typical of low-budget filmmaking, whereby existing footage is integrated into a new narrative but largely maintains its original meaning.

In *Ghouls*, for example, Lieutenant Bradford (Duke Moore) is called back on duty, interrupting his evening at the theatre. This explains why he conducts his investigation dressed in formal attire, but the setting primarily serves to provide continuity between the new narrative and a sequence poached from one of Wood's previous short films, *Final Curtain* (1957), in which an unnamed actor (Moore) is terrorized by a vampire in an old theatre. The scene is minimally recontextualised through new, first-person voice-over narration. Bradford offers commentary as he explores the space now intended to be identified as Acula's house, at one point remarking 'lighting equipment, props, scene sets, an old organ – now what a theatre group could do with these!' This indicates his suspicions regarding Acula's alleged spiritualism but also alludes to the scene's origins. Thus, although there is no indication the recycled footage is intended to be identified as such, viewers familiar with his earlier work are nonetheless offered a reminder of the existence of other Wood productions. Oddly, however, other voice-over narration in the sequence – this time from Criswell – indicates a deliberate effort to connect *Ghouls* and *Bride* at the level of their narratives: the 'omniscient' narrator reports that Bradford found the staircase 'he had remembered so well from the days long ago when he had been investigating the mad scientist and his monsters.' This is problematized, though, by the fact that no character called Bradford appears in *Bride*, exposing Criswell to be an unreliable narrator – just as Wood, through his failed attempts to both disguise and create connections between films, is exposed as an unreliable author.

While in *Ghouls* Wood's attempts to make his films speak to and about each other are occasionally explicit – if frequently ineffective – seemingly unintentional connections between this film and *The Sinister Urge* (1960) can also be identified, again through recycled footage. Despite both being written and directed by Wood, the two films have little in common narratively, thematically, or aesthetically; the only notable correlation is that both include

footage from a stalled production entitled either *Rock and Roll Hell* or *Hellborn*, featuring two men fighting outside an ice-cream parlour and a car crash on a mountain road. The footage is tenuously inserted into *Ghouls*, cursorily justified by Criswell's voice-over narration, but more thoroughly integrated into *The Sinister Urge*'s narrative; both films present the scenes as new, with no acknowledgement of their recycled origins. This repurposing, therefore, appears to be more indicative of Wood's resourcefulness than a conscious authorial signature or avant-garde aesthetic strategy. Furthermore, neither film seems to benefit narratively from the identification of the same footage's appearance in multiple movies. Rather, similarities between the unfinished project and the two completed films are unintentionally created, resulting in a viewing experience akin to déjà vu.

As noted, Wood's writing reveals a tendency to recycle and repackage previous ideas, and to borrow liberally from his own work by adapting books into screenplays and vice versa, as well as reusing characters and plots. Bernie Bloom recalls he 'could take the same story, and re-write, change it [sic] around the characters, and change around the sets, and the scenes, and you wouldn't know the difference' (Bloom in Grey 1992, 140). Considering Wood's financial situation in the 1960s, it is likely that productivity – being able to produce usable, sellable work meeting the minimum standards required – was prioritized over artistry. His approach to writing is more indicative of a desire to make a quick buck than, for example, the romantic notion of an auteur's so-called 'unfettered creativity' (Juno and Vale 1986, 5). Wood's proclivity to adapt, exploit, and recycle his own work enables intertextual readings he likely could not have anticipated, given that his cult reputation only developed after his death; taken as a group, his films and novels form a complicated, confusing, inconsistent, and yet often oddly *familiar* collection of stories.

Wood's later, pornographic films indicate that some of them benefit from intertextual readings more than others, though all gain (sub)cultural value due to their inclusion in the category of 'Ed Wood films.' *Necromania: A Tale of Weird Love!* (1971), a sex-driven narrative film that was Wood's second-to-last known directorial project, contains a number of Wood's recurring aesthetic and narrative tendencies. Shot in 3 days with an estimated budget of $7,000, *Necromania* is one of Wood's more technically competent films – perhaps because, as pornography, it is less ambitious than his earlier genre movies. However, there is still evidence of the 'stilted formality' of Wood's 'immortal' writing (Blevin 2013b) and his continued interest in certain themes, particularly the relationship between sex and death (Craig 2009, 250). There is also some pleasure in identifying Criswell's coffin in the film's climactic scene, while one of the character's comments about expecting 'Bela Lugosi as Dracula' to appear serves as a reminder of Wood's friendship with the cult star, as well as hinting at the film's horror inspirations. For the informed viewer, further connections can be made between *Necromania* and Wood's other movies. As Blevin notes, the supernatural 'bric-a-brac' cluttering

necromancer Madame Heles' home is reminiscent of the Scientist's otherworldly laboratory in *Glen or Glenda* (Blevin 2013). He also identifies a correlation between *Necromania* and *Orgy of the Dead*'s narrative themes, pointing out that both feature 'the swift sexual re-education/radicalization of a squabbling heterosexual couple: a woman named Shirley and her insensitive lunkhead of a boyfriend' (Blevin 2013b).

Considering Wood's proclivity for recycling his own ideas, these similarities are not surprising. As is typical of Wood criticism, the more informed the viewer, the easier it is to make connections between films, although some are more tenuous than others. There is seemingly little insight to be gained, for example, through recognition of a correlation between Paula's comments in *Plan 9* about touching her pillow when her husband is away and Danny (Ric Lutze) caressing a pillow in *Necromania* (Blevin 2013b). For a viewer who is so inclined, however, this negligible example of Wood's propensity for repetition may be used as further evidence of an (unconscious?) authorial signature. Other movies – particularly those written but not directed by Wood, such as *The Snow Bunnies* (Apostolof 1972), *The Class Reunion* (Apostolof 1972), and *The Cocktail Hostesses* (Apostolof 1973) – also contain similar dialogue, narratives, and characters, supporting Bloom's comment regarding Wood's willingness to repackage his stories. This enables identification of 'connections running through a cinematic oeuvre' (Sexton and Mathijs 2011, 68) that supports Wood's auteur status and allows the films to be included in the category of 'Ed Wood films,' but imbues them with little value beyond their existing status as curios for fans aiming to complete their collection.

Wood's resourcefulness extends beyond his willingness to recycle ideas; he was also willing to take on a variety of duties in the filmmaking process as required, including acting. He appears onscreen in perhaps eight directorial features and has screenwriting and acting credits in at least three others. His roles in *Glen or Glenda* and *Love Feast* (Joseph F. Robertson, 1969; also released as *Pretty Models All in a Row*) most obviously blur the lines between fact and fiction, enabling the informed viewer to use extratextual information to look beyond the text to the filmmaker's life (more on this in relation to *Love Feast* below). Others offer fans the investigative challenge of identifying the 'director's cameo.' Cameos 'add pleasurably intertextual and reflexive dimensions to a movie' while also standing out because of the extratextual connections they produce (Mathijs 2012, 146). The director's cameo is a 'signpost for cult cinema' that enables viewers to demonstrate their subcultural capital through a 'firm knowledge of, and deep commitment to, a certain form of cinema' (147). Several of Wood's alleged 'cameo' appearances, however, offer a challenge to even the most dedicated Wood fan. It is difficult to either confirm or deny claims his voice is heard on the radio in *Jail Bait*, or that he appears as 'Man holding newspaper' in *Plan 9* (both listed on IMDb); similarly, identification of Wood's appearance in *Plan 9* and *Ghouls*, in drag to double for the films' actresses, relies primarily on Paul Marco's comments (Marco in Weaver 1988, 247) rather than any obvious textual evidence. It has also been

claimed Wood features as a wizard in *Necromania* (Charles Anderson in Grey 1992, 133; Medved and Medved 1980, 179; Morton 1986, 159; the role is still listed on Wood's IMDb page) but none of the currently available prints feature such a character. Thus, extratextual information, including anecdotes and oral histories that are 'inevitably coloured by the distortions of memory and vanity' (Grey 1992, 7), must be approached with a degree of caution, and require interrogation in relation to the film texts themselves.

Mathijs suggests that interpreting a director's cameos 'relies on intertextual chains of meaning' (Mathijs 2012, 147) and that 'meanings can be inserted' into the performance through a director's auteur status and regular cameo roles (148). Wood's onscreen appearances, however, offer little consistency. They cannot all even be considered cameos, but rather comprise a variety of visible and invisible roles in which any observable auteurist signature is difficult to ascertain. He features as one of the brawlers in the recycled *Hellborn* footage in both *Ghouls* and *The Sinister Urge*, for example, but the performance offers little intertextual or biographical value beyond the identification of the director-as-actor. There is no indication it could be read as reflecting Wood's life or providing any insight into his emotional or mental state in the manner of some of his other roles, most obviously as the titular character in *Glen or Glenda*. Rather, the director's 'cameo' is more indicative simply of his willingness to take on any and all duties on and offscreen, necessitated by the restrictive working conditions of low-budget filmmaking.

Claims of Wood's originality, eccentricity, and uniqueness have often been predicated partly on the apparent rejection of genre conventions in his earlier films (e.g. Jancovich 1996, 304). This has been disputed, however, by both Warren (2010, 668) and Hill (2015, 181), who suggest even *Bride* and *Plan 9* demonstrate an intention to replicate aesthetic standards and established genre tropes. Indeed, Wood's post-*Plan 9* films in general indicate he was honing his craft through practical experience; his later films are more competent despite usually being made on a smaller budget. A breakdown of production costs indicates *The Sinister Urge*, an exploitation film addressing the 'taboo' topic of pornography, was made for just over $20,000 (Grey 1992, 100), roughly a third of *Plan 9*'s estimated budget. Yet its technical competence and relatively linear narrative suggests Wood was now more capable of avoiding, or correcting, the continuity errors and other failures for which his earlier films are now celebrated. Consequently, *The Sinister Urge* contains less evidence of what might be considered his 'unique' style. For commentators to include it in the category of 'Ed Wood films,' therefore, his signature must be located elsewhere. Primarily, this is achieved by using extratextual information to draw comparisons between Wood and his film's protagonist. Notably, the filmmaker claims to have taken inspiration from his own life, experiences, and even dreams (Wood 1998, 124–125). For the informed viewer, therefore, biographical interpretations are not only possible but endorsed by Wood himself. Simultaneously, however, pursuing this tendency can add further ambiguity to his inspirations: an anecdote relayed

in *Hollywood Rat Race*, ostensibly about an actress's bad experience on set of a film Wood was *not* involved in, describes a scene almost identical to the opening of *The Sinister Urge* (Wood 1998, 86–87). Wood's apparent willingness to exploit his life and previous works means that distinguishing between fact and fiction, and even identifying the origins of his stories, can be difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain.

The Sinister Urge does appear to offer parallels between Wood and Johnny Ryde (Carl Anthony), a smut picture director who is disappointed with the direction his career has gone. In one scene, he watches rushes of his latest sleaze film and remarks, 'I look at this slush and try to remember, at one point I made *good* movies.' Craig and others (Adams 2010, 68; Graham 1991, 107) suggest this 'certainly sounds like the voice of Wood in a serious moment of self-reflection' (Craig 2009, 208). This interpretation is based on the extratextual understanding that this was the filmmaker's last non-pornographic directorial feature, thus enabling the authors to infer biographical significance in lieu of the aesthetic 'standards' of Wood's earlier films. This is, however, an inherently retrospective reading: consistent in terms of Wood's posthumous critical re-evaluation, but inconsistent with both the text itself and its historical context. At the time of production, Wood had not yet begun his descent into sleaze and pornography, meaning that there is no reason to lament a career decline that had not yet occurred. Even *The Sinister Urge*'s status as exploitation does not adequately support the claim; *Glen or Glenda*, Wood's most personal film, was also exploitation. Furthermore, the identification of Ryde as a 'Wood substitute' is problematized by other moments in the film. Ryde's office is lined with posters for previous Wood productions, but when questioned about them he states they are made by 'friends' of his. This suggests Ryde is less a Wood stand-in than a contemporary who serves as a cautionary tale for aspiring filmmakers. Thus, drawing from extratextual information to identify biographical significance is compromized by the film's more explicit intertextuality. The desire to find evidence in Wood's later films that supports the assumption of his dissatisfaction with his career 'decline,' suggests, therefore, a desire to perpetuate the 'romanticized fable' of Wood; it allows him to be celebrated as a misunderstood artist and auteur, rather than be dismissed as a hack exploitationeer.

The Sinister Urge would be Wood's last known directorial credit for 10 years, but throughout the 1960s he was a prolific novelist and screenwriter. The significance of his cult auteur status, and the value of the constructed category of 'Ed Wood films' is particularly evident in the movies attributed to him through his screenwriting credits. As the author of these films' scripts, Wood has subsequently been treated also as their de facto cinematic auteur. This is, in part, a marketing strategy employed to capitalize on the filmmaker's cult value: for example, the DVD boxset *The Big Box of Wood* (S'more Entertainment, 2011) contains a selection of Wood-scripted films alongside his directorial efforts but declares them *all* to be 'by America's most infamous Hollywood outsider.' The tendency to attribute authorship to Wood exclusively

and explicitly, regardless of his actual involvement, is typical among fans also. Razzie founder John Wilson's review of *Orgy of the Dead* draws heavily on biographical information regarding Wood, and effectively dismisses any potential contribution by the film's director, Stephen C. Apostolof – even interpreting the mise-en-scene as containing 'typically unconvincing Wood-style moments' (Wilson 2005, 265). Craig, meanwhile, disregards Apostolof's claim that Wood was rarely on set as irrelevant because 'the spirit of Wood resides inexorably in the magnificently weird and revelatory screenplay' (Craig 2009, 241). Given that Wood's involvement provides the film its cultural value, it becomes necessary to find evidence to support its status as an 'Ed Wood film' by identifying authorial signatures, in this case in dialogue and narrative content. The decision to attribute authorship to the screenwriter rather than the director thus also relies here on a return to the literary origins of the term – precisely the tendency that the concept of a specifically cinematic auteurism traditionally opposes.

Wood wrote seven known screenplays for Apostolof in the 1960s and 1970s; of these, *Orgy of the Dead*, a horror-inspired nudie cutie described as 'bore-lesque' (Adams 2010, 69) due to the meagre narrative and lengthy dance routines, is one of the more likeable. It also provides the most opportunity to be subsumed into the category of 'Ed Wood films.' As well as starring Criswell, Wood's tendency to include 'roles rather than characters' (Routt 2001, 11) is evident; only the central couple, Bob and Shirley, are given names, while the women who occupy the majority of screen-time are characterized solely through their routines, listed in the credits as Hawaiian Dance, Skeleton Dance, etc. Drawing on the knowledge that Shirley was Wood's preferred drag name, Craig asserts the bickering pair are 'brightly drawn contrapuntal aspects of Wood himself' (Craig 2009, 219). Bob, a horror author, is scathingly described as a 'marginally talented hack and an unrepentant cad, guilty of bad acting and worse intent, a moral coward' (219) who is 'virtually indistinguishable' from his creator. Craig thus conflates the character, actor William Bates (who, presumably, is responsible for the bad acting) and screenwriter; the character is 'all but autobiographical' (240) for reasons that are not adequately argued. Conflating Wood and his characters, particularly through identifying supposed 'Wood substitutes' assumes the character onscreen reflects the filmmaker offscreen, but Wood's haphazard, inconsistent approach to writing means some films inevitably offer more potential for intertextual and biographical readings than others. This tendency is also evident in Craig's analysis of *Orgy*, which offers only superficial similarities between the filmmaker and his characters but has been ascribed the same cultural value as other, more obviously biographical movies, so it can be included in the category of 'Ed Wood films.' Craig's approach thus exposes the challenge fans and scholars face when attempting to identify 'the spirit of Wood' (2009, 241) – his authorship – in films that do not particularly encourage it.

There is one post-1960 film, however, that does appear to offer significant potential for biographical readings for the informed viewer. *Love Feast* is written by and stars Wood – although the 2000 DVD release by Rhino Video boasts new opening credits declaring it to be 'produced, written, and directed by' Wood, explicitly (and misleadingly) repackaging it as an 'Ed Wood film.' A softcore pornographic feature, *Love Feast*'s cultural value rests entirely on its potential as an auteurist text; as Wood's most substantial onscreen performance since *Glen or Glenda*, the repackaging invites comparisons between the two films, with biographical interpretations supported by extratextual information regarding the filmmaker's alcoholism and career trajectory.

Despite his exuberant performance as Mr. Murphy, a photographer who lures women to his apartment for sex, Wood's physical appearance is a far cry from the youthful good looks on display in his feature debut; *Love Feast* is 'sad for graphically showing how far Wood fell' (Adams 2010, 70). Craig goes further, arguing it is 'obvious that Wood is just playing himself – an effeminate, sexually obsessed boozehound' (Craig 2009, 256). It is significant that Wood is playing a role he has written for himself. Nevertheless, Craig's tendency to conflate actor/writer and character – he repeatedly refers to 'Wood' rather than 'Mr. Murphy' throughout his critical analysis – assumes the performance's authenticity only emerges through its extratextuality. Just as *Glen or Glenda* seemingly holds a 'mirror' to Wood's life, its autobiographical inspirations evident in the character of Glen as well as Alan/Ann's story, for the informed viewer it is difficult to *not* interpret Mr. Murphy as Wood 'just playing himself.' Murphy is an outsider; he is responsible for the orgy but rarely participates in it himself. Instead, drained and exhausted, he frequently retires to the patio to drink and smoke alone. Knowing of Wood's alcoholism at the time adds an uncomfortable realism to the performance, which at times seems 'too personal, raw, and vulnerable to even watch' (Blevin 2013a). Eventually, Murphy is punished for exploiting the agency. Three dominatrices arrive, dress him in a hideous pink frilly negligee and dog collar, and force him to lick their boots. This depiction offers a sharp contrast to Wood's earlier, progressive plea for acceptance of transvestism in *Glen or Glenda*. Here, cross-dressing is reduced to a fetish and, like the filmmaker, consigned to the seedy world of exploitation. In the final scene, Murphy declares he is 'loving [the women] to death,' a comment that can retrospectively be read as a 'poignant instance of self-realization' for the filmmaker (Blevin 2013a), reflecting his difficult relationship with the film industry. Rather than look for sympathy, however, Murphy – like Wood, who continued to make movies until his sudden death in 1978, at the age of 54 – remains defiant, confiding that he plans to get more 'girls! girls! girls!' in a few days, effectively accepting his fate and succumbing to his addiction.

Wood's films after *Plan 9* do not necessarily contradict the assumption that aspects of his work reflect his life, or that they speak to and about one another. They do, however, complicate that assumption by further exposing

Wood's erratic approach to filmmaking and writing, increasing the difficulty of constructing a coherent picture of what constitutes evidence for an 'authorial signature'. 'Ed Wood films,' a constructed category that is inherently tied to the perception of Wood as auteur, are often characterized by a curious combination of carelessness, resourcefulness, and flexibility. If a consistent authorial 'style' is to be identified across his whole body of work, it is one that seems to emerge accidentally – despite, rather than because of, Wood's intentions. His approach to filmmaking is inconsistent yet does periodically achieve an odd consistency as a result. He acknowledges taking inspiration from his life, which supports biographical readings of some films, but cannot reasonably be applied to all of them. Meanwhile, many of his intentional efforts to encourage intertextual readings are haphazard and often incompetently constructed. Conversely, his tendency to recycle material unintentionally makes possible comparisons and connections to be made between films that otherwise appear to 'defy classification.' The cultish tendency towards biographical and intertextual interpretations of Wood's films, therefore, seems to represent ways his movies are read in apparently 'unintended' and 'intended' ways. Wood's films emerge as inconsistent, complicated, and contradictory; finding any coherent way of approaching them is difficult. The constructed category of 'Ed Wood films' offers some potential, but is problematized because Wood is a particularly ambiguous, contradictory character. He is an eccentric, a hack, a pornographer, and an auteur; he 'lies somewhere in the twilight zone between idiocy and inspiration, between genius and hopelessness' (Warren 2010, 668). Forty years after his death, he can still seem to be just beyond our comprehension.

Distinguishing between Wood and the cult 'character' constructed over four decades of interest and cemented through repetition can be challenging. Identifying him as a sympathetic outsider determined to make his movies against all the odds is undoubtedly a more comfortable position – one that, for the motivated viewer, can be supported with some textual evidence. The purpose of this article has not been to reject this position entirely, but to suggest it represents only one facet of Ed Wood that is based on a selective approach, primarily comprised of just three films made in the first decade of his thirty-year career. His later films, when they are discussed, usually serve as a rather depressing epilogue, a 'reminder of his pitiful decline into … dreck, outright alcoholism, homelessness, and early death' (Adams 2010, 69). The later movies offer a challenge to the more nostalgic, sympathetic perception of Wood as a misunderstood auteur, not only because of their status as exploitation and pornography, but because they often suggest a filmmaker who was willing to repackage and recycle ideas, poaching from his previous works, and sometimes his own life, to find various ways of producing usable work as quickly and cheaply as possible. Rather than ignore or downplay this side of Wood and the two most productive decades of his career – as academic scholarship has tended to do – it is only by addressing the less comfortable, less coherent aspects of him that we can move beyond the

romantic, constructed cult ‘character’ of Wood to a more complete understanding of the filmmaker and his films.

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