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Audiences, exhibitors, and live cinema spaces

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Cult Film Atmospheres

Audiences, exhibitors, and live cinema spaces

HARIO SATRIO PRIAMBODHO

DEPT. OF COMMUNICATION | FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES | LUND UNIVERSITY



Cult Film Atmospheres

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Audiences, exhibitors, and live cinema spaces

Hario Satrio Priambodho



DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University to be publicly defended on 5th June 2025 at 09.00 in SOL:H104, Helgonabacken 12, Lund

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Abstract:

Cult film events like *The Bad Film Festival* (Gothenburg, 2019 and 2023-2025) and *The B-Film Club* (Malmö) offer unique atmospheres to audiences. In the two Swedish cities of Malmö and Gothenburg, exhibitors run regular festivals and standalone screenings of cult films such as *The Room*, *Birdemic*, *Miami Connection*, and others where an effervescent atmosphere is generated, often featuring audience participatory actions such as talkbacks, shouting out jokes, or dancing as part of the live screening events. This contravenes the commonplace norm of watching movies in the cinema where a degree of decorum and propriety are typically emphasized. With this as a backdrop, this thesis highlights the intertwining roles of cult film audiences, exhibitors, and the material cinema space as generative factors of the cult film atmosphere. By utilizing the overarching concepts of media engagement (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023), collective effervescence (Tutenges, 2023), and atmosphere (Böhme, 2017; Tawa, 2022), it strives to argue for why and how media atmospheres matter especially in relation to audience engagement. It acknowledges that there is an element of liveness through an intense form of engagement as constituted by ambiance, mood, and ultimately atmosphere. The thesis accomplishes this through an empirical qualitative multimethod approach where audiences and cinema figureheads are interviewed, and coupled with in-person observations at specific cult film screenings, in addition to a complementary aesthetic analysis of certain films and examination of cinema website blurbs. As such, this thesis contribute insights into how audiences and exhibitors are perceiving cult films, namely how they are defining them based on individuals' aesthetic appraisal, the perceived failures, and the replayability aspect of the films. It enriches the understanding on how identities from both audiences and exhibitors play a crucial role in the eventual generation of the atmosphere. The thesis then emphasizes the importance of examining the co-existence of ambiance and mood as integral constitutive elements, in which both are required to be present if an atmosphere is to be felt. Finally, the idea of the cult film effervescence is elucidated as a key contribution of the thesis, which is argued to be the primary characteristic of the cult film atmosphere and has the potential to facilitate audiences in forging uncanny bonds and a sense of community with others in the theatre. At its crux, the thesis advances academic research on how we can examine media as atmospheres as experienced by those who are bodily present within a specific space.

Key words: Media, atmospheres, media engagement, audience studies, media industries, cult films, film, cinema, space, cult film audiences, cult film exhibitors, ambiance, mood, collective effervescence, identity, taste, bad films, musical films, affinities, parameters of media engagement

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Cult Film Atmospheres

Audiences, exhibitors and live cinema spaces

Hario Satrio Priambodho



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To Yani, Anja, Mayo, and Kechi

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Preface

This thesis can be seen as a culmination of several years of watching and enjoying cult films, bad films, and everything in between. More than a fifteen years ago around 2008, I was contemplating what it is that I want to do in life and as chance would have it, I encountered a screening of Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* at a movie theatre in New York City's Greenwich Village. It was close to midnight and we saw a crowd lining up around the block that would eventually lead to the entrance of a movie theatre. Having already been interested in film since a young age, I naturally inquired to one of the bystanders what film they are in line for. The person said something along the lines of "it's the best movie in the world and you need to see it!" We then found out that it was in fact a midnight screening of *The Room*. Refusing to call it a night, we spontaneously joined the queue and luckily managed to get tickets. What ensued –as clichéd as it sounds and in hindsight- may have subconsciously forged my life trajectory for the next 17 years or so. For inside that Greenwich Village theatre, I witnessed first-hand the power and potency of a cult film atmosphere.

As we took our seats on the second floor balcony, the energy inside the auditorium was cranked up to 11, beyond any prior movie experiences. There were three or four people with musical instruments that were played to accompany the film's many cookie cutter "romance" songs and accentuate certain scenes with additional sounds. By the start of the movie, audiences were already hurling jokes, hooting, and clapping, so much so that as a first-time viewer I could hardly hear the film's dialogue because it was overwhelmingly drowned out by the crowd's frenzy. Football was thrown around, people said "Hi!" to the doggie, and acknowledged that Lisa was tearing Johnny apart. That one screening enticed me, which would lead to countless *The Room* screenings in many different cities and countries, which also expanded into attending screenings of other cult films and badfilms. Because of this, I then became fascinated as to why and how movie audiences are able to enjoy a film that is aesthetically poor in comparison to the thousands of other movies that have been produced. What makes these movies special and why is it that only certain movies receive adoration due to their crappy quality? At the same time, I pondered on the tensions and contraventions of being able to be rowdy and at times unruly in a cinema space where in non-cult situations there are normalized codes of conduct in that one should not disturb others who are watching the film.

Of course, such fascinations did not immediately result in academic interest on the matter. It took multiple strokes of serendipity over the span of years that solidified my vision to study cult films and especially their audiences. In the beginning of this research, the concept of atmosphere was not on my radar. I knew that I wanted to investigate the dynamics of cult film screenings from multiple vantage points, not just focusing on one singular aspect. Hence, I imagined the scope of the research would take into account audiences, exhibitors, and the cinema space. However, a bridge between the aspects were not visible at the time. It was not until I listened to a presentation from Peter Lunt and eventually had a conversation with him, that it became clear atmosphere was the driving force of these screenings and that there is a need to examine them from this perspective. Therefore, the thesis would hopefully contribute new insights on how we can understand the elements that constitute cult films and their screenings or events, but also in a broader sense, how and why media atmospheres matter.

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After five years and seven months, that included going through a global pandemic and the universe bestowing us with a beautiful daughter, this thesis has finally come to rest. Looking back throughout those years, an overwhelming mixed set of emotions can be felt. I have been told once that writing the acknowledgements can be the most difficult, plainly because after the long journey one may not know where to start. There have been countless people and institutions that helped and accompanied me on this journey. Therefore, I wish to start by saying thank you from the bottom of my heart to everyone that I've encountered and had the pleasure of talking with, even if it were only for moments at a time. Through the highs and lows, and everything else in between, do know that I am eternally grateful.

Prominently, I want to thank the respondents of this thesis both cult film audiences and film exhibitors. David Winsnes, you are an amazing person and I have been so lucky to get to know you. I also heartily thank Agnes Stenqvist, Anna Reimegård, Jack Stevenson, Jakob Abrahamsson, Paul Kraus, and Pernilla Nilsson. Without all of you, this thesis would not be complete and your wisdom has been kindling to the fire and getting to know all of you has been a highlight of this process. Here is to hoping badfilms and cult films proliferate more in Sweden. To audiences, I thank you for the insightful and fascinating conversations that we have had regarding cult films and their screenings. Thank you for your time, energy, and kindness in bringing me into your world and sharing your thoughts about the films and screenings. Thank you for having the patience and willingness, especially during the times of uncertainty during and post-COVID when many of our discussions were conducted online. Do know that the insights you have bestowed upon me are the true essence of this thesis. I certainly hope that we will run into each other again at a future screening!

At its foundation, this thesis would not have been possible if it were not for the incredible collegial support at the Department of Communication (IKO) at Lund University. Ever since I started my doctoral research, all of you have shown me nothing but love and kindness towards this person who was at the time still trying to get to know my way around the world of academia. The seminars you have organized, the lunchroom conversations, the feedback you have given me, and the administrative help are all treasured and have helped me become a better scholar. Dare I say, these were some of the best years of my life (so far) and you all had a role to play in that. Special mention should also be given to the media historians and rhetoricians. Even though we are not

under the same department anymore, I will always cherish our time together and be forever grateful for your support.

To Annette Hill, words cannot explain how your guidance and friendship has meant to me throughout my time as a doctoral student. As my supervisor, you have exhibited great resilience, vision, and most importantly, kindness over the last five years that allowed me to truly flourish in my research. I cannot imagine a world in which you were not one of my supervisors nor would I want it any other way. You have provided me with invaluable feedback, critique, and moral support for which became the foundations of an insightful learning experience. I want to thank you for all of this but especially for the unwavering confidence you have in my abilities and myself as a person.

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I want to thank my fellow doctoral student cohort in MKV, strategic communication, media history, and rhetoric. You have all provided me with a safe space to which we can share our joys and frustrations as doctoral students, but also grow and learn as a collective. Magnus Johansson, Martin Sundby, Cheryl Fung, Christine Davidsson Sandal, Valeriia Sementina, and Eskil Vesterlund, your friendship, camaraderie, and support have been irreplaceable. As Zac Efron once wisely said, “We’re all in this together!”

This thesis would not be in its current form if it were not for the wonderful people who graciously provided their time and energy to read its many versions through the seminars. Therefore, I want to thank Joanna Doona, Martin Lundqvist, John Lynch, and Tobias Linné. Your feedback, critique, and words of encouragement meant the world to me. It feels just like yesterday that I was sitting in front of you awaiting your thoughts on the work in progress. I also want give a special mention to Michael Rübsamen, Cecilia Cassinger, Joke Hermes, Ernest Mathijs, Magnus Andersson, Mia-Marie Hammarlin, Fredrik Miegel, Peter Dahlgren, and Renira Gambarato. At many points of the journey, you have all given me much to reflect on and nudged me to be better through your help, knowledge, and wisdom. Peter Lunt and Sébastien Tutenges, getting to know your work and writings provided this thesis with a foundation to stand

on. If it were not for you, cult film atmospheres and media atmosphere in general would be missing a ray of light that highlights its significance.

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To Yani, you are everything and there would not be enough space to write them all down. I thank you for your love, support, encouragement, warmth, the laughter we have created, and the home we have established. You have undoubtedly made me a better person, lighting the necessary fires in moments that are dim. You have always believed in me and I cling to that every single day. I look forward to the days of the future in which we are both achieving our dreams. To our beautiful Anja, you came into this world in the middle of all this. It has been the absolute best moments of my life sharing every day with your sincere and excitable presence. One day when you are able to read, maybe you can give us your thoughts on atmosphere and let papa and mama know what were the atmospheres of your life thus far. Coming home to both you and mama every day gives me life. Love you both!

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Lastly, I want to repeat and give my gratitude to everyone else that I have come across. Just know that I appreciate all of your kindness and support even without saying it. In the words of Tommy Wiseau's Johnny, and the title of a chapter in this thesis, "You know people don't have to say it, they can feel it."

Lund, March 2025

1. Introduction

The term “cult” has been widely debated amongst scholars in media, communications, and film studies, with works that range from trying to create a canonical list of media texts that fit into this category through the analysis of aesthetics and media audience research, to writings that problematize the very meaning of “cult”. Fundamentally, “cult” media are defined as texts where its values and meanings are detached and independent of “traditional sources” of appraisal and analysis (Kinkade and Katovich, 1992, p.194). It is often characterized in opposition of “dominant formulations of spectatorship” (Klinger, 1989, p.3) anchored in a transgressive sensibility of breaking boundaries, confronting taboos, and challenging “commonsense conceptions of what is normal and acceptable” (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, p.97). Cult often contains an element of transgression, which can be understood as something that infringes on “existing system of values and norms” and often “contesting one of its elements” (Paleczny and Sławik, 2016, p.232). However, one thing is for certain, there is no wide-reaching agreement on what exactly is cult to the people who experience it. As such, a number of different labels have been utilised to describe films that primarily fall under the “cult” umbrella. For example: exploitation film, cult-art, the badfilm –or often associated with “so bad it’s good”, cult horror, cult musical, or cult science fiction. For this research, the badfilm (e.g. *Miami Connection*, *Birdemic*, and *The Room*) and the cult musical (e.g. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) is the most prevalent within the geographical scope of Sweden. This means that the aforementioned movies are the ones that cinemas covered in this research regularly hold screenings a few times each year or were featured as part of film festivals (e.g. *Den Dåliga Filmfestivalen* or The Bad Film Festival in Gothenburg) or a dedicated program series (e.g. *B-Filmsklubben* or The B-Film Club in Malmö) and hence are the focal points of this thesis. Unlike some cinemas in the US or UK where they have monthly screenings of some cult films more regularly, cinemas in Sweden are typically more diffuse in their scheduling of cult films aside from the annual festivals.

The thesis is set within the backdrop of the film culture in Sweden where the cinema chain Filmstaden AB¹ holds a sizeable share of the market when it comes to film exhibition, which makes Sweden relatively bereft of diversity in terms of national cinema chains. Instead, many cities and towns in Sweden have medium to small-scale independent cinemas, in which Filmstaden may also be present if the corresponding city is large enough in demographic and geographic size. Because of this, the Swedish film culture generally encompasses Hollywood imports, Swedish-produced cinema, and European cinema, of which Hollywood is relatively dominant. Hence, many of the aforementioned independent cinemas are the standard-bearers for alternative exhibitions of films that may not fall under the purview or utility of the national chain companies, such as art-house films, international language films, or cult films. Having said that, many of the independent cinemas still depend on exhibiting tentpole blockbuster films simply because the market and interest for niche movies are not significant enough.

When it comes to cult films, the market is even narrower. As one respondent observes, the cult film culture in Sweden is “small” due to cinemas around the country not willing, or tried and failed, to offer audiences “more mature stuff, which really elaborates on the whole experience, regardless of what you’re watching” (George, 31, M, software engineer). Here, George is alluding to the fact that there are very few cinemas offering audiences the ability to bring food and beverages beyond the customary popcorns and sodas, where instead one can purchase a cheese platter, a salad, or alcoholic beverages such as beer and wine. At the same time, George is also acknowledging that few cinemas are willing to take the risk of exhibiting films that are outside of the established film milieu in Sweden as mentioned above.

This is in addition to the fact that a typical film screening in Sweden follows the commonplace practices and norms of moviewatching, which usually entails complete silence from the audience, discouragement to use one’s mobile telephones during the screening, and a prohibition of recording the movie. Announcements regarding these conducts are projected onto the screen before the movie starts and occasionally you will have a staff member conveying the same message prior to the screening. Signage are sometimes posted around the cinema auditorium or building specifically to reinforce the rules of the cinema. If an individual should violate any of these norms, they would typically be met with reprehension from others in the auditorium. If

¹ Filmstaden AB is currently a subsidiary of Odeon Cinemas Group, which in turn is owned by US-based AMC Theatres

someone would converse with their neighbours during a film screening, there is a high chance they would be confronted with a sharp stare of disapproval from another audience member or even a verbal rebuking. In short, moviegoing practices are often marked by propriety and a degree of decorum, unlike the cases that are examined in this thesis. Therefore, a research on cult film screenings in Sweden can be considered as a study on a specific set of practices that is often defined based on their perceived difference against the “mainstream” (Jancovich, 2002, p.307).

A key motivating factor of conducting research on cult film screenings in Sweden was the advent of the *Den Dåliga Filmfestivalen* (The Bad Film Festival) in 2019. At first, this was an event exclusively available in Gothenburg with Bio Roy² as its home turf where its conception was positioned as an antithesis to the “good” Gothenburg Film Festival. With the arrival of the COVID pandemic and restrictions, the festival had to be cancelled for the next few years, returning in 2023. Nevertheless, during the times of hiatus while awaiting recovery from the restrictions, the concept of screening “bad films” has propagated to other parts of Sweden. At Spegeln³ in Malmö for example, there is now the *B-Filmsklubben*⁴ or the “B-Film Club,” which at the time of this writing features a slew of five to six films that include *Batman and Robin*, *Grease 2*, and *Showdown in Little Tokyo* –shown over a time span of six months. Additionally, the whole concept of screening badfilms have also been adopted in the northern city of Umeå, whose Folkets Bio⁵ now hosts a similar *Den Dåliga Filmfestivalen* every February⁶ since its conception in 2021.

With the above in mind, this thesis specifically tackles the dynamics of the cult film atmospheres generated by audiences⁷ and facilitated by cinema exhibitors within the cinema space in Sweden. In the words of Peter Lunt (2024), such a study would shed a light on how audiences “experience media productions as

² <https://www.bioroy.se/>

³ <https://biografspiegel.se/>

⁴ Previously in 2021 until 2023, it was called the *Den Dåliga Filmklubben* (The Bad Film Club), and have featured a wide selection of badfilms such as *Troll 2*, *Miami Connection*, *Birdemic*, and *Tammy and the T-Rex* among others.

⁵ <https://folketsbioumea.se/>

⁶ Most recently it was held on 17 February 2024, with a line-up that includes *Samurai Cop*, *Hard Ticket to Hawaii*, and a sing-along of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

⁷ Those interviewed in this thesis were audiences of Swedish cinemas but do not necessarily mean they are Swedish citizens

atmospheres” (p.471). Here, atmosphere can be recognized as the felt-bodily experience by individuals who are present within a physical space as generated by both ambiance and mood; shaped in conjunction through architectural features and human emotions. A *cult film atmosphere* is ephemeral in nature, anchored by a shared viewing and engagement of a specific cult film. In unpacking the idea of atmosphere, this thesis critically examines how selected cult film screenings can be seen as a cocktail of multiple elements such as aesthetic discernment, the expression and resonance of identities, the cohabitation of ambiance and mood, and the creation of a cult film effervescence. Such elements are analysed in this thesis through qualitative research of audiences and exhibitors that would ultimately amalgamate into the generation of a cult film atmosphere that is “confined to the setting conditions in which the atmosphere appears” (Böhme, 2013, p.4).



Figure 1

The Rocky Horror Picture Show screening at Spegeln, Malmö, 28 February 2020

This thesis is an attempt to bring insights into how we can comprehend the boisterous nature of cult film screenings and also the diverse trajectories in which audiences can be drawn towards certain films repeatedly. We can look towards Sexton and Mathijs’s (2020) argument in that there is no single phenomenon of the cult experience and it is shaped by a multitude of factors including social, cultural, and technological (p.2). They point out that the cult

experience “often resists containment” and will always produce a “field of contestation,” in which there are no ways of denying or avoiding the fact that this is a “core characteristic of the field” (Ibid., p.4). The contestation of cult can be traced back to the notion that the text itself cannot stand alone in constituting cult and other extratextual factors play a role in demarcating what is cult (Eco, 1985). The “furnished world” (Ibid., p.3) of the cult text must have the potential to be deconstructed by audiences and then rearranged on the basis of individual and collective whims. Hence, it is only natural that different subject positions and contextual backgrounds produce an oft-disagreed-upon media and film phenomenon that is diverse based on “fluidity and volatility” (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.4). Thus, multiple directions and facets are needed in order to truly unpack the cult experience stemming from texts that were never naturally cult (Corrigan, 1991, p.26). As such, we can purposely utilize the lens of Dahlgren and Hill’s (2023) parameters of media engagement where the notion of *media engagement* itself is understood to be “a spectrum of phenomena that is processual and protean” that specifically deals with how and why individuals engage or disengage with media (p.24).

On the first level, cult film by its very nature is defined and shaped by audiences; although producers make films, or in other cases, music videos or television series that may become cult classics, they cannot control an artefact’s cult status based on any one meaning attached to it (see: Mathijs, 2008; Mathijs and Sexton, 2011; Austin, 1981). As Umberto Eco (1985) would argue, cult texts cannot be constructed around one central idea. Rather it is built from a number of “unhinged” textual elements where audiences deconstruct and reconstruct the elements into a cult experience. In his classic reading of cult films, Eco argues audiences are able to “unhinge” the cult object and thus create a number of “disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visionary icebergs” (p.4). Audience engagement then becomes central in understanding the cult film experience that can be understood as “a purposive relationship” between individuals and media content for which “affective, emotional, and critical” aspects are central to how people perceive and utilize media (Hill, 2019, p.60-61). Therefore, for the case of this research, it enables audiences to attach intense emotions to cult films and their segments, which often amounts to the establishment of participatory cult rituals and practices (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.5).

This deconstruction and reconstruction work of a cult text by audiences serves to highlight the symbolic power of audiences in the cult film experience. As Hall (1984) would argue, such deconstructive/reconstructive processes can alter meanings “from negative to positive as they are repositioned in the field

of interdiscursivity” (p.259). Cult audiences then, are able to generate a “variety of representational distortions” after which establishes a “shared set of responses” that solidifies a media text as cult (Corrigan, 1991, p.29). For example, an aesthetically bad drama film (e.g. *The Room*) can transcend its original characteristics due to audiences finding the value of laughter or humour within the movie’s ham-fisted, cheesy dialogue. Hence, cult is constituted by audiences, performed by audiences in live and mediated spaces, and contested –or reaffirmed- by cultural industries, producers and audiences in the ongoing practices of “doing cult”.

Which brings us to the second level, where the cult film experience should be understood as a notion that “must be predicated on the full circuit of communication” that encompasses the media’s texts, production or distribution, and audiences instead of “an overvaluation” of any individual elements (Gwellian-Jones and Pearson, 2004, p.x). Therefore, in addition to the focus on audience engagement, the role of those who hold positions of power within the structure of the cinema as an organization is warranted. Particularly, the thesis investigates cult cinema as a key area of research in the Scandinavian region. Of note is that in Swedish and Danish⁸ independent, alternative cinemas, cult texts tend to be from the established canon of mainly American and British film and television, with some notable exceptions such as *El Topo*, *Troll 2*, or the *Emmanuelle* films. This signals that cult artefacts from these two regions, rather than productions from other parts of the world shape the region’s cult experiences. This condition can be attributed to movie exhibitors trying to establish a place of cult and fostering an “at homeness” (Moore, 2017) by relying on inspiration from the more established cult regions and bringing in texts that are more familiar in a transnational context. Therefore, the focus on media industries would allow the thesis to articulate on how cinemas have the potential to “shape audience taste” and audience expectations on what constitutes as an enjoyable film experience (Spicer, 2022, p.434).

⁸ The research primarily focuses on the experiences of Swedish audiences in Malmö and Gothenburg, but one Danish cinema in Copenhagen was included to elaborate the media industries perspective

Aims and Research Questions

This thesis primarily aims to develop new knowledge regarding the understanding and constitution of the cult film experience in Sweden by way of the atmosphere that screenings generate, emphasizing the importance of the physical space and the performativity aspects of the cult experience specifically during screenings at the cinema. It strives to highlight the “temporality of experiences” in relation to how audiences may have an “appetite for novelty within the experience economy” (Atkinson, 2017, p.709). Unlike some approaches to studying cult films where the texts themselves typically take the lead, this thesis frames the design from audience engagement and experience and media industries’ perspective. As mentioned earlier, this is because one cannot predict when and if a certain text will eventually become cult as a particular text cannot be tailor-made for a cult audience (Mathijs, 2008) nor can producers intentionally and willingly set out to make a cult text. The cult film is often created due to the aesthetic qualities of the films and its culture that celebrates texts that are often unwatchable, inaccessible, or unpleasurable (Jancovich, 2002, p.309).

Cult is not solely created by the text itself and audiences, but also by the cultural actors surrounding it. Hence, the thesis aims to unpack the point of view of the media industry -namely cult film exhibitors- in order to explore the roles they play in generating cult and bringing it together with the audience point of view. This is also to address Hills’ (2002) lamentation that the roles of “specialized” outlets and spaces of niche media have relatively been untouched by academic inquiries. It fulfils an evident knowledge gap in the study of cult films that examines the role of people in power whose decisions hold weight in determining which films are to be shown physically in the cinema. In addition to audiences and exhibitors, the research would take into account the context of Swedish cult film screenings; this includes the importance of the physical space through in-person fieldwork and observations, and a brief exploration on the online spaces related to cult – specifically the websites of the cinemas.

This thesis focuses on Sweden as region where arguably, the cult experience is at its nascent phase. Most studies of cult film and television are located in the United States and United Kingdom; academic research has investigated the rise of cult in these regions, as a transgressive genre and contested cultural practice (e.g. Sconce, 1995; Jancovich, 2002; Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 1983; Telotte, 1991; Mathijs and Sexton, 2020). Indeed, scholars point out how cult has been “mainstreamed” (Klinger, 2010, p.2) in these regions. From the

US or UK perspective, niche audiences have become a “viable economic target”, no longer small and hence rendering them “harder to dismiss as outliers” (Askwith, Lundin, and Romano, 2018, p.368) in a traditional sense of the meaning of cult. Therefore, if we want to understand how the cult film atmosphere is generated through the screening experience, then the study of cult film screenings in Sweden can offer original insights into the doing of cult at a time when it arguably remains niche in this region. It acknowledges the fact that different geographical regions carry with them different “place-based practices” and social experiences (Jones, 2011, p.102).

One of the main contributions of the thesis is to broaden the understanding of the cult film atmosphere where “thoughts, beliefs, and other propositional attitudes are related to each other” and constitute the whole (Caruana, 2000, p.42). By taking into consideration multiple facets of the cult atmosphere, it can enhance our understanding of how various actors shape the personal individual and collective social cult experience. The research consolidates a number of cult’s tenets, for example but not limited to, transgression, perception on failures, replayability, identity, taste, performance, and placemaking. However, some aspects of cult films, such as film producers, film directors, actors, journalistic discourses, and others lay beyond the scope and capabilities of this research.

With that said, this thesis utilizes a qualitative approach to the study of audiences and media industries to accomplish the above aims. It primarily channels an audience studies approach by particularly recognizing individual and collective voices in the shaping of cultural knowledge (Hermes, 2005, p.85). The audience approach can elicit rich narratives from individuals and collectives on their perceptions, opinions, and values for cult film and television. Cult audiences are considered as individuals and collectives who possess the power to “co-create” experiences (Hill, 2015, p.7). It is also of importance to note that the research does not exclusively study fans of cult films but audiences in a broader sense. On the media industries side, a qualitative approach would allow us to form an analysis that is “attentive to how media exist in and through” the complexities of its relationships with multiple actors (McDonald, 2022, p.15). As such, the cult culture is “found” and “created” by viewers (Hills, 2002, p.98) who then form an attachment with the text and hence empowering it by creating a culture that seemingly holds more value than it was originally intended (Taylor, 1999, p.4). The “performativity” in the connections between media industries and audiences become the focal point of interest (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p.163). Furthermore, this study supplies its readers with glimpses of the backstage

through “embodied ways of knowing the industry” irreplaceable through other social scientific methods (Postigo, 2016; cited in Cunningham, 2022, p.503).

In both cases, the thesis takes an analytical stance in line with Jones’ (2004) approach of looking at the interlocutors as individuals “who construct the meaning and significance of their realities” (p.257). Essentially, the thesis critically analyses how different actors (i.e. audiences, exhibitors) obtain meaning based on the cult film atmosphere and how they are exhibiting or performing their knowledge within the context of cult film screenings. It stems from a standpoint that asks (but is not limited to) these research questions:

- a. In what ways do audiences and exhibitors understand cult films, specifically badfilms and cult musicals?
- b. What is the role of audience and exhibitor identities and taste in cult film screenings?
- c. How do exhibitors establish ambiance at cinemas and what is the mood of audiences in cult film screenings?
- d. What is the role of the collective effervescence in the constitution and reconstitution of the cult film atmosphere?

Thesis Disposition

Following this introduction, this thesis will provide an overview of previous research that are tangential to researching the cult atmosphere from the audiences and exhibitors’ perspectives. It serves to orientate the reader by providing a thorough elaboration as to where the thesis positions itself. This includes a prelude on the religious origins of the term “cult”, previous writings on cult cinema, an overview of the genres and sub-genres of cult, an elaboration on audiences as a concept, studies conducted on film exhibitors and its cinematic spaces, and some critical perspectives on the gendered tendencies of cult films. After the literature review chapter, the thesis will expound on the theoretical frameworks. This chapter explicates first, the theoretical tenets of media engagement as an overarching lens to understand how audiences are experiencing cult film screenings. Secondly, the concept of collective effervescence will be elaborated. Lastly, the notion of atmosphere will be unpacked. Afterwards, the thesis will elaborate the methods and methodologies utilized. This includes an overview of the qualitative methods,

research design and sampling, and some reflections based on what has been conducted.

In terms of analytical chapters, the thesis structures the different chapters corresponding to answering the aforementioned research questions. Therefore, Chapter 5 would address *Research Question 1: In what ways do audiences and exhibitors understand cult films, specifically badfilms and cult musicals?* This chapter deals with the understanding and identification of cult. This is anchored in the notion that cult is an “unsettled” experience where audiences and “distribution contexts” play a part in generating it (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.4). It takes into account that audiences and exhibitors possess a “knowledge to recognize” of what is cult and therefore are able to discern which sort of signs and actions are appropriate (Friedman and Kuipers, 2013, p.184) in order to constitute it as such. Therefore, this question specifically addresses matters of definitions. Even though there has been numerous attempts to define cult, it is valuable to this research and the study of cult films in general if we get a deeper understanding on how individuals outside academia are identifying films. As such, this research question entails a discussion on how individuals perceive the aesthetics of the cult films screened, the notion of failure, and the replayability aspect of cult films.

Chapter 6 entails a discussion on *Research Question 2: What is the role of audience and exhibitor identities and taste in cult film screenings?* It focuses on the performativity aspect of both audiences and exhibitors and how it is a fundamental component of the cult experience, especially in the live event settings. It draws upon the idea that a “sense of identification and belonging” arises from “distinctive way[s] of behaving” (Dyer, 2002c, p.49). It also addresses the role of individual taste and cultural/cult capital as integral to an individual’s ability to perform their identities in the cult setting, where the “uninitiated” may get a sense of being “inadequate or unworthy satisfaction” (Bourdieu, 1979, p.43). The thesis illustrates how contextual background (i.e. personal past experiences, knowledge, etc.) shapes both audiences’ and exhibitors’ mode of reading cult texts. It also explores how such contexts are utilized to position themselves within the cult experience. From an exhibitor’s point of view, it will be discussed how the cinemas within this research possess a distinct sense of identity that is materialized through their choice of programming and how they present themselves through promotional material and website blurbs. On the side of audiences, how their identities resonate with both the films and that of the cinemas they go to will be highlighted. This forms an ideal prelude into how audiences are able to perform and express such identities within the space of the cinema.

Chapter 7 addresses *Research Question 3: How do exhibitors establish ambiance at cinemas and what is the mood of audiences in cult film screenings?* It points towards the importance of the physical space, which can be considered to be “constitutive of the meaning” of the practices (Morley, 2001, p.426). In particular, this question alludes to the importance of the notions of ambiance and mood as a constitutive factor of atmosphere generation. As Tawa (2022) argues, atmosphere can be seen as what emerges “between the ambiance of circumstance and the mood of a human being who encounters it (p.5). For cult audiences, these spaces of cult are where individuals can possibly feel a “comfortable sense of at-homeness” (Moores, 2017, p.143) as a state of mind that is applicable during the screening. This question explores how audiences perceive the physical properties of the cinema themselves. It also takes into account the ideas of comfort and cosiness, and how meaning is embedded within these physical properties. Hence, through the interplay of ambiance and mood, a cult film effervescence may emerge as a consequence of audiences letting go of their inhibitions and apprehensions towards the social conditioning (Tutenges, 2023) of watching movies.

Finally, Chapter 8 will address *Research Question 4: What is the role of the collective effervescence in the constitution and reconstitution of the cult film atmosphere?* Here, the thesis looks at the practices audiences conduct during a cult film screening as an embodiment of a collective effervescence that is “intense, transgressive, and yet mutually attuned actions of and emotions among individuals who are gathered in the same place (Tutenges, 2023, p.6). If in the previous chapter the physical space were highlighted, this chapter is attuned to the social aspects of watching cult films in the cinema. What this means is that a discussion on the importance of watching cult films with other audience members instead of watching it alone will be presented. At the same time, it will be elaborated that through a number of rituals and performances that is contrary to the conventional moviegoing norms, the aforementioned effervescence is created, which in turn generates a particular type of atmosphere. This atmosphere then, will be linked to how audiences obtain a sense of belonging and unity with others who are co-present and may therefore be argued as one avenue into the formation of the “cult.”

2. Literature Review

In order to grasp the full scope of this research, we must come to an understanding that the thesis is not only contained within one specific field of study, rather it touches upon a number of tangential fields such as media studies, media industries, films studies, and to an extent, religious studies which the term “cult” derives from. It stems from the acknowledgment that “cinema as a concept, construct, and social activity is in need of constant revision, as are its frameworks for understanding, analysis, and study” (Atkinson, 2014, p.1). Hence, for a study of cult cinema in today’s context, it would be wise to attune ourselves towards the multiple pathways of comprehending the phenomenon, instead of focusing on a singular perspective. This is in line with Mathijs and Sexton’s (2011) argument in that cult has increasingly become complex, not just as media artefacts or cultural events, but also as a concept (p.242). In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the cult atmosphere, one must include an examination of the linkage between individual actors that form the experience and ultimately “generate social powers” (Elder-Vass, 2014, p.52). Specifically for the thesis, what this means is that any aesthetic considerations cannot be separated from the role of the audience in the constitution of the cult experience nor the spaces of cult. Therefore, the “fluidity and volatility” of the cult experience (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.4) is taken into account by addressing religious parallels, cult films as an example of cult media, the dynamics of cult audiences, the cult experience as events or live cinema, the importance of cult exhibitors, and lastly some critical perspectives on cult.

In the first section, the chapter elaborates how the term “cult” itself contains a number of religious connotations and how the cult film experience itself operates almost in parallel with that of the religious cult. Specifically, both forms of cults contain “organic sense of solidarity” expressed in “a multitude of ways” (Maffesoli, 1996, p.13). The chapter will then present a discussion on cult films as a form of cult media. In this part, a few crucial elements of cult films will be elaborated namely that of the genres of cult films and previous definitions based on their aesthetics. This section will attempt to lay out the

“operative coherence” (Mittell, 2004, p.11) of cult films based on its textual and contextual aspects (McCulloch and Crisp, 2016, p.194). More specifically, this part of the review will mainly focus on the “badfilm” and musical strands of cult films.

Following the section on cult film as a genre, it is important to follow up with a section on cult film audiences and how its studies have been linked with the notion of meaning-making or even the absence of meaning (Hermes, 1995). A critical examination of audiences is closely intertwined with the construction of their identity (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p.37) where individuals are considered to be “crucial actors” in a specific cultural phenomenon (Hill, 2015, p.7). Following this, we take a closer look at the role of film exhibitors and their potential role in constituting cult films. The idea of the cult film screenings as one of –if not the main arena of circulation of cult films is also brought up here. In parallel with art house cinema, cult films are defined as “an alternative culture” that reflects “the business and economic interests of film industry participants and the desires and aspirations” of audiences (Wilinsky, 2001, p.10). To close off the chapter, critical perspectives of the cult phenomenon acknowledge that cult culture and research around cult have the possibility to “reassert” the ideologies meant to be overthrown in the first place (Read, 2003).

The Religious Cult [Film]

In order to grasp what cult means in contemporary culture, it is worth taking into account its meaning in religious matters. Additionally, a brief discussion on the religious cult is important because there are many allusions to religiosity, both by audiences but also in cult films’ practice. The term “cult” itself can serve as a conceptual demarcation as to how we can understand cult audiences based on its terminological and historical context. Tracing back, Campbell (1978) argues that the idea of cult is constituted in two main concepts: “the sacred and the profane” (p.228). He then goes on to elaborate that there is hardly any consensus about which groups are “appropriately termed cults” (Ibid.), which is a mirror argument to those who are studying cult films. Campbell later channels Thomas O’Dea and emphasizes the importance of studying content –and one could also argue the context- of religious groups to “understand the process of institutionalization in a concrete case” (Ibid., p.239), also pertinent to the research of contemporary cult films. For the case of cult films, this is pertinent to how the different media

landscapes in post-theatrical releases develops “cult film identities and fan sensibilities” and hence enables viewers to reappraise the texts (Klinger, 2010, p.18).

Sociologist James T. Richardson posits that “cult” from a sociology of religion perspective acts as a metaphorical “rug” for which idiosyncratic experiences and religious deviants are swept under (1978, cited in Richardson, 1993, p.348). He acknowledges that there has been a lengthy debate in religious studies whether the term is rendered useless because there is much “confusion between the historic meaning” and the “current pejorative use” (Richardson, 1993, p.348). Richardson lastly argues in his writing that the word “cult” is loaded with negative connotations where the term can be weaponized that may create a strong aversion or even a phobia towards a specific group of people (Richardson, 1993, p.355). This is relevant when examining contemporary cult films considering that a number of cult film cultures are often positioning themselves as outside the “legitimate film culture” (Sconce, 1995, p.372) and hence more often than not, a semi-permeable barrier is created between those who are in the know with those aren’t. Semi-permeable here means that it’s not relatively difficult to enter the barrier and join a certain cult film culture, but not all tastes or mindsets can penetrate the barrier. Therefore, it is a matter of cultural capital where in a classical Bourdieusian (1979) sense those who are “uninitiated” or those that do not possess the right kind of knowledge may not obtain a sense of satisfaction stemming from the transcendental meanings contained within specific text (p.43).

The idea of certain individuals being able to “join” a cult if they possess the necessary capital was also elaborated in Bader and Damaris’ (1996) study of religious sects and cults. They found that the more educated a person is, the more likely they are drawn to exotic and “novel ideas expressed by religious cults” (Ibid., p.301). This supports the earlier writing of Bainbridge and Stark (1979) which postulates that human society is based on exchanges and that due to the scarcity of concrete rewards, “compensators” are generated to pacify one’s need to feel fulfilled (p.284). What this means is that cults specialize in the exchange of exotic compensators that originate from an “alien society” (Ibid.). When it comes to cult films, the compensators are based on a “philosophy of transgression that sees the elimination of restraint” (Austin-Smith, 2020, p. 143).

For example, in a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at Spegeln, Malmö, audiences were without hesitation when prompted to yell out “Asshole!” whenever the character Brad Majors (played by Barry Bostwick) is mentioned on-screen or “Slut!” when Janet Weiss (played by Susan

Sarandon) is named. Similarly, in screenings of *The Room*, audiences were gleefully shouting expletives and derogatory statements that would otherwise be frowned upon outside the theatre.

We can link the importance of the aforementioned “actions” with the possession of knowledge –or as mentioned earlier- “capital”. Much like cult leaders who are seemingly in possession of “divine” knowledge and can lead their followers into action, audiences who have gone to numerous screenings of *The Room* or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* can also “lead” the theatre into action. Such individuals can ascend to the role of a cult screening leader as a facilitator for the uninitiated that imparts knowledge to produce a “shared reading” of the movie (McCulloch, 2011, p.205). Therefore, the parallels between a religious cult and cult film audiences continue in that there may be a hierarchy within their specific contexts. As Bourdieu (1979) would argue, those on top of the hierarchy –those with experience and knowledge- would become a “source of inculcation” (p.65).

It can also be argued that the formation of cults in both fields of study share some similar characteristics. Wallis (1975) argues that religious cults are often developed based on a “synthesis of ideas and practices” that are typically based on the prevailing cultic knowledge (p.97). Religious cults often utilize these ideas to form an “emotional form of communal relationship” that promises its members to break free of routine and rules, “repudiates the past” and instil a sense of force that is revolutionary in nature (Weber, 1947, p.360-362). In other words, religious cults were built upon a number of disjointed notions where its members are able to fixate on them more easily because they are governed by emotions and irrationality. This is in parallel with Eco’s (1985) argument that cult texts cannot be constructed around one central idea. Rather it is built from a number of “unhinged” textual elements where audiences deconstruct them and then constructing the elements back based on their individual knowledge and perceptions (Ibid.). Therefore, this thesis would provide additional insights into the formation of a “cult” in a secular sense within a context that is completely separate from that of formal or institutional religion.

Cult Cinema

The study of cult cinema has spanned decades and the numerous attempts at defining it has typically produced unparadigmatic definitions because of cult cinema's dynamic and constantly changing nature, akin to "living, breeding organisms" (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.5). Oftentimes, the definition of cult lies within the prerogatives of the audience or those who watch the cult media in question. It could be understood that cult is a phenomenon where viewers are encouraged to "seize control of the cinematic experience" (Andrews, 2020, p.35) and obtain pleasure and through the deconstruction and reconstruction of the cult text. In other words, the text itself cannot stand on its own as cult nor can it establish itself as cult. The production of cultic knowledge or cult status is anchored in the deconstructive process where external factors (i.e. other people, the media, programmers, etc.) are required to provide validation.

Channelling Eco (1985), audiences unhinge cultural artefacts, disassemble it, and reassemble it based on their personal values to constitute it as cult. Such actions of "unhinging" enables the text in question to transcend its original meaning and embody entirely new meanings that gives rise to -for example-repetitive viewings/events and audience participation in the cinema. Henceforth we need to look at the whole experience from a bird's eye view in order to fully grasp the individual nuances each "unhinged" aspect brings. As McCulloch and Crisp (2016) posits, cult cinema should be considered to be amorphous and that academic research should focus on its "contextual as well as its textual dimensions" (p.194). Furthermore, due to the fundamental disjointed nature of cult films as explained before, it is no wonder that both its viewing culture and the scholarly work around it is rife with disagreements which can be argued to be a "necessary characteristic" (Telotte, 1991, p.1).

Having said that, the list of previous scholastic works on cult film is long and comprehensive. Even if that were so, many focuses on one particular aspect of the cult film experience (e.g. aesthetics, audiences, sonic, etc.) or one specific cult film. Because of this, the thesis would contribute new knowledge into the study of cult films in general by bringing in empirical data that pays close attention to a wider array of the phenomenon's scaffolding. Mathijs and Sexton (2011) identifies four contexts that scholars typically approach the study of cult: sociological studies, reception studies, textual interpretations, and aesthetic analysis (p.6). In relation to these approaches, this thesis strives to touch upon all four contexts and hence why one of its desired outcomes is to provide a broad overview of the cult experience. In his writings on cult, Telotte (1991) also provides us another perspective on how to delineate the boundaries

of cult. He notes that cult films can be distinguished into two major strands (Ibid., p.9-10): successful Hollywood movies that featured famous icons resuscitated back into life in a contemporary setting (e.g. *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*) and films that found their place at midnight screenings typically marked by audiences with subculture interests (e.g. *Eraserhead*, *The Room*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*).

For the first strand of cult films as defined by Telotte, they are typically established when “temporal and historical distance initiates the audience reaction” (Corrigan, 1991, p.29). Eco’s (1985) reading of *Casablanca* is one of the more prominent analyses on this type of cult film. He provides us with a framework on how to identify which films can be considered “cult” and puts forward a number of criteria that a film should fulfil if they are to be considered cult: “a hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly,” pleasure should be derived from its “incoherence,” and an extreme sense of banality that “allows us to catch a glimpse of the Sublime” among others (Ibid., p.3-4 and p.11). Additionally, and perhaps importantly, Eco states:

The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were part of the beliefs of a sect, a private world of their own, a world about which one can play puzzle games and trivia contests, and whose adepts recognize each other through common competence. (p.3)

In other words, a certain media text can only achieve cult status if extratextual elements can be created, whether it is based on the text’s diegetic or aesthetic components, or a combination of both. It evokes a certain sense of sociality, in which cult cannot be sustained if there were no relationship among individuals who equally appreciate the cult texts. It harkens back to a historical time when cinema-going was considered a social event, where audiences would mingle, intermissions filled with a person playing the piano, and the atmosphere was likened to that of a town square as a “public space for social interaction” (Butsch, 2008, p.47). It is a prime example of how film can embody social practice where “the meaning of the film, its venue, and audience experience come together” (Corbett and Wessels, 2017, p.77).

Eco (1985) further notes that the narrative structure of *Casablanca* helps us understand how certain films can be considered cult. He latches onto the notion of clichés noting, “two clichés make us laugh, but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves and celebrating a reunion” (p.11). In Eco’s mind, the extremity of the amount of

clichés found in *Casablanca* has allowed him to “catch a glimpse of the sublime” (Ibid.). However, a film cannot become cult by doing this all the time because as they have to do it *unintentionally*. Any sense of self-awareness exhibited by the directors and the whole enjoyment proposition evaporates. Eco provides an example of how in the movie *E.T.*, Spielberg included an Easter egg in the form of a dwarf from *The Empire Strikes Back* making a cameo in the form of a Halloween costumed kid. He posits that we cannot enjoy this small tidbit if we do not possess the knowledge of “where the second character comes from”, “know something about the relationship between the two directors” (Spielberg and Lucas), or “that both monsters have been designed by Rambaldi” (p.11-12). For films such as *E.T.* as illustrated above, audiences need a certain degree of filmic and media competence in order to appreciate Spielberg’s decision (Ibid.). On the other hand, films such as *Casablanca* and other cult films can be enjoyed via a baseline knowledge of some of the most well known clichés or archetypes. To sum up Eco’s point succinctly, we can look to one of his closing paragraphs in his writing:

It would be semiotically uninteresting to look for quotations of archetypes in Raiders or in Indiana Jones: they were conceived within a meta-semiosical culture, and what the semiotician can find in them is exactly what the directors put there. Spielberg and Lucas are semiotically nourished authors working for a culture of instinctive semioticians. (p.12)

Regarding the second strand of cult films as pointed out by Tellotte earlier, a number of scholars have elaborated that their characteristics trace back to the midnight movie. For example, Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983) –considered as two of the most influential authors to write about cult films- posits that cult films are established only when “they have become devalued or otherwise estranged from the mainstream acceptance” (p.31). In their book *Midnight Movies*, they identified *Rocky Horror*, *El Topo*, *Eraserhead*, George Romero and John Waters movies as examples of this type of cult films. Hoberman and Rosenbaum acknowledge that cult films cannot be manufactured intentionally, rather they can only obtain the status through a “spontaneous endorsement of the *vox populi*” (Ibid., p.19). In other words, the process of cultification goes through the opinions of the majority audience similar to the process of martyrdom and eventual canonization (Ibid.). Much like Catholic saints needing proof of miracles as witnessed by many people, cult films also need multiple individuals to experience them and collectively anoint that what they are experiencing is indeed worthy of being considered cult. In the concluding chapter of the book –styled as a dialogue between the two authors- it was

elaborated that midnight movies “offers some immediately relevant social metaphor” and could be considered to be “as the most social form of filmgoing—even more than most home viewing” (Ibid., p.301). Therefore, regardless of which strand one follows in defining cult films—or any other definitions for that matter, we must acknowledge that the cult film experience is fundamentally *social*.

The textual elements of a cult film and ultimately the sociality of cult was also prominent in Bruce Austin’s (1981) seminal study on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Speaking on the film, Austin (1981) alluded to Susan Sontag’s writings on “camp,” establishing that *Rocky Horror* “clearly qualifies as Camp” due to its artificial and exaggerated properties (p.44). He identifies two aspects that contributes to the making of a cult film: the nature of its exhibition and its audience. On the exhibition front, Austin believes that a cult films “must be screened at irregular hours [...] and these screenings must play on a regular and continuing (minimally once a month) basis” (Ibid.). Whether this definition holds true or not can be debated, and as will be shown throughout this thesis, the time factor does play a role in the constitution of cult, but would be not as consistent or frequent as Austin would put it. In relations to audiences, he posits that “repeated attendance of a group of certain individuals” (Ibid.) would qualify a film to be cult. Arguably, Austin’s early definitions of cult films and its audiences may be scrutinized further. Again, as this thesis will elaborate later on, cult audiences are more than just “young, single” high schoolers or college students (Ibid.). Rather, access to new technologies and media that allows certain films to be exhibited (Klinger, 2006; Hills and Sexton, 2015) has shifted the makeup of cult’s audiences greatly, becoming more dynamic and diverse just like the types of films that have obtained cult status.

Based on the above, it can be seen that audiences play a central in constituting cult. According to Austin, the main reason as to how audiences find pleasure in watching the film is through the social aspects (i.e. audience participation by singing, dancing, etc.) and the film itself becomes less important (Ibid., p.52). The promises of a social experience like no other were “potent drawing cards for first-time viewers” (Ibid.). When it comes to the formation of cult films, Austin states that cult films “are not *made*” but more appropriate as “*happen or become*” due to the irrelevancy of the film’s content and the filmmaker’s intentions (Ibid., p.44). He points out that audiences have the power to identify certain film as “cult” and that cult events are what propagates these processes of constitution (Ibid., p.44 and p.53). This echoes back to Hoberman and Rosenbaum’s (1983) argument in that “film fetishism and ritual

screenings” are crucial elements in the cult film culture (p.30). Later on, Klinger (2010) latched onto this notion of ritual screenings and applied it to *The Big Lebowski* as a means to investigate the role of “replay culture” in the constitution of cult films where “cult is both a product and an engine of replay” (p.19). In his conclusion, Austin (1981) poses a number of questions that are pertinent to this thesis –some more than others:

Why does audience participation occur? What are the social and psychological needs of the audience that are being met and presumably gratified by the Rocky Horror experience? How are these needs met? What factors can be identified that determine the process of how and why one individual becomes a Rocky Horror regular and others do not? Why don't all veterans go on to become regulars? To what extent is the content of the cult film an important element in drawing repeat attendance and what are the most salient components? Finally, why are these components important to the audience? (p.53)

The thesis is well equipped to answer a swathe of questions that Austin posed in his original study, specifically the dynamics of audience participation and how exhibitors are facilitating the “needs” of audiences through the generation of atmosphere.

Another important scholarly work on cult films and one of the guiding forces for this thesis is Mathijs and Sexton’s (2011) book titled *Cult Cinema*, where they aimed to give a rather all-encompassing view on the cult film experience as a whole. In this book, they explored a multitude of cult film elements such as reception contexts, fandom and subculture, and the themes and genres of cult films. They identify five possible frameworks into how we can approach the study of cult films: Cult cinema as a phenomenal experience, as a bad experience, a collective experience, a connected experience, and as a surplus experience (Ibid.). In their minds, the cult experience is constantly intertwined with and through the aforementioned five dimensions and that they each “inform each other” (Ibid., p.24). As a concluding thought in their introduction, Mathijs and Sexton puts forward the idea that the cult experience can also be considered a performance, which at the same time embodies a sincere and authentic experience (Ibid., p.24). Therefore, this supports the thesis’ standpoint as it casts a wide enough net that will hopefully encompass a number of the above elements.

A key chapter in their book is titled “Camp and Paracinema”. In this section of the book, Mathijs and Sexton delve into the concepts of “trash” and “camp” that is commonly ascribed to cult films. It is pertinent to this thesis considering

that one of its main focuses is examining the “badfilm” as a strand of cult films. They note that “a broadly ironic form of film appreciation” is a possibly entryway into examining “neglected, derided works.” (Ibid., p.95). However, they throw a word of caution to not box ourselves in with approaching such films solely through irony, rather we can also consider the films based on their “serious, aesthetic production” (Ibid.). Lastly, the book’s chapter titled “Transgression and Freakery” deals with how cult audiences and fans desire something “different,” which in turn can “lead to strange forms of appreciation” (Ibid., p.97). They provide an overview how transgression permeates the cult culture, utilizing infamous films such as *Pink Flamingos* and *Night of the Living Dead* to illustrate their points. One of their main points states that audiences need to be “liberated” from pre-existing frameworks of movie watching (Ibid., p.107). They continue on by saying that this mechanism is particularly applicable to “avant-garde and underground cinema, exploitation cinema, and the horror genre, all of which are seen to have it as their duty to transgress, shock, and sicken” (Ibid.).

Here, a parallel can be made with the video nasties panic that occurred in the UK in 1980s and the 1990s. In his writings on the distribution and advent of the video nasty category, McKenna (2020) observes that the demarcations of what fits within the typology of “video nasty” is based on people and the media’s perception of films that are overwhelmingly transgressive in comparison to the UK society’s societal norms at that time. He posits, “The various video nasty lists group together films based on their perception as transgressive films; it is this that marks them out as extreme examples of a genre that is already defined by its ability to horrify” (p.133). In this case, McKenna is alluding specifically to the horror genre that became the prime target of the UK’s panic and the ensuing censorship in the mid-1980s. Such panics were intricately linked with the “discourse of ‘moral decline’, along with the underclass, unmarried mothers and welfare dependency” (Thompson, 1998, p.97). In relation to cult films, McKenna (2020) argues that video nasties share a number of characteristics with that of cult film fandoms, in that they both maintain an oppositionality against “an industry that pitches an amorphous imagined marginal industry against an equally amorphous imagined mainstream” (p.135). This is not to say that films that were categorized as a “nasty” immediately become cult films –or vice versa, but that both strains of typologies are often perceived as “an external threat” that is imagined as having little to no commonality with “the established traditions” of the film industry and society in general (Ibid., p.2).

It is important to note that “transgression” and “subversion” are often intermixed, where “subversion touches the boundary, whereas transgression aims to do more and affect change” (Watson, 2020, p.170). Telotte (1991) notes that the “cult film simply transgresses even the boundaries we usually associate with the very notion of the genre” and that audiences are able to extract pleasure from such transgressions (p.6-7). Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983) posits that such pleasures can often be traced to the cult film’s content that often transgresses taboo (p.301). In my previous research (Priambodho, 2018), it was also found that audiences of *The Room* screenings embody a carnivalesque atmosphere which is characterized by frankness and freedom, liberated “from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.10). Bakhtin is an important piece here in unpacking the notion of transgression. Because many cult screenings contain the “carnavalesque” element, in addition to freedom and familiarity, impropriety also has its place” (Ibid., p.247). As Hermes and Hill (2020) would argue, Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque also comes with its hazards, specifically regarding the “othering of vulnerable groups” (p.3). Furthermore, they provide a word of caution that transgression should not be taken at face value; rather a certain degree of nuance should be employed.

As such, Grant (1991) argues that a cult film’s transgressive mechanism is a relatively safe transgression, in that audiences are able to “reclaim that which they seem to violate” where double pleasure is obtained by simultaneously rejecting dominant cultural values while at the same time still be “safely inscribed within them” (p.124). Cult film audiences are trained to recognize that whatever occurs within a screening (whether it is the text itself or audience participation) is often “deliberately transgressive” (Friedman and Kuipers, 2013, p.184) with the sole intention of providing pleasure *in* the cult screening. As Mathijs and Sexton (2011) points out, the watching and going to cult film screenings offer audiences a way “to enjoy transgression safely” but also “challenge conceptions of normalcy” (p.102). Therefore, the thesis would shed a light on how and if such transgressions are manifested within the Swedish moviegoing context and in what ways are audiences placing meaning on the transgressive sensibility.

(Sub) Genres and Strains of Cult Films

Because of the cult film's characteristics of being constantly contested and debated upon, it would be a worthy effort if we could map out some of the more prominent sub-genres or strains of cult films. This is due to the fact that in film, the "multiplicity of ways that combinations of experiences and expectations" often produces a host of criteria (Barker, 2012, p.203), or in other words the establishment of a certain genre or sub-genre. This is made possible because audiences of film often have differing conventional knowledge which contributes to the constitution of a genre (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 2017, p.330). It is even more relevant within cult films because cult cinema can be considered a "meta-genre" where it "encompasses a number of other film types" (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.7).

For the purposes of this research, both the badfilm –or "bad" texts- and musicals can be considered two of the most prominent simply because it is prevalent in the Sweden. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the badfilm has even received its own festival with the The Bad Film Festival in Gothenburg and the The B-Film Club in Malmö. The study of the badfilm has been conducted for decades. Hoberman (1980) once stated that badfilms are "philosopher's stones that converts the incompetent mistakes of naïve dross into modernist gold" (p.8). Films that fall into this category mostly rely on its aesthetic ineptitude and deficiencies, in which audiences pick up on them and communally deems them as badfilm (Popescu, 2013, p.3). In other words, badfilms epitomizes Sontag's (1966) main tenet of the camp sensibility where a text is highly enjoyable *because* it is awful (p.292). Based on this, canonical badfilms include: *The Room*, *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, *Birdemic: Shock and Terror*, *Miami Connection*, *Troll 2*, and *Reefer Madness* among many others.

In my previous research (Priambodho, 2018), Tommy Wiseau's *The Room*, one of the most notorious badfilms in the cult film canon was critically analysed from the perspective of the audience. It was found that audiences were utilizing the participatory and emotional nature of *The Room* screenings in order to exhibit and obtain "camp capital" which in turn is utilized to enhance one's standing within the screenings (Ibid.). Furthermore, that research managed to shed a light on how such cult film events fosters a sense of community and belonging as they "breed emotional closeness and trust" (Friedman and Kuipers, 2013, p.187). Building off *The Room* audience study, this thesis seeks to expand the selection of badfilms to other films that are categorized as such.

Other previous researches and academic writings on badfilm also shape the direction of this thesis. Even though she did not talk specifically about badfilms, Sontag (1966) provides a guiding light on understanding badfilms when we see these films possessing the ability to “dethrone” (p.288) serious subjects such as politics, or sexuality and gender roles. Oftentimes these subjects are presented in the form of hyperbolic generic conventions that arouses intense emotions (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 2017, p.336) and a comedic response from audiences. The audience, acting as a viewer and interpreter (Hill, 2007, p.89) might find pleasure in the comedic value of the film rather than feeling genuine emotions from the seriousness of the subject matters. Instead of invoking sadness, a thrill, or anger, they often incite laughter instead.

In a study of badfilm, Johnston (2019) conducted an analysis on the film *Fatal Deviation*, an Irish martial arts film where she grapples with its generic classification and the film’s inept sonic properties. She acknowledges the importance of sound in the constitution of a badfilm and how it establishes the *Fatal Deviation* as “so bad it’s good” through its “associated pleasures” (Ibid., p.11). Johnston then argues that the cultification of *Fatal Deviation* “took place in a very internet-driven, digital context” and its standing as a cult film is continuously evolving (Ibid., p.10). This statement provides us with additional reasoning as to why taking a wide approach is preferred. It is because we also want to take into account the role of cinema websites and blurbs as it employs “specific enunciative strategies” to construct identities (Hall, 1996, p.4).

Another research on badfilm was conducted by Becky Bartlett (2019) in which she analysed Ed Wood’s films that were released after *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, from the vantage point of intertextuality and extratextuality. Her writing was indeed focused more on the director, rather than the film(s) themselves. She examines the fundamental role of the *auteur* and how the identity of Ed Wood as a person and Ed Wood as the cult “character” can be distinguished. Bartlett concludes by arguing that in order to get a “more complete understanding of the filmmaker and his films” we cannot afford to downplay a person’s or director’s “less comfortable, less coherent aspects” (p.12). Almost in tangent, Hunter (2019) argues that to truly understand the nuances of a badfilm, we need to examine the texts from a multitude of perspectives and not just the film itself. As an example, he notes the importance of the cultural industry perspective, namely that of the film’s production to unpack how “badness is achieved within” (p.12). Even if that were so, here we can arguably pinpoint one of the limitations of this thesis as there isn’t a big focus

on the production side simply because it falls outside the scope of this research in terms of both practicalities and access.

In addition to the badfilm, the cult musical can also be considered one of the main strains of cult films to be commonly screened in Sweden. Conrich (2006) points out that there are a number of overlapping characteristics between the musical and cult films, such as “performance of extravagance and exuberance, obvious energy and ability, open emotions, fantasy and sudden explosions of spectacle” (p.115). Additionally in cult musicals and especially within sing-along events, audiences can potentially find further satisfaction through the act of singing because singing is “immediately connected with pleasure” (Stefani, 1987, p.23). Films often categorized within this strain often includes *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, John Waters’ *Hairspray*, and some would argue *The Sound of Music*. However, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is considered to be the most iconic of cult musicals.

In his study of *Rocky Horror*, Austin (1981) states that group rituals –as something embedded- characterizes cult film audiences through a flow of processes: preparation, waiting, and then active participation (p.53). He further argues that cult musicals such as *Rocky Horror* often rely on the tenets of camp, even though Austin (1981) admits that *not all* cult films can be considered to be patrons of camp (Ibid., p.44). Based on this, campy musicals are anchored in the “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag, 1966, p.275). Furthermore, in Austin’s (1981) mind, a necessary characteristic of cult films is a “continuing exhibition” (p.45). In other words, a film must receive regular –whether it is monthly or bi-monthly- screen time at a movie theatre.

In their sociological reading of *Rocky Horror*, Kinkade and Katovich (1992) utilizes the concept of play and how it “further embeds or socializes” both veterans and new audiences into the film’s celebratory culture (p.203). They draw parallels between the religious cult with that of the secular cult by remarking that “cult films represent one of the many secular replacements for religious symbols [...] in the age of electronic imagery” (Ibid., p.191). Somewhat circling back to the earlier notion of transgression, Kinkade and Katovich conclude that cult films such as *Rocky Horror* plays off of its playfulness and establishing itself as a “commercial product in a profane marketplace that nevertheless is made to transform its seemingly profane origins” (Ibid., p.203). Because of this, audiences are afforded the freedom for creative expressions and the potential fostering of a sense of community (Weinstock, 2008, p.6). In a filmic reading of *Rocky Horror*, Cornell (2008) draws our attention to the central role of camp and play through the use of desire as the film’s main structuring narrative device (p.41). Most notably,

Cornell draws upon the idea of the cinema space as a “place where sexual desire is enacted” and that the entire “cult film experience operates in the realm of desire” (Ibid.).

Aside from camp, some cult musicals operate through other means of resonance with the audience, namely that of nostalgia. On this side of the cult musical sphere, one can consider *The Wizard of Oz*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, and the previously mentioned *The Sound of Music* to be prime examples of movies that are considered cult by way of nostalgia. Such films retain “cultural currency” among audiences because they “evoke pleasurable memories” (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, p.175). Here, nostalgia is ultimately manifested in the form of a built up community, based on “romantic ideas of a lost utopia or a time where society was more cohesive and connected” (Middlemost, 2020, p.158). Its primary mobilizing source is audiences’ “desire to connect” in order to form a communal bond in contrast to being a solitary fan or audience (Ibid.). This echoes Turino’s (2008) argument in that any sort of musical participation is paramount for the “processes of personal and social integration” (p.1). Within a Scandinavian context, nostalgic cult musicals are often screened as part of a sing-along event where audiences are encouraged to audibly hum, sing, or shout based on a movie’s songs. Much like other participatory cult screenings, audiences’ “expressiveness and exhibitionism” are not repressed by the conventional rules of the cinema (Mulvey, 2003, p.135).

As the last point on cult musicals, we can take the example of Dyer’s (2002a) musings in which one of them was a “cultural reading” of *The Sound of Music*. He concluded that the movie is a site for ideological struggles as illustrated by the narrative structure of the film (Ibid., p.46-59). What he means by this is that even though *The Sound of Music* is filled with a number of catchy, heart-warming tunes, the movie also has potential to enable audiences to enact their individual identities; especially within a sing-along event at a movie theatre. Elsewhere, Dyer (2002b) also reminds us that the genre of musicals is a “form we still need to look at” if -in channelling Brecht- we are to enjoy the changing of the media landscape (p.29). This gives the research an added urgency in that it is acknowledged that the musical –or the cult musical in this case- is still deprived of academic interest. Hence, it is one of the main strains or (sub)genres of cult films that this thesis is examining primarily through *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Of course, other strains of cult films not elaborated here may serve as points of juxtaposition and potentially give additional contextual information as they should not be ignored when “considering cult cinemas” (Willis, 2003, p.82).

Cult Film Audiences

As the main departure point of this research, cult film audiences are typically much more involved in terms of both emotions and practices as opposed to the conventional movie theatre experience where they just “sit quietly and absorb the presentation” (Weinstock, 2008, p.5). The actions audiences carry out in many cult film screenings are indicative of the formation of an ephemeral community motivated by the sharing of textual knowledge (Vivar, 2018, p.125) and hence fostering a “sense of identification and belonging” (Dyer, 2002c, p.49). For example, in *The Room* audience research (Priambodho, 2018), it was found that audiences placed a high importance in watching the movie together with friends and not watching it alone. One respondent from that study reasoned that watching *The Room* in movie theatres “turns everything that you’re familiar with [in] moviegoing culture on its head” (25 year-old, female). Audience voice gives us “fragments of stories” that allows this research to construct a tapestry of cultural knowledge that respondents rely on in obtaining enjoyment (Hermes, 2005, p.85). As Austin (1981) posits, audiences are the key players in identifying certain films to be cult (p.44). Yet, there is seemingly a lack of depth and breadth when it comes to audience studies on the cult films in general. One possible explanation of this is that much of the discussions are more fixated on the fandom caused by the “intensification of how viewers and audiences attach to popular media” (Mathijs and Sexton, 2020, p.253) rather than a broader overview of audiences. Another possibility is that a number of studies have mainly focused on effects studies, uses and gratifications studies, or encoding-decoding studies, which typically shies away from the primacy of audience voice and how they construct cultural knowledge (Hermes, 2005).

Previous scholarly work on cult film audiences from a media studies approach is rather scarce and hence why this thesis can make a key contribution in this regards. As one of the main inspirations for this thesis, Austin’s (1981) study on audiences of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has shown us what audience research can shed a light on. In his research, Austin interviewed 562 individuals who attended screenings of *Rocky Horror* in Rochester, New York back in 1979. He categorized the respondents based on their self-proclaimed status as a viewer of *Rocky Horror*: “First-timers,” “Veterans,” and “Regulars.” He and his team then asks a series of question relating to their screening experience utilizing a more questionnaire-based format of research. Questions included if they attended the screenings by themselves, how they first heard of *Rocky Horror*, and what the deciding factor was to attend a

screening. As such, Austin provides us with a wide enough overview of what the demographics look like for a screening of *Rocky Horror* in New York, in the year 1979. He surmised that there were more men than women in attendance, the audience was youthful with about 68% within the 17-22 age group, and they were “virtually all white” (p.49). However, what Austin’s research did not take into account were the innermost processes of a person’s thoughts in how and why they actively attend and participate in cult screenings such as *Rocky Horror*. This is something that this thesis will build upon through qualitative in-depth interviews.

In an analysis of *Rocky Horror* audiences –but *not* through an audience study that involves qualitative interviews or observations, Weinstock (2008) provides some important pointers as to how we should consider audiences in relation to the film. He notes that the participatory aspects of the screenings are more than just verbal, but the physical interactions conducted by audiences are as –if not more- important than the verbal actions (Weinstock, 2008, p.72). He argues that audience members are not actually having a “dialogue” with the movie because “the film does not respond to or specifically address audience comments”:

What audience comments shouted at the screen reveal is precisely the failure of dialogue and the inability of the film to change or respond. Rather, what Rocky Horror fans do is to construct out of what I will refer to as the film’s primary script a secondary script, which is then overlaid on the primary script for the benefit of other audience members. (p.72)

This notion is key to the thesis specifically because in addition to *The Rocky Horror*, the film screenings sampled for this research mostly involves and even encourages audiences to talk during the screening. Weinstock goes on to state that a big reason as to why watching *Rocky Horror* in the cinema is rewarding is audiences obtain a “sense that one is in control of the film—that one speaks, rather than is spoken” (Ibid., p.81). He notes that the aforementioned “control” can be further enhanced by repeat viewings of the film with the ultimate goal “of getting it perfect” or a “desire to master the film” (Ibid.). He summarized these points by saying that audience behaviour “embodies in hyperbolic form two fundamental desires inherent in the cinematic experience of conventional narrative film: the desire to be the film and the desire to control the film” (Ibid., p.83). With this in mind, Weinstock’s elaboration of how he perceives audiences of *Rocky Horror* serves as an inspiration for this thesis and how we understand the importance of “replay culture” (Klinger, 2010, p.19) in the constitution of cult films.

Another relevant study of cult film audiences was McCulloch's (2011) work on audiences of *The Room*. His research focused on distinguishing the films audiences apart from the homogenous generalization of the journalistic media by conducting a combination of online surveys and phone interviews of audience members who were present at two screenings at the Prince Charles Cinema in London (Ibid., p.190-191). His main aim of the research was to question "how" and "why" participatory behaviours are evident within a screening of *The Room* and also explores how "individual members view themselves in relation to others inside the cinema" (Ibid., p.191). Specifically, his study linked audience participation with the concept of comedic relief by "exploring the social functions of comedy as they relate to cultural texts" (Ibid., p.189). In his conclusion, McCulloch (2011) noted that the audience of *The Room* find pleasure in their attempts of reading the text as something ironic or comedic where these readings "must subsequently be justified and legitimated by the reaction of others" and hence concerns cultural capital (p.212). McCulloch's research actually illustrates how a research into cult films is intertwined with matters of definitions and distinctions as central to "the cultural politics of cult movies" (Jancovich, Reboll, Stringer, and Willis, 2003, p.12).

In connection with the previous discussion on capital and competence of reading, we could naturally delve into Pierre Bourdieu's (1979) writings on distinction through taste to understand audiences, in which he notes that the individual's cognitive processes allow the acquirement of cultural codes (p.3). He remarks that the "uninitiated" may feel a sense of inadequacy that stems from their lack of ability to discern meanings that are contained within these texts (Ibid., p.43). For example in the realm of cult, a study by Vivar (2018) at the San Sebastian Horror and Fantasy Film Festival (SSHFFF) found that there were hierarchical dynamics at play during an event as veterans of the movie screening were more revered than those who are first-timers. In fact, when it comes to Vivar's study, it was observed that there were elements of aggressiveness in putting people down if so-called veterans of the SSHFFF deemed an unseasoned person's heckling is below their self-established witty standards. In my own previous research it was also uncovered that "one has to acquire enough camp capital through experience in order to be able to embody the persona of the 'instigator'" (Priambodho, 2018, p.54).

One key concept that is important for this thesis is that of taste. This is in line with the understanding that "a study on cult cinema is also a study of cultural taste" (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.4). We can consider taste as the "practical affirmation of an inevitable difference" (Bourdieu, 1979, p.56). What this

means is that because we all possess different historical life contexts, we employ our experiences –that are completely different from one individual to the other- in our day-to-day lives and most pertinently, our perception and appreciation of a media text. This is then manifested in for example, our choice of entertainment, the media texts we hold in high regard, or the company we keep due to similarities. Taste therefore, has the oppositional function of uniting or separating, and in Bourdieu's mind, when taste needs to be justified, it is characterised by the rejection of other tastes. Circling back to McCulloch's (2011) research before, Bourdieu (1979) would remark that cultural competence, how proficient one can navigate and *perform* in their current context, is key to obtain a sense of belonging within a specific group, community, or culture. Proficiency then, are demarcated by "conditions of acquisition" whose meanings and values are prescribed by other individuals inside the group (Ibid., p.65-66).

As one of Bourdieu's conclusions, he unpacks the notion of distinction where taste is one of the central cogs in orientating oneself within community, in which it also provides a "sense of one's place" that guides individuals towards the practices (or in other cases goods) that are most appropriate to their position (1979, p.466). However, this thesis does not aim to ascribe what is "good" taste or "bad" taste. Even though individual taste "determine our response to the films", the research is more concerned with the potential subtleties of individual perceptions based on context, which enables a multitude of interpretation pathways (Bartlett, 2020, p.48). Because of this, an examination on cult films should not produce a binary reading of audiences' tastes; rather the output should be nuanced and multi-layered.

Continuing on with Bourdieu's train of thoughts, Sarah Thornton (1995) also provides some relevant pointers that allows us to understand cult as arguably a subculture. Echoing Bourdieu, Thornton (1995) remarks that "the social logic of subcultural capital reveals most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn't" (p.105). She places a high emphasis on the idea of "authenticity," when something "rings true" or "feels real," and has "credibility and comes across as genuine" (Ibid., p.26). In relation to music, Thornton posits that an "authentic" musical experience is the antithesis of "commercial hype" (Ibid.). This is in line with how many cult films have been positioned ideologically by their audiences. The notion of authenticity is then closely interlinked with how individuals are perceiving the true intentions of the cult auteur and how that shapes the viewing experience –something that will be explored later in this thesis. Afterwards, Thornton (1995) surmised that the term "subculture" or "underground" themselves "are nebulous

constructions” that “can refer to a place, a style, an ethos” to which subscribers of the belief or ideology “usually shun definitive social categorization” (Ibid., p.117). Even though these groups may prefer to consider themselves separate from the “mainstream,” it is in fact the “mainstream” –including media and other cultural industries, which played a role in their formation (Ibid.). This is pertinent to this research because it is interested in how cult film audiences are positioning themselves within the greater culture, if at all.

We can further expound the notion of subculture by looking towards previous academic commentaries that specifically elucidate the dynamics of subculture formation and its inner workings. Seminally, Hebdige (1979) has written extensively on the topic with his book *Subculture: The meaning of style*. In his mind, members of a certain subculture typically signal a strong sense of “refusal,” to which actions, symbols, and their ideology are marked by a subversion of the “natural order” (p.3). As he posits, “The word ‘subculture’ is loaded with mystery. It suggests secrecy, masonic oaths, an Underworld. It also invokes the larger and no less difficult concept ‘culture’” (p.4). Seen from this angle, there is a link towards the practices of cult film screenings. In the introduction of this thesis, it was brought up that non-cult film screenings in Sweden are often characterized by a decorum where audiences are expected to be on their best behaviour as to not disturb others in the auditorium. Cult film screenings on the other hand, can be considered an affront towards said decorum, where rowdiness and audience participation are not just allowed, but also oftentimes encouraged. Furthermore, we can also recall the advent of the Bad Film Festival in Gothenburg was initially conceived as the direct antipode of the Gothenburg Film Festival, to which in Hebdige’s (1979) mind would qualify it as an opposition where its existence is “openly antithetical to, the traditional forms” (p.74).

Many scholars of the field have also brought up the idea that subcultures are in opposition to the “mainstream”. As Becker (1997) argues, subcultures “operate within, and in distinction to, the culture of the larger society” (p.56). In his examination on the bebop culture in London during the mid-40s, Kinsella (2022) observes that bebop was considered to “transgress conservative ideologies” that were implicit in the ways of how people commonly conducted themselves in society at the time (p.155). Because of this, the bebop subculture received wide attention from the UK media and was considered a “threat” primarily due to its “transatlantic” sartorial style (Ibid.). It has been acknowledged that the rebellious nature of subcultures stem from society’s pressure to conform and that individuals can be dependent on the widely available social milieus, which “provide a strong incentive” to select

alternatives that are “established and known to be congenial to our fellows” (Cohen, 1997, p.47). What this means is that subcultures in general are conceived as a reaction against the wills of societal norms and expectations on how one should behave and conduct themselves in public, but also how one can express their identity. Through conformity, individuals are “rewarded by acceptance, recognition, and respect” (Ibid.), and failure to comply would have consequences that are of the opposite effect.

Famously, the punk subcultures are the prime example of how a certain group of people can coalesce through shared values and ideologies. In punk, musical performances are the lynchpins through their lyrics and bodily movements that moves “closer to their audiences” (Hebdige, 1979, p.110), much like cult film screenings where there is potential to subvert the conventions of film exhibition in general, by also drawing in audiences through bodily participation. Additionally, it has been argued that “punk’s” style and characteristics are derived from what Hebdige (1979) calls a “bricolage,” where everyday material objects are appropriated and repurposed to incite a sense of rebellion and non-conformity. As Nault (2018) observes, punk “carries with it a set of associated aesthetics and values” where “the crude, the imperfect, and the disorderly” are highlighted (p.17). In channelling Walter Benjamin, Nault (2018) argues that punk’s style and aesthetics serve to “shock” individuals and ultimately disturbing “the discourses to which they have become accustomed” (p.18). These notions can also then be transplanted into the context of cult film screenings, considering that many of the films – especially exploitation, gore, or bad cult films, operate in a similar vein, where shock and awe play a central role in audience engagement. It can be argued that badfilms achieve this through “shocking” audiences with filmic elements that have poor aesthetic qualities, inciting a comedic reading and laughter.

Even if this is the case, Jancovich (2002) has cautioned against typologising the mainstream as something that is homogenous but also warned against the homogenization of the cult film culture itself. In his mind, although some would position cult films as the subculture of film culture in general, the notions of “inclusion and exclusion” (Ibid., p.320) are complex matters to comprehend and a nuanced approach is preferable. This is aligned with Stahl’s (2003) argument in that any production of culture, or in this case subculture, “are dynamic sites of activity and include the continual reassertion and maintenance of boundaries enacted through processes of differentiation and distinction made by groups and individuals, all of which needs stronger consideration” (p.31). Therefore, it would be prudent for this thesis to be aware that the experience of audiences and the considerations from film exhibitors

when it comes to cult films are never fixed but are always fluid, dependent on the context.

With the above said, exploring the inner workings of community formations or the processes of belonging are important notions for this thesis. Another concept that may further explain how audiences are creating a sense of community around cult films is that of Michel Maffesoli's (1988) *tribus* or neo-tribes, through which there have been attempts to see the cult film phenomenon through this lens (see Mathijs and Sexton, 2011 for example). However, Dawes (2016) elaborates that Maffesoli's concepts have been "embroiled in intra-disciplinary debates, particularly with those sociologists who prefer a more empirically rigorous or critical form of social science, and whom he in turn sees as mediocre and disappointingly 'modern'" (p.734). It has been argued that some of Maffesoli's ideas are seemingly too detracted from the reality of the subject matter, too often preferring a "meta-narrative grandeur" (Evans, 2007, p.240). Evans goes on to say that, Maffesoli's symbolism by way of the mythical figures of Prometheus and Dionysus "gives a one-sided and one dimensional image of social life which fails to understand the dangers of 'neo-tribalism' and the Dionysian orgiastic sociality of postmodernism" (Ibid.).

What this means for this thesis is that an element of awareness and critical evaluation helps to prevent a certain degree of naivety that can seep into the analysis –straying the results from the reality of what has actually been observed or analysed. Therefore, we must look at it from bigger perspective, populated with strong contextual backgrounding. As Dawes (2016) states regarding communities:

It is therefore important, when considering emerging forms of individualism and community today, to avoid dismissing them as ephemeral and inconsequential because of their failure to live up to a normative and 'modern', and therefore outdated, model. Rather, Maffesoli insists, we should look at how things actually are, and to the ways in which emerging practices, identities and communities illustrate the blurring of the boundaries between individual and society, and between self and other; to the ways in which they illustrate something new; as well as to how they relate to something older (p.737).

Cult film audiences can be considered as *tribus* based on Maffesoli's (1996) thoughts. Here, the *tribus* can be defined as groups "distinguished by their members' shared lifestyles and tastes" (Shields, 1996, p.x). It differs from the

anthropological tribe in that there is a lack of “fixity and longevity” (Ibid.), meaning that there is an element of ephemerality which is particularly pertinent to cult film audiences. In many cases, individuals will go see a cult film in the movie theatre where they somewhat merge with the collective identity of the film and other audiences temporarily. Oftentimes their identities transform when entering the physical space of the cult film, and regain their “outside” identity once the film is over and audiences filter out of the movie theatre. As Shields (1996) further notes in the foreword, the concept of the *tribus* places an emphasis on both “individual and collective consumption” (p.xii). Even if that were so, the thesis is aware that *tribus* as a framework is more often utilized to illustrate issues that are political or have political ramifications. As Shields (1996) also illustrates, examples such as the NRA is used to exemplify the dynamics of the *tribus* in that they “have strong powers of integration and inclusion, of the group solidarity” (p.xi). The *tribus* provides its members with a form of “temporary identification” even though an individual can belong to a number of overlapping groups (Shields, 1996, p.xii).

Through this lens, we can look at cult by emphasizing the importance of individual and collective identity in building a community. In Mathijs and Sexton’s (2011) book, they note that Maffesoli provides “the conceptualization of community that comes closest to capturing the collectivity of cult receptions” (p.20). They also observe that when we are talking about Maffesoli’s collectivity, it often implies a sense of “impression, a feeling of feeling together, and impression of solidarity and sharing that informs one’s emotional attitude, and not necessarily one’s material life” (Ibid.). Maffesoli’s ideas may also propose a shift “from studying cult receptions in functions of finding their essence to studying them in function of how they connect to each other” (Ibid., p.22). This resonates with the concept of “affinities” that may help us understanding the connections and bonds that can potentially be formed during the cult film events as elaborated by Jennifer Mason in her book *Affinities: Potent Connections in Personal Life*. In his chapter on the felt experiences of media, Lunt (2024) gives mention to Mason by observing that the collective effervescence (as posited by Durkheim) can be ultimately tied to how affinity can serve to explain the “interpersonal link between recognising others in more mundane routines of social life in which social relations are based on engaging others” (p.474).

The notion of affinities then could be argued as a more fitting point of view through which the findings of this thesis can be anchored upon. This is due to Mason’s (2018) acknowledgment that affinities occurs within a realm that she terms “socio-atmospherics.” This links back to this chapter’s earlier

elaboration on the concept of atmosphere to which Mason comments that atmosphere and atmospherics as a concept have been gaining traction in social sciences recently. She considers “gaining an attunement to atmospheres” as a good thing for this field of research because “crucially we are recognizing that atmospheres are powerful and they matter” (p.179). In her words, “We are exploring how they might be understood as relational sensation and auras of things and situations and gatherings, as infectious, as rhythms, as affective, and more recently as weathery” (Ibid.). However, she pushes the definition of atmospheres further by preferring the term *atmospherics* “to appreciate the liveness and relationality of the ecological (in the radical sense of the term) energies, effervescence and ‘goings on’ that are simultaneously tangible and intangible” (Ibid.). Moreover, Mason attaches the word *socio-* to produce in her mind the ideal term *socio-atmospherics* to account for not only “the aura or feeling” but also “the goings on themselves” (Ibid.).

With that said, this thesis opts to forego Mason’s (2018) recommendation of utilizing the term “socio-atmospherics” but instead utilizing the term “atmosphere(s)” as the primary descriptor of the thesis’ analysis. This decision can be traced to two factors. First, Mason considers socio-atmospherics as something that “emanates enigmatically in encounters and worldings, forces and lows, that rub shoulders, entangle, cling, effervesce, evanesce, coalesce, linger, haunt, and spark ineffably off each other” (p.180). This definition is too broad to take into consideration within the scope of this thesis. This is not to say that a seemingly holistic approach –as implied by Mason- is irrelevant, rather this thesis is not equipped with the necessary methods nor resources to be able to account for such claims. This is taking into consideration that in elaborating socio-atmospherics, Mason utilizes a “facet methodology” where “flashes of insight” can be obtained through an exploration of “strategically and artistically chosen *facets* of a problem” rather than describing all “dimensions of the problem in its entirety” (p.4), which is a different approach from this research. Secondly, Mason acknowledges that socio-atmospherics cannot be “pinned down for formal categorization as *types* of ecological or social or even more-than-social entity” (Ibid.). Building upon the first point, the seemingly diffuse and arguably ambiguous nature of socio-atmospherics may prove detrimental to how we can unpack the nuances of cult film events. Intuitively as a human being, Mason’s definitions may very well be the case but such demarcations (or the lack of, one can argue) may be counterproductive in trying to analyse the cult film screenings.

With this in mind, utilizing the concept of affinities can still be fruitful. Mason (2018) links the idea of affinities to the “ineffable” sense of kinship “as both a

way of seeing, and something of an ether” where such “affinities can flourish” (p.106). In her mind, this concept creates a potent bond between individuals who were co-present for a specific amount of time in which “moments” were generated and felt. For Mason, such moments can be defined as “multi-sensory glimpses, windows, apertures or revelations into an intriguing and arresting discordance or conglomeration” of temporalities that provide insights into nuances of life, to which “they are full of sensation” (p.193). In other words, Mason considers “moments” to be the foundational building blocks of how individuals who live in this world recollect past experiences through their latching onto specific time frames that were memorable. It emphasizes the importance of and the “creative role of memory and imagination” (p.180) in order for us to understand how the aforementioned sense of kinship is formed. The notion of time then, is a key “layer” in Mason’s mind, in which time can be considered to be “an operator in the nexus of affinities” (p.189). In her approach, she highlights the importance of focusing on “*the connecting* more than what is connected” (Ibid.). This alludes to the importance of taking into account the atmosphere of things (or in Mason’s case, the socio-atmospherics) because the thesis’ interests rest on the sum of the relational aspects of the cult film screenings, rather than considering each aspect as independent. Therefore, we can consider the bonds and unity audiences may feel during cult film screenings as consequences of “moments that are electric, are highly charged, are revelatory, are epiphanal” (Mason, 2018, p.193).

Cult Film Exhibitors and Spaces

The thesis expands its scope beyond audiences by also taking into consideration the role of cult film exhibitors and spaces where the cult film culture is present. This is set amongst the backdrop in which “the emergence of transmedia and multiplatform projects” have challenged “traditional and funding models” (Atkinson, 2014, p.172). Despite this and as mentioned in the introduction, academic attention on cult film exhibitors is still lacking. This is one aspect of studying cult films studies that this thesis can provide a great contribution of knowledge. One starting point to examine the role of cult film exhibitors is to look at them as having a “push-pull” dynamic with audiences where there is a constant “maintaining, reinforcing, testing, and challenging” of relations (Hill, 2015, p.8). As Hill (2019) later notes, such dynamics should be understood as a “complicated power relations [...] between media industries and audiences” (p.4). Because after all, judgments on the quality, worth, or

even genre of certain films are ultimately tied to which films are made and which films have been “lucky enough” to get distributed (Crisp, 2015, p.3). Klinger (2010) also acknowledges this by stating that film exhibition is “central to defining cult films and audiences” (p.2). In other words, audiences would have no means of identifying a film as cult if it never saw the light of day.

To illustrate this point, we can look at the example of the film *Miami Connection*. The film was a passion project for Tae Kwon Do grandmaster Y.K. Kim. Initially produced in 1986-87, the film was thought to be missing from existence until an unprecedented chance rediscovery by a film collector in 2009, who coincidentally also works at Drafthouse Films⁹ in the US, which then gradually launched the film back into circulation. It was first screened at an Alamo Drafthouse Cinema to a limited amount of people. But due to the overwhelmingly positive response, Drafthouse Films took the initiative to restore the film and made it a regular midnight screening at their cinema venues. Evidently, the film’s sensational comeback even made it to Europe and *Miami Connection* was one of the main features of Gothenburg’s The Bad Film Festival in both 2019 and 2020.

Therefore if we are to accept cult cinema as an *experience* where a multitude of dimensions (including distribution, exhibition, and taste) feed into its constitution (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.3-5), we must then examine the role of the exhibitors more closely and how they contribute to the experience as a whole. This notion is given further urgency due to the reality that there is hardly any research that puts the cult film exhibitor as one of its main focus; even more so if we approach its study through the qualitative perspective of exhibitor interviews *and* in the Scandinavian region. However, there has been a slew of studies that touch upon the role of the cinema more broadly but also within the context of cult films. Waller (1991) for example, conducted a market study set in Lexington, Kentucky during the 1980s of midnight movie venues in terms of their “booking policies, and range of movies shown after hours” (p.167). He found that one of the main reasons for cinemas programming the midnight movies is down to its commercial viability, noting that for many multiplexes or mall cinemas, it wasn’t as profitable because many of these movies became readily available on VHS and to an extent, cable television (Ibid., p.171-172). A key talking point in Waller’s writing is the discussion on whether the “midnight movie” constitutes its own genre. To which Waller

⁹ Drafthouse Films is an offshoot of the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema chain, who specializes in niche, art-house, and cult releases in the US.

surmises that the midnight movie genre is “ever-alterable” finding its footing through a common understanding by both audiences and exhibitors (Ibid., p.180). Hence, this gives the thesis an additional foundation for approaching the study of the cult film atmosphere by taking into account the two main actors as elaborated by Waller. Furthermore, Waller acknowledges that midnight movies is “marked by variation as well as repetition, diversity, as well as uniformity” (Ibid.). All aspects that will be encompassed within this thesis later in the analysis chapters.

Additionally, Waller (2005) also conducted an analysis of a fictional small-town theatre in rural Indiana, focusing on their business strategies and resonance within the local community. In his article, Waller used the example of the Lllamarada Theatre, supposedly located in a town called Hilltown, Indiana, where in reality the theatre and the town, was created by Margaret Weymouth Jackson as part of five stories published in the newspaper. Even though the subject of study was fictional, the ramifications and values extracted from the stories were not. As Waller (2005) states:

That the stories are fiction does not negate their historical value-or, for that matter, that of the many other movie-related works of fiction published in the Post during this period. In fact, the Lllamarada stories are an important, overlooked resource, which, when read in the context of the motion picture trade press, can help us analyse the small-town theatre as concrete practice, business strategy, and culturally resonant myth, particularly during the first years of the Depression. (p.3)

With this in mind, Waller goes into great detail how both the imagined and real circumstances of the small town theatre in the 1930s is about setting itself apart from the big city theatres. The discussions in his article is as much about the theatre’s relation with Hollywood as its own relations to the local community. In fact, it is a fascinating illustration on the notion of cinema identity where Waller (2005) argues “perhaps a small-town theatre’s degree of local identity could be gauged not by its independence from chains or outside control but by how thoroughly the owner-operator was able to partner with and endorse those empowered individuals and institutions that promoted-and therefore defined-the “good of the community” (p.16). This is relevant to this thesis particularly because it strives to explore and shed a light on the dynamics of the relationship between cult film exhibitors and their audiences. Furthermore, it provides us with an awareness that for most cases, the constitution of cult is possibly co-created by all parties that are seemingly in agreement of what is cult. It is in line with Waller’s (2005) concluding reflection where once a movie theatre has

established itself as a “centrepiece of the community,” we can naturally ask: What is the community? And who defines the parameters of the activity? (Ibid.).

As another example, Chisholm and Norman (2012), through a cultural economic perspective provided an analysis of movie theatres in two metropolitan markets in the United States based on their “spatial determinants of attendance at movie theatres in the US first-run theatrical exhibition market” (p.208). By way of statistics and spatial economy theory, they incorporated and juxtaposed multiple variables such as “theatre count,” “stadium [seating],” or “digital.” Granted, such extrapolation of data is not entirely relevant to this research. However, their conclusions are more useful for the scope of this thesis. First, direct competition of cinemas has an effect on movie-theatre demand (Ibid., p.224). When talking about cult films, we can latch onto the idea of scarcity and how most cult film events are considered “special” events that happen regularly but not as often as a newly released blockbuster film. Second and most pertinent, they say that looking at “film-programming choice by exhibitors” can illuminate how “product attributes” are related to audience choice (Ibid., p.224). This gives this thesis additional reasoning as to why the taste and knowledge of exhibitors will also be examined, which is to recognize that different tastes may lead to different types of films individuals actively seek out (Crisp, 2015, p.43). Here, as with audiences, taste would offer a “practical anticipation [of the] social meaning and value of the chosen practice or thing will be” (Bourdieu, 1979, p.466-467).

Regarding the physical cinema space, we can look upon it as a performative space where there is a “sense of specialness” –as briefly teased before- separate from the mundanity of everyday life (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p.40). As Kracauer (1987) argues in his examination of “picture palaces” in Berlin, the cinema space has become increasingly elaborate in terms of architectural features in order to support a growing amount of audiences who are looking for shows that are more “glittering” and profused with “production numbers and presentations” (p.92). He grandly proclaims that the large picture houses in Berlin “are palaces of distraction,” refusing to call them movie theatres because it “would be disrespectful” (Ibid., p.91). This illustrates how the physical space –namely “old school” *Kinos* in Kracauer’s case- are interlinked with obtaining enjoyment and plays an important role in how cinemas are able to transport audiences into another world, separate from the buzz of day-to-day life. He relies heavily on the notion of “distraction” as a means for some sort of escapism that can only be attained in the movie theatre. He puts forward scathing remarks on bigger cinemas, considering them to be *faux*-movie

theatres that does not grant audiences with the appropriate level of “distraction” that immerses them in the film completely:

For even as they [large movie theatres] summon to distraction they immediately rob distraction of its meaning by amalgamating the multiplicity of effects - which by their nature demand to be isolated from each other - into an 'artistic' unity. (p.95)

In a reading of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, Tiessen (2016) remarks that “the dynamics of community” is a key element in the overall identity and operations of a movie theatre (p.92). He points out that the ideal condition of a movie theatre is the creation of a “safe social space around a cinema” sustained by the people (i.e. cinema managers, programmers, etc.) who are directly involved with the operations of the physical space (Ibid., p.98).

The establishment of such safe spaces allows us to unpack how the identity of individuals (both audiences and exhibitors) is manifested in relations to the cult cinema experience. It falls in line with Crisp's (2015) call to further examine how individuals “negotiate and navigate their position” (p.22) within the structure and spaces of the cult experience. From the above, we can see that cinema spaces are arenas for activities that determine their place in culture and society in general, where those involved are attempting to “assert their own identities” (Cresswell, 2004, p.7). As such, the cinema space and the individuals running it act as a form of “intermediary” between production and audiences by attempting to “change and transform the sensory experiences” (Borer, 2017, p.121). Therefore, the thesis is also an attempt to understand the “complexities and contradictions of the ideas of identity, place, [and] belonging” (Morley, 2001, p.443).

To further expound on these notions, we can possibly look upon the “home” of the cult experience as “constitutive of the meaning” of the practices (Morley, 2001, p.426). For cult audiences, these “homes” are where individuals feel a comfort (Moore, 2017) constituted through a number of rituals and performances. Therefore, as Moore would put it, many cult audiences would have obtained an “embodied experience” that has gradually developed over time through repetitious attendance and participation (Ibid., p.143). Based on this, we can pinpoint the formation of a “place”-or in the case of this research the cinema for example- where habitual practices and “movements of media use” become meaningful (Ibid., p.141). In other words, a “place” within the context of this research is a physical space –a cult space defined as a geographical realm “without meaning,” which possesses a continuous relationship with individuals where they are able to “produce and consume

meaning” (Cresswell, 2004, p.7). Even though this thesis is not a study of the everyday life, it is still aware that media use can be considered as “place-constituting activities” (Moore, 2012, p.46). Hence, the cult cinema is both a space and a place: it is a geographical location with physical bodies present where the space is ascribed meaning through activities related to cult and establishes it as a place. In other words, the cinema becomes a cult space and hence a place for cult when cinema programmers begin exhibiting cult films and audiences recognize it as so.

One way to look at cinemas that exhibit cult films is through the lens of the screenings as “live cinema.” In the book *Live Cinema. Cultures, Economies, Aesthetics*, Sarah Atkinson and Helen W. Kennedy edit a collection of chapters that specifically deals with the “liveness” of some cinematic events. They rely on the notion of “immersion” as a running theme throughout the book and acknowledges *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as “a watershed moment for the field of live, immersive and participatory cinema” (Atkinson and Kennedy, 2018, p.3). They pay homage to Bruce Austin’s (1981) study as an “ideal antecedent” for successive research on participatory cinema. In addition they also state:

[Rocky Horror] is the most famous example of participatory cinema, it is used as the cornerstone through which to anchor discussions and debates in this field of study, and it is also an immediately recognizable exemplar of what is meant by participatory and live cinema, which involves dressing up, singing, dancing, quoting and gesturing. Also, importantly, the participatory element was embedded as a real embodied aspect of the experience of the film, not a marketing add on. (p.3)

In talking about space, Atkinson and Kennedy (2018) remarks that in a live cinema setting, the space can be defined or characterized as “enhanced, augmented, or participatory” (p.17). It is then acknowledged that the “cinema is foregrounded as a spatialized event that mobilizes new forms of spectatorship, new forms of embodiment and new possibilities for community engagement and participation” (Ibid., p.20).

In her chapter on nostalgia and placemaking in outdoor cinemas in Los Angeles, Levitt (2018) posits that the heightened “emphasis on place and experience” of moviegoing is partially attributed to the increased ease of access to libraries of movies (i.e. streaming services, Blu-ray, etc.) (p.21). She acknowledges that the film experience is shaped by context and the “dramatically different ambiance” can “transform the reception of a film”

(Ibid., p.23). By leaning on Lefebvre's work on the social construction of place, Levitt (2018) surmises that "when social interaction is lacking, so is a sense of place" (p.25). This statement lends this thesis an additional justification in considering the cinema as a place of cult, as briefly mentioned earlier. Without the cult events or screenings, a cinema is just a cinema devoid of any "specialness" and harkening back to Kracauer's (1987) musings earlier, is inadequate to *disintegrate* reality, which in his mind is the key factor in an immersive, enjoyable cinematic experience. Therefore, it can be argued that participatory aspects of cult events –such as dressing up, the replication of scenes, and talking at the screen, are all efforts audiences and facilitated by exhibitors to imbue the associated cinema with specialness.

With the above in mind, the identity of these filmic spaces are often transformed because the cinemas have an obligation to compound additional values for the audiences. For example, in screenings of *The Room*, the cinema must accommodate people bringing their own spoons or providing audiences with spoons themselves¹⁰. Or in the case of *Rocky Horror*, cinemas should sustain the screening's many participatory activities such as having squirt guns, providing people with rice to throw, or even having a dedicated host to lead the audience through the rituals. Due to this, the cult cinema space becomes similar to that of the cinephile space where some elements fall "outside utilitarian rationality" where the rewards of the extra labour come in the form of subcultural capital (Vélez-Serna, 2020, p.114). It is acknowledged that such seemingly counterintuitive dynamics historically stems from the midnight movies circuit, in which audiences were able to attend an event "where they often felt comfortable with like-minded others" (Mathijs and Sexton, 2020, p.199). In his writing on midnight movies, Moulton (2020) considers the cinema as a "space where films, screens, and cult audiences meet" and that the cult experience as a whole is "co-opted" and "constructed by exhibitors" (p.206 and p.208). He specifically notes that "immersion" is a crucial part of the experience and that a wide approach would be able to link the cult cinemagoing practices in relation to the movies' "thematic framework or diegetic world" (Ibid., p.212). Because of these extratextual factors, cult film audiences are able to participate in an experience in a cinematic space that is "not live by many definitions [...] but it has pretensions to liveness" (Barker, 2012, p.201).

¹⁰ Throwing spoons towards the cinema screen is a tradition in *The Room* screenings. The audience will throw plastic spoons while yelling "Spoooon!!!" every time a framed picture of a spoon is shown on-screen.

As we can see up to this point, the physical cinema space can be considered a key element in the constitution of the cult film experience. Even if that may be, more recent studies have focused on how the cult experience has permeated other forms of media in addition to the traditional cinema. Some have argued that the increased availability of cult texts has diminished their cult status, while others have said it is merely reconfigured into another form (Hills, 2015). Pett (2020) on the other hand, suggests that the current uneven status of cult's circulation is actually a reflection of the "nebulous and unpredictable character of cult cinema itself" (p.187). Hills and Sexton (2015) argues that cult has recently been more "domestically oriented" due to DVDs, Blu-Ray, and streaming services (p.5) as briefly mentioned before. This echoes what Klinger (2010) had earlier stated that the "replay culture" of cult films is propagated by the "expansion of film's place in domestic settings" (p.19). However, the circulation of cult in a cinema-going sense is something that was disrupted due to the COVID pandemic. For a long period, no longer were movie theatres the main arenas for cult films due to health restrictions for almost three years. Coming out of the restrictions, cult film screenings slowly made their way back to prominence within the Swedish context. Although online aspects may increasingly factor into the propagation of cult films, this thesis would argue that *the experience* of watching cult films is lessened to an extent without the co-presence of other audience members inside a cinema auditorium. Thus, the research's operational lens through the concept of atmosphere would provide a distinct perspective on the importance of the cinema space; a perspective that had not been prevalent in previous researches.

Critical Perspectives of Cult Cinema

Up to this point, we can see that one of the main focus of this thesis is an exploration how the cult film atmosphere is constituted through a number of intertwining elements. At the crux of it all, the obtainment of entertainment and joy by audiences lies in the centre as a key factor among others that enables individuals to identify a film as cult. However, there are also a multitude of dimensions within the experience that must be acknowledged if anything plainly for the purpose of exhibiting awareness. Because after all, a study of cult cinema is ultimately tied with an investigation into the ownership of taste (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.4). And as Sconce (1995) argues, individual taste will ultimately have political implications due to its nature as a social construct (p.392). Therefore, the research acknowledges the fact that the cult film

atmosphere is inherently a component within the greater systemic media power (Corner, 2011) and that media outlets play a big role in determining the value of texts (Wasko, 2003, p.88). This is also an acknowledgment that whatever makes it into the popular culture canon is the result of texts being institutionalized by a capitalistic cultural industry and marked by contradictions (Fiske, 1989).

As previously elaborated, transgression is one of the key components of the cult experience. Cult screenings are often marked by an element of subversiveness as the central tenet of entertainment for audiences where they are able to conduct actions that may otherwise be frowned upon taken out of context. However, in the majority instances of transgressions, whether it is in film, music, or the everyday life, “there is always something, or someone, that is transgressed (Hollows, 2003, p.49). This statement is something that the research will be well aware of especially in the study of carnivalesque-like events characterized by “freedom and familiarity” where impropriety has a place to flourish (Bakhtin, 1984, p.247). Foucault (1977) prominently elaborated the notion of transgression itself in his writings on sexuality where he sees it akin to a “fissure” that “marks the limit within us and designates us as a limit” (p.30). Transgression then, in Foucault’s mind, is a “profanation” without the presence of a sacred object and functions to recompose its “empty form” which enables it to become even more “scintillating” (Ibid.). It has been argued that transgression from a Foucauldian perspective is ultimately about “self-dissolution” anchored on the “image of another’s loss” (Surkis, 1996, p.30). Based on this, we can pull transgression back into the cultural sphere where we can see it as an “action integrated into creative activities which may take on a constructive or destructive character” (Paleczny and Sławik, 2016, p.233). In other words, audiences are able to cultivate pleasure by letting go of their self-identity through practices or performances that oftentimes go against their very being as an individual integrated into the greater societal norms.

On the surface, it may seem that the cult experience is marked by play and fun. Nevertheless, because of the possible constructive-destructive dynamic of transgression as mentioned above, it is worth noting that there are still marginalized voices to be found in the cult experience. We have to acknowledge that the concept of distinguishing “cult” as a genre or a culture, for example, is in itself a matter of taxonomy by “organizing things into recognizable classes” (Frow, 2006, p.51). Because of this, we should always be aware that power dynamics are always in play when we are talking about the classification of cult. Again, this stems from the Bourdieusian (1979) notion that only those with the right type and right amount of cultural capital

can obtain a sense of pleasure. Sexton (2017) had also brought up the issue of exoticization as a possible source of pleasure in cult film fans in which there is a likelihood many people are interpreting cult texts from “positions of power and dominance” (p.6). This line of thinking is pertinent considering that some cult directors come from immigrant backgrounds. Therefore, it is important when one watches these films be aware of their individual backgrounds and perspectives. For example, we need to be aware that many of the movies were intended for the Hollywood system, with reasons of making the films on the basis of personal desires, and an understanding that the media oftentimes “sets the dominant population as natural, normal, and even positive” as opposed to those who are othered (Williams and Korn, 2017, p.31).

A central element of the cult experience is the idea of identification, which in Dyer’s (2002c) mind can be brought about through having a “good camp together” (p.49) by enjoying cult’s many exaggerations and artifices. Due to the prevalent transgressive nature of the cult culture, its study would also have to tackle the nuances of the “politics of incorrectness rather than counter-aesthetics” (Read, 2003, p.65). Thus, it would do right for the thesis by avoiding “radicalizing” any ideas that contain political implications caused by the “potentially disruptive forces of style and excess” (Sconce, 1995, p.392-393). Hollows (2003) points out such radicalization is sustained “by processes of othering” and in conducting a study on this subject we should always be aware of “who, and what, is being ‘othered’” (p.49). This echoes Hall’s (1996) argument in that even if identification is brought about through a shared experience or characteristic, its entrenchment “does not obliterate difference” (p.3). In fact, Hall argues that the “merging” of identification is nothing more than just a “fantasy of incorporation” (Ibid.). Identification, as McRobbie (1993) posits, “knows first and foremost what it is not” (p.29) which is the central component of othering mechanisms and how certain “in-groups” can set themselves up to be different from other groups. Therefore, any sort of distinguishing practices are never carried out with equality in mind, rather there is an underlying presumption of inferiority towards others and “entail some claim to authority” (Thornton, 1995, p.10)

Such distinctions created by audiences and also academics are often gendered in nature (Hollows, 2003, p.35). Hollows points out that in many discussions around cult, the mainstream is often characterized as feminine and “cult is naturalized as masculine” (Ibid., p.37). This is in line with what Thornton (1995) wrote in that there is a tendency for “mass culture” to be disparaged as the “other” culture where it’s characterized as feminine and often “devalued as imitative and passive” (p.104-105). It explains as to why in the study of cult

texts, there is often a prevalent sense of a “cult of masculinity” (Read, 2003). Based on her analysis of Sharon Stone movies, Feasey (2003) posits that cult fandom has an affinity towards the “othering of femininity” and transforming it into a male-centric culture (p.183). In her mind, women who want to be involved in such cult cultures must create a distance or “disavow” their femininity by converting it to an “object of otherness and ridicule” in order to become “one of the boys” (Ibid.). Because after all, it is acknowledged that any popular image of a subculture typically emphasizes “male membership, male focal concerns and masculine values” (McRobbie and Garber, 1991, p.3). Hence, the thesis is anchored in an understanding that “there is nothing essentially male” about the cult culture in both its viewing practices or the study of cult (Austin-Smith, 2020, p.144).

Conclusion

With what has been written in this literature overview chapter, the thesis has positioned itself within a number of tangential fields of interest that are pertinent to the study of cult film atmospheres. At the beginning the chapter, elaborated how in looking at cult film screenings, we can draw parallels to that of the religious cult. It was elaborated that the nature of both the religious cult and the cult film culture stems from a standpoint that positions themselves outside of the formal or widely accepted system. There is also a prevalent sense of membership or a feeling of belonging when one is initiated into the cult, usually by means of rituals that are conducted together with other individuals. In the next two sections, this chapter illustrated the wide array of past academic inquiries specifically relating to the study of cult films and its sub-genres, while also highlighting the gaps in knowledge where this thesis can contribute. Primarily, it was shown that there is a need of research that places the focal point on cult film audiences but also cult film exhibitors due to the understanding that cult film screenings are inherently a social. Furthermore, even if previous studies on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *The Room* have been conducted, this thesis provides original empirical data from a specific geographical location (Sweden) where there has not been a study on the aforementioned films, especially so with the existence of the Bad Film Festival in Gothenburg and the B-Film Club in Malmö.

Following this, it was put forward that this thesis can make key contributions to the research field because there has been scarce academic attention cult film audiences. Here, it was presented that taking a qualitative approach through in-

depth interviews and observations to the study of cult film screenings is a relatively novel idea in comparison to previous research that have tended to shy away from audience in-depth interviews or in-person observations. Additionally, matters of taste, subculture dynamics, and community formation was also accounted for, all of which are central to understanding the nuances of cult film screenings and how it generates a distinct atmosphere. This is then followed up by a section that highlights the importance and urgency of conducting a research on cult film exhibitors and the cinema spaces. This section of the chapter asserts this thesis' original contribution to knowledge considering that there have hardly been any inquiries on such intersections and that many previous film industry-focused research are more concerned on normal film exhibitions rather than specialized or niche. It was also highlighted that some academic interest on film exhibition have shifted towards the operational processes of online distribution, but this thesis would still argue that the in-person experience of watching cult films are relevant because of new knowledge to be uncovered through its examination. Lastly, this chapter concluded with an overview of how the phenomenon of cult films has the tendency to transgress certain groups of people. Meaning, there is a chance that an individual can take offense with the films themselves or through the interaction with other people, but also that even if cult is often billed as having a sense of freedom, some exclusionary mechanisms can still be in place. In the next chapter, this thesis will highlight three conceptual underpinnings that taken as a whole, construct the backbone of the analysis.

3. Conceptual Tenets

There are three key concepts which can be considered the overarching lenses this thesis operates under: media engagement, collective effervescence, and atmospheres. First, an overview of the notion of media engagement as primarily elaborated by Dahlgren and Hill (2023) will be elaborated. It will latch on to the understanding that cult film events can be considered an intense form of engagement in which participation is a possible outcome. This section will elaborate the idea that media engagement can be shaped through a number of factors that includes context, motivations, modalities, intensities, and consequences. By looking at the cult film events through these factors, the next section of this chapter deals with unpacking notion of collective effervescence as a potential by-product of the aforementioned intense engagement. Here, the writings of Tutenges (2023) will primarily be the source of inspiration. His concept of effervescence departs from the reading of Durkheim (1995) and Collins (2004) where the concept of collective effervescence can be seen as a mechanism to which individuals “make meaning because they alter the way we experience ourselves and our connections with other people” (Tutenges, 2023, p.5). Lastly, the notion of atmosphere is primarily elucidated through the reading of Gernot Böhme’s philosophical ruminations of the relation between space, culture, and feelings. In Böhme’s (2017), mind atmosphere is an all-encompassing concept that is persistently present in our everyday life and thus can be “applied to humans, to spaces, and to nature” (p.13). Therefore, the three above concepts can serve as the primary signposts, as a guide to the reoccurring foundational elements the thesis’ analysis is built upon.

Media Engagement

In talking about the notion of media engagement, this concept as applied in this thesis breaks away from the understanding of engagement as “consumer logics” that has been prevalent in its use among media industries (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.5). Meaning, this thesis is not addressing behavioural

measurements, quantitative impacts of media, nor trends or analytics. Instead, it is focused on the “moment[s] of engagement” as a form of “attention or affective investment rather than considering “engagement as a commodity” (Ibid.). Generally speaking, the thesis adopts Dahlgren and Hill’s “parameters of engagement” as a means to explicate the nuances and dynamics of cult film events as experienced by audiences and exhibitors. This stems from the understanding that the boisterous and often participatory nature of such events can be generated through “energizing internal forces” that is “rooted in affect and identity” (Ibid.). It is also rooted in the notion that “engagement with media is relational” in that multiple elements of a person’s life, sociocultural contexts, and the media among others shape the form of engagement (p.6). This justifies this thesis’ approach in studying cult film events that does not treat its different constitutive components in isolation apart from each other, rather it takes into account how each component are in constant conversation.

When it comes to the parameters of media engagement, Dahlgren and Hill (2023) elaborates that it can be looked at through five focal points: contexts, motivations, modalities, intensities, and consequences. Each of these points in one way or another directly corresponds to an aspect of this thesis’s analysis. Context in their eyes, are factors that act as delimiters, which situate instances of media engagement within specific circumstance, be it cultural, political, or economic among others (p.26). For the case of this thesis, contexts are primarily the focus of the first analytical chapter in which much of its attention is turned towards the aesthetics of the film based on audience perception, but also regarding the definitions of “cult film” itself. Motivations as the second parameter of engagement, can be considered as the “intentionality behind the engagement” that alludes to the “subjective predispositions” of those who are experiencing the engagement (p.29). This is illustrated in this thesis mainly through the second analytical chapter where identities and taste take centre stage. It elucidates how such motivations of engagement can take into account a person’s wish to experience for example, entertainment, joy, relaxation, or escapism, “which draws upon affect and emotionality” (Ibid.). Modalities as the third component of engagement is a reoccurring theme throughout this thesis. Particularly, it is shown in how audiences are perceiving bad films and cult films as a genre, how audiences and exhibitors each contribute to the generation of the cult film effervescence, but also the architectural material features of the cinema. As Dahlgren and Hill (2023) posits, “the mood of a live experience will impact on the affective modality of engagement of the crowd” (p.30), which will be further elaborated in Chapter 7.

The last two parameters of engagement can primarily be observed in the final two analytical chapters of this thesis. Intensities are linked with the examination of how audiences, alongside affordances of the cinema space are able to create a bubbling up of energies that results in the occurrence of a cult film effervescence, because it deals with “emotional force” (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.32). As will be elaborated later on, these intensities are often dynamic in nature in that they are never consistent throughout the course of a cult film event. Rather, it is likely that it builds up but also winds down during certain segments of the film. It is “manifested in duration” and is wholly dependent on the length of the experience time-wise and also if it can be sustained throughout (Ibid.). Finally, consequences as the result of a particular case of engagement can materialize in multiple ways, such as empowerment, the feeling of happiness, but also potentially negative outcomes such as disinformation (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.34). For this thesis, consequences can serve as an ideal platform to which we can comprehend the generation of the cult film atmosphere –as a result of the effervescence that can occur inside the cult film screenings. Additionally, consequences of audience engagement within cult film events can also be observed in their reflections on forming a sense of unity and belonging with others in the crowd, but also potentially returning to consequent cult film events.

The parameters of engagement can be considered to be a tool that can assist us in breaking down the main talking points of this thesis into a more digestible configuration. In using music as a metaphor to expound the parameters of engagement, Dahlgren and Hill (2023) remarks:

Each parameter makes a particular note but together they create a tonal arrangement. We can imagine the way the five parameters are chordal relations. Just as you can hear a musical arrangement for the piano, made up of chords that relate together to create an overall sound, so too you can hear the parameters relate together as an overall tone, or affective and cognitive arrangement. (p.34)

Therefore, it would not be wise to consider each parameter as their own separate objects because they are inextricably linked with each other. It may be that one or two of the parameters are recessed into the background in certain cases, but ultimately they “work in conjunction with each other” (p.25).

Of all the case studies offered by the authors in their book, the sub-chapter titled *The Case of Populism and Professional Wrestling* is the most applicable to this thesis particularly its section on *Carnavalesque Wrestling*. In this case study, Dahlgren and Hill provide an analysis on how professional wrestling

utilize the trope of the populist and divisive political figure as a character that “invites their audiences and fans to passionately engage in positive and negative ways with contemporary political culture and the rise of populism in Europe” (p.35). By using a British wrestler who works in Stockholm, Sweden playing up to the stereotype of an upper-class politician as an example, Dahlgren and Hill (2023) found that through “theatricality and physicality work” professional wrestling can “channel negative emotions and transform them into positive experiences” (p.41). Most importantly in regards to its relevance to this thesis, the authors posit that the “live experience ensures a visceral and intense engagement from the crowd, one where physicality and spectacle are part of the event” (p.38). From this, there are parallels to how we can comprehend cult film events where the liveness and the importance of being together with other people in a gathering cannot be understated. Hence, the concept of media engagement as elaborated by Dahlgren and Hill, provides this thesis with a sturdy scaffolding to stand on.

Collective Effervescence

In utilizing the concept of the collective effervescence, the thesis was inspired by Tutenges’ (2023) research on the sociological implications of being intoxicated at bars and clubs, whether through drugs or alcohol or both within the context of nightlife primarily in Denmark and Bulgaria. For Tutenges, the conception of his research stemmed from a simple curiosity of why and how are individuals willing to pursue “wild intoxication” and in his mind, “seeing something akin to a religious experience” (p.2). From this alone, there are immediate parallels to this thesis in that first, cult films in its ontological sense adopts certain tenets from religious cults in the way they are formed and how self-proclaimed members feel a heightened sense of belonging. Secondly, much like the experience of night revellers in Tutenges’ case, audiences of cult film screenings more often than not conduct rituals in the form of both verbal and non-verbal actions that are specific to certain movies. Furthermore, in all three cases of the religious cult, drunkenness, and cult films, transgressions that subverts some aspects of the social norm is a common feature which facilitates individuals to embrace the tenets of cult (Davis, 2020, p.29).

Tutenges (2023) defines the collective effervescence as such:

It is an altered state of heightened intersubjectivity marked by intense, transgressive, and yet mutually attuned actions and emotions among individuals who are gathered in the same place. (p.6)

For the case of this thesis, Tutenges' definition can be operationalized as the working definition of the collective effervescence as it is utilized in elaborating the facets of the cult film screening experience. The thesis would also expand the definition adding to the importance of place, to also include the importance of the specific cult film that is being screened because the experience of watching them in the cinema is equally shaped by both the physical space and the aesthetics of the film in question. As such, Tutenges' demarcation on studying the collective effervescence as ephemeral, "that focuses narrowly on experiences that come from instances of human assembly occurring in a specific location for a limited or defined duration of time" (p.6) is also applicable to this thesis.

It is worth noting that in his use of the notion of collective effervescence, Tutenges (2023) primarily channels the work of Émile Durkheim (1995) and Randall Collins (2004). In particular, he harks back to Durkheim's (1995) writings in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that elaborates the dynamics of Australian Aborigines' in regards to their religious experiences, rituals, and beliefs. To which he defines religion as: "A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (p.44). In the case of Durkheim, he emphasizes the importance of the notion of "totemism" in which members of certain religious groups attach symbolic meaning towards specific artefacts or items to which their religious fervour is centred around. The collective effervescence in Durkheim's mind transports members of the religion beyond their sense of individuality, instilling a collective surge of energy and passion through external stimulation as they carry out their lives "differently and more intensely than in normal times" (p.212-213). For Durkheim, one of the pathways to how the collective effervescence can occur is having an object or symbol that arouses feelings from people who place specific and shared meanings to the object or symbol, giving the "impressions of dependence and of heightened energy" (p.222). Additionally, the impressions of the collective effervescence can persist even though the "assembly" has finished in which "the emotions felt are perpetually kept alive and fresh (Ibid.). As such, Durkheim's relevance to this thesis not only applies to the rowdiness that is

commonly found in cult film screenings, but also the consequences afterwards in which there is a possibility to form a sense of “kinship.”

When it comes to Collins, Tutenges (2023) particularly remarks that Collins’ (2004) book *Interaction Ritual Chains* has “played a major role in making the concept of collective effervescence accessible, applicable, and increasingly popular in the social sciences (p.10). In that book, Collins builds upon Durkheim’s microsociology of interaction rituals where its central mechanism hinges on “a high degree of mutual focus of attention, that is, a high degree of intersubjectivity, together with a high degree of emotional entrainment” (p.42). Such rituals, in Collins’ mind, have the potential to provide the individuals involved with “high points,” that are “events that we remember, that give meaning to our personal biographies, and sometimes to obsessive attempts to repeat them” (p.43). Because of this, we can see that there are direct parallels to how cult film events and its effervescent atmosphere could provide us insights into the formation of the “cult” that is centred on a specific film.

Collins (2004) also puts forward the idea that the “emotional energies and symbolic meanings” as obtained from attending the rituals can potentially “fade if they are not renewed” (p.44). Hence, there is an emphasis on repetition, which can be argued as a hallmark of cult films and how the recreation and reconstitution of its atmosphere is key to the overall experience. On top of that, rituals have the potential to instil a “sense of solidarity and identity” that manages to transform a crowd “beyond being passive observers to actively taking part” (p.82). This notion will later be illustrated on how cult film audiences become a spectacle themselves for others in attendance, akin to Dahlgren and Hill’s (2023) example of pro wrestling audiences.

Going back to Tutenges (2023), he acknowledges that effervescences can take many forms and varieties to which his research encompasses the following subtypes: drunken effervescence, psychedelic effervescence, melodramatic effervescence, violent effervescence, compassionate effervescence, and sexual effervescence. In the case of this thesis, it is worth noting the effervescence observed during cult film screenings cannot be typologized into any of the subtypes mentioned above, rather the live cult film event can be a combination of a few subtypes such as drunken and compassionate effervescence, and less sexual or melodramatic effervescence for example. At the same time, he observes that the effervescence is not only differing in terms of form, but also in terms of intensity to which he posits, “At its lowest degree, it is a subtle buzzing of increased interactivity and mutual awareness. At its highest pitch, it is a powerful rush of rhythmically synchronized actions and emotions that involves a sense of being overtaken by a collective force with its own agenda”

(p.10). This is especially pertinent to cult film screenings because the atmosphere generated has its ebbs and flows, and the effervescence often does not immediately ignite the moment the film starts.

At its core, Tutenges (2023) alongside both Durkheim and Collins emphasize the importance of co-presence as a driving force behind the effervescence. They highlight how a congregation of individuals who are mutually attuned to certain anchoring symbols has a high likelihood of spreading energy or in Durkheim's (1995) mind a "contagion." For Tutenges, the primacy of human co-presence boils down to our ability as humans to "sense and affect one another with their entire bodies – not only through sight and hearing but also through touch, smell, and taste" (p.39). He continues, "To feel and act in common involves a mutual awareness that diminishes the distance between self and other. There is a sense of being enlarged and of merging with something bigger and more powerful than oneself" (Ibid., p.50).

Furthermore, Tutenges (2023) posits that the collective effervescence is foundationally built upon the notions of symbolization and revitalization, but also most pertinent for this research, unity, intensity, and transgression (p.49), in which all –in one way or another- parallels that of cult film screenings. Unity, in the ways audiences often conducting a shared reading of the films being screened and finding common grounds in terms of aesthetic appraisal. Intensity, when it comes to audiences coalescing in shared rituals, and verbal and non-verbal actions. And transgression, to which Mathijs and Sexton's (2011) argues allows "audiences to 'imagine' another world with other rules, and laugh at that world at the same time" thus creating a "rebellious attitude of defiance at odds with what dominant forces in a society endorse" (p.24).

Media and Atmosphere

This thesis' focus on the importance of atmosphere as the crucial component in the analysis of cult film screening audiences and exhibitors is anchored in the idea that the relationship between audiences and space have often been taken for granted and that we should attempt to continuously challenge "conventional understandings of media environments as stable architectures in which media experiences occur" (Keightley, 2024, p.422). As such, an elaboration and the utilization of atmosphere is inherently linked with the concept of space where Massey (2005) argues that it is "a discrete multiplicity, but one in which the elements of that multiplicity are themselves imbued with

temporality” (p.55). The characteristics and dynamics of a physical space, and the atmosphere in which the space generates can vary depending on individuals who are bodily present but also dependent on the physical structuring and features bestowed upon it that are evident at any given one time. As Massey then points out, space in itself is an “ongoing production” as it can never be settled or fixed and that it is open in nature towards “genuine multiplicity of trajectories” (Ibid.). An understanding of space as a container –if you will, of the atmosphere is key to understanding how audiences are “‘placing’ themselves in media environments” as contingent to “media infrastructures, audience actions and interactions, and cultural content” (Keightley, 2024, p.422). Thus, this provides an apt pretext to this thesis’ scope of incorporating not only audience perspectives, but also that of the exhibitors and the physical space of the cinema. In Massey’s (2005) words, “space is the *social* dimension” where the heterogeneity of meanings and actions are consistently reconstituted (p.61).

With that said, this thesis strives to offer an original contribution to the analysis of cult films by bringing the notion of atmosphere, as afforded by the space for which the films are screened, to the forefront. Midway through the research’s progress, the decision to incorporate atmosphere as a feature was inspired by Peter Lunt’s work that links atmospheres and media audience studies. In his recent book chapter *The Felt Experience of Atmosphere*, Lunt (2024) explores the idea that audiences, whether they are live audiences or home audiences “experience media productions as atmospheres” (p.471). He accomplishes this primarily by providing an overview of previous media-centric studies that have taken into account atmosphere as a central concept in their analysis. But most importantly, Lunt provides the groundworks to constructing a bridge between the philosophy of architecture with that of media studies by acknowledging the pertinence of Gernot Böhme’s writings on atmosphere. As Lunt (2024) observes, Böhme “suggests that engagement in felt spaces can be understood as tuning into an atmosphere” where the interlinkage of “setting and experience” constitutes and generates the atmosphere (p.471). Lunt then continues based on his reading of Böhme, “Atmospheres are an amalgam or interaction between the material conditions of context or setting and the actions and interactions of those present and experienced as bodily feelings as we are gripped by an atmosphere” (p.473).

As such, Lunt’s approach to media and atmosphere is befitting to the research of cult film audiences simply because the nature of the screenings themselves rely heavily on the atmosphere that is generated. The inclusion of the role of cult film exhibitors exemplify the need to examine atmosphere as generated

through the structuring of the “staged space” and the “aestheticisation of experience” (Lunt, 2024, p.474). What this means is that we cannot consider media atmosphere as naturally occurring in isolation, rather there are elements of human intervention or involvement. Lunt then acknowledges that previous media-centric analysis of atmospheres have been conducted. He calls back for example, Dayan and Katz’s (1992) study on media events where it was found that live broadcast elements such as music and live commentary during such events constitutes the viewing experience as they try to spread “the rhythmic contagion of the live event” (p.478). Lunt also mentions Roquet’s (2016) study on ambient media where it was argued that listening to music creates a “haptic dimension of hearing” that envelops the listener and thus “creating an atmosphere that constitutes a context for our experience” (Lunt, 2024, p.476). He then invokes his seminal study on *The Jerry Springer Show* (see Lunt and Stenner, 2005) in which the “emotional climate,” as they posited in the original research, “gives precedence to emotional expression and conflict in a carnivalesque atmosphere” (Ibid., p.479). Importantly, Lunt (2024) infers that atmospheres –specifically media atmospheres can take on different forms where in the case of *Jerry Springer*, it was an “effervescent climate of extreme forms of emotional expression” (p.480), paralleling this thesis. Therefore, he provides this thesis with an entry point into adopting Böhme’s writings on atmospheric architectures as it “offers a middle way between accounts of the structuring of experience by designed spaces and the role of experience in constituting atmospheres” (Ibid.).

Following the above elucidation of Lunt’s writing on media and atmosphere, we can now further unpack the notion of atmosphere through Böhme’s (2017) ideas. In his mind, atmosphere can first be looked upon through a reworking of the understanding of aesthetics, in which Böhme terms “new aesthetics” (p.14). What this entails is that first, a new approach to aesthetics should be more about the experience, much more so the “sensuous experience” rather than being “preoccupied with judgment, with speed, with conversation” (Ibid.). Second, he posits this particular approach to aesthetics should shift away from the dominance of language as the main communicator and that we should not be overly dependent in trying to ascertain the intentions of the object’s creator, rather bask in the “presence of the represented (p.15-16). Lastly, he presents the term “aesthetic labour” to which Böhme believes that aesthetics should no longer “determine what art or work of art is and to provide

means for art criticism,” but we should look at aesthetics as producers of atmosphere and that art in general has a social function¹¹ (p.16).

In elaborating the concept of atmosphere, Böhme (2017) is inspired by Schmitz’s ruminations on the phenomenology of feeling and that of the felt body. He notes that Schmitz has taken up the concept by arguing that images or objects have dual functions where on one hand, they have “relative autonomy in relation to things and, on the other, their role as active, externally pushing and pulling emotional entities” (p.19). As Lunt (2024) also observes, Schmitz’s phenomenology shifts the focus away “from transcendental and universal claims about forms of experience” but rather focus on how “individuals come to accept, or at least not to deny, the existence of states of affairs as constituting phenomena in historical, social, and cultural contexts” (p.473). What this means is that an examination into atmosphere should shy away from making grand claims that its existence is universal and stable, rather its generation and how humans experience it are always in a state of flux dependent on the contexts surrounding it. This harkens back to Massey’s (2005) reflections on space, in that she acknowledges that there is always “an element of ‘chaos’” and there is no such thing as a “singular universal” (p.111). As such, this would supplement the thesis by instilling an awareness that the cult film atmosphere as experienced by audiences is differently felt by each individual on the basis of their own previous experiences, knowledge, and identity –for example.

At the centre of it all, this thesis finds its analytical impetus on atmospheres based on Böhme’s (2017) arguments on architecture and felt space, in which he posits:

Atmosphere is therefore a fundamental fact of human perception, that is, of the way in which people sense at once where they are, through their disposition. Seen in this way, atmospheres shape a person’s being-in-the-world as a whole: the relationship to environments, to other people, to things, and to works of art. (p.71)

From this, we can extrapolate the linkage between each of the components as elaborated by Böhme with those that are found in the cult film experience of watching in the cinema. First, the relationship to environments alludes to a focus of this thesis that investigates the perception of individuals to the physical space of the cinema and its many affordances and furnishings.

¹¹ Böhme utilizes the example of museums and exhibitions in which he argues function to “convey familiarity with atmospheres and mediate their engagement” (p.16)

Secondly, the relationship to other people points towards the thesis' examination of how watching cult films with other audience members in the cinema, instead for example watching it alone or at home with minimal people, generates the specific cult film atmosphere. Thirdly, the relationship to things is primarily linked to how exhibitors often facilitate the generation of the atmosphere through the bestowing of paraphernalia and also how audiences are utilizing such items within the confines of the cinema space. Lastly, the relationship to works of art can be observed in how audiences are perceiving the aesthetic qualities of the cult films that are being screened, as an anchoring for the experience overall. Therefore, taken in conjunction, we can then begin to create an illustration of how the cult film atmosphere is constituted and generated by the screenings in the cinema.

Böhme's writings also give credence to approaching the study of the cult film atmosphere from a qualitative, audience and media industries perspective. As he argues that in order to be able to ascertain the atmosphere and create a mental evaluation of the space, "one has to be bodily present" (p.74). In other words, conducting interviews with audiences who were *present* during the cult film screenings would provide this thesis with empirical data that is arguably appropriate, well-equipped to answer the research questions, and precise in elucidating the reality of the atmospheres as felt by individuals within this context. For in Böhme's mind, one can be not present inside the space and still pass judgment from an observer point of view, but that would not provide a "definitive" account of the experience as "one's disposition has to be tuned by one's presence in the space in question" (Ibid.).

In addition to Böhme, this thesis also takes inspiration from other scholars who have written on the concept of atmosphere. For example, Griffero (2014 and 2020) has written extensively on atmospheres where he acknowledges that atmospheres can "paradoxically, be everything and nothing" (2014, p.3). In his writings that are more philosophically attuned, Griffero (2014) notes that atmospheres are rather vague yet easily identifiable by humans as "it can be recognised without being really felt [...] be perceived differently in the course of time, and it may be so dependent on the perceptual (subjective) form that it concretises itself even in materials that normally express other moods" (p.139). Much like Böhme, Griffero also takes a perspective that is aligned with phenomenology, especially in his later book where he argues that atmospheres "are felt-bodily resonances that, being aroused in us by our (lived, experienced) spaces, ultimately mark the quality of our entire existence" (2020, p.11). For Griffero (2020), atmosphere is also a determining factor in the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of individuals who experience them, to which there are often

consequences (i.e. protesting, watching a movie over and over again, purchasing merchandise, boycotting, etc.) (p.185). In his conclusion, he acknowledges that “vagueness” is an essential element of atmosphere as a concept, but we would do well to remember that its examination would compel us to “deal with specific and even discordant aspects that general theory could not foresee” (p.186).

Giuliana Bruno (2022) has theorized in her book *Projection* that the practice of projecting still or moving images onto a medium or canvas would immediately instil an atmospheric feeling that can shape the beholder’s mood. She asserts, “One becomes sensitive to an atmosphere, that is, to the affect or tonality that is exuded and irradiated from space, in and off screen, and in the site of projection itself” (p.29). In her mind, atmospheres can be considered as “the veil that shrouds the space we live in and filters its perception” (Ibid., p.16). The cinema screen in the case of this thesis, as a facilitator of said atmosphere is not merely an object of technical value, but “rather a kind of medium that operates both in and as space” (Ibid., p.27). These notions are key to understanding how exhibiting cult films –an act of projecting in its own right- is essentially an act of atmosphere generation, even it were to be an isolated incident, where the light emitted from projectors is enough to constitute the atmosphere. Add in other factors that are present during a cult film screening, such as audience reactions or participations, the aesthetics of the film, the sounds that are heard in the auditorium, and others present elements, the atmosphere in Bruno’s viewpoint has the potential to morph and transform in accordance with the composition of the environment (p.41).

Coming from a philosophical visual arts perspective, Bruno argues that the act of projecting is dense with “potentialities, cultural movements, material transformations, mercurial energies, and hybrid contaminations” (p.10). This again, can be linked with the earlier idea from Massey (2005) in that much like space, there are seemingly unlimited permutations that can be generated through the projection of light. Bruno (2022) then continues by positing that “atmospheric engagement in material space can constitute a permeable landscape of projective transformations, because projections can, indeed, create an ecology: an environment of relationality and interrelational movements” (p.286). In this sense, we can consider the cult film screening in a cinema to be an example of such ecologies where multiple factors have the probability to coagulate into an experience that is marked by an effervescent atmosphere. As Bruno (2022) postulates, the act of projection “unfolds as a real space: the hybrid and fluid matter of connections between subjects and

technical objects that creates an environment,” generated through the intermixing of energies from “persons and things” (p.27).

In addition to the above authors, the writings of Tawa (2022) have also bestowed this thesis with a valuable framework, in which he proposed that in looking at atmospheres, a phenomenological or aesthetic approach may not be fitting for a wider array of cases. He problematizes Böhme’s writings as rather broad and generally lacks specifics on how atmospheres are generated. As such, he argues that in order to comprehend atmospheres, we must break down its components further. Tawa argues that an added focus on the “underlying spatial and temporal structures of those settings—their ambience—delivered by implicit and often indiscernible but categorically designed geometries, forces and rhythms” should be highlighted (p.4). Because of this, he infers that “architectural and cinematic settings” should be considered less theatrical (as found in Böhme’s writings), but it should be considered as “*enabling infrastructures*” (Ibid.). What this means is that there is actually more of an emphasis in the multitude of possibilities of atmosphere, where in Böhme’s case, atmosphere can be structured much like the *mise en scène* of theatrical productions, in which a *desired outcome* or atmosphere can be envisioned. For Tawa, this perspective holds less true because the structuring of space does not guarantee the generation of a specific type of atmosphere, rather “circumstance functions as a setup, infrastructure or frame that enables happenstance” (p.60). In the case of this thesis, such infrastructures are afforded through the cinemas physical properties such as building characteristics, seats, lightings, and so on. Even if these features were not established exclusively with cult films in mind, it still has the potential to sustain the exhibition of cult films and ultimately the generation of the cult film atmosphere.

Based on this, he then provides his own definition of atmosphere as “an emergent condition, resulting consequentially from the transactions between affective situational ambiances and human moods” (Tawa, 2022, p.44). The key takeaway from this is that Tawa breaks down the notion of atmosphere further as constituted by *both ambience and mood* where he notes, “places have ambiances but not moods; and they can only be said to be atmospheric if human beings and their moods are involved (Ibid.). This would then serve as a crucial framework that this thesis has adopted in which one of the analytical chapters here specifically utilizes the Tawa’s perspective of accounting both ambience and mood. Therefore, both Böhme and Tawa has proven influential and valuable to the structuring and analysis of the thesis, in that they both have provided practical guidelines into how we can unpack the notion of cult film atmosphere. On one hand, Böhme has given us a pathway into elucidating

atmosphere from the perspective of the individual subjective and their relationships to their surroundings as a felt bodily experience. On the other, Tawa (2022) allows us to also be aware that circumstances and context are by no means settled, and that in order for a specific atmosphere to be generated there needs to be “a state of indeterminacy that keeps a system from closing and therefore keeps it open to interpretation and engagement” (p.23).

Conclusion

This chapter has unpacked the nuances of three conceptual frameworks that serve as the primary driving forces behind the analysis of the empirical data in the attempt to uncover how a cult film atmosphere is generated. On the first level, we have looked at the notion of the parameters of media engagement as elaborated by Dahlgren and Hill (2023) to facilitate our understanding of how and why audiences can engage with certain media intensely. The parameters – contexts, motivations, modalities, intensities, and consequences- can be looked upon as topographical landmarks that allow for a more comprehensible lay of the land for wayfarers seeking to understand the dynamics of the experience of watching cult films in the cinema. As remarked in this chapter, even if the five parameters can be considered separately in their own right, they are all fundamentally intertwined with each other and act in harmony.

Secondly, this chapter has elucidated the concept of collective effervescence as a bubbling up of energies on the part of audiences due to their shared reading of a cult film but also their participation in conducting certain actions that are hallmarks of cult film screenings. In this part, the writings of Tutenges (2023), who in turn was inspired by Collins (2004) and Durkheim (1995) show how collective effervescence is fruitful in being applied to the analysis because it provides us with three operational notions that are central to cult film screenings: unity, intensity, and transgression. These three factors taken in conjunction with each other helps us shed a light on how audiences and exhibitors are able to transform the typically reserved practice of watching movies into a practice that is characterized by rowdiness.

Lastly, the concept of atmosphere and its relation to media was expounded. For the purpose of this thesis, the linkage between cult film screenings and atmosphere is a key contribution of the research overall. By taking inspiration from Böhme (2017), this chapter has highlighted how we can build bridges between media-centric approaches with the field of architecture and one of

their traditions in which the felt body experience is integral for individuals if they are to experience a physical space. Lunt's (2024) writings draw parallels between media audience studies with the concept of atmosphere, and thus this thesis as a whole can be seen as a continuation of this train of thought that widens the horizon of possibilities in what can be surmised from studying media atmospheres. Bruno's (2022) work on the art of projection has also provided this thesis with a direct link to atmosphere through the act of film exhibition, which in itself is an act of projecting light into space. Finally, an overview of Tawa's (2022) ideation has provided this thesis with an additional blueprint to break down atmosphere further by taking into account ambiance and mood, both of which are required in order for an atmosphere to be generated. The former relates to the materiality of the physical space and the latter to human dispositions.

In the next chapter, an overview of the methods and methodology utilized in the research will be given. It will highlight the importance and relevance of a qualitative approach to research cult film screenings, specifically coming from a media audiences and media industries perspective.

4. Approaches to Researching the Cult Film Screenings

Researching Audiences

The thesis is based on understanding the “taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world” (Burr, 1995, p.3). It strives to unpack the deep meaning-making processes that are held by each individual respondent. It is more about how individuals are ascribing meaning to a cultural text, how they act on it, and the nature of enjoyment itself; and along the way creating a by-product in the form of a cultural phenomenon. It is not a study on the everyday life, as the cult audience engagement and experience is constituted under extraordinary circumstance. Even as that may be, there are aspects that parallel the everyday, namely rituals, repetition, and community building. Instead of focusing on the interactions between individuals where a different set of complexities lie, the research is looking inwards, towards the oft-underrepresented intricacies of the human as an individual. It has been established that the research is interested in the personal experiences, opinions, and values. Because of this, qualitative methods are the approach of choice for its ability to extrapolate a wide range of empirical data and bring up to the surface rich narratives. The research considers individuals as people “who *construct* the meaning and significance of their realities” (Jones, 2004, p.257). It shines a light on how a person’s “sense of identity” can be obtained from “cultural artefacts” that allows them to position themselves within specific cultural fields (Jensen, 2002, p.236). Through the qualitative perspective, we can focus on the voices of different individuals by providing a space for them to be heard (Hermes, 2012, p.198).

The thesis is first rooted in audience studies methodologies, which for Schofield Clark (2024) is akin to mosaics where empirical data are drawn together to create a “pattern that conveys meaning, even if only tenuously or temporarily” (p.485). Therefore, qualitative in-depth interviews with both audiences are warranted as it gives respondents the opportunity to create “thick

descriptions” and fully “elaborated and detailed answers” (Rapley, 2004, p.15). Furthermore, a qualitative approach through audience studies and even more so, through media industry studies are few and far between. This was acknowledged by Allen (2011) who remarks that studies around film have long held a normative and dominant pedagogic practice that emphasises the text itself as the only important object that is to be analysed, viewed, and discussed (p.45). Ultimately, we can unpack the subjective that is implicated in any form of engagement, the production of knowledge, and the production of pleasure (Corner, 2011, p.87), for which can be argued as the building blocks of the cult film atmosphere.

This research approaches audiences as having the agency and means to “distill” meaning from a specific media (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p.43). The ability to do so stems from a person’s capability to employ their individual identities through –for example, identification with the film characters, participating in activities, or experience “emotions that transcend everyday situations” (Kinkade and Katovich, 1992, p.202). Audiences are seen to possess the capacity to reflect on their own knowledge and experience which has the potential to intensify their emotional connection to the texts (Hill, 2019, p.75). At the same time, audience identities are understood to be constructed in specific contexts, within “specific discursive formations and practices” (Hall, 1996, p.4). Hence this thesis acknowledges that audiences’ identities are a key factor as it materialises in a form of “performance” (Goffman, 1959).

We can also approach audiences as active in constituting their individual performances through the concept of “emotional work,” having the power to re-enforce and shape events (Hill, 2014). Additionally, and importantly, it enables us to pinpoint how audiences are incrementally building a community of like-minded people (Hermes, 2005) based on their knowledge, meanings, and values within the cult film experience. It seeks to expand upon Meinhof’s (2005) reasoning that audiences utilize the knowledge available to them in adapting cultural forms and performances in significant ways, or even subversive and critical (p.115). As such, the research seeks to explore how (and if) audience performance is interconnected with the cult film atmosphere, specifically in regards to the production of knowledge and the obtainment of pleasure. One such framework that we can approach this is through the perspective of a circuit where each component can potentially transgress and transform “cultural categories and hierarchies” (Green, 1989, p.33).

Austin’s (1981) work also provides some fundamental underpinnings in the research design namely in the qualitative approach to audiences. In this way, the research adopts an approach that goes beyond to just “listening to people”

by taking into account for example, expectations prior to events, the mechanisms of othering (how they define “we” or “they”), and how audiences are defined “both broadly in a period, and locally around a particular moment” (Barker, 2012, p.190). Furthermore, the thesis is aware that “investment” is a notable concept to understand how audiences “care about their media and cultural engagements” and how they construct their strategies around a specific media (Ibid., p.191).

The prominent focus on audiences rather than fans is an attempt to prevent the researcher from being “uncritical of the relations of power” where in fact distinctions “within and between fan cultures” exist (Jancovich, 2002, p.307). It channels the notion of “ideal spectatorship” and how cult audience responses are often seemingly in opposition to “dominant formulations of spectatorship that define the spectator’s response as a product of the specific operations of a text” (Klinger, 1989, p.3). There has and will always be an issue of “worth” within the dichotomy of popular culture and subculture (Thornton, 1995, p.5). As McRobbie (1993) argues, subcultures attract individuals based on their offering of different “modes of empowerment” (p.30) and hence in the constitutive processes of cult, power relations will always be present; whether it’s between fans with non-fans, among fans, or audiences with exhibitors. This is especially pertinent when we are unpacking how audiences are finding, creating, and identifying cultural artefacts as cult because these processes are based on othering and transgression that will be further elaborated later in the text.

The methodological approach of this thesis contrasts the idea that audiences of cult films are representative of individual habits in the everyday life and not complete representation of their general moviegoing habits. This is to avoid what Hermes (1995) calls a “fallacy of meaningfulness” where researchers are prone to present “knowledgeable” individuals as “average”, homogenising their characteristics with the everyday individual and ignoring the importance of the text the individuals are interacting with (p.148). This is also a reason as to why in addition to qualitative in-depth interviews, in-person observations were conducted as it injects a sense of “critical subjectivity” (Ladkin, 2006, p.480). It allows the researcher to obtain a more complete illustration of how individuals in the screenings are engaging with the text and other audience members.

With this in mind, the thesis is also motivated by some media ethnographical elements as it strives to take into account as much –not all- aspects of the cult experience as possible. Interviews, as the primary method, when complemented with in-person observation gives the research the ability to

“chart how people variously intervene into, draw back from and act upon the media (Schröder et al., 2003, p.157). As Pertierra (2018) argues, one of the key tenets of ethnography is conducting fieldwork that allows “for the open-ended exploration of people’s diverse engagements with the world” (p.150). Ultimately, the philosophical foundation of this ethnographic-inspired approach stems from the thesis’ aim “to understand movies as an institution and as a product of the society which produces them, and so to gain further insight into that society” (Powdermaker, 1947, p.87). We can draw parallels to the cult atmosphere in that the spectacle is centrepiece of the experience, and rituals, sentiments, and emotions play an influential role that shapes the culture overall. And what better way to understand a society or culture than by studying the individuals who inhabit these areas.

Researching Film Exhibitors

In addition to rooting the thesis in audiences studies methodologies, it is also rooted in media industries methodologies where academic inquiry of cult film exhibitors’ unique knowledge is recognized to be scarce. Hence, an added focus on movie exhibitors is warranted in this research, particularly due to the “surprising and worrying” fact that academic inquiries into the sociological and cultural roles of film intermediaries (i.e. distributors, producers, exhibitors) are lacking (Crisp, 2015, p.2). Interviews with film exhibitors in addition to audiences are necessary because they have special knowledge that are irreplaceable by another person’s knowledge (Bruun, 2016, p.134). This understanding cannot be emphasized enough, specifically because film exhibitors can be seen as people in power who holds sway towards the daily programming of the cinema. As Corner (2011) posits, the media has the capacity to determine how the “way things are” as the by-product of the “perceptions they encourage, the information they provide, and the feelings they generate” (p.14). It is in accord with the belief that “media industries are uniquely important because their products depict and potentially influence human thought and action” (McGuigan, 2022, p.129). Additionally, incorporating both exhibitor and audience interviews would only “widen our horizon of understanding of engagement and experience” (Hill, 2019, p.24).

In approaching the study of film exhibitors, this thesis finds its anchoring in the idea that the cinemas themselves are a part of a “broader set of industrialized activities and actors” (McDonald, 2022, p.15). Movie theatres are just another component that serves a purpose within the juggernaut that is

the movie industry: distribution. As such, the analysis of the cinema and those who are employed in it should exhibit a consideration into the complexities of the “intra- and inter-industry relationships” (Ibid.). In his historical reading of the study of the film industry, Spicer (2022) posits that “‘film’ has been reconceptualised, not as a separate, singular practice” but should be positioned within a greater, wider context and that the term “industry”, should be seen as “shifting set of practices and discourses rather than a given” (p.431). This is pertinent to the approach of this research because if we can understand the cult atmosphere as something that is “living, breeding” (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.5), then it is only natural that we approach its study through a qualitative lens that is “empirically driven” by daring to ask “pointed questions” (Donoghue, 2022, p.179). We can then construct a methodological approach to studying film exhibitors –that coupled with the previous section on audiences, “capture both performance metrics and the relationships between people and media content” (Hill, 2019, p.23).

Building on the above, we may also find a methodological footing by way of the “analytic dialogue” concept as a “means to explore and critically analyse the meaning of audience engagement in different settings, across media industries and everyday life” (Hill, 2019, p.24). This approach into the study of media industries recognize that “producer and audience” work together in a multi-faceted “meaningful relationship” (Hill, 2022, p.510). It encourages us to approach the study of film exhibitors from a sociological perspective where we are able to unpack the “various values of the media and the existing flow of power inside and outside” (Corner and Roscoe, 2016; cited in Hill, 2022, p.516). By looking at the research from this perspective, it resonates with Allen and Gomery’s (1985) early acknowledgment that we need to “take into account the fact that at any given time the cinema participates in a complex network of relationships” with other societal actors (p.170). In relation to studying cult film exhibitors, one can argue that their main source of societal clout stems from their relationship with their audience and to which degree they are accommodating to them. With this in mind, we can propose that an investigation into the core values of a culture should include an “examination of how it fascinates and binds [and] how it is incremental in community building” (Hermes, 2005, p.8). Here, we can put forward the idea that such community building processes involve a reciprocal “practical knowing” (Moore, 2017, p.132) of how to behave and act in a certain environment. Hence, through the qualitative approach to examining film exhibitors we can highlight “the relationship between human agency and structure” (Bruun, 2016, p.136).

Conducting the Research

On a practical level, the thesis primarily adopts an audience and exhibitor sampling method that is mostly based on convenience where the researcher is present in-person at cult film screenings. This is because there is limited accessibility to the screenings (Jensen, 2002, p.239) in that cult film screenings do not occur that often (once a month or even longer in certain places). Specifically speaking, five locations (four in Sweden and one in Denmark) were initially chosen to be the focus of the audience and exhibitor research due to their commitment to regular alternative programming catered for specific audiences. However, due to the COVID pandemic, fieldwork has been challenging due to limited movement and general health restrictions. Add to the fact that some theatres took time to go back to their original programming, events of cult films have not been as prevalent as it was before the pandemic but has only recently picked up. Therefore, two cinemas have been instrumental in providing opportunities to interview audiences:

Biograf Spegeln in Malmö

Spegeln¹² is an art-house cinema where in addition to contemporary films, they also screen a number of “iconic” movies (e.g. *No Country for old Men*, *Moonstruck*), movie sing-alongs (e.g. *The Sound of Music*, *Mamma Mia!*), and cult hits (e.g. *The Room*). They have three auditoriums with one that is bigger in terms of capacity (around 65 people max) and two smaller auditoriums (around 25 people max). During the COVID lockdowns in Sweden, Spegeln was shut down for a good amount of time. Once restrictions were lifted, they slowly began programming cult screenings again such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Room*. Due to their close relationship (i.e. under the same parent collective) with Bio Roy in Gothenburg, they have managed to mirror some programming choices from Roy. This is exemplified by the inception of the *B-Filmsklubben* (The B-Film Club) as an offshoot of The Bad Film Festival, where “badfilms” are screened almost on a monthly basis. Films screened under the banner of this program includes *Miami Connection*, *Birdemic*, *Howard the Duck*, and *Cry Wilderness* to name a few.

¹² <http://www.biografspiegel.se>



Figure 2
Spegeln's Alcázar auditorium

Bio Roy in Gothenburg

Bio Roy¹³ is an art house cinema focusing mainly on independent and art-house movies, in addition to a few Hollywood blockbusters. They have one big auditorium that fits more than 120 people. It was initially chosen due to its *Den Dåliga Filmfestivalen* (The Bad Film Festival) –first conceived in 2019, where cult badfilms such as *Samurai Cop* and *Troll 2* were screened as a prelude to the Gothenburg Film Festival in 2019. In the following year, The Bad Film Festival was cancelled due to the onset of the COVID pandemic and had only returned in 2023.

¹³ <https://www.bioroy.se>



Figure 3

Bio Roy's sole auditorium prior to a screening of *The Room* with Greg Sestero in attendance. 9 May 2022

During the times of COVID restrictions, the cinema closed down quite lengthily. After restrictions were abolished, it took a lot of time to get back on their feet again especially considering they have only one auditorium, which means they cannot screen multiple movies at once. Prior to 2023 and the return of The Bad Film Festival, Roy also had The B-Film Club programmed as an almost-monthly event.

The two cinemas mentioned above became the lynchpins of this thesis in terms of audience-centric data collection and observation. I managed to attend a number of cult film events ever since COVID restrictions were eased at either of those cinemas. With that said, there were also other cinemas in the region that were envisioned for conducting fieldwork, but did not materialize due to restrictions and time considerations. However, prior to the spread of COVID and its consequences, I managed to have interviews with the respective heads of the following cinemas:

Husets Biograf in Copenhagen

Husets Biograf¹⁴ is an independent “culture house” where its monthly film events offer screenings of a number of cult classics (e.g. *The Big Lebowski*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), all screened on vintage 35mm film. They have one modest-sized auditorium that could fit around 40 people.

¹⁴ <https://Husets.kk.dk/>



Figure 4
Husets Biograf projector room

Located on the second floor of the building, Husets Biograf prides itself for programming alternative films with barely any recent or major blockbuster films. During COVID lockdowns in Denmark, the theatre shut down for a long time. It took a while for them to start programming movies again, even longer than theatres in Sweden.

Hypnos in Malmö

Hypnos¹⁵ is a membership-based cinema situated in an industrial part of Malmö, where they do not have a regular screening schedule and exhibit movies that are often considered underground, cult, and art-house (e.g. *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Pinochet Porn*, *Mulholland Drive*). They have one auditorium that can fit about 80 people. During COVID restrictions, the cinema closed down and took a while to open up again.

¹⁵ <http://hypnosmalmo.com>



Figure 5
Hypnos entrance

This was simply because compared to other cinemas included in this thesis, Hypnos does not have the same amount of external support in terms of funding. It embodies a fairly grassroots approach to film exhibition in that it has a committee board that decides the programming and other decisions related to the cinema. The cinema also runs its day-to-day mostly based on the good graces of volunteers instead of paid employees.

Capitol Bio in Stockholm

Capitol Bio¹⁶ describes themselves as an “adult cinema” where in addition to newly released films, also screen classics (e.g. *8 ½*, *In the Mood for Love*), cult (e.g. *The Big Lebowski*), and sing-alongs (e.g. *Mamma Mia!*, *Moulin Rouge!*). They have four auditoriums, with capacities of 103, 82, 19, and 17 people respectively. During COVID restrictions, the cinema was shut down for a

¹⁶ <https://www.capitolbio.se>

while too. Programming for cult screenings are seeming slower than the other theatres in Sweden. However, they have recently started showing *Casablanca* and a number of sing-alongs. The cinema has a close relationship with NonStop Entertainment, a leading distributor of films in Sweden that specializes in art house and independent films. They also have a Video on Demand (VOD) service available to the public.



Figure 6
Capitol Bio's large auditorium

Other cinemas were considered in Denmark (e.g. Øst for Paradis in Aarhus) did not pan out mainly because of the pandemic. By selecting the aforementioned theatres that have a tradition of exhibiting cult films, it enables the research to expound individual practices linked to situational contexts (Angrosino, 2005, p.736). The research recognizes the importance of place-based practices that in this case, cinemas exhibiting cult films are prominent actors in the propagation of “replay culture” that can be argued as a constitutive element in the creation of cult films (Klinger, 2010, p.20). Therefore, field work in the form of observations were carried out at cult screenings in order to better our understanding of the “implications of what people do or say” (Jensen, 2002, p.242) by picking up nuances that would have otherwise been

lost if interviews were the sole method. The following screenings and events were attended for the purposes of this thesis:

- *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: 28 February 2020, Spegeln, Malmö¹⁷
- *Birdemic*: 15 July 2021, Spegeln, Malmö¹⁸
- *The Room*: 8 October 2021, Spegeln, Malmö¹⁹
- *The Room*: 8 May 2022, Spegeln, Malmö
- *The Room*: 9 May 2022, Bio Roy, Gothenburg
- *Miami Connection*: 1 September 2022, Spegeln, Malmö
- *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: 1 November 2022, Bio Roy, Gothenburg
- *The Dragon Lives Again*: 6 April 2023, Spegeln, Malmö
- *The Bad Film Festival*, Bio Roy, Gothenburg: 4-7 May 2023
 - Screenings attended: *Attack of the Beast Creatures*, *Troll 2*, *1990: The Bronx Warriors*, *Howard the Duck*
- *The Room*: 12 May 2023, Bio Roy, Gothenburg
- *Troll 2*: 18 May 2023, Spegeln, Malmö
- *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*: 7 July 2023, Spegeln, Malmö

Research Design, Sampling, and Analysis

The Qualitative Interview

The research's use of interviews as the primary method departs from the methodological underpinnings of audience research and media industry research in media and communication studies. Interviews in this case can be

¹⁷ The only one attended prior to COVID restrictions

¹⁸ One of the first screenings after restrictions were eased for the first time; as part of The B-Film Club

¹⁹ One of the first screenings after restrictions were eased for the second time

reflected upon as a method that attempts to draw out the real-life experiences –emotional and physical- of the actors who are a part of the cult film experience. It can be said that one of the aims of the interviews is to bring to the forefront the description of the experience in “emotional terms” (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001, p.27). In this sense, the interview guide was created with a keen eye on a narrative structure that encompasses the interviewee’s perceptions before, during, and after a cult film screening. This is in part due to the method’s awareness that “social phenomena are relational” and that context is equally important (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018, p.46). The questions contained within the interview guide casts a rather wide net of topics. From personal background on their movie going habits, their definitions of “good” or “bad”, to questions about the theatre as a physical space. As such, the nature of the questions were ones that would produce reflections on the individual’s interpretations of the media’s content based on their personal experiences (Hill, 2015, p.20). This is to account for the emphasis on strong contextual backgrounding of the respondents. The approach to interviewing placed a high importance of letting the interviewee talk, giving them enough time to breathe, but also take pauses. As such, I attempted to provide them with enough room for themselves without the worry of having to intrude them with “data production techniques” (Mannay and Morgan, 2015, p.178) such as asking new questions too quickly or interrupting them mid-sentence.

Instead of considering interviewees as objects of research, the project considers them as complex individuals with different experiences that ultimately shapes their perception of film and their life experiences related to film. This is in line with an approach that places an importance on the respondents’ ability to interpret themselves rather than the researcher as the sole holder of interpretation and hence fostering an interviewing environment that can produce a range of complex meanings (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p.17). Therefore, we must be aware that whatever a respondent says, it is not to be interpreted without further reflections but with a critical mindset that is aware of the greater picture in the back of our minds. As such, the methodological approach in the research strives to provide more of a “sample of reality” replete with nuances and prone to a multitude of interpretations, instead of an approach that aims to “reflect external facts” (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018, p.66).

Conducting interviews with the exhibitors and programmers can provide us privileged knowledge such as the financial considerations of running the cinema, the considerations for programming certain films, the process of obtaining licenses to screen film, or most recently, the struggles of staying afloat during the COVID pandemic. Additionally, conversations with these

people in power also gives us a deeper look into the physical aspects of the cinema where the concept of atmosphere is a key feature of the doctoral research. It stems from a question if and how the decorations, lighting, and seating arrangements, for example, sustain or constitute the cult film experience. This is in parallel –though not wholly similar- to seminal studies on institutions where it was acknowledged that their spatial features and their “material and symbolic boundaries” could provide us with a more complete picture of the institution’s complexity (Atkinson, 2015, p.70).

Pilot interviews were conducted in early 2020, to which the interview guide was further revised. In addition to this, the COVID pandemic not long after the pilots were finished also shaped the structure of the interview guide and added more questions specifically regarding how individuals are coping with restrictions and/or lockdowns –in relations to movie watching. For example, questions were later added that specifically asked if individuals conducted “watch parties” over Zoom or any other online media. Further along after most restrictions were lifted, questions on reflections of their lockdown experience were also added and how they are making their way back into the cinema.

In-Person Observations

As mentioned in the previous section, the thesis incorporates some elements of ethnography, especially in-person observations that in many ways embody the approach of plunging into the midst of it to find knowledge (Geertz, 1973, p.30). It strives to take into account as much –not all- aspects of the cult experience as possible. This is then channelled in the critical decision to include in-person observations as a methodological feature of the research. It is as Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) puts it, to seek “immersion” and what are “meaningful and important,” but also take into account the routines that happen within a setting (p.3). Having a physical presence as a researcher during these cult screenings helps us further understand how the cinema as a physical space provides “spaces of physical immersion where generic thrills could seemingly bleed outward” into the audience (Church, 2020, p.218). Therefore, field notes were produced to complement the research as a means of cross-examination with the audience interviews. Reflecting further, I decided that for some screenings I would take on the role as a passive observer, meaning that I would minimize my participation in the rituals conducted during the screening. For other screenings, I would also partake in the participatory aspects (e.g. throwing rice, talking at the screen, etc.). It allowed me to get a

wider range of observations regarding how audiences were responding and notice the flow of participation even more.

Up to this point, we have established the cult film experience as a social phenomenon that is “conventional and culturally shaped, socially shared, skilfully accomplished, and semiotically complex” (Atkinson, 2015, p.33). Thus, observations play a crucial role in the research. Combined with the tenets of conducting interviews, the multimethod approach allows us incorporate a wider swathe of reference points but also avoid an understatement of the knowledge that individuals possess (Mik-Meyer, 2020). Considering that cult film events can be categorized as “special events,” it would be judicious for us to hatch a study that attempts to encompass as many elements of the event as possible. For example, screenings of *The Room* in Sweden typically only occurs once every year in May (or in the autumn in the case of 2024) and screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* usually only occur twice or three times a year in the cinemas that I am conducting research in. It would be detrimental to the quality of the research if it did not include observations as a method, even if it were complementary in nature. Through observations, I was able to obtain a better, fuller, and richer picture of the phenomenon at hand. I was able to take into account how people were dressing up (if any), who some of them came with (in a group or alone), and gauge the overall atmosphere (a key concept in the analysis) appropriately.

Through a practical lens, the observational approach of my research has a narrative structure in that there is a beginning and an end. The beginning of the process transpires the moment I arrive at the cinema in question, standing in front of its doors looking in. The ending would then be the moments after the movie finishes playing and I finally walk out the same cinema door. In between those two, I would weave myself around the many possible points of interest such as the bar area, sitting area, the smoking area outside the theatre, and most importantly inside the auditorium itself. In some ways, this approach in conducting observations –in spirit- share some practical foundations with the go-along where there is an emphasis on the “symbolic qualities” of the “spatial practices” (Kusenbach, 2003, p.478). This observational ritual –if you will, are then repeated over the course of multiple cult film screenings and usually follow a similar spatial path (i.e. outside-inside-waiting area-outside-inside-outside-etc.). This is a reflection of what Flyvbjerg (2006) posits that in order for a researcher to achieve a high competence in the field, we must create a close and sustained proximity with the experience (p.223).

Sampling

Throughout the process of the research, eleven interviews were conducted with seven film exhibitors/managers/programmers in Sweden and Denmark. They are:

- Agnes Stenqvist, Event Producer – Spegeln, Malmö
 - In-person interview, 21/10/22, interview length 01:00:18
- Anna Reimegård, Operating Manager – Bio Roy, Gothenburg
 - In-person interview together with David Winsnes, 11/10/19, interview length 01:00:56
- David Winsnes, Programmer – Bio Roy, Gothenburg
 - In-person interview together with Anna Reimegård, 11/10/19, interview length 01:00:56
 - Zoom interview, 29/04/20, interview length 00:48:20
 - Zoom interview, 09/09/20, interview length 00:41:57
 - Zoom interview, 19/01/21, interview length 00:50:20
 - In-person interview, 11/05/22, interview length 00:52:16
- Jack Stevenson, Owner and Manager – Husets Biograf, Copenhagen
 - In-person interview, 11/10/19, interview length 00:53:23
- Jakob Abrahamsson, CEO – NonStop Entertainment²⁰, Stockholm
 - In-person interview, 18/11/19, interview length 01:14:35
- Paul Kraus, Co-Founder and Head of Operations – Hypnos, Malmö
 - In-person interview, 12/12/19, interview length 01:01:32
- Pernilla Nilsson, Operating Manager – Spegeln, Malmö
 - In-person interview, 25/10/19, interview length 01:12:56

Of all the exhibitors interviewed, it should be noted that Winsnes has been one of the key anchors for this research. Overall, interviews with the above individuals allows us to get a glimpse into the inner workings of the theatre

²⁰ NonStop Entertainment has a close relationship with Capitol Bio in Stockholm. They do not necessarily operate the day to day, but considers Capitol to be under their umbrella.

and shed a light on their “booking policies” and also the variety of films shown at their respective theatres (Waller, 1991, p.167). It also validates the research’s utilization of the “analytic dialogue” approach (Hill, 2019) of studying industry professionals in tangent with audiences (p.24).

In regards to audience interviews, 17 face-to-face and Zoom interviews were conducted with 23 individuals since the winter of 2019²¹. Of the 17 interview sessions, four were group interviews with two or three individuals who came together to a cult film screening. Outside of the 17 face-to-face/Zoom interviews, one person responded to the questions in writing via email because some unforeseen circumstance occurred and they preferred to answer the questions in this way. The interviews ranged from 22 minutes as the shortest to 1 hour 42 minutes as the longest.

Following each interview –including the exhibitor interviews, the audio were transcribed and their transcriptions imported into NVivo for coding. Here, it is recognized that conducting coding serves as a means to identifying sequences of data that are “related thematically” (Jensen, 2002, p.246). Consequentially, categories and themes uncovered during coding honed in on the respondents’ “potential motives” (Brennen, 2013, p.22) and acted as a guiding force for this thesis, especially its structure. In the process of analysing, Bazely’s (2013) guidance of “read, reflect, and connect” was firmly entrenched in order to produce a “holistic understanding” of the research subject. Even if that were so, the process was well aware that we should try our best to not de-contextualize and re-contextualize the data to the extremes, which could result in an analysis that becomes too one-dimensional (Atkinson, 2015, p.60). Therefore, in its analysis, we can take inspiration from Riessman (2014) in that we should acknowledge –among other things- the contexts, setting, and other interactions (p.368). This also complements Silverman’s (2017) caution that we need to “attend to the way in which interviewees position what they say in relation to the actions (or inactions) of the interviewer” (p.152).

Having said that, the actual process itself is much less black and white; rather it was also a process of constant revisions and reflections, with an open-minded approach. In the analysis of interview excerpts, occasionally a tangential narrative perspective can be present as oftentimes “interviewees frequently frame their answers as stories” (Roulston, 2013, p.304). This is especially pertinent to interviews with cult film exhibitors or individuals that hold positions of power within the organization. For example, an interview with the

²¹ See “Interviews” on page 253 for the full list of respondents

owner and manager of Husets Biograf in Copenhagen yielded an hour-long session where he goes through the motions of his upbringing, how he moved to Copenhagen, but also the story of the cinema's building itself. Latching on to the aforementioned revisions and reflections, the analysis process also involved a continuous cycle of interpretations –much aligned to the hermeneutic approach where “reflecting on data and making assertions, and reviewing and revising prior understanding of topics” (Roulston, 2013, p.302) are present. To illustrate this, I can reflect on the fact that because I did my master's thesis on a similar topic (that of cult film audiences), a number of pre-assumptions were evident prior to the start of data collection and analysis. However, it did not stop me from being aware to consistently challenge myself in connection with said pre-assumptions.

Complementary Methods

A minor, complementary method of analysing film aesthetics was also needed. Based on this, the study also adopts a baseline method of film analysis as inspired by Mikos (2014) to take into account the film's aesthetic elements (e.g. camera angles, acting, colour, and sound). A focus on aesthetics would benefit the unpacking of cult films as it is arguably the first step to understand how films are able to deploy their potential meaning when they are “integrated in social and cultural relations” (Ibid., p.411). This resonates with the understanding that a certain genre is constituted by the texts' “expressive capacities” or its ability to “offer frameworks for constructing meaning and value” (Frow, 2006, p.73). With this in mind, I have looked at four films in particular: *Miami Connection*, *Birdemic*, *The Room*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The four films compose the film screenings that were most notable since the research began. Having watched them in my own time – outside of the screenings, I took notes regarding the films' aesthetic elements as a point of reference to be used in this thesis. From this, I was able to pinpoint some exact moments that a number of respondents referenced to during their interviews. I also used these observations as means to illustrate arguments, as shown later in the analysis chapters. Therefore, a consideration into filmic aesthetics only enhanced the thesis by giving it a multi-layered approach to analysing the data and thus allowing more nuances to shine through.

At the onset of this research and right when the COVID restrictions came into place, taking into account the online presence (e.g. Facebook or Instagram) of the cinemas and audience interactions were considered. It was thought that these social media platforms can be considered to fulfil the cinema's need to

create a digital communal space where the “de-territorialized” nature of the platform is used to their advantage to create a “sense of place” (Duru and Trenz, 2016, p.109), especially in the face of physical restrictions caused by the pandemic. Social media’s nature that openly “endorses friendship as an intimate affiliation” and “emphasizes self-disclosure and sharing” (Chambers, 2017, p.33) may offer cinemas a digital space to sustain a number of aspects that would have otherwise been present pre-pandemic times. Additionally, a consideration into social media to account for how identity is “enacted, edited, and made visible” on such platforms (Robards and Lincoln, 2017, p.716), could have been explored. There was a potential to uncover the intertwining dynamics between the online and physical spaces as a network where social phenomena, movements, and indexed speech and text are embedded and embodied (Burrell, 2017, p.58).

However upon further reflections and after some piloting in analysing Bio Roy’s Facebook account and the responses I received from audiences regarding their online social media use, it was found that this strand of method was not entirely fruitful. The main reason was that most –if not all respondents, are not active social media users. That is not to say that nothing came out of conducting this method of research. Because online practices –especially by the exhibitors- still has the potential to modify the meanings of “place” (Polson, 2015, p.631), as will be shown in the chapter on identity. In this way, the thesis recognizes that the cult film-related identities are not solely expressed offline (i.e. in the physical cinema); rather it is to an extent also expressed via online platforms. Therefore, we will still get a glimpse on the essential relationship between people and new technologies (Miller et al., 2016, p.112) especially in relation to cinemas’ identities as expressed through their websites.

Ethical Considerations

Based on the requirements as indicated by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, my research does not involve the handling of "sensitive" personal data per their criteria and definitions (e.g. political views, religion, health details, etc.); nor does it fall into the other categories such as physical intervention, obtaining biological material, obvious risk of harm, etc. The research deals mainly on the nature of enjoyment and pleasure from watching a media text (films in this case), and it does not correlate with information that can potentially harm or adversely affect the participants. Therefore, it is ensured that their dignity would be protected.

With that said, the research still takes the highest precautions to safeguard the data and hence the participants. A consent form was provided to each respondent prior to the start of each interview. Contained within the forms were a brief outline about this research, an option to anonymize their identities or not, write-in fields regarding their general information, and most importantly, asking their permission to be recorded. This step of the research embodies an approach that signifies the interviewees' voluntary nature of participating without coercion (Christians, 2005, p.144). The research is always voluntary in nature and I inform the participants they can withdraw from the study at any time. Even though this research does not explicitly deal with topics or questions that can be considered sensitive personal data, names of the respondents have been completely pseudonymized in the thesis' analysis as an additional measure of safety. As mentioned before, the COVID pandemic greatly affected the research process. As such, consent forms were not always provided in print form namely for the Zoom interviews. When this was the case, I would send the respondents a digital copy of the consent form, asking them to fill it in and send it back to me. To ensure the correctness of consent, I would ask them about participation in the research again at the beginning of each interview recording.

Regarding data storage security, the necessary steps have been taken in ensuring the data is not accessible to those without privilege. The data is stored in a password protected laptop provided by the university, of whom their overall security measures (e.g. data backups, cloud storage, etc.) are reputable. Furthermore, the laptop itself has not been placed in locations that may carry a high risk of theft and are always behind locked doors, or it is always on my person. Through these steps, I believe it is sufficient to prevent any third parties accessing my data without explicit consent or permission. Additionally in the written consent forms, it is also mentioned the articles of GDPR that is pertinent to the participants' right to know about data storage and processing. Therefore, the research's aspect on data storage and processing is in compliance with Article 5 of the GDPR in that: I have lawful basis to process the data as the main researcher, I have only collected data that are specific to the aims and interests of the research, I did not process any more data than necessary, and -as stated before- have taken the necessary steps to protect the data from unauthorized use or access.

5. Here's Looking at You Cult: Understanding Cult Films

The title of this chapter playfully refers to and slightly adjusts one of the most famous quotes from arguably one of the most famous cult films of all time: *Casablanca*. Michael Curtiz's 1942 tour de force racked up around \$10 million dollars in its box office haul (or around \$182 million after inflation adjustment) and has been a mainstay for many theatres worldwide, even 80 years after its initial release. Because of this –its replayability factor- *Casablanca* has been canonized within the shrines of cult films. As Eco (1984) once wrote, the “unconscious” aspects such as its structure and narrative components allow the film to give birth to the cult sensibility (p.11). He then wrote profoundly:

Just as extreme pain meets sensual pleasure, and extreme perversion borders on mystical energy, so does extreme banality allow us to catch a glimpse of the Sublime. Nobody would have been able to achieve such a cosmic result intentionally. Nature has spoken here in place of men. If nothing else, this is a phenomenon worthy of veneration. (Eco, 1984, p.11)

What this means is that almost no such film can intentionally set out to be a cult film. As Eco puts it, “nature” or in other words, fate, is the sole driving force that creates cult films.

Many directors and equally many producers have tried tapping into the cult film market and audience, but most of them have failed in doing so because they approached the making of the movie with “extreme intertextual awareness” (Ibid.). These individuals who strived to make a cult film are conscious in their aesthetic decisions based on their own personal experience and knowledge, emulating what in their mind constitutes a cult film. Whether it is over the top drama, soap opera-ish elements, shoddy lighting, sub-par sound, or a poorly written script, the intention makes these elements inorganic, as compared to the “organic imperfections” (Ibid.) that are typical characteristic of films in the cult canon. Telotte (1991) has said that one of the

main reasons that certain films have been considered cult, is because they “challenge certain norms usually associated with the movie experience” (p.6). Most of the time when we watch a movie, we are expecting to see a “good” movie that is worth seeing in the cinema or at home that is worthy of our time and money. However, cult films seem to buck this trend in favour of possessing said “organic imperfections” much to the delight of cult audiences that have grown to appreciate them for what it is.

With the above in mind, we then realize that cult is not something created out of the pure intentions of its director or producers. As Corrigan (1991) put it, no film “is naturally a cult film; all cult films are adopted children (p.26)”. Naturally, a logical follow through to this statement would be asking: Who is adopting them? How do we define cult and how is it constituted?

You can set out to make a movie, but then you hand it to the audience. It's like you're handing over your baby and then the audience can make it to whatever they want.

(Greg Sestero Q&A, Spegeln, Malmö, 8 May 2022)

The above quote comes from a Q&A session with one of the main actors of Tommy Wiseau’s *The Room*. Ever since *The Room* became a cult phenomenon since 2004, both Wiseau and Sestero have constantly toured the world, hitting multiple countries in multiple continents to both promote and give an interesting behind the scenes take to how the film was made²². Sestero, who plays the character Mark has since co-authored a book, *The Disaster Artist* (Sestero and Bissel, 2013), that also provide its readers with a fascinating recounting of what went on during the production of the film via a comedic tone of writing. What is clear however, is that not even Greg –based on his book or Q&A’s- believe that Tommy knew what he was doing in making *The Room*. In Sestero’s book, it was told that the individuals involved with the film (e.g. actors, camera crew, make up, etc.) did not initially take a liking in the direction of the film. It was even elaborated that some of the actors cowered in fear during the premiere of the film in Los Angeles, simply because they were ashamed to be a part of the production. It even became so bad for actor Juliette Danielle, who played Lisa²³ that she made an effort to disappear from public life when *The Room* was first released, stating in an interview that “at first, I

²² Granted, Greg was always the more helpful and enlightening in answering questions where in comparison Tommy usually makes jokes or gives half-serious answers to any questions that come his way

²³ The lover of Tommy Wiseau’s Johnny character

was so embarrassed about it. I was told the nudity would be tasteful. Every time a friend or co-worker would find out about it, watch it and then come loudly tell me about it, I would cringe in agony (Grass, 2014).” And adding that at first, she “wanted to deny it ever happened and disappear” (Ibid.). Here, Danielle’s experience is in stark contrast with that of Sestero who seemingly embraced the growing prominence the film garnered, which can be attributed to the oversexualized and misogynistic portrayal of Danielle’s character and women in general within the film. However, the key word here is *initially*.

As time passed and stars aligning perfectly, *The Room* became a hit with audiences simply through word of mouth in the early days. People would see it, then they would bring along their friends, and their friends eventually bring along other friends, and so on. The film caught fire and the film world was soon exposed to the many qualities –or lack thereof- of Wiseau’s brainchild. Instead of seeing the film due to its glamorous aesthetic qualities, audiences wanted to see it “to laugh *at* it rather than *with* it” (McCulloch, 2011, p.190). By 2006, *The Room* has been firmly interred into the “so bad it’s good” category cementing “its status as a midnight movie and acknowledge a dedicated audience” (Foy, 2012, p.5). It would be fair to argue that such an outcome for a film that was initially critically panned and given a second life be the stuff of envy for many film producers. Jack Stevenson (2019, interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 11/11/19), who owns and runs the art house/independent/underground movie theatre Husets Biograf in Copenhagen, Denmark notes that “many movies want to be cult movies.” He notes that “if a movie fails, it wants to be a cult movie. When *Showgirls* came out and got terrible reviews they reopened it a few weeks later with [people] giving out door prizes and called it a cult movie. *Mommy Dearest* also...they gave out coat hangers to beat your child with or *Birdemic* also gave out [stuff].”

At the core of it all, this thesis will argue that audiences and exhibitors play a role in the constitution of the cult atmosphere by, first and foremost, identifying which films are worthy of the moniker. In relation to the parameters of media engagement (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023), this chapter is primarily concerned with the notions of context and modalities, in how certain cult films are able to gain the moniker but also what is the perceived value of the genre.

Jakob Abrahamsson (2019, interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 18/11/19), who is the CEO and co-founder of NonStop Entertainment, who also runs the Capitol Bio in Stockholm, aptly describes this interplay of cult actors in the constitution of cult itself can be constituted:

The way to address it is not addressing cult movies as a sort of film genre...more of a behaviour in the audience interactions, which is sort of how we approach what we do at the Capitol cinema. We're not saying we show horror, or art house, or whatever. We're showing films for a grown up audience. [In which] there's a lot of freedom.

(Abrahamsson, 2019)

The aforementioned freedom is key here, which will play a more prominent role in a later chapter. Many event screenings of cult films involve a certain degree of freedom for the audience. This is of course generally in opposition of the typical societal norms that are expected of us when we watch a film at the movie theatre. For example, no cellular phone use, no talking loudly with other people, even more so no throwing objects inside the auditorium. Therefore, this reinforces the notion put forward by Klinger (1989) in that the ideal spectator of cult films is different from that of other films, firmly against “dominant formulations of spectatorship” (p.3). As explained by Sven (40, M, project manager), “it is socially acceptable to come with small comments for these movies or for certain scenes. Like it’s okay to just say ‘Bullshit!!’ or just like ‘What?!?’ or you know like...’oh ninjas!’”. Clara (37, F), who worked as an administrator concurred with Sven, noting that for “bad films”, watching them in a “special way” worked best:

But I think for us, also, the whole bad movie thing, it's easier to do social things around bad movies because you don't ruin shit when you talk. You're kind of supposed to talk and comment and laugh, and if you watch a movie that is a really good one, you don't want to talk over it or whatever. So I think that works well.

(Clara, 37, F, administrator)

After all, it is this abundance of freedom that has made the study of cult films especially complicated because one must take into account that a number of certain films’ “cultish” characteristics are identified through “its interaction with an audience” (Mathijs, 1991, p.109).

For example, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Despite its initial poor reception with film audiences when it first screened in 1975, it was discovered that many audiences in the Los Angeles area saw the movie repeatedly (Weinstock, 2008,

p.5). Although there are debates surrounding how the whole participatory aspect of the film developed, Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983) posits that it may have all began in 1976 when a teacher named Louis Farese Jr. talked back at the movie during a screening at the Waverly theatre in Greenwich Village, New York City and caught on to consecutive screenings afterwards (p.176). They note that due to the movie's qualities, it "was asking for it" and that "the more one listened to the movie's dialogue, the more it seemed to offer an invitation, or even a dare to throw in your two cents and see if it glittered" (Ibid.). After the initial *acceptance* that a viewer can talk back at the movie, rituals began to develop that has "become absorbed within the general text" (Ibid.).

Another example, albeit at the opposite end of the spectrum is the 2019 Hollywood movie adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber's stage musical *Cats*. This particular movie had a pedigree that leans toward the Academy Awards crowd: directed by Tom Hooper who had won an Oscar for helming *The King's Speech* (2010), its scriptwriter garnered an Oscar nomination for *Billy Elliot* (2000) –a movie that is similar in terms of genre, and had a rousing cast that featured the likes of Dame Judi Dench, Sir Ian McKellen, and Idris Elba.

What nobody expected however, was how sub-par the CGI cat-people²⁴ looked upon the first reveal of the movie's trailer. The internet went wild and people were talking about the movie already for the wrong reasons. Turns out people's suspicions were right, and the movie bombed both critically and financially. Even if that were so, *Cats'* lack of quality caught the attention of some that appreciate "bad films," myself included. Around December 2019, my wife and I bought tickets to go see the movie at a Filmstaden multiplex in Malmö plainly with the intention of laughing at it. As we walked into the auditorium, we began to notice the people who were coming in and decidedly group them into two: those who probably liked the musical and

²⁴ For example, human hands were still evident, private jewellery still seen, not enough fur on the cat-people makes the actors look like actors in a body suit rather than embodying a cat, and a disturbingly high amount of uncanny valley effects

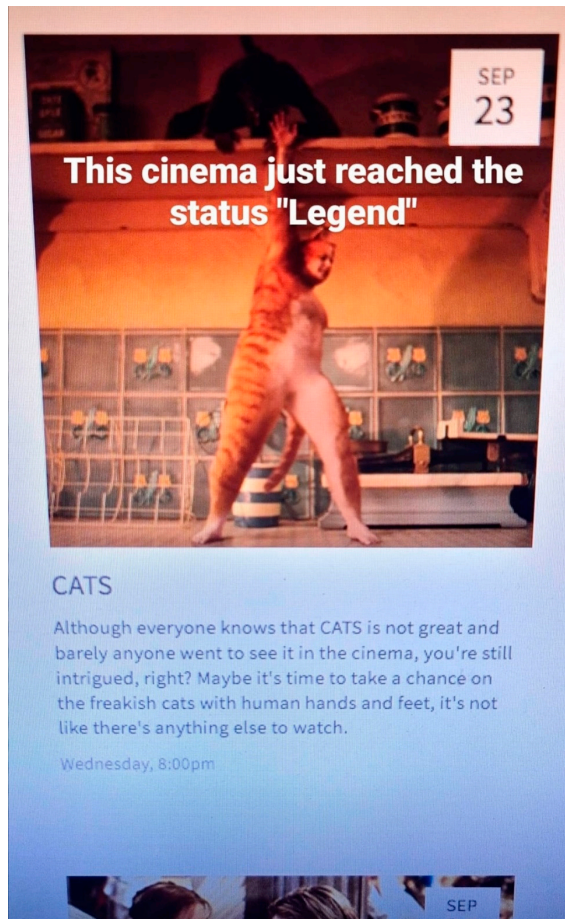


Figure 7
Screengrab of an Australian cinema promoting Tom Hooper's *Cats* film. Circa August 2020

wanted to see the movie adaptation (or just have a general curiosity of the movie) and those who are in it for the shits and giggles. Evidently, there were laughs here and there throughout the movie but no overt talkbacks or yells or screams. At face value, within the context of winter 2019, *Cats* could have very well become a new cult film (and could still be in the future). In fact, a friend of mine who lives in Sydney, Australia and works at a movie theatre told me that their cinema was screening *Cats* packaged as a participatory-interactive screening (as shown in Figure 7) where you are explicitly told on their ticketing website you are allowed to talk and yell and do other stuff. Additionally, there

were also rumblings that the Prince Charles theatre in London also attempted a similar screening. Unfortunately however, this effort by the cinema did not catch on arguably due to the COVID-19 lockdowns not long after the movie's release. Hence, it is likely that we will never know what could have been, had it not been for the restrictions in place that greatly affected the cinema world.

Both of the above examples illustrates how film exhibitors and the presence of an audience is key in establishing a movie to be cult. It stresses the importance of the “interactive modes of consumption” commonly found in cult cinema that allows the audience to “seize control of the cinematic experience” (Andrews, 2020, p.35). It can be argued that the rowdy nature of cult film screenings is an open opposition by audiences towards the restrained nature of watching films that are commonly found in non-cult focused cinemas, such as national chain multiplexes. For some, watching films is all about immersion and any external factors (i.e. loud talking, phone beeping, inappropriate laughter, etc.) may break that immersion and can be considered an affront to the solemn atmosphere of watching films. This is also pertinent in Sweden, because as mentioned in the introduction chapter, the codes of conduct of watching movies in Sweden are generally that of minimal disturbance. Much like the experience of watching *Cats* in 2019 –at a national chain cinema no less, there was apprehension whether laughter is allowed *not* due to intentional comedic scenes of the movie, but rather laughing due to the hilarity of the film's perceived deficiencies. Evidently, some of us got stares when we laughed at the horrendous scene of Rebel Wilson's cat character dancing while eating human-like cockroaches or Sir Ian McKellen lapping up water from a bowl, for example. Therefore, there is a sense of rule breaking when one experiences a screening where talking out loud or yelling is allowed *within* a cinema space, plainly due to having cultural memory of moviegoing behavioural expectations.

Naturally, such “control” of the experience can only go so far as much as the cinemas that exhibit these movies would allow it. In the cases of *Rocky Horror* and *The Room* for example, cinemas caught on to the hype and rumblings that audiences made due to them appropriating the nascent screenings based on mostly improvised, spur of the moment reactions. Due to audiences conducting their own actions that are in opposition to the decorum of cinemawatching, they are able to steer to an extent what future screenings would look and feel like. Thus, rituals and participatory guides were conceived. Events centred on Halloween dress-up screenings of *Rocky Horror* became prevalent in Sweden and Greg Sestero from *The Room* made guest appearances almost annually.

Exhibitors noticed that there is in fact an audience for cult film and because of this, they have played a role as ground zero for cult experiences.

On the other hand, theatres can also provide audiences with a prompt or a nudge in a direction, but if audiences do not catch on to it the whole system breaks down and nothing comes out of it. Or in the case of *Cats*, the lack of a cinema willing to give it a run potentially inhibited –for now- any possible cultish outcomes simply because the players couldn't play. Hence, there is a case to be made that both audiences and exhibitors must exist in conjunction with each other in order to constitute a cult experience. Following this section, the chapter will expound three main strands of how audiences and exhibitors are defining cult. If we are to ultimately expound the constitution of the cult atmosphere, this chapter latches onto the notion of how audiences and exhibitors see perceive themselves in their relationships with works of art (Böhme, 2017, p.70), which in the case of this thesis are the cult films screened in Sweden. We achieve this by first examining the importance of the film's aesthetic values in relations to the cult moniker. Secondly, a discussion on the notion of "failure" –both material and imagined- and its linkage with how individuals are characterizing cult. Lastly, this chapter explores how cult is understood based on its historical journey and how that factors into the "replay culture" (Klinger, 2010).

Considering the Aesthetics

The vast majority of bad movies you come across in your life are hours you want to and will forget. A slow story, bad dialogue, confusing camera work or bad acting performances can ruin an evening. But we also want to claim that there are bad films that are so abysmal that they turn around and become watchable again.

This is why Roy has started the Bad Film Festival, which raises essential issues for every person who has ever been stuck in front of an action film on TV6 in the middle of the night and thought with some delight that it could not get any worse.

It can.

(A blurb on Bio Roy's webpage for The Bad Film Festival²⁵)

²⁵ Translated from Swedish, can be found at <https://www.bioroy.se/#/content/114>

As noted earlier in the thesis, the scope of this research mostly falls around the badfilm and musical sub-genre of cult films. Both sub-genres have become a staple of certain cult-minded theatres in Sweden. Bar the COVID lockdowns, screenings of films such as *Miami Connection*, *The Room*, *Troll 2*, and *Rocky Horror Picture Show* have been met with positive reaction from the Swedish crowds. As David Winsnes (2021, interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 19/01/21) who is the programmer of Bio Roy in Gothenburg and Spegeln in Malmö states during the pandemic, before COVID happened they would sell out their auditorium for most of these screenings within a few weeks of the ticket release online. Similar stories have also been recounted in Malmö at Spegeln, where a capacity crowds would congregate at a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*; some donning costumes inspired by the movie. It is evident that what transpires on-screen shapes the way audiences create their individual cult experience.

As Taylor (1999) posits in talking about aesthetics, cult viewers “makes a virtue of ordinariness, camp of obviousness” (p.151). Because of this, it is possible to take into account arguably the singular objective aspect of these films: aesthetics. Aesthetics is the starting point for audiences to “‘imagine’ another world with other rules” (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, p.24) and genuinely enjoy their time being in that world repeatedly. This section considers how aesthetic elements are utilized as markers to identify what is cult. This will primarily be done through an examination of both *Miami Connection* and *Birdemic* to illustrate the specifics of how aesthetics contribute to a cult sensibility. Therefore, we can obtain a clearer picture how such films are able to grab the hearts of many individuals based on their qualities –or lack of qualities. As one interviewee noted:

Sometimes with the cult films, they usually mix a lot of different genres together, and there's usually a lot of humour to it. And if you don't like the humour, then it's just like, sort of lost on you.

(Dana, 39, F, author)

In his examination of *Rocky Horror*, Austin (1981) notes that both the “intent of the filmmaker and the film’s content” tend to not define a cult film (p.44). Rather, the film’s content is bestowed a “camp” sensibility or method of appreciation by audiences (Ibid.). This is arguably true when it comes to badfilms as well, because just like the opening blurb at the beginning of this section states, there comes a point when an objectively “bad” film –in terms of aesthetics, diegesis, or both- “turn around” and becomes something that is quite enjoyable. It can be said that there is a certain mode of enjoyment to watching

these types of films, one that is ultimately linked with one's "capacity to see" as a "function of knowledge" in their repertoire of cultural competence (Bourdieu, 1979, p.2), which also reflects Dana's thoughts above.

Evidently, societal movie going culture nowadays (especially before COVID and is slowly retaking shape) has been overrun with tentpole blockbusters that are formulaic almost to a point of homogenization. As one respondent stated: "I feel like superhero movies are exactly the same but the hero is a different person, literally. Because they have the same plot, exactly the same plot. You know what will happen, you don't even need to watch the movie, you already know" (Sofia, 27, F, UI/UX designer). Another respondent noted how horror movies are the current flavour of production companies, pointing out:

I think horror movies is the easiest genre to make. And a lot of filmmakers do that because there is a lot of money in it. So they don't care about the story, they only care about making money. So a lot of horror movies are bad. And bad horror movies are not fun, they are just boring.

(Bengt, 39, M, filmmaker)

For people like Bengt and Sofia, cult films require an added layer of excitement and in some ways, an added layer of exoticness. As such, certain cult films can afford to provide them in spades, in the form of "cardboard sets, continuity errors, plot holes, and other markers of 'badness'" (Singleton, 2019, p.414). What films like *Howard the Duck*, *Birdemic*, or even *Rocky Horror* can provide is their ability to "replace classical Hollywood cinema's seductive promises of diegetic immersion and identification with non-diegetic immersion and identification" (Ibid.). Instead of pulling us into the world of the movie, the aesthetics of these films instead create a "state of unintentionally heightened" sense of awareness (MacDowell and Zborowski, 2013, p.5) that compels audiences create distance between the viewer and what is unfolding on-screen. Louis (36, M, doctoral candidate), who came to a screening of *The Room* in Malmö without knowing anything about the movie created an interesting comparison in relation to the film's sex scenes:

Every sex scene [laughter] with the two main actors was like, why is this happening? Like, why is this so cliché? I mean, yes, they're going to lay on the bed and they have the rose on the bed and the romantic music. I don't know. It's like German porn movies from the 70s. Not that I watch this, [laughter] but it's my prejudice about it, I guess.

(Louis, 36, M, doctoral candidate)

Earlier in this section, it was noted that a common characteristic of cult films is the presences of excess or the unnecessary exaggeration of a certain element. This was illustrated through Louis' reflections above that in the case of *The Room*, sex scenes that are commonly associated with intimacy produces the opposite reaction due to exaggeration of romantic elements such as the roses and the music. It embodies a “hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly” (Eco, 1985, p.3).



Figure 8
Miami Connection poster

If we take *Miami Connection* (poster shown in Figure 8) for example, the film possesses an aesthetic styling of a seemingly bygone era. From the grainy film quality (even on Blu-Ray quality high definition), quintessential 80s synth pop songs and music, to the subpar sound mixing and editing, *Miami Connection* hits all the right notes that for most contemporary viewers find a sense of

nostalgia that stems from “a growing patina of romance as they age” (Hills and Sexton, 2015, p.3).

The costumes and appearances of the characters are exactly what you normally would think of from an 80s action film: minimal, bright colours, and outdated stylistic choices (by today’s standards). The poster of the movie exudes a bright neon pink, one that this researcher associates with the times of when the movie was produced and shot. It also harkens back the imagery of the city of Miami pretty well (even though the whole movie was actually shot in Orlando). Overall, the aesthetic conventions of the movie –even from the first scene- are able to sharply set our expectations about the rest of the film (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 2017, p.329).

When it comes to the narrative structure of the film, it can be considered a cookie-cutter, action-slash-drama peppered in with a bit of romance. One can properly identify the common conventions utilized in the movie just by reading the synopsis prior to watching the film. Y.K. Kim²⁶ acts in the movie as a Korean immigrant to the United States who is supposedly a Tae Kwon Do master that is teaching the values and philosophy behind the martial arts style. With him are four disciples who take Tae Kwon Do as serious as Kim does and together they are a part of the musical band Dragon Sound, who occasionally plays in a nightclub. The story begins with the reveal that somewhere in Miami, there is a gang of biker ninjas who are selling and distributing drugs. It turns out that friends of the ninjas are also a music band and are annoyed with the fact that Dragon Sound is performing in the club instead of them. Afterwards, the story follows the travails of Kim and his disciples as they encounter the ninjas and drug dealers incessantly throughout the movie. As the movie progresses, we are introduced to familial subplots that does not really add anything to the story. Such as the fact that Dragon Sound’s lead singer is apparently the sibling for the leader of the drug dealers. And one of the “good guys” is desperately trying to find his estranged father with whom he lost contact since he was a small child. But in the end, the good guys obviously win as Kim and his buddies face down the full force of the ninja in a ravine supposedly somewhere in Miami and strikes a fatal blow against the leader of the ninjas.

Audiences were able to latch onto the preposterousness of the plot, the cheesy acting, and the sound aspects of the film. Sven (40, M, project manager) said that there is usually a “good premise” within these types of movies. He noted

²⁶ Both main actor and co-director

that the value of the movie is greater than the sum of its individual aesthetic components:

If you look at it isolated, it has a terrible script! The story behind it is decent enough but it has a terrible script. The dialogue is atrocious! I mean...now I care [laughter] or the fantastic phrase "Oh, ninjas!" [laughter] And there's actually elements of good acting....but at completely wrong times! The cinematography is amateurish umm....i mean there's so many things you can point at and say "oh god this is so bad". But then viewed as a whole, it becomes amazing!

(Sven, 40, M, project manager)

His friend, Dean (32, M, programmer) had never known anything about *Miami Connection* before and he gave attention to the extreme cheesiness of the premise: "I don't think you could make a proper out of it without just being extremely tongue in cheek because....it was really low budget or whatever you want to call it. They just went full...let's just do it...let's make this serious!" When asked about his favourite scene, Sven (40, M, project manager) retorted "the Vietnam flashbacks in a river outside of...what is it Orlando?? It's not even in Miami! It's in Orlando and there's a fucking river next to a highway! Where they go completely insane." Dean (32, M, Programmer) on the other hand, had fonder memory of one of the film's supplemental subplots:

*My favourite bit was the jarring experience of him telling his experience about his father, followed by tits and ass on the beach [laughter]. That...that transition is soo shocking [laughter]. I mean I turned to...who was it... [Name of another friend] I just went like *raises hand, squints eyes* "what just happened"? So I don't know...I think we're on the beach now?*

(Dean, 32, M, programmer)

Taken as a whole, *Miami Connection* is the perfect embodiment of what was mentioned earlier about a "hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly" (Eco, 1985, p.3). What makes the movie sensational can be credited to the lack of acting finesse by the actors themselves. Line deliveries are often botched and unbelievable. There is an element of over-the-top violence where blood splatters and gushes out in moments of combat. In the middle of the movie, Kim and his disciples act out what was seemingly a 10-minute video demo of Tae Kwon Do for no reason at all. With all of this taken into consideration, it is no wonder that at the time of its initial release, *Miami Connection* was dismissed by the few film critics that got to see it and was

eventually forgotten, only to be rediscovered and appreciated some decades later.

Similar themes can also be found in the film *Birdemic*. Director and producer James Nguyen envisioned his film to tackle on the disaster/monster/thriller movie genre with a strong message about environmentalism (probably akin to Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*). But unlike Emmerich's big-budget, CGI-fest movie, *Birdemic* was produced on a miniscule budget of around \$10,000. The limited resources Nguyen had at his disposal created an "aesthetic distance" between what he originally intended with that of the final product (Smith, 2019, p.3). The film was rife with technical inefficiencies. The film quality was sub-par (even on high definition quality) and the colour palette washed out, almost muddy. The actors oftentimes seemed lost and would deliver lines in a blocky manner. Shots and scenes were also framed in an awkward manner where establishing shots would sometimes take up too much time and camera movement is unsmooth. However, the most egregious aspect of *Birdemic*, which is arguably the main reason it has gotten so much attention, is the horrendous attempt at manifesting CGI eagles and vultures. When the birds finally come out of nowhere in the film, it immediately disrupts the rhythm set in the prior minutes explosively and produces a comedic effect (Leitch, 1985, p.171).

In terms of story, *Birdemic* is sharply divided into two portions: prior to the birds attacking and after the birds attacking (illustrated through its poster in Figure 9 on the next page). Prior to the attacks, the film is through and through trying to be a drama-romance movie.

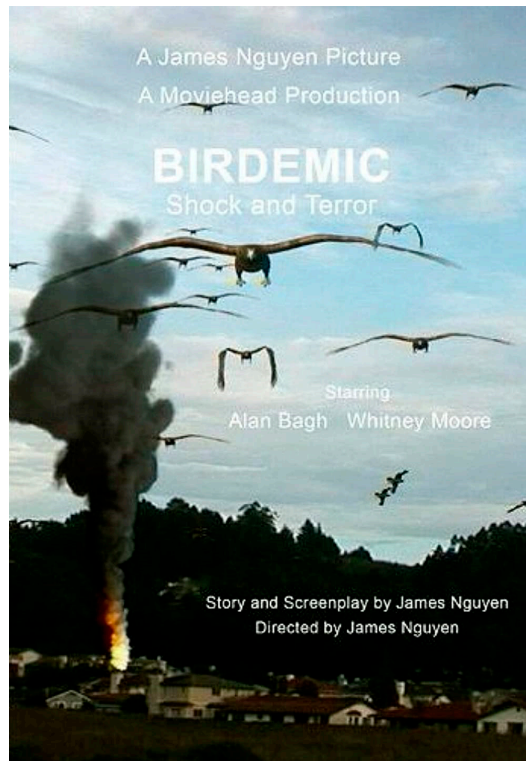


Figure 9
Birdemic poster

The main character, Rod, is a successful sales rep for an up-and-coming tech company who has dreams of having his own “green” energy business. His life becomes more interesting when he encounters Nathalie, a former high school classmate who works as a model. The first half of the film purely focuses on their relationship while at the same time elaborating a story filled with clichéd tropes such as closing a \$1 million deal, getting a dream job as a Victoria’s Secret model, and the annoying best friend who only thinks about sex. It was not until Rod and Nathalie finally decide to spend the night together in a motel that the CGI birds with horrific screeching sounds –in which the audio mixing is so atrocious it can damage your hearing if listened loud enough- attack without warning or explanation. Afterwards the movie takes on the themes of survival as Rod and Nathalie go on a road trip (to God-knows where) and encounter a bunch of colourful characters. For example, an environmental “professor” who is seemingly unaffected by the chaos of rabid birds and who

happens to be sitting on a park bench on the beach. Or a “tree hugger” type of character who decided years ago to ditch the cities and live in the Californian redwoods inside a treehouse and provides environmental wisdom to the protagonists. It is through these characters that the film attempts to convey a number of environmental messages. However, violence ensues and follows the main characters as people start dying by having their eyes gouged out or fatally cut on their necks by the birds. The movie finally ends with the eagles and vultures going away, driven away by white doves –again for no reason or explanation.

Mirroring the above elaboration on *Birdemic*, interviewees were quick to point out the multitude of faults contained in the movie. The sub-par quality of the audio was noted by audience members as the film sounded as if there was only “one guy and a camera, so there’s no sound team or anything” (Micke, 30, M, software developer). Another person remarked that the audio sounds “off” and that the music does not help much because it is the same music used over and over again (Malin, 31, F, student). She continued on that the opening three minutes “builds up your expectations of the movie” even though she “was not expecting that it would get that bad fast.” Jon (26, M, warehouse worker) on the other hand, thought the audio was so bad that he had a hard time believing it was unintentional:

The audio is probably the worst part, and I actually had a debate with [name of other friend] whether some of the audio was deliberate or not because it seems to be so incompetent that it seems to be purposefully terrible. Maybe some of the audio was terrible and the other was fine and [the director] tried to match it by making it deliberately terrible.

(Jon, 26, M, warehouse worker)

Based on Jon’s answer above and coupled with the torrid bird screeching sounds mentioned earlier, we could see that sound plays a role in the establishment of the atmosphere during a screening of *Birdemic*. In non-badfilms, it has been argued that sound, “can provide a specific atmosphere of a public site in the construction of the diegetic space – or the interior world of a film or sound-based media artwork” (Chattopadhyay, 2017, p.354). Meaning that if the audio or sounds are properly mixed and utilized appropriately, it would have enhanced the viewing experience of the movie. However in the case of *Birdemic*, the audio produced the opposite result in that instead of having the potential to immerse oneself into the movie, it creates a sense of repulsion. To this effect, *Birdemic*’s sound deficiencies allowed audiences to

construct new meanings –primarily comedic- that does not align with the director’s original intention. This rejection of audio quality can also be seen in *The Room* screenings for example, where audiences have the tendency to lampoon the poorly produced “romantic” soundtracks, the uneven dialogue mixing, or even Tommy Wiseau’s odd laughter. As such, the audio can also be seen as a sublimation factor for audiences to coalesce into an effervescence that is triggered by laughter, verbal comments, or conversations among groups of friends in response to the sonic elements of the movie.

The narrative aspects of *Birdemic* also caught the attention of some viewers. Nicole (28, F, student) admitted that her favourite scene of the movie was actually at the beginning, where it was shown the main protagonist driving in his car aimlessly, all the while accompanied by repetitive monotonous music. The music in question consists of only about two to three notes that are seemingly performed with a violin, repeated multiple times with only its pitch differing slightly. Here again, we can see how audio can constitute the atmosphere of the screening. When it comes to art exhibitions, Bruno (2022) posits that sound has the potential to build up “sympathy with the inanimate” and allows such “inorganic elements” to transmit “affects as atmosphere” (p.229). Similar to the shocking bird sounds before, the music of *Birdemic*’s intro does not build sympathy nor does it allow audiences to feel anything other than befuddlement where typically, intros to movies and its accompanying music are utilized to build up anticipation or excitement.

Nicole (28, F, student) then admitted that if she were to have watched it alone she would have “turned it off right away.” For Bengt (39, M, filmmaker), he felt a sense of confusion as to why there has to be a scientist “that talks for 25 hours about global warming” as if it “came from nowhere.” It can be seen from these responses that some of the audiences’ favourite scenes were due to shock or the sudden nature of some scenes. In many ways, their expectations were shattered and their perception of the movie was pushed in an extreme manner that these scenes lingered in their minds even after the movie was finished.

Another example of a case where the unexpected happened quite suddenly was elaborated by another individual:

When the birdemic actually hits or when the birds start to get dangerous for the first time, and they're just sort of filming random places in the city, and everything is pretty calm, and no one's really out. So they're doing that for about a minute. A bit too long. And then all of a sudden, there are these air strikes from birds [laughter] and things start exploding. I just remember that. I was like, "Oh, no."

(Malin, 31, F, student)

Looking deeper into the diegetic components of both *Miami Connection* and *Birdemic*, a number of themes and values are prominent. If we keep in mind that the producers of both movies are American immigrants, the ideas and narrative components of these movies are seemingly in line with “the regiments of the state” (Alford, 2010, p.81): “The American Dream.” The films are constantly alluding to the success stories of their main characters that emphasizes upward mobility and ownership (Archer, 2014, p.7). Therefore, the concept of success in both films are closely related to the values of heroism and altruism as a mechanism that safeguards the aforementioned dream. For example, the character of Mark in *Miami Connection* takes it upon himself to personally go after drug dealing ninjas just so he can continue his Tae Kwon Do movement while at the same time being able to a part of a musical band, which in many ways can be argued to be Kim’s idea of the American Dream. The way they present these ideas are closely tied with the conventions of the classical action genre in which spectacle is favoured “over finely tuned narrative” (Higgins, 2008, p.74). Considering that the main characters were male, the films also exude a sense of hypermasculinity, specifically through incarnations of physicality and hence amplifying sensations when we watch the movies (Palmer, 2012, p.25), albeit arguably not for the right reasons in this instance.

Both Kim and Nguyen created an “intensely personal” film influenced by their own experience through cultural memory (Highmore, 2016, p.108 and p.153). Their own interpretations of their living conditions shaped the final form and structure of the movies. Another common reoccurring theme that fits in with the notion of preserving the way of life is the environmental ideologies permeating through the script. For Nguyen, he places the blame of humanity’s plight on the feet of capitalistic companies who are not aware that their practices are destroying nature. He accomplishes this by overtly integrating the message into the film’s dialogue. For the case of Kim, he integrates the

messaging into the lyrics of Dragon Sound where they sing melodic tunes about friendship, love, and of course Tae Kwon Do. However due to the heavy-handed nature of the messages' delivery in the films, a degree of persuasion was lost amidst the conversations and hence "dethroning" (Sontag, 1964, p.10) what is otherwise a serious subject. All in all the directors tried to utilize certain generic, cinematic, and aesthetic codes but ultimately failed (Smith, 2019, p.3).

Based on these examples, we can begin to see that a cult appreciation – especially around badfilms- truly starts at the aesthetic level. The decisions made during production, the blatant disregard for quality control, narrative elements that are airdropped suddenly for no apparent reason, all contribute to how individuals are perceiving these types of films. As Abrahamsson (2019) pointed out, there seems to be an increase in the "general appreciation of the strange and weird, but films that actually are so bad that they're good, if we sort of go down that cult movie tree. I think that became more of a thing." For badfilms, the extraction of comedy from the movie's scenes provide audiences with gratification, in which the "appeal is considerably heightened because viewers are required to construct the comedy for themselves, from the barest of raw materials" (McCulloch, 2011. p.212). This mirrors an earlier statement that audiences' imaginations play a crucial role in defining cult. Such imaginations are able to pull in audiences into the films' intricate world *as themselves*, arguably free from the constraints of what culture in general says about it. Therefore, audiences can embody and perform their own identity within the confines of the cinema.

In the case of *Rocky Horror* as another example, "much of the film relies on the unnaturalness of Frank's castle" in which "everyday objects do not really exist" (Artt, 2008, p.57). As one respondent stated, he loved "the completely disparate themes that they weave together," combining elements of horror, science fiction, mystery, and musical while acknowledging that the movie "handles queerness" with flamboyance (Gustav, 40, M, customer support). Audiences participate in the enjoyment of cult films as a way to recognize their perceived similarities and dissimilarities "within uncommon circumstances" (Kinkade and Katovich, 1992, p.202). Hence, they are tasked to draw their own connections to the aesthetic elements of these films and eventually coming up with their own conclusions and attach different meanings based on their personal backgrounds and identity –something that will be discussed in Chapter 6. This last point is perfectly encapsulated through a response from one audience member of *Rocky Horror*:

So I think a cult is something that's grown in the general...that people appreciate in the general public. Maybe not because it's an Oscar-

winning movie or something that would be considered by critics like objectively a good film, but it's something that's grown in people's... just how people consider it.

(Kajsa, 40, F, court clerk)

Understanding Failure

Individuals who watch cult films, are granted the opportunity to “rhetorically deconstruct the meanings foregrounded in the text” (Foy, 2022, p.129). Linking with the previous section, aesthetics were the lens for us to understand another deeper –yet common– layer of defining cult: the notion of failing. The thesis explores this idea by tracing it through two strands of characteristics, which are failing in terms of perceived quality and failing commercially and/or critically.

Regarding the notion of failing commercially or critically, we can look at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as one of the prime examples of a cult film failing in its initial release but has managed to obtain a staying power beyond anyone’s dreams. It has featured extensively in regions outside the US and the UK, and in Swedish cities such as Gothenburg, *Rocky Horror* screenings are held at least twice and sometimes more each year (for example Figure 10 below).



Figure 10

Screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Bio Roy, Gothenburg, 1 November 2022

Being a follow up to a successful stage musical, *Rocky Horror* the movie was released in 1975 to poor critical responses and only garnered about \$400 thousand within the first three weeks of its opening (Samuels, 1983, p.133). However, it was still quite successful in the Los Angeles area and movie executives scrambled to give the movie a second chance by assigning it a midnight movie slot in New York (Weinstock, 2008, p.5). There, it “ran for a record-setting ninety-five weeks” (Ibid.) creating history as it built up its own cult following.

The same can be said about *The Room* and *Miami Connection* for example. The former, was released in only one theatre in Los Angeles in which supposedly many viewers asked “for their money back – before even 30 minutes have passed” (Foundas, 2003). And yet, it is still a constant fixture in many theatres around the world where audiences would dress up, throw spoons, and wondering about Claudette’s cancer²⁷. The latter, produced and released in the late 80s opened to poor reception and was thought to have disappeared until an unprecedented chance rediscovery by a film collector in 2009 gradually launched the film back into circulation. *Donnie Darko* is also another example of a cult movie that sputtered in its initial release –mainly due to releasing two months after 9/11. It has since been “incredibly successful in terms of DVD sales” and has seen numerous re-releases in both theatres and DVD box sets (Gerber, 2021).

Jon (26, M, warehouse worker) defined cult films, in that they “typically tank in the box office.” He continued:

A lot of the more famous cult movies usually go to a theatre, or they have their screenings in theatres, and they tank horribly and eventually they find a new audience with people who actively seek the movie out.

(Jon, 26, M, warehouse worker)

Echoing these sentiments, Micke (30, M, software developer) believed that cult films were not successful to begin with but then a following builds and “people start to enjoy it” because they have “something special to it or weird to it.” The element of craziness or weirdness in terms of aesthetics is a reoccurring theme and was prevalent in the discussions of the previous section. It can be argued that this is the reason why many cult films were not immediate hits upon their first release as they can be considered to have been “repressed” and perhaps

²⁷ One of the plot points of *The Room* is Lisa’s mother (Claudette) saying she has breast cancer, but only mentions it once in the entire movie and it never gets a resolution

“buried by disapproval and neglect” (Barefoot, 2017, p.4) coming back in force due to the change of taste (Hoberman, 1980, p.7). Dana (39, F, author) also believed that cult films “weren’t that popular when they came out” but makes a distinction between some films that go “more mainstream and sometimes still pretty much underground.” She referred to films by John Waters (e.g. *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*) as examples that she considered to be controversial upon their release and even until now because “people still think they’re crazy.” This is of course a reflection of how Waters’ films are considered to be “direct challenges to good taste” with a deliberate “attempt to outrage” (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, p.100-101).

Based on these examples, we can clearly see how the previously examined aesthetic and narrative elements interlink with how some cult films were initially received upon release. The films were “overlooked by the general audience” (Sven, 40, M, project manager) arguably due to their outrageousness and failed to connect with the larger market. Abrahamsson (2019) used *The Big Lebowski* to illustrate a point regarding the dynamics between quirkiness and box office success:

[The Big Lebowski] was not a commercial success, the Coens were not unknown, absolutely not, but it wasn’t a success. Not saying the Coens set out to make a cult film, rather probably they are attuned to what people become obsessive about. But obviously it has a lot of nice quirky elements to it that can be picked up. Dressing, drinking, bowling whatever.

(Abrahamsson, 2019)

As exemplified by Abrahamsson here, audiences were not the only ones thinking about the lack of commercial/critical success as a criteria to define cult films. Stevenson (2019) believed that a working definition of cult should be attributed to movies who were originally relegated to the midnight movie circuit due to their lack of mainstream success, to which he says that “mainstream movies that somehow completely misfires could be a cult movie...a bad movie.” In some ways, this resembles how subcultures have been formed in that cult film audiences “detach [themselves] from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms” (Hebdige, 1979, p.19). Meaning, there was an individual or group of people that saw value in certain cult films *regardless* of how well it performed in the box office, which is the commonly accepted metric of film success.

Much like the aesthetic aspects of cult movies, there is also an element of unexpectedness in the commercial release of these films. Winsnes (2019)

stated that cult movies “attracts a much bigger crowd than what’s expected” by way of unconventionality “very much apart from the mainstream.” At the same time, a cult film can also be a movie that never made it to the cinema as stated by Pernilla Nilsson (2019, interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 25/10/19) who is the operating manager of Spegeln in Malmö. With this in mind, the nature of the films’ release links to the idea of “replayability,” which is something that will be explored in the next section. Even if in the beginning a certain film lacks appreciative viewers, time is the ultimate deciding factor as it allows some of these films to be “recuperated and reconstructed through the mobility of our perspective” (Corrigan, 1991, p.30).

Perhaps for some movies, their stature within the cult community could wane. But for others, the allure and enjoyment has not faltered one bit just like how Gustav (40, M, customer support) noted that *Rocky Horror* is “almost 50 years old and still has a showing in Malmö even.” From the perspective of the present day, there may as well be many films out there that given even more time, could enter the cult canon. Agnes Stenqvist (2022, interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 21/10/22), who was the event producer at Spegeln, Malmö, noticed that “there’s all these movies from the 2000s that are now coming full circle into almost cult again that has a really big crowd.” Because of this, she has been trying to curate more movies at Spegeln based on her personal observation.

Paul Kraus (2019, interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 12/12/19), who is the co-founder of Hypnos, a small independent and arguably an underground theatre in Malmö echoed these sentiments and emphasized the importance of the ever-shifting perspective of people:

I mean, in the framework of our curation or our programming, I think we have the opportunity...the longer we stick around, the opportunity to create a cult film if we can pluck one out of history, and that has certain qualities that...and I think these qualities, I think things change.

(Kraus, 2019)

Circling back to a previous point, it is worth remembering the “qualities” that Kraus mentioned can be considered to be in a state of constant flux when it comes to cult films. This is emphasized by Hills and Sexton (2015) by pointing out that cult films cannot be “entirely stabilised as objects of study without losing a sense of their mutability and their availability as shifting markers of cultural identity” (p.9). This notion is even more applicable when we are talking about bad films where audiences and scholars alike adopts a multitude

of viewing strategies that is consistently “ambivalent, even contradictory” in ascribing significance to the author’s intentions (Bartlett, 2019, p.2). It is through a cross-examination of audiences’ perception and the original intentions of the film producers can we grasp the concept of “failing” that is commonly used as a marker-definition for many cult film. Oftentimes, viewers are not able to discern whether the film’s director purposely created a bad film.

Malin (31, F, student) pondered if the directors of the film actually “wanted to make a bad movie” and puzzled at the thought of someone putting together the movie “then decide to actually air it and not realize that this is so bad...I’m just going to throw it away.” This mirrored what Sofia (27, F, UI/UX designer) has been asking herself in relation to *The Room*:

How is it possible not to see it's a bad movie and share it with people. So a lot of times, always, I'm like, "Why, why why? [...] Because the directors believe it's good, right? That's why they make the movie. But how is it possible not to see the ugliness?"

(Sofia, 27, F, UI/UX designer)

Here, Sofia exhibited a sense of dissonance with Tommy Wiseau, placing her aesthetic appraisal as seemingly superior to what Wiseau had originally envisioned. In her mind if she was the director or producer, she would not let the movie be seen by others let alone an audience that spans many geographical regions. As such, her reflection above stems from Sofia’s overwhelming sense of disbelief for having to witness a film that is “ugly.”

In another case, Bengt (39, M, Filmmaker) did not expect *Birdemic* to be “as crap as it was” even though he knew it would be “crap”:

I think that this is something else because this is so incompetent that I don't think that it's- I don't think that it's on purpose. It can't be something they tried to do, and then it didn't work, and then this is what we got. There were so many stupid choices made that they can't have done that on purpose, is my theory. So I didn't know that it was going to be as bad as it was.

(Bengt, 39, M, Filmmaker)

Hollywood has seen its fair share of “failed” filmmakers, but only a handful have persevered and made it into the pantheon of reverence. One such example—arguably the most famous of them all, was Ed Wood known for films such as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and *Bride of the Monster*. As a “prolific filmmaker—novelist—pornographer whose name (or pseudonym) appears on 10 films and

more than 80 pulp novels” (Singleton, 2019, p421), Wood drew the attention of many including renowned director Tim Burton, who produced a biopic of Wood’s life in 1994. One can consider Wood to be an “inscrutable [man] on the margins whose labour and passion were not fully appreciated from the very beginning” (Priambodho, 2022, p.165). Wood’s trajectory as a director, was somewhat replicated unintentionally by many others even though they may not have household recognition like Wood. It has spawned the “so bad it’s good” mode of appreciation that focuses on “some kind of aesthetic failure or incompetence” of movies that are “striving for and failing to deploy artistic conventions associated with a particular aesthetic/cultural category” (MacDowell and McCulloch, 2019, p.2). The notion of “so bad it’s good” often correlates with comedic enjoyment that arises from the previously mentioned disconnect between intentions and perception. In this way, the comedic nature of the films “insists upon the limitations” of actuality (Feibleman, 1938, p.421) by providing alternate scenarios where for example, sobering environmental messaging is greeted with chuckles rather than contemplation. Therefore, as the source of pleasure shifts, the film itself transforms into something unforeseeable by the original producers.

Sebastian (30, M, software engineer) who said that we have been “taught” as to what sort of emotions should be evoked by movies reflected upon these points. In regards to *The Room*, he said:

But this is something that is not traditional and you don't know what it's supposed to evoke because it doesn't evoke any of the traditional emotions. But it still evokes some kind of weird reaction, it's just that we are not observant of those types of reaction. Like the feeling of something being surreal or something being like a fever dream or whatever.

(Sebastian, 30, M, software engineer)

Sebastian’s comment shows how certain bad films illicit a sense of detachment from reality. By stating that it was similar to a “fever dream,” he acknowledges that the contents of the movie was perceived at a distance instead of resonance, which can be argued as one pathway towards establishing a film as cult.

When asked how they would characterize a cult movie, Ingrid (41, F, teacher), who was interviewed after a screening of *Rocky Horror*, immediately turned to badness as a way to characterize them. She noted that some musicals are bad and could easily fall into the genre and gives David Cronenberg’s *The Fly* as an example of a bad movie that was highly enjoyable and ultimately has “a cultural impact beyond what it was meant to have.” Sven (40, M, project

manager) mostly places the blame on the foot of the directors, stating that for many cult films “there is always a good premise” but “it’s just the people that have made it didn’t have the talent or the skill to fully realize their vision and premise.” This takes us back to a previous point when Ed Wood was used as an example of a “failed” director irrespective of his true intentions. As the individual who arguably holds a big sway in making the movie, we can clearly draw the linkage between the director’s role with the movie’s aesthetics. As far as “so bad it’s good” is concerned, it can be attributed to the movie’s “remarkable lack of artistry or their bald, contradictory or even hypocritical, ideological position” (Jancovich, 2002, p.317). The degree of the “lack of artistry” to which a movie adheres to, ultimately determines what is “so bad it’s good.” Micke (30, M, software developer) elaborated:

Birdemic is just-...everything is just insane and so over the top. So it becomes funny. But when it's less of those scenes and it's better in a traditional sense, like the acting is better and the script makes more sense, then it might not be as funny [...] If the quality is lower than a certain point and everything just becomes like, "What is going on?" Then that makes it funny. But if it's kind of not that terrible, then it just becomes more boring.

(Micke, 30, M, software developer)



Figure 11
When birds attack! A scene from *Birdemic*

Based on Micke's comment, it exemplifies how certain movies are able to evoke an enjoyable reaction from its audiences because it has moved beyond the qualifications of a movie that is just "boring." Due to the film's many exaggerations and aesthetic quality, audiences such as Micke are no longer able to suspend any sense of disbelief but instead are aware of reality in which what is transpiring on-screen bear no semblances at all.

One such case was when birds attacked in *Birdemic*, which was greatly exaggerated as illustrated in Figure 11 in the previous page. Many producers, directors, and production houses attempt to capture this exaggeration by *intentionally* making bad movies—at the cost of self-awareness that invalidates the idea of the sincere filmmaker. For example, notorious American film company The Asylum has for years created knockoffs of major Hollywood blockbuster films in which the movie titles are not necessarily subtle (e.g. *Avengers Grimm*, *Atlantic Rim*, and the more well-known *Sharknado*). Nicole (28, F student) believed that badfilms come from a genuine place in that the directors "really tried [but] it didn't work out at all." She reflected that in comparison to other types of movies, badfilms at least had "someone [who] cared about the movie." It elicits a feeling of sympathy with those who made the film, as Dean (32, M, programmer) noted regarding badfilms:

It's full of mistakes and errors and it's almost encouraging to watch. Like it wasn't perfect [...] It reminds you there's a person behind it all.

(Dean, 32, M, Programmer)

This is in opposition of intentional bad movies who are "somewhat self-reflexive and reference already established cult, camp, kitsch and bad taste aesthetics" (Popescu, 2013, p.3). Audiences then create a myth surrounding the sincere filmmakers who fail based on what works for them: "what they are saying to one another, what they are reading online, and how they pick and choose tidbits they believe in based on their own perception and understandings" (Priambodho, 2022, p.173). Because of this, there is a chance that some badfilm directors view themselves "as other people view [them]" (Winsnes, 2022, interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 11/05/22) taking on the persona based on public acclamation. In many ways, it is similar to Mathijs' (2003) example of Cronenberg's *Shivers* and its relationship with its critical reception. Audiences *help* these badfilm directors "secure their own relevance" (Ibid., p.122) by identifying their work as cult based on the notion of "failure"; a nuanced reciprocal relation that amalgamates both aesthetics and their perceived meaning or value.

The Replayability of Cult

This section of this chapter aims to shed light on how audiences and exhibitors alike define cult films from the replayability perspective. In the case of cult films, oftentimes movies find a new lifeline within repeated special screenings due to the ever-changing shift of audience point of views and taste. Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983) have traced the origins of cult back to the boom of midnight movies, specifically in New York in the 1960s where the staple of the programming was “marginal exploitation fares...Halloween spook-a-thons or rowdy New Year’s Eve bacchanals” (p.1). Such exhibition traditions have continued in Sweden where there is an effort from the cinemas in programming cult films but also “classic films.” Cinemas covered in this thesis do not exclusively screen the newest Hollywood productions, but also exhibiting movies that can be found in the archives. As such, the theatres who exhibited these types of movies “facilitated the acquisition of cult status” (Davis, 2020, p.28). This links back to the notion that was brought up in Chapter 2 when facets of the religious cult was discussed. The replayability of cult films, harkens back to the ritualistic nature of some religious cults in which such rituals serve as an act of “veneration” focused on a specific symbol –be it a cult leader or in the case of this thesis, a film (Marquez, 2018, p.276). As Collins (2004) argues, the solidification of one’s membership within a specific group or even the constitution of a person’s core experiential memories can be attributed to “intense ritual experiences,” which can then lead to change (p.42-43). Therefore, it can be argued that the practice of screening cult films repeatedly with audiences potentially watching the films more than once is both a process of finding oneself but also a process of reaffirmation.

Repeated viewing and exhibition of cult films embody the tenets of media engagement in that audiences are commonly immersed in a perpetual flow of engaging, disengaging, and potentially re-engaging with media (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.8). Because of this, a person’s media habits are either continuously reinforced or diminished as time goes on. In terms of watching cult films, it can also be linked with to Banbridge and Stark’s (1979) observation that in order for someone to join or stay within a cult is the existence of a sense of personal gratification –whether they are pleasure, enjoyment, fun, and so on. Audiences are able to attend cult film screenings repeatedly as long as they feel a sense of fulfilment and a wish to replenish this feeling would bring them back into the movie theatre. Such fulfilments can be brought about through the generation of a cult film atmosphere. However, the nature of cult-ish rituals as found in both religious and filmic cult screenings

are “inherently fragile” and “relatively transitory” due to these factors (Wallis, 1975, p.97). For if something goes amiss during the ritual, individuals may as well exclude themselves from future occasions.

When talking about how to define cult, Stevenson from Huset's Biograf quipped that “there are many arguments that can be made about it”. He also noted that a historical-oriented definition would also be applicable, echoing the midnight movie strain of defining cult:

Probably you would have to go back to the term midnight movies to find anything that can be definable basically and that would be a movie that...basically became a hit in the midnight movies sort of umm...circumstances. Which is easier to define.

(Stevenson, 2019)

Winsnes from Bio Roy in Gothenburg believed that there has been a shift of viewing perspective in the times between the initial release of certain movies to how audiences are perceiving them at the time of the cult film event screening:

You're not appreciating it for...you're appreciating it for what [the film] is, but you're also having a different perspective of it. Like some kind of irony [...] you watched films like that in the 90s, in the 80s in a different way, and you're not doing that today.

(Winsnes, 2019)

The above two examples illustrate how understanding the definition of cult is bound by context—in this case historic context- in which they have shifted over the years based on inclusion and exclusion (Storey, 2015, p.16).



Figure 12
Collection of 35mm films at Husets Biograf, Copenhagen

In the case of Stevenson, he took a great amount of effort to collect vintage 35mm films (as seen in Figure 12), which were the only available mode of exhibition at Husets Biograf, eschewing digital formats as commonly found in movie theatres nowadays. For Winsnes and Bio Roy, they have established good relationships with a film archive in the UK mainly for being able to screen some more obscure and often forgotten films. Therefore, the concept of time has become central in the discussion. Brian (36, M, administrator) thought “cult movies are films that everybody loves regardless before the internet and are something particular.” He added that “if a movie was done in the 70s and people still remember it, it's probably a cult movie just because of sort of a vibe to it.” Kraus (2019) further emphasized this. He pointed towards how historical events –not necessarily always related to cinema- can shape our perception of films:

So I think that certain cataclysmic or global events or local, national, significant events can transform a perspective to the point where what was, is now something else, in which case that opens up...it opens up the door to re-watching a film and going, "Oh, wait a minute, this was..." and maybe it's not more brilliant now, maybe it wasn't more insightful, but maybe it's like, "Oh, my God, how uncomfortable this all is." Yeah, I don't know, maybe it takes on a quality that can, yeah, be exploited.

(Kraus, 2019)

Here, Kraus illustrates how taste and society's perception on certain things can shift over time. What was socially acceptable a decade or five years ago may not be considered appropriate in terms of political correctness if it were juxtaposed with the present day's standards. Thus, it creates an opening for certain films to be re-appraised after a certain amount of time has passed. Abrahamsson (2019) believed that years ago before the advent of the internet, we can create our own "hierarchy" of movies based on "what's important and not important". He came to this conclusion because before the internet, going to the video store was one of the few options to see a movie. This meant there was a general lack of freedom or knowledge in comparison to contemporary movie going culture, where previously we did not "quite know what was considered to be good or bad or famous."

Interlinked with time, cult films are also often defined based on its replayability. For example, *Rocky Horror* through the "play of repetition and innovation" attained a ritualistic characteristic in which the performance of audiences became "a show with its own stars" (Wood, 1991, p.157). Klinger (2010) in her article on *The Big Lebowski* puts forward the idea that "replay culture", especially in the realm of cult cinema, is the by-product of movie distributors having access to wider array of mediums in addition to the movie theatre, from VHS, DVDs, to Blu-Rays, and eventually streaming platforms. It echoes what Green (1989) has said in that art in general is "economic process as much as an aesthetic one" (p.29). This understanding that cult films can be defined as texts that are played over and over again, by whichever medium it manages to spawn in, is acknowledged by almost all of the respondents to this research.

Anna Reimegård (2019, interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 11/10/19), who was the operations manager of Bio Roy in Gothenburg until January 2023, noted that a cult film should have "a few years on it". In an interview where both Reimegård and Winsnes was present, they discussed the replayability of cult films:

Reimegård: The Big Lebowski is also a cult movie because it has followers that watches it again and again and again. You could watch it a hundred times and you still laugh at it and love it. It has brought feelings to someone that makes it live on...

Winsnes: Yeah that's true! The repetitiveness! That it doesn't leave you.

Reimegård: Yes! You'll watch it every year and you will go again and watch.

Winsnes: That's a good definition.

Reimegård: That's a cult movie.

(Reimegård and Winsnes, 2019)

This resonates with Austin's (1981) characterization of cult films, in that there is always a "repeated attendance of a group of certain individuals" (p.44). The notion of cult films possessing an intrinsic value that is highly revered by people around the world, in that they are willing to watch the film over and over again was also echoed by other respondents. George (31, M, software engineer) believed that rewatchability "should be very high" on the criteria list of cult films. He said, "You should be able to watch it on repeat, pretty much, and it's as good as ever." His partner, Malin (31, F, student) added "or even better...quotability and rewatchability." Nicole (28, F, student) quipped that "films that people watch over and over and gathers a following that...for example, *The Room*, that my partner and his friends went to several screenings of and met the actors and have photos of the actors, it seems quite culty to me." Gustav (40, M, technical support) noted that cult films were those "that people can't get enough of, that keeps coming back to be shown at cinemas and has a vibrant fan community around it."

From this, we can purposely hark back to the dynamics of religious cults once more. In Marquez's (2018) mind, participation in cult rituals "signals membership in a particular community and such rituals act as amplifiers of emotion" that is interlinked with a specific symbol (p.276). Both the sense of belonging to a community and the amplification of emotion will be further discussed in Chapter 8. However, at this point of the thesis we can surmise that cult film screenings are perpetually anchored in a specific filmic text due to individuals' perception on its aesthetic qualities. Naturally, different films carry with them different sets of practices and expectations. Even in the cases of consequent screenings of *Rocky Horror* or *The Room* for example, there will always be factors that are wildcards, unpredictable permutations, or happenstance that may ultimately shape the atmosphere. This is because cult film screenings can be seen as a "modulation" where certain conditions, features, and characteristics can be retained from previous occasions, but other aspects can also be "recast" as the identities and configuration of those in attendance change (Trophagan, 2013, p.34).

Conclusion

One of the main takeaways from this chapter is that cult films elicit the feeling of joy and being entertained even in repeat viewings. It has explained how both audiences and exhibitors are understanding and perceiving cult films in terms of their establishment into the cult canon. Staiger (2000) writes that audiences may find pleasure in devious activities and derives from the dissolution of boundaries (p.165), which is certainly the case for many cult films. Cult films and their screenings are typically marked by an abundance of excess, pushing “the viewer beyond the formal boundaries of the text” (Sconce, 1995, p.387). In some ways, this is a reflection on how the media “have deradicalized the overstepping of boundaries –by turning protest and power into play and spectacle” (Hermes and Hill, 2020, p.4). These two notions will later be elaborated as foundational pieces into the creation of the cult film effervescence and ultimately the atmosphere of such events.

Regardless of the seemingly shifting ideologies behind the film, audiences still manage to create an intense attachment. Be it through the over the top aesthetics, a highly quotable script filled with gems of lines, or the practices and rituals surrounding the film screenings, one thing is for certain: audiences have managed to consistently “repurpose existing cultural materials” in order to produce something that is fresh (Lamerich, 2018, p.17) throughout the hundreds –if not thousands- of screenings all around the world. It is within this “freshness” that has allowed many cult films to endure the test of time, continuing to grace big screens even decades after their initial release. This is the embodiment of how “pleasures of repetition” are obtained, in that audiences “translate the text into a personal script” (Klinger, 2006, p.186), or in the case of the cult screenings of this research, a collective script. As Atkinson (2014) argues, experiential cinema practices “facilitate the consummation of the desire to engage in the repetitious and ritualistic practices of watching,” in which the aforementioned script may also be revised and adapted by different audiences (p.49). Because of the above points, the aesthetics, factual and perceived failures of a cult film, and the replayability of the films contribute to defining cult films. Taken in conjunction with each other, the three concepts create a groundwork for how we can understand the constitution of the cult atmosphere for badfilm and cult musical events.

Following this chapter, the thesis will unpack a key factor in how audiences and exhibitors are able to place a significant meaning on cult films: identity and how previous knowledge and experience plays a role in shaping an individual’s screening experience.

6. I'm the Only Cause I'm Interested In: Cult Identity and Performance

This chapter is focused primarily on the identity work of both audiences and exhibitors, stemming from an understanding that identity is never constituted in isolation nor are they “innocent constructions, even if individuals often are unaware of the power relations in which their sense of self is wrought” (Hermes, 2024, p.353). This is because in the case of cult film events, there is a robust interplay of identities from those involved that plays a significant role in the shaping the atmosphere of such events. The practice of watching films in the cinema have long been associated with a number of “accepted” societal norms where rowdiness and audibly disturbing others in the same auditorium are discouraged. One is expected, for example, to remain mostly quiet and not conduct excessive actions that would potentially jeopardize the enjoyment of others. Additionally, prior to the start of films, there would typically be announcements imploring audiences to refrain from talking or using their phones. From this we can outline how even in the cinema there is institutional power at play as a manifestation of the venue’s values and identity but also the genre of the film itself. Laughter is accepted during comedy movies and gasps or expressions of surprise might be applicable to horror films, but such expressions of emotions might be frowned upon during other genres. As Hanich (2018) posits regarding the nuances of watching movies with other people, “specific social situations come with specific obligations and entitlements, and hence with specific rules what we can expect from others” (p.282), which is also valid in the case of cult film screenings.

The exhibition of cult films in the cinema, especially so if they are centred around an “event” (e.g. sing-alongs, party-alongs, drink-alongs, etc.) come with them a distinct set of expectations diverging from the experience of watching movies at multiplexes. What this usually entails is that now audiences are welcome to speak with others, sing along with the songs in the

movie, or even utilize objects as props to enhance the screening experience. As this chapter will further elucidate, how audiences are motivating themselves to attend, aligning themselves with the values of the events will greatly hinge on their personal identity. However, cult film screening expectations are not constituted merely by audiences performing their identity, but also from the part of the exhibitors as facilitators of aforementioned expectations.

In the case of the cult film engagement and experience, expectations derived from that of the multiplex are typically not carried over and even shunned in some cases. There is a heightened sense of freedom and to an extent “liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.10). Within the context of the screenings of such films, audiences are afforded the ability to be whomever they want and are given extra breathing room to feel emotions and expressing them outwardly.

As such, we can also look towards the below quote taken from film critic Pauline Kael’s essay on “trash films” or films that contradict the “normal” aesthetic appraisals:

Far from supervision and official culture, in the darkness at the movies where nothing is asked of us and we are left alone, the liberation from duty and constraint allows us to develop our own aesthetic responses. Unsupervised enjoyment is probably not the only kind there is but it may feel like the only kind. Irresponsibility is part of the pleasure of all art; it is the part the schools cannot recognize. (Kael, 1970, p.104)

In her essay, originally published in *Harper’s Magazine*, Kael goes to great lengths to argue about how film appreciation and ultimately the enjoyment of film and obtaining pleasure from them, stems from the fundamental fact that each individual possesses differing perspectives on aesthetic appreciation. This is largely due to the fact that each person owes their outlooks on art and life in general to their cultural upbringing. As Kael (1970) puts it, “unfamiliarity” plays a key role in how a person can ascertain the value of entertainment regardless of the quality of the object at face value. The aforementioned upbringing, and thus the concept of unfamiliarity as something that is linked with one’s life would eventually enable a person –or in the case of this research- audience members *and* cinema programmers to discern where and how pleasure can potentially be found. “Irresponsibility” as Kael says, means that audiences of such film screenings are not expected to conform nor are they expected to be consistent in their “appearance and manner” (Goffman, 1959, p.15).

Although cult film culture is often discussed in the same breath as the notion of fandom, not each and every audience members are fans in the manner that they exceedingly “emphasize the centrality of their object of fandom to their sense of self” (Sandvoss, 2005, p.100). Even if the moniker of “cult” itself has an implication of having dedicated followers, this chapter will show that the processes of identification and the performance of identity are less linear than one would assume. Affinity towards cult films does not always develop within a short time frame, rather it evolves over time wholly dependent on the circumstances an individual would experience the cult film experience. There is a temporal aspect present, considering that cult film events and screenings are not an everyday occurrence and hence audiences are only able to build up their affinities over time. This is not to say that one cannot continuously foster a cult sensibility or a taste for cult films within days, for example by binging on such films, rather this serves as an acknowledgment that the ephemerality aspect of the phenomenon should not be taken for granted. If we are to understand the engagement of cult films as “a dynamic relational process rooted in affect and identity” (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.5), then it would be wise to take our time in understanding the nuances and perceptions of exhibitors and audiences in relation to how they’ve primed themselves for the cult film experience.

An exploration on the nuances of personal identities in this chapter serves as an ideal point of departure prior to an analysis of the sociality aspects of the cult film experience that will be expounded in the next chapter. Connecting back to Dahlgren and Hill’s (2023) writing, this chapter mainly focuses on the motivational aspects of media engagement. While audiences’ and exhibitors’ backgrounds and knowledge vary, a heightened sense of intersubjectivity occurs within the confines of the cinema auditorium, where seemingly a new, albeit ephemeral collective identity is generated. It is sustained by a shared affective engagement that is anchored in the processes of identification for those who are involved and present during cult film events. When asked about his thoughts on how cult film events motivate audiences to attend, Jakob Abrahamsson who is the CEO of NonStop Entertainment, believed that feeling of belonging to a group is “very human.” However, he also thought that a person has to conduct oneself based on too many social situations. He puts forward the idea that that did not have to be the case in connection with film screenings:

I think you have a tremendous amount of identities now and that they are in flux and most people that’s how it is and you deal with it. But I think momentarily just being one thing, is actually super attractive.

And also shutting off your phone and just being there. Sometimes I think there are a lot of things in the umm... [very short pause] Very few people are super religious in Sweden, so it's sort of a rite as well, a ritual. Obviously not the same thing but you actually...umm... on a very basic level you at least for a very brief moment are involved in something that is bigger than your person and body.

(Abrahamsson, 2019)

Abrahamsson's reflection again alludes to the formation of a temporary collective identity bound by the cinema auditorium and the duration of a certain film. He acknowledges that as individuals, we are expected to perform our identities wholly dependent on the social context. By looking at identities, it would allow us to see the multiple pathways to enjoyment through films that are otherwise –at the least- debatable in regards to their aesthetic qualities based on the different audiences' and exhibitors' fundamental beliefs and values. This links with how we consider cult screenings to be “spectacles” where “physical and emotional work” is involved by all actors (Hill, 2014, p.187) such as audiences and those who work at the cinema. It arises from an understanding that identities, whether they are individual or collective, are constantly “shifting and multiple” but also constantly constructed and reconstructed (Cameron, 2001, p.170). Therefore, if we are to expound on the cult film atmosphere, this chapter pays close attention to how audiences and exhibitors relate with not just other people, but also with themselves as an act of self-reflection (Böhme, 2017, p.71).

Consequently, as the first part of this chapter, a discussion on the identities of the cinemas as an organization, which in turn provides a space for cult film screenings will be unpacked. The chapter will elaborate exactly how cinemas both explicitly and implicitly express and perform their identities. One way of doing this is by examining the written materials they have produced, such as website “about me” sections or blurbs on specific film events. Additionally, an analysis of how individuals in positions of power (e.g. programmers, cinema managers, or proprietors) perceive themselves in relation to their operational modes in running the cinemas will be unpacked. We look into how these exhibitors are consciously programming the slate of films to be exhibited on their screens and explore their personal filmic preferences and taste, glimpsing into the business decisions such as financial considerations.

In the second part of this chapter, a thorough exploration on the aspects of motivations that are linked to the notions of identity and an analysis of how different audiences ascertain fun and enjoyment from attending a screening is

elaborated. If in the previous chapter the idea of the “so bad it’s good” moniker has been teased primarily from the film’s perceived aesthetic qualities, in this chapter we take a closer look how individuals are reflecting on the sense of enjoyment anchored in their personal dispositions. What is good? What is bad or does it matter? This entails an exploration on personal tastes, knowledge, and previous experiences as a motivating force for coming to the cinema that shapes their viewing experience, which in turn may facilitate the generation of the cult film atmosphere.

Setting the Stage: Cinema Identity

In understanding the motivations that are at play in relation to cult film screenings, we must first acknowledge that the cinemas themselves -as a key factor in the constitution of the cult experience- possess their own distinct identities that are constructed through “specific enunciative strategies (Hall, 1996, p.4). This also reverberates with Thornton’s (1995) concluding remarks in that subcultures are created not just by the individuals who identify themselves within, but also by the media by “naming them and draw boundaries around them in the act of describing them” (p.162). Oftentimes, their identity has been manifested mainly through their choice of programming that appeals to a certain type of audience. Unlike the national cinema chains such as Filmstaden in Sweden, the cinemas that were incorporated in this research all made conscious and distinct choices when it comes to selecting the movies that were playing on their screens. Aside from the obvious link to catering towards a more “art-house,” “independent,” “underground,” or even “cult” audiences, the cinemas typically have a limited number of auditoriums that are capable of exhibiting movies. For example, Husets Biograf in Copenhagen, Hypnos in Malmö, and Bio Roy in Gothenburg only have one auditorium, which leaves no possibilities to hold parallel screenings of different movies. Spegeln in Malmö has three auditoriums and Capitol Bio in Stockholm has four. In comparison, multiplexes owned and operated by Filmstaden may have more than double the amount of auditoriums in any of the bigger cities such as Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. Therefore, cinemas with limited resources (i.e. amount of auditoriums available but also financial) must find inventive ways to pronounce who they are to audiences with the hopes of attracting would-be moviegoers. In many ways, these cinemas engage in a programming regime that is similar to film festivals where

“creative programming” and “eventfulness” take precedent in appealing to their imagined audiences (Dickson, 2018, p.98).

Whilst these cinemas have well-defined programming choices, it would be prudent to remember that the ability to do so is ultimately tied with those who have the power to do so within the organization. In talking about power of the media, Corner (2011) states that the symbolic and cultural aspects of media power has the ability to shape the “perception, knowledge, and feeling” of audiences (p.15). This is a key observation for this thesis particularly because within the context of cult film screenings, it can be argued audiences would not be able to *fully experience* certain cult films without having someone – whether they are individuals, organizations, or cinemas- willing to put in the effort or have enough resources to exhibit such films to them. This is because some cult films are interlinked with a number of rituals and practices as an integral part of the experience. It is not saying that individuals are unable to form their own collective belonging or shared experience in another manner, such as through online platforms. However, the degree of intensity and participation may be lessened to a degree compared to being the same room with dozens of other people, which will be explored later on in this thesis. It is as Mathijs and Sexton (2011) affirmed that in regards to cult screenings, “it was not so much the film that mattered, but the experience itself, and the images of the film were there to support that experience” (p.33). Moreover, in order to comprehend the audience experience, we must first be mindful of the role of “spaces and traditions” in the shaping of participation (Barker, 2012, p.190), which is primarily garnered through screenings of cult films as a materialization of the cinema’s identity as an organization.

To illustrate the above points, we can consider the underpinnings of the cinemas’ identities in relation to programming. For example, Husets Biograf’s programme is mostly based on the whims of Jack Stevenson, who is the owner and manager of the cinema. He distinguished Husets Biograf in terms of programming and its identity in comparison to how the previous owner/manager ran the cinema, noting that the previous manager operated the theatre as an “art house movie theatre,” where films for “younger audiences” such as *Coffee and Cigarettes* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* were the staples. In comparison, when Stevenson took over they “completely changed the identity of the place” and considers Husets Biograf to be an “underground movie theatre or a cult movie theatre,” contingent to his belief that cult movie theatres are ones who exhibit “classic midnight movies” or films by John Waters such as *Pink Flamingos* or *Female Trouble*. In comparison to other cinemas that fell within the scope of this research, Husets Biograf arguably has

the most eclectic line-up of films and events –in line with Stevenson’s vision of what his cinema should be. It is also the only place in the Nordics that have monthly screenings of *The Room* since 2011, and regular sing-alongs and drink-alongs for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Big Lebowski* respectively. A blurb on their website reads:

In a world of big theatre chains and sterile multiplex cinemas, Husets Biograf combines a personal touch with a fiercely anti-corporate atmosphere and attitude that harkens back to the founding hippie/Bohemian spirit of Husets, launched in 1970.

(Husets Biograf website²⁸)

We can see that the language used above is assertive in the way they pronounce their identity. Husets Biograf positions themselves as an enclave that stands against the seemingly unappealing characteristics of the multiplex. It embodies “a rebellious attitude of defiance at odds with what dominant forces in a society endorse” (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, p.24). This is a direct call-back to the idea of subcultures, where many of its formations were attributed to the “challenging at a symbolic level the ‘inevitability’, the ‘naturalness’ of class” (Hebdige, 1979, p.89). In other words, Stevenson and his cinema are openly problematizing the capitalistic tendencies of the contemporary film industry.



Figure 13
Husets Biograf’s Facebook banner

²⁸ <https://Husets.kk.dk/en/about/venues/Husets-biograf?language=en>

Being “fiercely anti-corporate” in the case of Husets Biograf is a direct pushback against any “dominant cultural biases” and can also be considered a way to talk back to power by delineating and breaking down the barriers to “esthetic distinctions” as a characteristic of the ‘mainstream’ (Church, 2008). Furthermore, their Facebook page’s banner declares that they are “Copenhagen’s Underground Cinema Since the 1970s” (as shown in Figure 13 in the previous page). Here, they are also implicating their space is hidden and relatively unknown even to those who live in the city, and only those who are knowledgeable can find them. What the above blurb and the banner is broadcasting to audiences is that Husets Biograf as a cinema is offering them a unique experience that is far removed from mundanity, or mainstream tastes and films.

A cinema identity that is seemingly recoiling against the dominant film culture –albeit not as extreme- was also evident with Bio Roy in Gothenburg. In an interview with David Winsnes he proclaimed that he did not “like booking the obvious movies” such as *The Terminator* or *A Clockwork Orange*, specifically for their “classics” screenings or as centerpieces for their cult film events. Anna Reimegård, who was Winsnes’ colleague at the onset of this thesis, also concurred, by saying that “we are not screening typical movies that you do in like the bigger...bigger companies.” This echoes back to similar sentiments from Stevenson in they were not in the business of competing nor were they offering the same experiences as multiplexes. Even if that were so, there was a marked difference between the two cinemas in how they perceive their identity. Where Husets Biograf was considered “underground” or “cult” by its manager, Reimegård and Winsnes did not consider themselves to be any of those and even refused to call themselves an “art house cinema,” but preferring to call themselves an “event cinema.” They elaborated on the reasoning as to why this is by saying they took strides to “put a value to it, so it’s not just a screening of a movie” and that it is “often connected to something.” For example –aside from their eponymous *Den Dåliga Filmfestivalen*, their programming includes a plethora of sing-alongs (e.g. *Mamma Mia*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), classic films packaged as an event (e.g. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy marathon), but also recorded musical and opera performances (e.g. Metropolitan Opera, Paris Opera). We can see the statements of both Reimegård and Winsnes reflected in Bio Roy’s “About Us” section on their website:

In a fantastic salon in the middle of town, we offer daily film screenings. In addition to new repertory films, with a focus on quality films, event cinema is a central feature of our program. Interactive

screenings, niche documentary films, themed genre nights, imported music films, classics and much more. [...] Our programming is based on curiosity and openness - simply put, we want to be a cultural centre and a meeting place that offers experiences you won't find anywhere else in Gothenburg.

(Bio Roy website²⁹)

Similar to Husets Biograf before –and along with other cinemas in this study, Bio Roy are engaging in a strategy that expounds on the experiential aspect that cannot be replicated elsewhere (Silver and McDonnell, 2007, p.500). Albeit the wording on Bio Roy’s website is not as forceful, it is still trying to convey the uniqueness of their identity. Even though they acknowledge their focus on “quality films,” the term itself also carries a nuanced meaning, specifically in a Bourdieusian (1979) sense where taste creates a means to distinction with implications of proficiency in the film culture in order for someone to “get it.” In this case, Winsnes as the head programmer imparts his own tastes into the programming, permeating the choices that Bio Roy has taken. In discussing in detail about how they choose films, Winsnes referred to two other cinemas in Gothenburg who are carrying out a similar programming. On one hand, one of the cinemas highlight “Sundance” films and a host of American independent films that can be considered “cool.” Another cinema located 15 minutes away from Bio Roy mostly focuses on “very very niche films [...] a lot of world cinema from all over the world.” Winsnes then continued: “meanwhile we are somewhere in the middle. We screen a lot of films that they do too. But we’re a bit more fun and weird. [...] We book a lot of international titles that wouldn’t otherwise come to Sweden. [...] We probably have like eight, nine films that no one else had thought about.” Much like the cinemas who organize a cult film screening in Sweden, their programming exudes a sense of “exclusivity” that is seemingly attempting to “distinguish themselves from more accessible, ‘mainstream’ modes of cinema consumption” (Moulton, 2020, p.206).

Although both Husets Biograf and Bio Roy are forthcoming regarding their identities by situating themselves somewhat on the fringes of the ‘mainstream,’ not all cinemas who possess a cult sensibility in Sweden are as blatant. Spegeln in Malmö for example, embody an identity that is more commercially oriented than Bio Roy even though both theatres are members of the people’s collective

²⁹ Found at <https://www.bioroy.se/om-bio-roy>; translated to English from Swedish

(*folkrörelse*, in Swedish) *Folkets Hus och Parker*³⁰, from which they receive some funding. Reimegård reflected briefly on this by saying that both cinemas “are quite similar, but where Spegeln is a bit more commercial, if you want to say it that way.” She then stated that Spegeln can afford to exhibit some of the bigger and more recently released Hollywood movies because they have more auditoriums (three in total) at their disposal.

Those who work at Spegeln echo these reflections from a person outside their organization. Pernilla Nilsson, who is the manager of the cinema, acknowledged that when she took over the role, she widened the program with the underlying thought of being more inclusive. She quipped, that for movies “there’s a daily mood. You can’t always watch Ingmar Bergman films...maybe you want to...it’s okay to watch *Star Wars* and like Ingmar Bergman as well. Who are we to say that that’s not culture?” She noted that her discovery of *The Room* in Copenhagen as told by a friend many years ago was the beginning of her booking more cult films. Nilsson admitted that one of the things she loved about running the movie theatre was seeing the different types of audiences interspersing with each other, such as when “opera audiences meet punk documentary or *The Room* or the *Natural Born Killers* audiences.” If we look at Spegeln’s “About Us” blurb on their website, there is a synchronicity with Nilsson’s thoughts on their identity:

Cinema Spegeln is located on Stortorget near central Malmö and in 2014 became Malmö's first cinema with a bar and bistro. Word of the catered cinema spread and people travelled from all over Sweden to Malmö to experience à la carte in the cinema hall. Today we boast three serviced salons and an eventful event program that includes Sing Alongs, the Cinematheque, Breakfast cinema, gala premieres and much more than that! And what could be better than experiencing all that in an atmosphere where food, drink and film meet in a perfect symbiosis? So take a break from everyday life and experience everything Spegeln has to offer. (Spegeln website³¹)

³⁰ *Folkets Hus och Parker* is a membership-based “people’s movement” comprised of over 500 “meeting places”, which includes *Folkets Hus* (meaning “the people’s house” in Swedish, a public building purposed for gatherings of people), parks, and cinemas. It is a unique component of the Swedish society with a history dating back to the early 20th century. It is a “non-political and non-religious organisation” whose mission statement is: “We fight together for the right to happiness, life and dreams. For the right to influence and shape our common future. We create meeting places for culture, education and organisation.” See: <https://www.folketshusochparker.se/om-oss/om-oss-english>

³¹ Found at <https://biografspiegel.se/om-spegeln>, translated to English from Swedish

Unlike previous examples from cinemas' "About Us" section, there are minimal aspects of distinction in terms of taste on Spegeln's website. Where in previous cases terms such as "anti-corporate" or "quality films" were present in the description, Spegeln opts to focus on the experience of coming to the theatre instead and the joys that can potentially be found by attending a screening. Instead of conveying their identity through the specific types of film in their programming, they are highlighting that audiences "from all over" are more than welcome and underscores the importance of their atmosphere. Therefore, they are attempting to entice potential audiences with a promise of a "rewarding" experience for coming to the movie theatre in comparison to say watching movies through other media (Jullier and Leveratto, 2012, p.147). Agnes Stenqvist, who was Spegeln's event producer, also expressed this philosophy of catering towards a wide range of audiences from a financial point of view. She said, "We are an art house cinema so we have to- we want to show the smaller films as well and to be able to do that because we know they're not going to bring in money, we have to also show James Bond." Stenqvist then went on to say that they were curating towards a variety of individuals from "sing-along enthusiasts" to "your normal 20-year-old girl who wants to go on a date with her boyfriend." This outlook on audiences was of course sustained by the fact that the cinema has more than one auditorium, through which they are able to exhibit films in parallel to each other.

Similar in approach to Spegeln, Capitol Bio in Stockholm also generally strives to cater towards a wide array of audiences. Equipped with four auditoriums, the cinema prides itself on its history that dates back to 1926 and for having the capability to show a diverse line-up of films. Jakob Abrahamsson, who is the CEO of Nonstop Entertainment³² and whose company spearheaded the revival of Capitol Bio since 2016, stated in an interview they are focused on "audience interactions" rather than who they are as individuals. He said they would gladly show "more niche films" such as Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* alongside other movies with a sizeably bigger profile and renown such as *Joker*, *Star Wars*, *Escape From New York*, or *Blade Runner*. This is in addition to screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (packaged as a Halloween event for example) and *The Room*. Abrahamsson thought that Capitol Bio was not strictly a cult theatre like the Prince Charles (London, UK) or the Metrograph (New York, United States), noting that Capitol was "much too small" to be like them. Interestingly,

³² Nonstop Entertainment is a Sweden-based film distributor of "quality films in Scandinavia." They specialize in buying the rights to many independent, art-house, and cult films. See: <https://www.nonstopentertainment.com/about>

Abrahamsson delineated the aforementioned international cinemas as “maybe snobbish, but also tribal... and the whole building is designed for being that. Sort of the hipster, highbrow crossover.” It is quite telling that he does not consider Capitol to be in the same vein of the cult cinema mainstays of the world. Distancing themselves from explicating a pronounced identity that they are “exclusive” or all about underground or cult films, as other cinemas may proudly proclaim. If like previously we are to look at their “About Us” section of their website, there are hence less allusions to matters of distinction:

Centrally located in the heart of Vasastan is Bio & Bistro Capitol, which since 1926 has prided itself as one of Stockholm's largest and most beautiful cinemas. More than three decades after the original cinema operations were shut down, the entrance doors have been open again since 2018. Inside them awaits not only a historically important location for the film, but also a place of culinary and architectural delight.

You will recognize the 1920s Art Deco when you come here - we have kept everything original as far as possible.

From the pillars, railings and stucco in the foyer and the old curtain machinery at the back in Salon 2, to the balcony's bend and railing in Salon 1. But despite operating in an older building, we haven't skimped on accessibility, technology and comfort.

With a film-savvy program team with a good sense of humour and a bistro and kitchen team with long experience and great passion for their craft, we promise an experience out of the ordinary.

(Capitol Bio website³³)

Much like Spegeln before, the language used is arguably open and inclusive in nature, bucking the notion of exclusivity as often implied by the cult film culture. Moreover, the self-proclamation of who Capitol Bio are primarily focuses on the atmosphere and hence the added value of watching a film on their premises. The importance of the alluded atmosphere lies in its function as a “setup, infrastructure, or frame” that allows the possibility for a memorable experience to occur (Tawa, 2022, p.60). Therefore, they are identifying themselves less as a “movie” place, but banking more on being a place where specialness happens. Their motivations are not as much about being the beacon of cinephilia in a sizeable and diverse city such as Stockholm,

³³ Found at <https://www.capitolbio.se/om-oss>, translated to English from Swedish

as they are being an immersive space where watching a movie is accompanied by other complementing factors (e.g. drinking wine, eating food, admiring the architecture). This is in tangent with Abrahamsson's own opinion that Capitol cannot be boxed into a specific moniker, as they are "showing films for a grown up audience" where "there's a lot of freedom" and importantly "doesn't actually say what's bad or good or niche or broad."

In the case of Hypnos in Malmö, a refusal to be boxed in is also expressed to an extent. This is despite that their current website immediately states that they are a "Live venue and independent cinema," and their programming choice is evidently channelling a certain type of identity with their line-up of Hitchcock films, Ruben Östlund retrospectives, and *Twin Peaks* marathons. However, Paul Kraus who was the co-founder and up until a few years ago, the head of operations of Hypnos believed that "identity is something [we] really stay away from" for the reason that he wants people to come in with minimal preconceived notions. They even go as far as having minimal decorations inside their lone auditorium because "we don't want people to have some sort of opinion." He continued:

If you let people fill in all the gaps themselves, you let the people be the paintings here. [...] Identity is, you come to the red curtains, to the best of our ability, you should be forgetting that outside and around here is what it is. There should be a cave that is just for fantasy, just for play.

(Kraus, 2019)

The above statement about minimal furnishings of the auditorium is in stark contrast with the approach of the other cinemas within this research, which signifies a different mode of identity expression, and ultimately generating a different atmosphere. Therefore, we can surmise that Hypnos is creating wiggle room for potential audiences to bring with them their own identity and in one way or the other, coalesce with the cinema's outwardly ambiguous identity.

Even though there is a reluctance on Kraus' part to solidify a cinematic identity for Hypnos and wants to instil a sense of openness, his reflections on their programming—as briefly teased above—say otherwise in which there are certain criteria that needs to be fulfilled. He creates a typology of film types, which are divided into three categories: category one, category two, and category three. He admits that category one is as "poppy" as they will go, with the likes of *Pulp Fiction* and *Léon: The Professional* as examples. Category two is considered to be more niche where Kraus considers most David Lynch films

belong in this category. The third category, he considers to be even more segmented with films such as Carl Abrahamsson's *Anton Lavey – Into the Devil's Den* and Ellen Cantor's *Pinochet Porn* as primary examples. Despite the particularities of his programming, Kraus still admits that he envisioned to have all the categories covered in the schedule so that "when somebody looks on [the program], no matter their taste, they're always going to find something in the future that they're interested in."

By expressing their identity, cinemas are creating the groundworks for a place where audiences are able to experience "critical modes of engagement" through their resonance of genre knowledge (Hill, 2019, p.61). Such identity work is materialized in their programming and conveyed through their modes of communication. On one hand, there is a strong sentiment to rail against what is considered to be "mainstream," instead capitalizing on their identity as a means of distinction alluding to the existence of a semi-permeable layer pierced only with the appropriate cultural knowledge; embodying "a refusal of complicity" (Thornton, 1995, p.102) towards the perceived dominant moviegoing practices of the region. On the other, a stronger sense of inclusivity rather than exclusivity is revealed. This is not to say one approach is better than the other, nor is one approach *the* ultimate epitomizing of the cult film culture. Rather, it paints a picture of how cinemas who screen cult films may have completely different motivations in doing so. There is no sense of a unified "cult" identity in the case of the cinemas encompassed in this research, although some tangential aspects are evident. It exemplifies Jancovich's (2002) argument in that there are no singular cult identities where in fact oppositionality is a hallmark of the cult film culture. Ultimately, such programming practices and choices are economically motivated in vying for the attention of potential audiences. The previously discussed cinema identities—as diverse *or* similar as they may be, are a facilitator to provide a space that has the possibility to foster cult practices and sensibilities, yet "in reality are shaped through commercial media industries" (Moulton, 2020, p.208).

Based on what has been written in this chapter so far, we can see that different cinemas have different motivations and modes of identity expression. Such motivations and expressions from the part of the movie theatres are in turn utilized with the hopes of precipitating motivational factors on the side of audiences, culminating in their attendance of a film screening at the theatre. It sets the stage for the *potential* multiplicities and dynamism of the moviegoing experience and hence it is evident that there are no homogenous approaches in order to achieve this. We can argue that the nebulous nature of cult film audiences and the understanding that different individuals come with them

varying degrees of subjectivities that are implicated in the experiential aspect of media engagement (Corner, 2011, p.87).

In his discussion on film taste and how niche films are marketed, Hesmondhalgh (2002) puts forward the idea that audiences “are able to enjoy different kinds of cultural experiences” that exceeds the expectations and projections of both researchers but also those within the film industry (p.253). As Levitt (2018) argues, the “filmic experience” is shaped by “context and the dramatically different ambiance³⁴” of venues (p.23), and the material and symbolic manifestation of a cinema’s identity certainly plays a central role in shaping the aforementioned filmic experience. The matter of resonance with said identity are thus left in the hands of the audience, which will be discussed in the next section.

Taking the Stage: Audience Identity and Collective Identity

The approach to researching cult film audiences stems from seeking to “understand the complexities of personal and social relations” (Esin, Fathi, and Squire, 2014, p.203), particularly in their relations to the cult film experience as a cultural and social phenomenon. It attempts to examine the relational nuances and reflections of audiences with other factors that are encompassed in the moviegoing experience, such as the exhibitors, the films, and not least, themselves as individuals. As Dahlgren and Hill (2023) argues, the “emotional experience” of media engagement in any case implicates “identity processes” as an embodied component of said experience (p.15). Therefore, to understand how the cult film experience is constituted, we must explore how audiences who compose such experiences are perceiving themselves and how they are “presenting” themselves if we are to take into account Goffman’s (1959) idea of identity as a performance. At the same time, there should be a degree of awareness that identity in itself is never perpetual in nature and that it shifts multiple times as individuals follow the ebb and flow of everyday life.

This resonates with Cameron’s (2001) arguments in her discussion on the role of language in the construction of identity, where she posits that language use and ergo identities are not “necessarily equal in any given social situation” (p.161). Audiences who attend cult film screenings may embody a different

³⁴ In Levitt’s (2018) case, it was the context and ambiance of outdoor cinema.

identity within the cinema space while taking on a different one as soon as they exit the space. Furthermore, how each individual identity is performed during the moments leading up to and inside the cinema auditorium varies from screening to screening. Of course, there are cases of identities that are constant throughout the screenings, but it is far from certain. This relates back to Jakob Abrahamsson's opinion earlier in this chapter, to which he believes that people's identities are always in "flux" and when it comes to being in the cinema there is a merging of identities that is to an extent, shaped by the movie that is being screened.

Identity as a motivational factor in media engagement that are enmeshed with "human agency and subjectivity" (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.44), can then serve as the ideal starting point prior to a closer examination of the more collective and practical elements of the cult film experience. Cinemas as the facilitators of the movie screenings are limited in their ability to imagine and predict their audiences. There is seemingly a number of what we can term as "identity checks" that flows from the onset of someone being interested in seeing a film at the cinema, whether they are self-coagulated or with the help of external factors (i.e. friends or family providing the impetus to watch the movie). These checks, if a person passes each one, would ultimately lead to them going to the cinema. The conception of interest can originate from many different sources, forms, and media. It could be news articles, online forums or threads, movie posters, or other individuals. For example, Dean (32, M, programmer) was enticed into a screening of *Miami Connection* by his friend who hyped up the film consistently. He admitted that reading about the plot alone would have gotten him into the movie theatre, but on top of that the poster also acted as a pull factor by saying "I mean the poster alone...like never mind how much he hyped it up, once I looked at the poster I was like wow! This is gonna be great." Identity is the thread for Dean to be able to garner enough interest in *Miami Connection* well before he goes on to see the movie *in addition to* having the confidence that he will have a "great" time.

At first glance, it would be too convenient to presuppose that audiences of cult film have a shared identity and hence why they are flocking to the same films repeatedly. However, it is acknowledged "cult movie audiences do not share a single, and certainly not a uniformly oppositional, attitude towards legitimate culture" (Jancovich, 2002, p.314). Much like the cinemas where audiences congregate to enjoy their cult films, there are different motivating factors at play that emphasizes the importance of filmic taste that includes their previous knowledge and experiences, but also how different individuals perceive the faux-binary distinctions of "bad" and "good" (if any). Audiences in the case of

this research are not necessarily fans nor are they always “film buffs,” “cinephiles,” or any other appellations. Some are more accepting of such identities, but others are even proclaiming themselves to be anything but a “fan” of cult films or film in general. Hence, it can be argued that such predications and how cult audiences are perceiving themselves are dependent on context (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011, p.60-61).

If we take the example of Dean again to elucidate the above points, we can look towards this reflection on his own identity:

I think I'm just a regular movie goer and that said, I have watched very few movies [laughter]. I had a bit of an isolated childhood because I grew up on a farm in the middle of nowhere in France. So the first ten years of my life was just like...in a barn [laughter]

(Dean, 32, M, programmer)

He then went on to say that he was “super lightweight when it comes to obsessing about movies” and he admitted that he had the tendency to forget about movies after watching them. At the same time, Dean developed a certain taste of films, specifically that of badfilms, considering that he went on to attend screenings of films that are a part of the *B-Filmsklubben* in Malmö a number of times and often with the same group of friends. As such, it can be argued that even though Dean shied away from identifying himself as a “movie person,” his actions of watching bad films have constructed a personal identity that was obfuscated even from himself. In that sense, we can see that certain culture has indeed played a key role in the reproduction of identities (Hermes, 2024, p.17), which in Dean’s case was developing an affinity towards badfilms.

A similar downplaying of or refusal of the “fan” or cineophile identity was also exhibited by others that were interviewed in this research. When asked about how she perceived herself in relation to films, *Rocky Horror* attendee Anna (33, F, marketing associate) hesitated by saying, “I’m not sure if I’m a movie person,” despite admitting that horror movies are her favourite and watch a lot of them and stating, “there was a period I went a lot [to the movies].” As another example, Nicole (28, F, student) who went to a screening of *Birdemic* with her partner considered herself to be “a casual watcher” and shied away from any other predicates by saying, “I’m definitely not a film critic” while admitting:

Sometimes I get through phases where I'm a little more into something, but it never lasts for very long. So sometimes I will watch all the M.

Night Shyamalan movies in a week or something. But that's about as intense as it goes. I am someone who likes to watch movies and then read a lot of stuff online [laughter] about what other people thought.

(Nicole, 28, F, student)

As we can see from the examples above, there is no guarantee that audiences of cult films in the case of this research perceive themselves as someone who embody –in the words of Bourdieu (1979) - a “connoisseur.” Nor are we to prescribe that the audience composition of any cult film screening should follow a predetermined formula where audiences are predisposed towards a certain taste or cinephilia. Others were more than willing to play up to and express their expertise in film watching.

Case in point Brian (36, M, administrator) and his wife Clara (37, F, administrator) were both admittedly “old cinema buffs” according to Brian. They disclosed having a dedicated logbook where they wrote reviews of all the films they have watched, not only giving them a score and “a star if both [of us] gives it 8 out of 10,” but also wrote lines from the movie in the book. In the case of Sven (40, M, project manager), his expertise was connected with his experience growing up when friends got him into *Star Wars* and eventually “self-taught” himself on films, admitting, “I completely watched way too many movies.” Throughout the interview, Sven was able to recall precise movie titles along with the actors who starred in them. From *Jurassic Park* to *Slumber Party Massacre*, he was more than happy to indulge in laying out the constellation of all the films that felt important to him. He later said, “I have a brain for [movies], it just sticks. Terrible with names in ordinary life but actors and directors and crew members....read it once, I know who you are.” This signifies the fact that Sven has been accumulating filmic knowledge over the course of his life and thus constructing his personal identity that plays a role in how he perceives cult and badfilms as something meaningful.

For Dana (39, F, author), her affinity towards film built up over the course of her life, such as watching more and more Troma-produced films while living in the Netherlands and getting a knack for art movies while studying philosophy. She said, “I watched a lot, tried to get as much as possible. But [then] I started turning into a little bit of snob. I only watched arts movies. I didn't watch mainstream films anymore.” Eventually she admitted that after starting film studies at university, her preferences shifted again:

I thought they were going to talk only about art films [...] but it was actually the opposite. [...] They are very much interested in more like Hollywood and mainstream films. And at first I was a bit annoyed with

it, but then I really realized that how much the mainstream film has contributed and how it has shaped society in different ways and how you can look at it in different ways too. So I started appreciating mainstream films much more again.

(Dana, 39, F, author)

The notion of *connoisseurship* brings with it implications of separation based on taste, what is good or what is bad, but also what is acceptable and what is not. But it can also bring about a reappraisal of the boundaries of which films can be enjoyed, regardless of their aesthetic qualities.

In researching cult films and especially the badfilm subgenre, we are thrust into a reflexive mode of appraising aesthetic qualities primarily due to our individually unique cultural and social upbringing. This in Bourdieu's (1979) mind, is the rational mode of knowledge transmission (i.e. we were *taught* as such) triumphing over the "direct experience" where we should be able to ascertain meanings and values based on our individuality (p.68). We have been "trained" –albeit more informally so- in our filmic knowledge and repertoire since a young age to recognize what is supposedly "bad" and "good." It can be said that such cultivation of knowledge is skewed towards the belief that producers and studios of the Hollywood Academy are meant to be the beacons of "quality" and anything that falls outside of its purview are reduced in status and thus, establishing a hegemonic structure of film appraisal. This is rooted in the understanding that "Hollywood's historical importance has come through its ability to shape audience tastes across the globe, moulding their expectations of what constitutes a film as a pleasurable experience" (Spicer, 2022, p.434). It reflects what Miller (1993) had also argued that popular culture in general still owes "fealty to the cultural-capitalist state" (cited in Hermes and Kardolus, 2024, p.131).

When it comes to cult films, appraisals or their canonization have been associated with films that created enough distance from "the norms of filmmaking and from the mainstream as a whole," even though it has been acknowledged that many of today's filmmaking practices are aware of said distance dynamic and adopted the approach (Sexton and Mathijs, 2020, p.2). Hence, the cultivation process are always "far from certain" and cannot rely on the taste and value judgments based on aesthetic quality alone, but "ultimately processes of reception can override such textual qualities in designating whether a film is cult" (Ibid.). This is in accordance with Straw's (1997) argument in that subcultures undergo these processes because they are essentially commodity-based and such commodities themselves "pass through

a number of distinct markets and populations in the course of their lifecycles,” in which “their distinctiveness and bases of their value” may shift significantly (p.496).

Therefore, it is telling to see that audiences mirror some of the above considerations in how they perceive the oft convenient and more commonly accepted –but ultimately redundant- binary of “bad” and “good”. Some audiences in this research reflect that there is indeed no such thing as an objective aesthetic appraisal, but the experience of watching the cult films in the theatre take prominence compared to all else. In many ways, this exemplifies how some subcultures are formed, in that different groups of people align and realign themselves, shifting from one situation to another in search of a “social milieu” that is favourable to their needs and wants (Cohen, 1997, p.48). In short, what is bad or what is good is wholly dependent on an individual’s context and what is important for them at a given time and place. This is in addition to audiences embodying the commonly accepted tenet of the cult film culture and subculture, which is to contravene the societally established norms of aesthetic appraisal by placing extraneous values and meanings towards films that would otherwise likely be diminished by the filmmaking elite.

Identity as one of the driving forces for media engagement (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023), in this case serves as a conduit between a person’s aesthetic-based judgment with their ability to find enjoyment. Their previous experiences have shaped who they are as a filmgoer and established a criterion of movies that they tend to gravitate towards in addition to populating an evaluative imagined logbook that ascribes values to the aesthetics. This contributes to how only certain films are celebrated as cult while others are not, but also how each subsequent watch of such films typically reinforce *their own* cult status. As Kinkade and Katovich (1992) argues, each cult text within themselves contain snippets of the genre’s “history” that may be perceived as a callback to other movies that are in the same vein (p.203). In other words, any component of the film, be it diegetic or aesthetic, can serve as a red thread between films present and past, and as a trigger point to which audiences can recall previous filmgoing experiences that elicited a similar reaction –both consciously and subconsciously. Audiences can attend a screening of the same cult movie more than once because they were inextricably engaged. As the thesis will further unpack in Chapter 8, this plays a prominent role in the constitution and eventual reconstitution of the cult film atmosphere.

Thus, there needs to be a degree of resonance with one’s own identity validated within the cult space. For some, the resonance lies within the thematic and

narrative components of the movies they watch. This is particularly pertinent in the case of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* where audiences typically have a heightened sense of freedom in performing their identity. Ingrid (41, F, teacher) latched onto this notion by saying audiences of *Rocky Horror* can have their “weirdness accepted [even] for a minute”. She then went on to say that for the film, “you’re supposed to watch it, just be nurturing your inner freak for a couple of hours and just being free in that.” There is a prevailing belief for Ingrid that *Rocky Horror* “speaks to its own crowd” conveying a message of “sex positivism and the indulgence of the self” where audiences are “celebrating that within the group rather than telling other people to do the same.” In that specific *Rocky Horror* screening, Ingrid attended with her friend Kajsa (40, F, court clerk) who shared similar outlooks on identity resonance. She believed that *Rocky Horror* events were a safe place to dress up in costume as “a way for people to express themselves.” This is exemplified in the fact that both Ingrid and Kajsa wore costumes portraying the characters of Magenta and Colombia respectively to the screening they attended. Kajsa noted that audiences should feel comfortable “if they want to wear a garter and a bra and all the stuff that they wear in the movie that should be a comfortable zone to do so because that is what the movie is about.”

For friends Dana (39, F, author) and Gustav (40, M, technical support), attending a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was also about performing their identities through dressing up. In this case, Dana dressed up as Mickey Mouse ears-Colombia and Gustav took it upon himself to dress up as Dr. Frank-N-Furter, in which Gustav had a hand in creating both costumes because he is “experienced with making outfits.” When asked about the general cult culture in Sweden, Dana quipped that in her mind that there has been a shift in recent years and that it may be more acceptable now to take risks and perform one’s identity more openly. She brought up an anecdote about when Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit* came out in 2012, she camped outside a movie theatre to catch the first screening of the movie, where people who passed by kindly asked them what they were queuing for and were met with a sense of understanding. Dana then compared this experience to when *The Return of the King* came out years before; people were admonishing her for camping out and they even had people telling the group of campers that they were crazy and stupid in the middle of winter, and “people were really rude and horrible to us.” She linked this anecdote to how she perceived the culture of going to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* screenings nowadays, where she observed, “you can be weirder now without getting that much attention, and it’s not such a huge thing anymore, like, being just doing weird things.” Gustav echoed previous sentiments about how these screenings should emphasize

“openness and joy” akin to “going to a theme park or a rollercoaster.” He then concurred with some of Dana’s talking points about the culture in Sweden generally by saying:

I think it's something that's needed in Sweden. [laughter] I think Swedes are pretty low-key and not really extravagant in that way. So I think it's a really good thing for us culturally. [Rocky Horror] lets us go wild a bit because I think there's way too little of that in our society. And with fascism rising and everything, [laughter] you kind of have to celebrate weirdness and going out of the norm. So I think they do have an important function and outlet for people. I think we sort of become comfortable within our own spheres, and I think we need to be challenged a bit more.

(Gustav, 40, M, technical support)

Here, Gustav is associating the ability to express oneself at a *Rocky Horror* screening with that of resisting hegemonic power and forced conformity. By celebrating “weirdness,” he is emphasizing the need for individuals to have ability to express their identity irrespective of the established social norms. He is alluding to the wish of having a place where one can feel a sense of relaxedness and “one could be one’s own man” (Goffman, 1997, p.326). It is pertinent in the Swedish context, because moviegoing habits and practices in Sweden are generally a reserved affair in which minimal disturbances are preferred within the cinema auditorium. What Gustav is implying is that there is a need for a space and place where individuals or moviegoers can subvert the expected norms of going to the cinema by not adhering to many of the written and unwritten rules of conduct. Parallels can be drawn with Bey’s (2003) idea of the “temporary autonomous zone” (TAZ) in which the zone’s emergence can be seen as a direct and strong reaction to the suppression of artistic expressions where “the sheer pleasure of play” acts as its central tenet (p.129-130). Much like Bey’s contemplations, the cult film screening is temporally demarcated, in that it does not exist in perpetuity but there is usually a clearly defined amount of time where such acts reliant on play are socially accepted. Thus, the freedom to resonate and perform one’s identity is an affordance cult film screenings can bestow on audiences.

Due to aforementioned freedom, it allows an affective experience to flourish where “emotions arises, is signified, negotiated, and evaluated in the inter-subjective moment” (Wetherell, 2012, p.74). Affect then, has the potential to shape “tonal mood of engagement” (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.162) and bring with them a multitude of potential outcomes both emotionally and rationally.

Am I having a good time watching this movie? How much worse can this movie get? That was such an insane scene, I can't believe he/she did that. Now the movie's over, should I tell other people about it? Audiences may pose such mental questions and more during the time leading up to, within, and after watching the film. Whether they are feeling intense emotions of sadness, joy, or disgust, all paths lead to the importance of *being entertained* as a by-product of the affective experience rooted in the resonance and expression of identity.

In the case of cult films however, identity resonance with the films is not the sole operational factor that is at play in order for someone to obtain the joy of being entertained. In fact, distance between one's identity and those that are portrayed in the film can act as a key avenue towards entertainment. By channeling Sontag's ruminations on the nature of camp, Mathijs and Sexton (2011) point out that such distances "can provide detachment and transform banality into the fantastic" (p.89). Audiences are able to have a positive experience in an aesthetically bad film simply because there are no shreds of believability grounded in the reality of everyday life and thus a more comedic cognitive and emotional process takes primacy.

Aesthetics in this case, matters less than the overall experience. We can take the example of partners Malin (31, F, student) and George (31, M, software engineer) who professed that their filmgoing habits usually know no boundaries, watching everything from James Bond films to Victor Kossakovsky's 2020 pig documentary *Gunda*. However, they placed the idea of coherence and authenticity high on the list of factors that makes a movie experience worthwhile. They reflected more on these notions based on their *Birdemic* screening noting that the movie has a coherence of badness and in their minds, there is a sliver of authentic effort. George went on to say, "I think what makes a bad movie good is the resemblance of a good movie, but it's bad. So yes. So you see the effort that went into it." To which, Malin added that the opening scenes of the film was her favourite. In this case, she was talking about how *Birdemic* opens with the main male character running into an old high school crush at a random diner in town. The scene was shot with flawed audio mixing, improper use of light exposure, and simplistic dialogue coupled with unbelievable acting from both male and female characters. Malin then said, "It just builds up your expectations of the movie. It really set the first two, three minutes. And then it doesn't get any better or worse. I don't know. It just keeps that level the entire movie. And I wasn't expecting that it would get that bad that fast."

In reflecting on her experience, Johanna (43, F, researcher) traced her filmic knowledge to her time growing up, watching and re-watching films that she

had taped on VCR and acknowledged that she has an affinity towards viewing a film repetitively. She said, “I always watched on TV the afternoon screenings of old classic movies or Swedish movies from the 30s, 40s.” She was an active member in a film club during her teenage years and later on studying film when she “watched five films a day [...] and claim it to be work.” Additionally, she cannot recall the amount of times she has been to a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, noting that her history of watching the film spans all the way back to 20 years ago. In this way, we can see that Johanna is immensely well versed in the world of film. When it comes to her accumulated experience of watching *Rocky Horror* “a few times”, she pointed out it is “a good movie because it’s a bad movie.” She continued by saying that “a good film is a movie that satisfies a need,” which depends on what the current need is; while at the same time, a good film does not necessarily need to have a “good script or good acting or good narrative,” rather it should impart a degree of entertainment. Hence, Johanna placed a high importance in the overall experience itself, bypassing its aesthetic qualities even though she acknowledges that they are “bad.”

Although Johanna was seemingly rendering the aesthetic component as non-essential compared to the outcome of watching a film, Anna (33, F, marketing associate) made a distinction by saying, “there’s a good film, and then there’s a good film experience.” She noted some movies can “be really fun, even if it’s a terrible movie.” Anna then went on to list a number of criteria that in her mind qualifies a movie as good, such as identification with the motives of the characters, the element of surprise, an unsettling experience, no plot holes, and good dialogue. But then, when it comes to distinguishing a good film experience she said:

All that kind of goes out the window, [...] because those things can be there and I still might not have fun with the movie. [...] You know what a movie is supposed to be, how a story is supposed to be told, right? And instead, you're watching this terribly made movie, so it doesn't follow the patterns at all. And so you're constantly surprised by these insane choices, or like weird costumes or songs that make no sense. So like, when it comes with The Room [for example], that's really enjoyable, because it, it just confuses you at every moment, why anyone would make these choices. And so it's really fun, even though it's also infuriating.

(Anna, 33, F, marketing associate)

This harkens back to the notion of “so bad it’s good” where the reading and engagement of such films contain elements of “ambiguity, multitudes, and incompleteness” (Mathijs, 2008), which allows audiences to deconstruct and ultimately reconstruct the film based on their own subjectivity. Experience then, as an overarching idea that encapsulates the viewing of cult films and attending their screenings establishes “our psychic archive, our memory and identities” (Hill, 2019, p.58), which then serves as our primary subconscious compass as we navigate our practices of film watching. Here, the subconscious takes the form of our personal predispositions, based on previous knowledge and cultural memory, which in Bourdieu’s (1979) mind such “cultivations” are inextricably intertwining, reinforcing, and legitimating each other (p.499) as an individual moves along in life. Knowledge from experience is embedded in our being and becomes instructive in how we act and conduct our cultural practices. Even if some individuals do not play up to or present themselves as cinephiles, it is still undeniable that previous knowledge and experience play a sizeable role in how we can feel enjoyment and being entertained as exemplified by the respondents above. If certain media texts are to be endowed with a reputation or predicate, “cultural competence” channelled through “interpretive work” by audiences are hence prerequisites (Stewart, 2017, p.46-47). Therefore based on the examples above, we can surmise that the experience as a whole is what matters the most for audiences. It seems then, there are no good or bad aesthetics, only good or bad experiences.

With that said, we must also be aware of the disparity in competences that potentially resides within audiences in the ability to delineate quality judgments when we are critically examining the cult film experience. As discussed throughout this chapter, identity and taste plays a central role in the enjoyment of cult films, and hence “it unites and separates” (Bourdieu, 1979, p.56). Because after all, if a good portion of the cult sensibility has been positioned to be “outside” of the mainstream, there is a need for a certain level of “aesthetic disposition and high levels of cultural capital” (Stewart, 2017, p.48). This is in order for audiences to be able to ascribe the appropriate meaning to cult texts. For first timers or those who are unfamiliar to the reading mode required for cult films, there needs to be a degree of acclimation to the experience. One does not typically feel an immediate sense of alignment with the general atmosphere, nor with other individuals in attendance. This links with Frith’s (1996) arguments on musical identity in that only through experiencing the screenings first-hand would a person be able to ascertain their place within the culture.

In the case of Louis (36, M, doctoral student), receiving an invite to go see *The Room* in Malmö did not necessarily align with his filmgoing habits. “I’m really picky in choosing movies. Normally, I really select what I want to see,” he quipped. But in this case, he wanted to be “spontaneous” and agreed on watching a movie “that I had no idea about.” Originally from France, he held a certain pride towards French cinema, emphasizing the concept of *l’exception culturelle* (the cultural exception) and noting how French cinema for the most part can be considered “more intelligent [and] more reflective.” He noted, “I said I don’t want to sound too braggy, but this is a little bit how many French people relate to the cinema. We believe that it has an exceptional place in the cultural world.” When it comes to the experience of *The Room* screening, Louis thought it was the complete opposite, which was something he would consider never to happen in French Cinema. “You’re not only sitting in the silence in the dark. You can just do something and laugh. I was also very surprised because, yes, a lot of people may have seen *The Room* 1,000 times that they knew every line, and they were repeating,” he continued. It certainly helped that Louis attended the screening with a few other friends as he reflects, “I wouldn’t recommend [*The Room*] at all if it’s just to see it alone.”

As we have seen so far, identity resonance plays a vital role in the eventual participatory aspects at play during cult film screenings, but it is not the singular determinant. Much like Louis’ experience above, other people in the audience assist in propagating the appropriate mode of reading and appreciating cult films. Hence, there is also an element of being initiated into the culture if one lacks the precise know-hows. Experienced audiences are instrumental in “creating and defining” the culture (Thornton, 1995, p.12), embodying the role of the standard-bearer that imparts knowledge on others. Reflecting about the role of the experienced audience member, Lena (37, F, researcher) believed that the cult film experience “depends a very great deal on how close you are to the people who know, like the advanced people.” Based on a different screening of *Rocky Horror* than Anna before, Lena thought that there is often a noticeable difference in expertise among audiences, “there are the more advanced people who have done it in Canada and America, or have like, who shout slut all the time. And if you’re closer to them, I guess it’s a very different experience.” Anna’s (33, F, Marketing Associate) experience in the *Rocky Horror* screening in Gothenburg echoed this, where she recalled, “we sat in a way that the few of us who knew what we were doing-ish, were in between. So we could be like, okay, next is this thing, like, get this ready,” all in an effort to “kind of coach them.” Anna then said:

Everyone's just doing things around you, like screaming stuff and throwing things. And eventually you kind of pick up on what you're supposed to do. And if you get the next time, you know, a little bit more. But every time there's, you know, a crop of new people who've never been, and a small crop of people who are very experienced and like know exactly what to do and have everything memorized. And that's sort of the fun of it is like indoctrinating new people, weird traditions that we all share for some reason.

(Anna, 33, F, marketing associate)

By ascribing the predicate “weird” to certain traditions of cult films, Anna is acknowledging these rituals are not commonly occurring in typical movie screenings and there needs to be a certain degree of familiarity in order to conduct them properly. Because of this, she alludes to the daunting and possibly intimidating task a “new” person may feel when going to one of these screenings for the first time and especially so if there are nobody available to show them the ropes.

Furthermore, audiences were not the only people who felt a sense of being “initiated” into the cult film culture. Agnes Stenqvist, who was the event producer of Spegeln admitted that she was never a big fan of cult or bad films until after she started the job at the movie theatre. Therefore, we can argue that an individual’s identity can shift depending on the type of media they are exposed with, especially so if they work within the industry. Stenqvist had to re-evaluate her comprehension on the cult film culture and it showed in her responses, notably her surprise that there seemingly is an endless stream of bad movies that can be screened. She pondered, “how many [bad films] can there be?” Ultimately, she began to realize that there was a plethora of movies that can be screened, where she accepted that “we’re not running out of bad movies.” In some of the screenings that I attended, Stenqvist was the person giving the introduction to the films, providing guests with some fun facts about the movies and sometimes setting the expectations of the audiences. In our conversation, she acknowledged that she often watched the films together with the audiences if there was space in the auditorium and have grown a liking towards cult films. This exemplifies the process of “entering the cult” –or in this case the cult of badfilms. In a Bourdieusian (1979) sense, it was a process of initiation imbuing Agnes with the appropriate cultural knowledge to be able to understand the culture. If Agnes was not a “film buff” when she commenced her duties as an event producer, now she can arguably impart knowledge to replicate a “shared reading” of cult films (McCulloch, 2011, p.205) through her work in creating events for them.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above analysis that identity plays a crucial role if a cult film screening is to flourish. On the first level, exhibitors as a facilitator and place for such identities to be performed are required to provide the necessary scenery for audiences to build on. This may take the form of providing paraphernalia to be used during the screenings, providing a written guideline on what happens during the course of the movie, or even as early as the moment they announce a screening of a movie and how they “package” it. Furthermore, we can see that cinema operators are both explicitly and implicitly expressing their identities through a number of pathways, such as their websites, interior design (more on this in Chapter 7), but most importantly, their programming choices. The role of the operational figureheads of the cinemas were also expounded, in which there are tangential identity alignments between the individual and the cinema as an organization. As elaborated in this chapter, cinemas and the individuals who take part in its operations may “forecast” who their desired audiences are, but are ultimately bound by a mostly rational mode of thinking that may overlook the importance of the more specific, more personal and subjective contexts (Rimscha, 2022, p.462). This relates to the acknowledgement that cinemas are ultimately business entities and it would be wise for us to still be cognizant of financial motivations that may lie beneath the surface. Even if they position themselves on the fringes, they are still generally reliant on the identities and degree of intensities of audience engagement.

With audiences coming into the fold, it can then be argued that the identification process of the cult film experience takes the next step where individuals are subjected to a flurry of affective prompts that fundamentally shape the overall experience. An oscillating spectrum of taste for or even distaste entrenched in both aesthetic judgment and the social experience would allow audiences to find their place within the experience and *how they feel* about it. Consequently, entertainment and joy can be found based on a person’s identity and the degree of its resonance; or in the case of badfilms, the degree of distance in which the aesthetic components of the film become so far-removed from reality, they become humorous instead. As such, enjoyment in this case is constituted through a convergence of emotional response, but most importantly, a dissolving of the “limits of our individuality or group belongingness and merging in an affective collectivity” (Hanich, 2018, p.182). Therefore, taken in conjunction, both the cinema and audiences establish “a

strong, affective bond [...] both of which work together to facilitate a positive, shared, meaningful film experience” (McCulloch and Crisp, 2018, p.166).

In the next chapter, the thesis will tackle the notions of ambiance and mood as two constitutive factors that generate the cult film atmosphere.

7. The Candles, the Music, the Sexy Dress: Ambiance and Mood

Up until this point, the thesis' discussions on the cult film experience has mostly been contained within a personal level and its relational dynamic with audiences' individual identity and how they perceive the films' aesthetics. But the experience does not constitute itself in isolation at the personal level. Hence, we will now begin to expand those boundaries by incorporating the sociality aspect of the culture. This is because for some, the matter of self-perception was less of an issue compared to the matter of having a sense of belonging in the experience itself. Because after all, the sharing of emotions in a social setting have always played a central part of the moviegoing experience (Stempel, 2001, p.218). Taking inspiration from Frith's (1996) arguments on musical identity and building off of the previous chapter, the formation of the collective in the cult film culture is experienced through an aesthetic practice where audiences are able to "get to know themselves as groups [...] through cultural activity" and not through a prior agreement of values (p.111). It can be argued that within the moment of the cult film screenings, a collective identity in many ways supplants the individual. Regardless if one identifies themselves as a movie buff, cinephile, "normal person," or any other descriptive terms, these identities meld into an ephemeral collective identity that is constrained to the particular film screening at hand; anchored by the filmic text that is being exhibited. The anchoring is necessary because only then can a collective understanding and eventually an effervescent atmosphere transpire when a shared reading of a text is conducted and feelings of emotions begin to spread (Durkheim, 1995, p.221).

With the above said, this chapter further expounds the notion of identity by elucidating its manifestations both materially and emotionally. Therefore, the notions of ambiance and mood will be unpacked as key elements in the constitution of the cult film atmosphere. Ambiance is constituted by the

material properties of the cinema, and mood is related to how audiences are feeling within the cinema space, which was a key takeaway from Tawa's (2022) arguments. Ambiance and mood constitute atmosphere through the perception of both exhibitors and audiences as individuals who are and were "bodily present" in the cinema space, obtaining a sense of what surrounds them, "a sense of [its] atmosphere" (Böhme, 2017, p.74). From a media engagement angle, the analysis of ambiance and mood is primarily concerned with that of modalities, and to an extent intensities and consequences (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023).

The importance of in-person cult film screenings cannot be understated, especially during and after the times of a global pandemic that was COVID. For Bruno (2022), the art of projecting film in a cinema is constitutive of the space's atmosphere and can metaphorically be considered as "vehicles of transits and transitions, the points of contact and mediation between worlds" (p.49). From an exhibitor's point of view, David Winsnes from Bio Roy in Gothenburg specifically noted that in the year 2022—which can be considered to be the tail-end of the global pandemic when severe restrictions to congregations were no longer in place in Sweden, the cinema was still struggling to find their footing again. He noted that they were "having a really hard time getting people into regular repertoire films and even the regular classic screenings cycle on Friday" (Winsnes, 2022). However, he went on to say event cinemas were the sole bright light during that time, noting that event screenings of films such as *Grease*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *The Room* are the ones that were "working" at that moment. What this shows is that audiences gravitated towards such event cinemas, including and most importantly cult film screenings after they were deprived of the physical, in-person aspect of the moviegoing experience for almost three years. Therefore, one can argue that the physical, in-person, social aspects of such experiences are held in high esteem among Swedish audiences.

A certain film—or other kinds of media texts for that matter—cannot obtain the "cult" status without audiences coalescing in a common understanding of what such texts stand for, their preferred reading of the text, and having a space to validate these assumptions. As Kinkade and Katovich (1992) posit, the cult status of a certain film can only emerge if "patrons align in relation to a shared focus" (p.202). Having said that, some scholars have pointed out that the importance of in-person cult film screenings may have depreciated in terms of its role in creating the cult film culture. In the introduction of their edited collection, Telotte (2015) argues that midnight movie screenings have become more "muted" and such exhibition practices (i.e. cult film screenings as events)

have “become almost irrelevant to the creation or support of a cult following” (p.16). In their minds, this is due to the advent of newer modes of film distributions, such as Netflix, YouTube, TikTok, and others. It has been argued that the circulation of filmic content across “networked spaces and across the social web” are challenging mainstream modes of distribution (Atkinson, 2014, p.172). This parallels Lynch’s (2021) observation in that the advent of new digital technologies “has profoundly altered the circuits of human communication” towards arguably detrimental levels of online consumption (p.2). Even if that were so, this thesis would argue that at least in the case of Sweden it is not necessarily the case and cult film screenings in cinema auditoriums still hold value.

In particular, this chapter pays close attention to the ways individuals place themselves in relation to the environment (Böhme, 2017, p.70). The ideas of ambiance and mood would then be considered as a precursor to the analysis in Chapter 8 of cult film effervescence and atmosphere. This allows us to shed a light on the dynamics and nuances of a set of practices and rituals that are anchored in a particular cult film, but are seldom constant in their execution between different screenings. Therefore, we need to be mindful of the “different focal points, including the conditions that produce it, the type(s) of effervescence that it represents, the degree of its manifestation, and the short- and long-term outcomes that may result” (Tutenges, 2023, p.10). Furthermore, by incorporating the role of cinemas as both an organization but also as physical space, we will be able to expound on how “designed spaces” contribute to the constitution of the atmosphere and the “structuring of experience” (Lunt, 2024, p.480).

The environment also entails the presence of other audience members, which holds the potential to shape an individual’s mood. For cult film screenings, there is an allure in experiencing something together with other people or feeling a sense of belonging. If in the previous chapter it has been elaborated from a more individual-oriented vantage point of identity, this chapter expands the scope where interpersonal dynamics are highlighted. This stems from the understanding that the pathways to how each person perceive reality as something “concrete, particular, [and] individual” are deeply rooted in their surroundings (Collins, 2004, p.374). Meaning, our personal identities are fundamentally shaped and constituted through our interactions with those around us, both material and immaterial.

An important note however, is that even if this chapter is structured in a way that seemingly separates the different components of the cult film atmosphere, it is worth remembering that they are inherently intertwined in the actual

practice. This means that it would not be prudent to distinguish mood and ambiance, for example, as separate, self-sustaining notions that operate within their own orbit. Rather, we should look at the atmosphere generated as “not only the outcome of the relationships between the forces that are said to constitute it,” but also in their relationality to the “shared configuration” of ambiance and mood (Pink, Mackley, and Moroşanu, 2015, p.354).

This chapter analyses both ambiance and mood as key elements in the constitution of the cult film atmosphere. The first part will start with a discussion on the material hallmarks of the cinemas who screen cult films, such as furniture, architectural features, lighting, decorations, and so on. It will be unpacked through the perceptions of audiences and exhibitors, and their considerations into how the materiality shapes their overall experience of watching a cult film. This section latches on to the concept of “ambiance” in which we can understand as a “distinctive assemblage of conditions that characterize a setting” through which an aura or radiance flows in conjunction with the affective (Tawa, 2022, p.85). In other words, it can be argued that audiences’ bodily experience begins well before the screening and is already made possible by a number of the cinema’s physical properties, such as the cinema entrance, the magnificence of the building, the darkened and quiet hall, the seating position, or the light on stage focusing the viewer’s attention on a limited place, which in Tawa’s (2022) mind can be considered as “enabling infrastructures” (p.4). There is a marked difference in the *feeling* of being in the space by watching films at Spegeln (Malmö) or Bio Roy (Gothenburg), in comparison to a Filmstaden auditorium for example. Thus, the material configurations of the cinema play a key role in the generation of its atmosphere as sensed by individuals in that space.

In the second part of this chapter, it will be expounded how audiences place a high importance of watching cult films in cinema that is considered comfortable and relaxing. This section primarily unpacks the notion of “mood” as the “temperament, countenance, or disposition” as possessed by individuals that shape their “experience of the ambiance they find themselves in” (Tawa, 2022, p.85). The chapter examines how audiences consider and sense the material presence of the cinema. It builds on the first part of the chapter where the physical features of the venues are considered. Furthermore, this part also explores the practice of watching cult films as essentially social, and that enjoyment from the experience is decidedly depreciated if one were to watch it alone. This will entail reflections from audiences regarding how cult films by their very nature are meant to be shared with others. Audiences connect this aspect of watching movies with the sense of comfort where having other

individuals present allows them to feel more at home, which means they are more likely to detach themselves from the conventional etiquette of watching movies. Because of this, a relaxed mood is established which plays a key role in the generation of the cult film effervescence and atmosphere.

Establishing Ambiance

In understanding the cinema as a space populated with material objects, we can first consider it as an “ongoing production” where a host of multiplicities can occur when injected with a sense of temporality (Massey, 2005, p. 55). Here, the notion of multiplicities implies that a specific space can be imbued with varying degrees of felt emotions and experiences. In the case of watching movies at the cinema, this means that the aforementioned experience is shaped in conjunction, for example, between the different genres of film, the dynamic levels of audience engagement, but also the ambiance of the cinema in question. This, as Massey has argued, can only happen within a specific timeframe considering that both time and space are “co-implicated” where the concepts of simultaneity and practices are consolidated (Ibid.). Ambiance can also be understood as a “transitive forms of experience of “material space and material relations that are also, and fundamentally, resonant sites of imagination” (Bruno, 2022, p.14). Thus, there is a persistent exchange of meaning between the materiality of the space and audiences or individuals who are congregated within that space. After all, it can be argued that one of the conditions for an effervescence to emerge is having enough people that are physically close within a space that allows them to “sense one another and efficiently receive, transmit, and contribute to the affective flows” (Tutenges, 2023, p.28). The probability of the aforementioned affective flows, as this thesis would argue are heightened if the physical space permits it. Meaning, there needs to be a distinct ambiance to facilitate such flows.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is an undeniable element of ephemerality in moviegoing. Much like Bey’s (2003) idea of the temporary autonomous zone, cult film screenings are situated “spatio-temporally” interlinked with its relation to “moment and locale” (p.103). Audiences populate the cinema space under the constraints of a movie’s running time, after which it is expected that they immediately vacate the premises as soon as the end credits are finished. Because of the limited amount of time audiences inhabit their space, it is no wonder that cinemas take great lengths to instil a sense of comfort and satisfaction for those who attend screenings.

For example, some auditoriums are equipped with extra wide seating with comfortable armrests, strict temperature control so that audiences do not feel too warm nor too cold, having a bar with alcoholic drinks available, equipping the lobbies with cosy sofas or armchairs, and so on. In Bruno's (2022) mind, this exemplifies a case where the practice of film exhibition supported by the material furnishings "not only relies on but magnifies corporeal qualities that exist in space, such as feelings in and of the surrounding space" (p.29). Therefore, we can infer that the obtainment of enjoyment on the audience side is greatly shaped by not only the perceived quality of the film screened, but also their bodily experiences of being in the cinema space. This is in addition to the social aspects of watching cult films, which are not experienced equally when watching in different cinemas and especially so if we juxtapose the viewing experience of going to the multiplex in comparison to niche cinemas as covered in this thesis. The decorations, furniture, and lighting play central roles in the establishment of the ambiance, considering that atmospheres are "made possible by the (corporeal but also social and symbolic) co-presence of subject and object" (Griffero, 2014, p.121). Hence, an ideal prelude into the elaboration of the atmospheres of cult film screenings is through an examination of how audiences and exhibitors are reflecting on the material aspects as found in the cinema space, which entails a glimpse into the considerations of the cinema's environmental aesthetics.

Luxurious Ambiance

It is worth remembering from the previous chapter that cinemas as organizations express and materialize their identities in a multitude of ways. Some explicitly express said identities through their website blurbs, their programming choices, while others place a high importance in the ambiances they establish in their cinemas. All in an effort to distinguish one's cinema from the national chain cinemas where homogeneity is expected and considered the norm. In the case of Sweden for example, if we go to a cinema owned by Filmstaden there is always a familiar flow to the procession of watching a movie.

Two examples where cinemas are seemingly exuding an ambiance that conveys luxury and exclusivity are Spegeln in Malmö (as shown in Figure 14 in the following page)



Figure 14
Spegeln interior in one of their smaller auditoriums, “Camera”

and Capitol Bio in Stockholm. Pernilla Nilsson, who is the manager of Spegeln in Malmö reflected that multiplexes “looks the same. It’s the same colours, it’s very anonymous.” She continued, “so it’s not a unique environment and you get...you pick your candy yourself or what you want, no help there. And then you pay for it and you get into the screening room, you see the movie, and then you get out through the back.” In contrast, her philosophy of the Spegeln experience is that they “want people around us” and that audiences can have free rein on where and how they interact with other people –including the staff, but also how they peruse the furniture provided by the cinema. “Come back in the foyer after the movie, have a glass of wine and talk to us about the movie, the experience, book your next visit, hang out,” she says. The above flow of watching a movie as elaborated by Nilsson can only be made possible due to the architectural features of Spegeln itself. Unlike the funnel-like experience of Filmstaden, visitors can go almost anywhere they please once inside the main entrances of Spegeln.

For example, the toilets are clearly marked on the left of the foyer and you can access their waiting area that is furnished with seemingly vintage sofas and chairs, both without having to go through a ticket check first. Nilsson said that her approach to establishing the cinema experience to an “adult level, to more like a theatre, to resemble the theatre.” But also, taking inspiration from the cinema’s storied past in which two of their three auditoriums are named after the movie theatre’s previous names (Alcazar and Camera). The auditoriums themselves are retrofitted with comfortable armchairs draped in velvet-like material. They are arranged two-by-two and separated by a small chairside table equipped with a small desk lamp, for audiences to place their food and drinks. Because of the desk lamp present, the lighting of Spegeln’s auditoriums are never completely dimmed. Audiences are still able to see their surroundings but not enough that it pales the movie being screened. The foyer and lobby areas are also consistent with the lighting of the auditoriums, in that they are not overly bright akin to being illuminated with LED lights. Due to these choices, the lighting exudes a sense of intimacy and warmth. In terms of ambient sound, the foyer and lobby feature audible music that is occasionally interspersed with soundbites from movies or trailers. Additionally, inside all auditoriums, there is a mini bar attended by a staff member that allows audiences to top up their beverages any time during a screening. Therefore, there is a marked difference even in the furnishings and layout of the auditoriums compared to the national chain cinemas that are solely focused on audiences watching films with minimal distractions.

The choice of colour was also an important factor that Nilsson played with at the onset her duties as manager of Spegeln. She said:

You should play with the colour....you have this long foyer like in a furniture store. A long foyer because people were traveling from reality to the world of movies and you need to change the expression and get into that world, and I really like that idea. So my boss just said, well you’re in charge, you decide. And I’m “oh God!” I started Googling colours for cinemas [laughter] and sent mood boards of Versailles [laughter] and yeah...and the architect just thought I was completely out of my mind.

(Nilsson, 2019)

From the above quote, we can see that Nilsson placed a high importance in shifting audiences’ mood as shaped by the ambiance of the cinema space. This sets the stage for individuals coming into the cinema to be immersed “within a flow of experience in which affects, emotions, sensations and meanings are

inextricably mingled” (Edensor, 2015, p.334). Therefore, we can see that the cult film atmosphere is generated continuously that already begins prior to the beginning of the film screening, where audiences are afforded the chance to set their mood by taking in the ambiance of the cinema.



Figure 15
Capitol Bio's smaller auditorium

The second cinema that emphasizes a luxurious ambiance is Capitol Bio. Jakob Abrahamsson, who is the CEO of Capitol's main stakeholder NonStop Entertainment, alluded in an interview that if one were to establish a place for cult film events to fully flourish, its environmental ambiance should shy away from the typical aesthetic properties of multiplexes, which may entail limited freedom of movement, template-like colour schemes, and a cold ambiance. He also implied that the cult experience should take place in a space that falls outside of the conventional designs of the modern cinema and instead emphasizing on the felt emotions of audiences as they take in the architectural features of the building in order to “make a visit to the cinema special.” In relation to Capitol, his approach was to harken back to the building's history that dates to the early 20th century and “tried to play along with the magic of the cinema and the cinema experience” of that time. He continued:

It was built in 1926, it made a historical and architectural sense in that way. [...] It's an era where a lot of sort of grand cinema palaces

were built. It's an era when cinemas were huge, glamorous, and beautiful. And in Sweden some of the top architects built cinemas, that wouldn't happen today, if you build a cinema it will be a sort of modernistic...umm...and it was important for us to do it in a style.

(Abrahamsson, 2019)

We can purposely recall from Chapter 6 where Capitol's website blurb also highlights the cinema's long history and specifically its art deco style, which is in synchronization with Abrahamsson's opinion above. As an example of how Capitol Bio channelled the notions of "glamorous" and "beautiful," we can look at their seating arrangements in the auditoriums in which the chairs are lined with velvet-like materials, complete with a small table that is equipped with a vintage-looking desk lamp (as seen in Figure 15 in the previous page). Much like Spegeln before, this approach also complements their ability to offer food and beverages that can be brought into the auditoriums. The lighting of Capitol's auditorium is similar to Spegeln in that it does not go completely dark due to the presence of the table lamps. The foyer and lobby also exudes a sense of intimacy where there are no overly bright lamps illuminating the space, and there is also a perceptible ambient music.

Therefore, such approaches in cinemagoing are in direct contrast with how Kracauer (1987) envisioned a cinema experience should be; free from distractions but rather fully immersed in the world of the movie being screened. Instead of opting for a seemingly functionalist approach to watching movies, the cinemas discussed in this thesis thus far have exhibited a willingness to embrace the *potentiality of distraction* in lieu of instituting an environment and ambiance that restricts it. "Surface splendor" as Kracauer (1987, p.91) puts it, becomes less relevant considering that the cinemas are keen on emphasizing immersion in the experience of *being there*, and immersion in the film becomes a composing aspect of the experience. Because of this, the eventual atmospheres generated are sufficiently open to multiple probabilities, which enables its "emergent nature" to thrive and nor should atmospheres be constrained as something pre-determined (Pink, Mackley, and Moroşanu, 2015, p.353). This is in congruence with the nature of the cult film experience where a host of possible readings, constructions and re-constructions of the films are the primary mode of operation. On one hand, there is enough ambiguity in the diegetic and aesthetic components of cult movies, and on the other such ambiguities are mirrored in the ambient factors of the cinemas themselves. Hence, when it comes to felt experience of being in the space, "meanings multiply and proliferate, as do possible interpretations" (Tawa, 2022, p.54).

Because of the extra considerations into setting people's mood, both Spegeln and Capitol Bio have established itself as an ideal place for cult film screenings to occur simply because the space itself allows for the possibility of excess and spectacle to take place, as audiences construct their "secondary script" anchored on the film's "primary script" (Weinstock, 2008, p.72). By bestowing audiences with the ability to carry out actions that are otherwise unavailable in multiplexes (e.g. drink alcohol, eat food, relax in the lounge, etc.), we can argue that they have shifted the barriers and expectations in relations to the common moviegoing norms. Instead, instilling an ambiance that "takes off the stress" and "calms people down," where "you just sit there and they get spoiled and we spoil them," quipped Nilsson from Spegeln.

Grandeur Ambiance

Unlike Spegeln and Capitol Bio before, Bio Roy in Gothenburg does not feature tables next to the seats nor do they have table lamps present inside the auditorium. The cinema's lighting also do not follow the formula of the previous cinemas where it was observed the lighting exudes a sense of intimacy. Instead, Bio Roy highlights the grandeur of its one and only auditorium through the use of bright and punchy lighting prior to the beginning of the film, and close to darkness for the duration of the film. Roy's physical space is arguably more compact in comparison to other cinemas covered in this thesis, although its sole auditorium is the largest in terms of size compared to the others. However, in regards to liminal space outside the auditorium, the cinema itself is rather constrained. Entering the doors to Bio Roy, you immediately have the concession stand to the right, the toilets are to the left down a small flight of stairs, and in the middle, there are about four small tables, each equipped with two chairs, and there are no discernible ambient music that can be heard. This perceived limitation was factored into how the cinema programmes its films. David Winsnes, Bio Roy's programmer said in an interview that they had to adjust to the ever-changing landscape of movie exhibition in Gothenburg. He said:

Before we can probably screen a movie for two months...a new movie, and a new audience will come every time. But nowadays it's very very rare that we screen a movie for more than 3 weeks. [...] Because there's too many screens in Gothenburg, so we need to do something else.

(Winsnes, 2019)

This consideration has led them to emphasize more on event cinemas such as sing-alongs and cult films, but also embracing and showcasing the building's history as their selling point in terms of ambiance. As Winsnes disclosed, Bio Roy has undergone a plethora of changes and renovations throughout the span of its 84 years of history. He noted, "Every change made to Roy during my 12 years here has been carefully planned to blend seamlessly with the cinema's 1940s aesthetic." Although he admitted that many of the changes were less of design choices but rather safety-related decisions, for example replacing the yellow fabric for sound dampening linings on the walls in which the previous material was found to be flammable. The centrepiece of Bio Roy's interior, is arguably its elaborate mural on both sides of the auditorium's walls (one of its sides seen in Figure 16).



Figure 16
Bio Roy interior showing their murals on one side of its walls

Winsnes went on to say that in his mind the murals "emphasize a sense of gravity and magnificence that can truly elevate a film experience from good to extraordinary." He continued, "[Bio Roy] really stands out compared to the modern box-like cinemas we mostly have here. It also creates an intriguing contrast when we screen interactive and light-hearted shows like *The Room* - pop culture happening in an auditorium that almost looks like a museum."

Eclectic Ambiance

If the three cinemas before exude a sense splendour and luxury, Husets Biograf in Copenhagen and Hypnos in Malmö opt for a more distinct ambiance. For Husets Biograf, owner and manager Jack Stevenson, establishing the cinema's ambiance takes inspiration from the building's long history, which at one point was neglected but later on transformed to be utilized as a culture house. In an interview, Stevenson believed the cinema's environment should be cozy and strange at the same time, and because of this, they have been acknowledged as such within the Scandinavian region. Jakob Abrahamsson from Capitol Bio even observed that in the case of Sweden, there is no place that is "100% cult-ish" like in Copenhagen, alluding to Husets Biograf. Abrahamsson believed that in order to obtain that reputation, one would have to "find a place that has a low rent and you need to decide more like a rock club."

Situated on the top floors of a building in downtown Copenhagen that has a history dating back to the 1700s, owner and manager Stevenson believes the cinema's architectural and material features preserves the space's original characteristics as much as possible. He said in an interview he was proud that the building is used as a cultural house³⁵ rather than transformed into "some yuppie apartment renting for 50 thousand [Danish Krona] a month or something." He continued that because the cinema has retained much of its charm, "it's still kind of a squat. So there's still a kind of bohemian sort of thing...allowing things to take their own course." Compared to other cinemas, Husets Biograf's space can be considered small in size. According to their website, its sole auditorium has the capacity of 63 people and the lobby –where tickets, beverages, and snacks are sold- is able to fit 25-30 people. There are no audible ambient music or sounds, but when the lobby is packed with audiences, it creates a "buzzy" ambiance where people's conversations fill the air. Said lobby is washed with the colour red as the predominant palette and decorated to the brim with movie-related posters, memorabilia, along with other eccentric items such as tribal masks and indigenous figurines. Stevenson admitted that most, if not all the decorations and aesthetic considerations were based on his decisions. He recalled the time he began his journey as owner and manager after the previous owners left:

I realized I could design or decorate the café any way I wanted it and I didn't have a boss to tell me not to do it anymore. There's nothing

³⁵ It is worth noting that Husets Biograf is a part of the cultural house Husets-KBH that was founded in 1970. It encompasses five floors of different cultural venues including musical performance spaces, a board game café, and the cinema.

down there that a boss would give permission for. So it was just an accumulation and stuff. I went a lot to local markets for 10 years also when I got to America I search out strange items to bring back, put on the walls umm...strange pieces of furniture and stuff like that. Try to make it cosy and functional uhh...kind of like a hangout place, people like it.

(Stevenson, 2019)



Figure 17

Husetst Biograf interior, showing the slanted walls to the right and a brick wall to the left

Stevenson reflected how such approach to establishing the cinema in Copenhagen would never work in the US, where he is originally from. He said, “It’s an unknown concept in America” in comparing Husetst Biograf as “a classic culture house in the way they have it in Holland and Germany. Every small to medium town in Holland has a culture house like this that started with squatting by hippies and then turned into a culture house”, where Husetst Biograf’s interior mirrors Stevenson’s reflections with its relatively small sized auditorium and slanted walls (as seen in Figure 17). His acknowledgment that Husetst can be considered a “hangout place” resonates with Pernilla Nilsson of

Spegehn's approach on establishing the ambiance and eventually generating the atmosphere of the cinema. We can again argue that the feeling of being comfortable is a key factor in how these cinemas are able to facilitate the mood of audiences. The characteristics of such ambiances then, "communicates a feeling" to those who are co-present in the physical space (Böhme, 2013, p.2), and in this case, it was a feeling of comfort.

For Husets Biograf, the notion of comfort is also interlinked with the idea of "strange," considering that Stevenson went above and beyond to decorate the cinema with curiosities from around the world. In his mind, that greatly contributes to how the cinema has been doing well over the years, saying that Husets offers a place that is both strange and cosy, and "Danes love cosy." He continued, "If we were running this theatre in a room with folding chairs and a sheet on the wall, nobody would come. They could watch films on their computers. It's the atmosphere." At first glance, cosiness may not immediately imply a feeling that facilitates rowdiness or even transgression as commonly found in the cult film experience. With the addition of Stevenson's eclectic approach to establishing Husets's environment, cosiness is then pierced with a tinge of the extraordinary, just enough to constitute an ambiance that provides the possibility for audiences to contravene the conventional moviegoing habits and etiquette. We can then argue that cosiness can imply an added level of safety, much like being in our own homes that if we were to break *some* rules there would be minimal harm. Therefore, the spaces of which cult film screenings are held can be considered safe spaces to "relate to the world both ironically and sincerely," but also "confront and negotiate social contradictions" (Pavlounis, 2012, p.28). By having an ambiance that exudes both cosiness and eccentricity, those who visit Husets may be faced with an internal reconsideration of what a cinema space should look and feel like.

If up to this point, the cinemas have been playing up their environmental features and taking inspiration from the history of their buildings, Hypnos in Malmö has a different approach in how they constitute their ambiance while at the same time giving enough room for the ambiguities a cult space entails to proliferate. We can recall the discussion on their identity in the previous chapter, where their approach was to have minimal decorations inside the auditorium. Paul Kraus, who was the co-founder, attributed this consideration to believing that audiences should "fill in the gaps themselves." His idea of Hypnos at the onset of its creation stems from the concept of having a bookstore, café, and a cinema all in one place. "We really started to elevate the significance and importance of creating a social space around this cinematic experience," he said. One of the reasons for this perspective was Kraus' strong

stance against the “tendency towards isolationism” brought about by streaming services that made watching movies in our own homes more convenient.

Unlike the approaches of previous cinemas in regards to ambiance where having “extras” is desired, Kraus was more averse to added distractions noting that the practice of watching movies itself is a distraction so “you should have to keep it simple.”



Figure 18
Hypnos’ rather barebones and industrial-looking interior

This is manifested in the minimal decorations of the auditorium (as seen in Figure 18) and peppering the rear of the auditorium through a series of second-hand purchases and through gifts, arguably without a rigid vision of what it should look or feel like. Additionally, similar to Husets Biograf before, there are no audible ambient music or sounds. However, Kraus believed that as a cinema there are some material considerations that needed to be met, specifically that of the chairs. He elaborated that due to his initial idea of having multipurpose space, having the chairs all facing in one direction was a

conundrum, and that “although it's conventional for the cinema, it was like, there are more perspectives than that.” He continued:

But the fact is, I told my wife, I'm like, "If we don't get these chairs, this is not a thing. We can't do it." Even though with the speakers, the projector, everything else, it's not a thing if we don't have the chairs. And then the chairs have to be facing a certain way. And then it turns out that if you're going to show, you have to give the audience some level of comfort or how to expect, how to behave when they come into a place, and then after that, you can mess with them.

-Kraus (2019)

The key takeaway is that even if cinemas may allow for a degree of spontaneity of feelings and possibly actions, the environmental configurations are still beseeched by some fundamental requirements. His statement of “chairs have to be facing a certain way” implies that if the opposite were true or that the chairs were positioned unharmoniously, the ambiance of the cinema would lose its meaning.

As such, we can argue that ambiance and hence atmosphere, has the possibility to be sustained over time and repeated experiences. Although the make-up of the cinema audiences or the films being screened can differ throughout the course of time, there remains a “certain homogeneity” in the ambient configuration where audiences “experience a stage set in roughly the same way” whose meanings are “instilled through cultural socialization” (Böhme, 2013, p.3). What this means is that essentially individuals should be able to discern of *being in a cinema* rather than in a lecture hall or a nightclub for example, and hence they can recall which expectations and norms are applicable within the cinema space based on the environmental components and their cultural upbringing. This is in line with Kraus’ reflections in that he acknowledges there are a set of expectations as to how audiences should behave within the cinema’s environment.

This point further reinforces the notion that the collective experience of watching cult films in the movie theatre also hinges on the architectural features and interior design of cinemas and not existing “in an artificial vacuum” (Hanich, 2014, p.341). The seating arrangements and the individual seat design for example, shapes how audiences are able to feel “comfort” (Kraus, 2019). It can also instil a sense of closeness or distance to other individuals who are watching the same film. We can look back to instances where narrow seats may impede our own enjoyment of the film because we are constantly being mindful of not bumping into the audience member sitting next

to us. At the same time, cinemas within this research have shown they have adopted an approach that utilize the aforementioned comfort as a license to create particular experiences that are eclectic in nature compared to being in a multiplex. Recalling again to Kraus' statement, cinemas can to an extent "mess" with audiences.

Having said the above, it is worth acknowledging that there are matters of access –mainly from a financial point of view- that can be recognized. As Louis (36, M, doctoral candidate) pointed out, watching a movie at Spegeln is on the pricy side. For context at the time of this writing, a normal movie ticket for a recently released film at Filmstaden would cost 169 SEK and a ticket at Spegeln for the same exact movie would cost 180 SEK. However, event screenings such as sing-alongs and special cult film events (e.g. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) tickets are slightly increased to 185 SEK at Spegeln, although films under their "Classics" category is lower in price at 160 SEK. Pricing for other cinemas in this thesis hover –more or less- around the same level for ticket of admission, with the exception of Hypnos that operates on a membership system. Even if the difference in price between the cinemas are not astronomical, the idea of spending any of the aforementioned amount for entertainment can be considered a splurge for many.

Unlike nickelodeons that were prevalent in the early 20th century, modern cinema houses arguably exude an ambiance that attracts audiences that are more affluent. This is especially true in today's context if we are to juxtapose the cost of watching one film at a time in the cinema, in comparison to a near-equivalent cost for a subscription to a streaming service, for example. Therefore, it can be surmised that the sense of comfort and relaxation that audiences are able to experience in these cinemas certainly come at an increased cost. And with it, contemporary cinemas in this way communicate "very different expectations of behaviour" to their audiences compared to nickelodeons in the past where casualness, "light entertainment, a novelty, not serious work" were the main messages (Butsch, 2019, p.9). As elaborated in this thesis, cult film screenings generally subvert such behavioural expectations, even more so when contrasted with non-cult cinemas or national multiplexes. But at the same time due to the premium placed upon these experiences, the ability to be rowdy and boisterous is priced in, in tandem with either the luxurious, grandeur, or eclectic ambiance one can experience at these cinemas.

Mood of Audiences

It has been argued that atmospheres “are an amalgam or interaction between the material conditions of context or setting and the actions and interactions of those present and experienced as bodily feelings” (Lunt, 2024, p.473). The material aspects would not have the capacity to emanate meanings or values if it were not experienced in conjunction with the presence of an audience. Therefore, the natural next step for this chapter is to examine how said audiences are reflecting on the previous material aspects of cinemas that screen cult films. In analysing how audiences are perceiving such ambiances, we can first look towards Tawa’s (2022) arguments in that “places have ambiances but not moods” and the atmospheric experience can only be extrapolated if there are individuals involved (p.44).

The focus on audiences and their relationship with the material environment stems from the understanding such interplays are “always spatially contextualized” and that media has the ability to establish “social spaces” based on the “interaction between humans and the built environment” (Fornäs, 2006, p.208). Harkening back to a previous point in that the collective experience is not created in isolation, rather the material aspects of a particular space are imbued meaning to the extent of the individuals who are coming into direct contact with them. However, the reverse is also applicable in that the furniture or architectural features of a building for example, can also galvanize audiences towards a specific feeling. This echoes Griffero’s (2020) observations in that “objects and spaces are not merely functional” but also has the ability to shape the emotionality of individuals, which may increase the likelihood of certain behaviours to occur (p.100). This is particularly pertinent in the case of cult film screenings, as we will see below in that audiences place an importance in how the physical affordances can eventually set the mood for when they enter the cinema space.

One of the physical aspects that audiences reflect on is the architectural style of the cinema space, often linking it to the history of the cinemas. Almost all of the movie theatres in this thesis (except Hypnos in Malmö) had undergone transformations both architecturally and operationally that spans many decades in the past. At Spegeln in Malmö for example, its main auditorium Alcazar has retained the stage at the front, right underneath the screen. This was a design choice by the cinema’s original architect and owners, whom wanted to construct a movie theatre that stood out from other established cinemas in the context of 1930s Sweden (Stauslund, 2001, p.10). Such architectural feature was appreciated by Gustav (40, M, technical support) who went to a *Rocky*

Horror screening at Spegeln where along with his friends, “jumped up on the stage because we wanted some photos of us there, and the entire audience just erupted in applause [laughter].” He continued reflecting on the ambiance of Spegeln by acknowledging there are art deco elements to the interior design, “and they have these orange walls that just glow when you take a picture of them. So I think it’s a really beautiful space to have events in with the seating, with the tables, and the single couches.”

Another example of how audiences are placing an importance in the aged environmental features of the cinema was elaborated by Lena (37, F, researcher) who watched a *Rocky Horror* screening and admittedly has been visiting Bio Roy in Gothenburg since she was a child. Apart from the classical ambiance to be felt at Roy, Lena also pointed out that she appreciated the diversity of people working at the cinema, especially regarding their perceived age though “not super old, but they’re not like [young] compared to [Filmstaden].” This also harkens back to Winsnes’ thoughts earlier on how the cinema’s history was thought to greatly shape the moviegoing experience. She said, “They did a renovation and I’m very happy that they preserved so much. Because I liked it. They only enhanced and sort of strengthened what they already had.” A similar sentiment can also be seen from sisters Sara (28, F, barista) and Sofia (27, F, UI/UX designer) in their reflections of watching *The Room* at Bio Roy. They noted strong fondness towards Roy because of its “old” ambiance, which links to their identities of having an affinity towards vintage related stuff. Sara noted that upon entering Roy’s lobby she got a “full feeling” of being in a different era, to which Sofia chimed in by adding, “The seats and everything [feel] old.” This is despite that Roy had undergone numerous renovations and most recently in 2021 refurbished the seats in their auditorium. Even if that were so, based on Sofia and Sara’s perceptions, the cinema has retained most of its historical charm, to which Sara added that it does not really matter which movie is being screened, but it’s more about “just being there.” She continued:

The moment you step in that place, you know something different starts. You are in a warmer space. [...] And when we watched the Lord of the Rings marathon, we sat on the balcony and it was so perfect. The table in the middle, the space in between the seat [...] we really love it. Even the outside.

(Sara, 28, F, barista)

Sara’s quote above points towards a sense of enjoyment and satisfaction from merely being in the cinema space. It also relates back to a notion brought up

earlier, in that the mood of audiences are immediately shaped “the moment you step in” the cinema as Sara puts it. It also serves as the ideal segue into another aspect of the cinemas’ material features that plays a role in the shaping of the mood: the chair.

We can recollect back to the elaboration by Paul Kraus from Hypnos in that a movie theatre calls for the availability of chairs configured in a specific way in order for the space to embody the identity of a cinema. The importance of the chair is illustrated by Clara (37, F, administrator), who claimed that she preferred Spegeln’s chairs in comparison to the Royal³⁶ in Malmö because she tended to gravitate towards smaller audiences, even though she admitted to preferring the bigger audiences when it comes to certain types of films. Regarding Spegeln, she said, “there’s room to crawl up and change positions, you sit in them, and having your table and everything, I think, yeah, it really does something to the whole experience.” Chairs were also of high importance for Dean (32, M, programmer) as he recalled an experience of watching a film in a cinema in Edinburgh where he lived before coming to Sweden. “It was a lot like Spegeln, small theatre...the seats weren’t amazing. They just had the oldest red velvet movie seats,” he said. Dean then admitted that he went to that particular cinema a few times, but could not convince any of his friends to come along due to the lack of comfort partially afforded by the cinema chairs. He compared the watching experience at Spegeln with “the commercialized experience” of multiplexes by saying, “I cannot stand those really big rooms with crap ton of people [and] mildly uncomfortable seats.”

The cinema chair is an important material factor when it comes to the cinema experience as it is synonymous with how we practically watch movies, which is sitting down. The design of cinema spaces, with screens at the very front and people sitting down in chairs opposite of said screens have always served the purpose to immerse audiences in the imagined world of the film that is projected. As Ameri (2011) posits in his philosophical ruminations on the architectural design of the cinema, “every mutation and modification of the movie theatre” are carried out with the consideration of being able to release any other external aspects of life not directly related to the movie itself (p.90). But also, any sense of an authentic reality can be seen as a “function of space and distance” (Ibid.). Throughout moviegoing history, the architectural design of the cinema along with its material and environmental features emphasize

³⁶ The Royal is the largest cinema in Malmö in terms of attendance capacity at around 498 people. It is owned and operated by Filmstaden.

the desire for audiences to situate themselves temporarily within a seemingly alternate reality where much of the everyday is inconsequential.

Hence, in today's movie theatre culture there are both spoken and unspoken norms of watching at the cinema, such as to minimize disturbance through talking loudly or the bright screens of mobile phones. For watching normal movies, the chairs then function as one component of a vessel that transports audiences from one reality –the “outside”- with that of the perceived “inside,” which is the immersive world provided by movies. In cases such as this, audiences are “invariably informed by often contesting cultural values and habits of apprehension” (Edensor, 2015, p.334). However, in the case of the cult film experience, such boundaries of outside-inside are blurred and, in some cases, dissolved. Gone are the expectations that one should not yell or generally be rowdy as would be more commonplace “outside” the cinema. Nor are there any expectations that audiences should remain seated in their chairs throughout the entirety of the movie's running time.

This *breaking of immersion* was emphasized by Sebastian (30, M, software engineer) who went to a cult film screening at Bio Roy in Gothenburg. Audiences' attention and awareness are no longer centred on the diegetic components of a film, but focused on the reality that they are watching a film with others in a particular space. That there are others cheering along with you or having an awareness that cult films have no emotional pull that draws you in into their presented world. They are not immersed in the constructed reality presented by the film. Sebastian drew an oppositional parallel with watching Christopher Nolan's *Inception* at a Filmstaden IMAX screen where “you experience the film in its entirety while not having anything else to distract you” and more akin to a “sensory deprivation place.” He continued:

They want to make sure that the only thing your mind experiences right now is the movie. And I think the polar opposite to that is something like Bio Roy, because when you want to watch like a cult movie, being a cult while watching it is part of the experience. And that means that somehow being conscious that you are in a cinema is part of that experience. [...] If that's taken away from you, then maybe it's not a complete experience.

(Sebastian, 30, M, software engineer)

From this, we can further surmise the mood of being in a specific type of cinema when watching cult films can be attributed to the particular makeup and design of the space itself. As Böhme (2017) would argue, one must experience an atmosphere through their own personal mood, through which

the atmosphere “conveys to us, as participating subjects, a disposition” (p.158-159). Or in Sebastian’s case, it was the feeling of being bodily present *in* a cinema, rather than being engulfed by the movie’s imaginary world.

Additionally, Sebastian’s remarks also imply that audiences themselves are constituting the mood within the cinema. As such, cinema chairs –along with the other material aspects of the cinema- instead serve less as a constitutive factor of immersion but more a constitutive factor of subversion through the sense of comfort it instils. Through this, it facilitates audiences in bringing additional practices that are “outside of and contrary” to the existing sociocultural norms of going to the cinema, similar to the carnival where such norms are suspended only for the duration of the screening (Bakhtin, 1984, p.255). The notion of comfort can then be established as a key factor that sets the mood of cult film screenings, which later facilitates the generation of a cult film effervescence. Louis (36, M, doctoral candidate) also shared this view, thinking that even though Spegeln “is a bit more expensive,” he appreciates the “comfortable seats you can sit in” and the “old-fashioned” ambiance of the cinema that exudes luxury, which harks back to the earlier analysis on Spegeln’s ambiance. He continued, “You feel really relaxed” and “if you relax, you can enjoy your wine and stuff like [this *The Room* screening].”

By being able to relax, audiences are able to obtain a heightened sense of freedom that are more commonly found in private spaces rather than public spaces. They are no longer bound or at the least, incrementally released from the common expectations of behaviour within the cinema that have been socially conditioned throughout one’s life. As such, some audiences juxtapose the experience of watching cult films in these cinemas more aligned with watching movies at home. Case in point, Malin (31, F, student) and her partner George (31, M, software engineer) recalled the time they lived 500 meters away from Spegeln and would visit the cinema any time they possibly can. Malin elaborated that because they had a “really small apartment” the couple would go “all the time for movies and drinks,” adding that Spegeln “just became our second living room.” For both Malin and George, the cinema space was considered an extension of their private life in spite of the fact that it is very much a public space where any members of the public can visit and attend a screening. Resonating with Malin and George, Brian (36, M, administrator) also perceived Spegeln’s ambiance to be homely and appreciates the recent renovations that equipped all of the cinema’s auditoriums with wider seats and tables in between. “It’s like a nice little living room where you can just have a drink,” he said referring to the general interior design and layout. However, he acknowledged, “all places can’t have that” considering that different cinemas

will have differing priorities when it comes to their design but also their financial operations.

The above audience reflections further sustains the argument that cult film screenings are replete with an increased possibility for happenstance due to the multiplicity of meanings that can be attributed to the space. This is the case because some individuals are not thoroughly immersed in the movie at hand, but instead they exhibit a sense of awareness of being in a public space whose ambiance is subconsciously interlinked with that of their own private space. In talking about the transfer of symbols and the feelings they carry, Durkheim (1995) argues that such processes can occur because both a material object and its symbol “are closely connected in our minds” (p.221). For if, the object in question lacks a degree of connectedness with a particular learned feeling or experience, “it cannot serve as a mooring for the impression felt” (Ibid.).

Audiences have thus far placed an importance on the notions of comfort, but they have also shown a high degree of appreciation towards the social aspects of watching cult films in the cinema as a mood-setting factor. In other words, the mood of watching these movies parallel that of house parties or family gatherings where sociality is an intrinsic element of the experience. As Butsch (2019) posits, “culture happens when people gather in places and engage in situations where they interact, create, and express that culture” (p.6). The seemingly convivial nature that the screenings exude were reflected upon that if audiences were to not watch cult films in the presence of other people, it would lessen the mood and ultimately the enjoyment considerably. This is despite the varying degrees of identities that audiences possess and perform. Therefore, we can argue a sensory experience such as this was augmented due to the “collective embodiment” of those in attendance in relationship to how they obtain enjoyment from doing particular things together (Duru, 2024, p.132). As such, a collective identity may begin to form. This was echoed by Kajsa (40, F, court clerk) who stated that “the best way” to watch a cult film is with other people considering “it’s not really about hearing all the dialogue anymore,” rather “it’s more about enjoying it with someone else.”

Even if audiences previously acknowledge that the cult cinema space is interlinked with the feeling of home, the mood of going to the screenings is not so much about the sense of privacy of being in one’s home, but rather being able to experience a boisterous good time with others who may share a similar perspective on these films. Gustav reflected upon this in relation to how the Spiegeln’s ambiance shapes the mood of visitors:

I guess it creates a more comfortable ambiance. It doesn't feel so commercial. It's not plastic everywhere, and things that are just easy to clean, and you feel like you're in a conference room. It's more like a bar than it is what I would call a standard Swedish movie theatre. So I think it definitely adds to the experience to feel like it's organic in a way.

(Gustav, 40, M, technical support)

Here, Gustav is echoing some of the statements made by the cinema figureheads in relation to how they envisioned the cinema experience. Namely, the experience should stand apart as something distinct in comparison to watching a movie at a multiplex. There are allusions to resisting against the commercialized, standardized ambiance design as exemplified by Gustav's opinion that some spaces feel like a "conference room." Instead, he appreciates the implied convivial nature of Spegeln akin to that of a bar where people often gather with friends and possibly socialize with others. Because of this, Spegeln's space opens itself up for "potential elements of chance" where social relations and material practices can coalesce (Massey, 2005, p.95). It is in stark contrast to the moviegoing experience one would encounter at the national chain cinemas, where spaces for the social to take place is minimal and the film is almost isolated as the sole notable feature without the "need for supplementation" (Kracauer, 1987, p.96). There is usually no bar area that serves alcoholic drinks and differing food items beyond the eponymous popcorn or candy bars. Even more so, the non-availability of comfortable chairs or sofas available for visitors to sit in while waiting for the screening to begin. Therefore, the architectural makeup of the cinema has the potential to be one of many constitutive factors in the propagation of specific types of culture simply because the space allows it.

The sense of freedom one can feel and ultimately the enjoyment are amplified primarily due to being able to share the experience with other people present. This was acknowledged by Bengt (39, M, filmmaker) based on his experience of watching *Birdemic* at Spegeln, to which he said that when it comes to bad movies, "it's always better to watch with someone else because if nothing else, you want to talk about it with someone." He continued, "The worst thing about watching a movie is that there is no one that you know that has seen it" and believes that it is particularly "worse" for bad movies because in his mind these types of movies need to be talked about. Bengt then reflected on watching such movies in the theatre with strangers juxtaposed with watching them alone by saying that watching the film at the cinema with other people was "a big deal" considering that he usually watched films by himself or occasionally with

friends. This in his mind shaped how he valued bad movies because “where a bad movie, in order to not be terrible, has to not be boring. And when you watch a movie alone, either it's even more boring or it's much better than you thought.”

The belief of watching cult films as an experience to be shared with others also resonates with Sven, who attended a screening of *Miami Connection* with a group of friends. When asked about how physically being in the movie theatre for *Miami Connection* shaped his overall enjoyment, Sven replied, “It’s a greater experience than just seeing the movie because it’s about the people that are there too.” He took a wider point of view believing that any cinema experience is inherently a social experience to be shared “among strangers,” irrespective of the movie being screened whether “it’s a bad movie or a blockbuster or the latest *Avengers* film or whatever it is.” However, he noted that in the case of badfilms and cult films, it is even more pertinent because “a bad movie *must* be shared” and doing otherwise would lessen the impact of the experience.

As another example, Olaf (45, M, lecturer) had never seen *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a sing-along in the movie theatre before, although he had seen it as a musical. Because of this, his friend Johanna (43, F, researcher) took it upon herself to invite and persuade Olaf to go see a screening at Bio Roy because it is an experience that she considered “a fun thing to do together.” In talking about the days leading up to the screening, Johanna divulged that she and Olaf “saw the movie at home a couple of days before” to “prepare” Olaf. This harkens back to a point made in the previous chapter in how audience members who possess previous knowledge and competence often utilize the enjoyment from a previous shared experience as a selling point to others in order for them to watch the film in the cinema together. Because of this, the “connoisseurs” play a role in setting both the expectations and the mood of would-be first-time viewers by imparting relevant practical knowledge in connection with the movie they are watching. Olaf reflected on why he decided to accept Johanna’s invitation:

Yeah, I mean, largely, obviously, social reasons that, okay, so you have a nice company, and you're doing something fun, so somebody comes up with an idea, so you follow. I suppose, yeah, and I've seen it as a musical before, but I think this is my actually first kind of sing-along screening of any movie, this one or another. So I didn't know exactly what to expect, but with a good crowd, it must be fun, right?

(Olaf, 45, M, lecturer)

Olaf had already begun to form a pre-conceived imagination of what the film experience would be like. Even though he had not seen *Rocky Horror* as a sing-along before, he relied on the social nature of it—watching it with a few friends or “a good crowd,” as an anchoring in how he established his expectations.

In many ways, this social element of the cult film experience only expounds the sense of comfort and relaxedness an audience member can feel because they are conducting the practices together in the presence of others who they are acquainted with and trust. Hence, audiences can feel an additional measure of safety from negative social judgments that could potentially be bequeathed by other people in a different context because they are attending the screenings with like-minded individuals be it within their circle of friends or complete strangers. The idea of comfort, taken in conjunction with the social nature of cult film screenings constitute a mood that highlights “the affective modality of engagement of the crowd” (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.30). They are the driving force behind audience participation, in that if one feels at home or comfortable in the space, they are more likely to conduct actions even if it is in a public space. Additionally, having a particular ambiance stemming from a cinema space that facilitates the aforementioned elements will only augment the overall experience. This in turn, increases the likelihood for a feeling of solidarity among audiences to coalesce that may result in people taking part “in a collective action” such as “clapping, cheering, booing” (Collins, 2004, p. 82).

Conclusion

In writing about film, Walter Benjamin (2008) once argued that due to technological revolutions, the practice of exhibiting film has become a “new realm of consciousness” where film, as the anchoring media text, acts as a prism through which audiences can witness “the spaces of their immediate environment” projected in a “comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way” (p.329). Naturally, the dynamics of film exhibition have shifted over time since Benjamin’s writing. As shown in this thesis thus far, no longer are films exclusively meant to be other-worlds into which audiences are emotionally and psychologically transported. Nor are modern cinemas exclusively *kinos*, as Kracauer’s (1987) would have it, where distraction should be minimized or eliminated altogether. On the contrary, this chapter has illustrated that cult film screenings take place in cinema spaces that allow for the proliferation of ambiguities where audiences are able to construct and attach their own

meanings towards the environmental ambiance where they are bodily present based on their mood. By breaking down the concept of atmosphere into two constitutive factors –ambiance and mood, this chapter has illustrated that distraction *or* immersion are not compulsory, they are merely options. On the one hand, such affordance is bestowed upon audiences partially through the cinemas’ setting of ambiance, which includes factors such as decorations, furnishings, lightings, and so on. We have seen here that the cinemas within the scope of this thesis exude ambiance that can primarily be characterized as luxurious, grandeur, or eclectic. Each of the cinemas determine their environmental design based on the philosophies of their owners or managers, all in an effort to offer audiences special experiences in comparison to watching films at other cinemas such as large multiplexes.

On the other hand, audiences come to cult film screenings with a certain emotional state that is –to an extent, shaped prior to and during the screening. Here, this chapter has explored the nuances of mood as relational between subjects (i.e. audience members) with objects (i.e. the materiality of the cinema) that in themselves should be considered a “totality of intersubjective being-with-one-another and being among entities” (Tawa, 2022, p.100). Ambiance and mood are conjoined and it would not be advantageous for us to consider them as separate entities –even though for the purposes of analysis it is prudent to demarcate as such. With this in mind, we have seen that cult film audiences acknowledge how the ambient architectural features of the cinemas they visit greatly established their mood, highlighting in particular the history of some cinemas that invoke a feeling of warmth and affection. Furthermore, audiences have also pointed out the importance of being comfortable as a key factor in their participation within cult film screenings. Comfort, in this sense, acts twofold: first, comfort as brought upon by the physical properties of the cinema, such as the chairs audiences are sitting in, and second, comfort that is obtained from being in space with other like-minded audience members. This leads to another takeaway from this chapter, which is that of the sociality of cult film screenings. Audiences remarked how watching cult films with a group of people, whether they are friends or complete strangers enhances the mood and has the potential to enhance audience participation. Hence, taken in conjunction, ambiance and mood is constitutive of an atmosphere that can be understood “as a site of composite, fluid mixing” (Bruno, 2022, p.110), where multiple determining yet amenable aspects are interspersed.

In the next chapter, the thesis will culminate in the conceptualizing of the cult film atmosphere that is generated through the occurrence of a collective effervescence in the screenings.

8. People Don't Have to Say It, They Can Feel It: Cult Film Effervescent Atmosphere

Movies should always be seen in a movie theatre...in a dark movie theatre with strangers sitting around you. And the reaction of the crowd is amazing. The way that umm...that it affects people. To see a movie in a crowd when the crowd is reacting...laughing or gasping in shock umm...and you see that in The Room also. Like I tell people about The Room...don't watch it alone, don't watch it by yourself. Go to a movie theatre to watch it, you will love it. You watch it alone, you just won't get it...probably.

(Stevenson, 2019)

The above quote from Jack Stevenson, who is the owner and manager of Husets Biograf in Copenhagen, encapsulates the core argument in this chapter that watching cult films with dozens of other individuals brings about a distinct sense of togetherness where heightened emotions are felt and experienced. It is sustained by a shared reading of the same media text, a shared affective engagement, and a shared set of rituals that ultimately produces a type of effervescence that may be termed as *cult film effervescence*. Here, the cult film effervescence can be understood as the possible feeling of “heightened intersubjectivity marked by intense, transgressive, and yet mutually attuned actions and emotions” (Tutenges, 2023, p.6) as experienced by cult film audiences. It can be considered as the bubbling up of energies as individuals in a cult film screening detach themselves from the conventional moviegoing norms (i.e. being silent during the film, not recording on their phones, etc.), which generates an atmosphere that is boisterous yet safe.

In this research's attempt to elaborate the cult film atmosphere that is generated by and through cult film screenings, a word of caution is needed. On one hand, although we may easily separate the concepts of the cult film effervescence

and atmospheres when talking about them, it should be acknowledged that they are by far and away not mutually exclusive nor can they be considered as two separate entities with impermeable boundaries. This also applies to the relationship between atmosphere and that of ambiance and mood, but also with aesthetic appraisal and the nuances of identity as elaborated in earlier chapters. The concept of atmosphere is the broader term and other aspects that have been covered in this thesis ultimately generate a cult film atmosphere.

Much like Dahlgren and Hill's (2023) metaphor of music to explain their parameters of engagement, here too should the *cult film atmosphere* be considered as "made up of chords that relate together to create an overall sound" where the different components harmonize together as "an overall tone, or affective and cognitive arrangement" (p.34). Atmosphere then, as a component of the cult film experience is far-reaching and penetrates all aspects of the experience. In Böhme's (2017) words:

Atmospheres are totalities: they flood out over everything, they tinge the entire world or sight, they let everything appear in a certain light, and they aggregate a multiplicity of impressions into an overall mood.
(p.159)

Furthermore, as Anderson (2009) articulates atmospheres are "indeterminate with regard to distinction between the subjective and objective" and that they are "impersonal in that they belong to collective situations and yet can be felt as intensely personal" (p.80). Hence, atmosphere is enduring where other notions such as the cult film effervescence is not.

Atmospheres may change in terms of its *description* as felt by individuals, but its existence and presence is unwavering. Because of this, it may not be the sole conceptual driving force of the cult film experience, but at times, it can be the most identifiable by individuals. Therefore, we can argue that atmosphere is the consequence of the cult film effervescence and all that it entails. It embodies the potential "consequences of engagement" such as satisfaction, enjoyment, and pleasure (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.34). If a person experiences a positive atmosphere based on attending a cult film screening, then there is a high likelihood they would come away happy or elated, and thus increasing the likelihood of going to another screening sometime in the future. Conversely, if a person feels let down by the atmosphere, it would possibly then serve as a detrimental factor from coming to future events.

With the above laid out, we can return to Tutenges' (2023) operational demarcations of effervescence as a jumping off point. Unlike Durkheim's original ruminations on collective effervescence, what is elaborated here is

narrower in scope, coming from “instances of human assembly occurring in a specific location for a limited or defined duration of time” (Tutenges, 2023, p.6). The notion of ephemerality is central in how we can understand the cult film effervescence. This resonates with Dahlgren and Hill’s (2023) argument in that there is an allotted duration for an “experience of engagement” (p.32). The coursing of energies and the seemingly unified participatory actions are made possible because it is primarily anchored in the particular film that is being exhibited and therefore limited by its running time. Evidently, seeds of a collective effervescence can be observed prior to the start of the film but also remnants of it may remain well after the screening has finished. Fundamentally, the sum of all the parts of this research would coalesce into a cult film effervescence that is distinct in its anchoring (a film that is being screened), the space it occurs in (the cinema), and the motivations of those involved (i.e. having a fun and enjoyable time by participating in a cult film event).

To expound on the cult film effervescence, we can look to a quote from actor Greg Sestero, who plays the character of Mark in the cult film *The Room*. It serves as an ideal prelude to the rest of the chapter because it elucidates all the elements that would generate the cult film effervescence:

I really feel like, you know it’s important to see movies with a crowd in a theatre, you know there’s an art to that. Umm having been to screenings and see the way what people respond to, I feel like then you can make something genuinely. Because I think you can try to do something on purpose, it’s not quite as authentic. You really try to tell a story organically that plays with the crowd, so there’s that participation. I think it makes it much better. There are movies out there that are pretentious playing to what they feel is interesting rather than what a crowd would. There’s a big difference.

(Greg Sestero, *The Room* Q&A, 8 May 2022, Spegeln, Malmö)

The key takeaway from Sestero’s opinion is that in order for an effervescence to occur, there needs to be a group of individuals situated within the same space, and mostly having a shared perception that the movie they are watching is sincere in its intentions. Only because of this will participation happen as carried out by audiences. As such, we can view the cult film effervescence as an “energizing force” that allows audiences to experience an intense form of media engagement (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.32). These forces are generated and shaped by the amalgamation of the above elements, which stems from how

individuals are behaving, as a by-product of their resonance with the media text, the environment, and with other people in the same vicinity.

There are a number of avenues for which we can begin to extrapolate the concept of the cult film effervescence. The first part of this chapter will take into account how the exhibitors are conducting concerted efforts in order to *increase the likelihood* of the cult film effervescence to happen. This is because even if the circumstances are suitable for an effervescence to occur, there are no guarantees that it will. Audiences may already have had their mood set through practices such as people gathering with their friends beforehand while drinking some alcoholic beverages or watching the movie at home days prior, but that does not ensure that a high intensity effervescence will take place once they come into the cinema auditorium. Although our understanding of the effervescence is based on something that is shared among individuals, we must always be aware that such occurrences are not uniform in any way and that they are “multifaceted and ambiguous conditions that affect participants differently, depending on their predispositions” (Tutenges, 2023, p.13). Therefore, we cannot and should not ascribe the cult film effervescence as something rigid or constant.

Afterwards, this chapter evaluates the importance of the participatory aspects of screenings as the “implications of a particular instance of engagement” (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.33), where engagements are typically intense in nature and thus constituting the cult film screening atmosphere. Even if that were so, such participations in the form of established rituals or spontaneous actions are often dynamic in its intensity. Different audience members will not experience the same level of intensity as others even if they are in the same vicinity, nor will different screenings have the same levels of engagement and participation. This notion was briefly flagged up in a previous chapter where differences in identities play a role in setting the people’s expectations and failure to meet these expectations may lead to disappointment. This chapter explicates further exactly what and how audiences are participating, and their reflections on how it adds value and meaning. It specifically deals with how different individuals are expressing themselves and experiencing “a high degree of focused awareness and a peak of shared emotions” (Collins, 2004, p.43) as constitutive of the cult film effervescence. Lastly, the forging of bonds and obtaining a sense of belonging as a consequence of the cult film atmosphere is expounded, elaborating how audience are able to feel a sense of affinity with others through the sensations of watching cult films with others in a cinema (Mason, 2018, p.200).

Facilitating the Cult Film Atmosphere

With the above in mind, the role of the cinema as facilitators cannot be understated in regards to how they are priming audiences towards a collective effervescence. Taking inspiration from Böhme (2017), we can consider exhibitors as having the power to “stage life and perform experience” (p.29). This notion is inextricably linked with how exhibitors attempt to establish the mood through ambiance, as elaborated in Chapter 7. They typically provide audiences with material stimuli such as print out of guides (as seen in Figure 19) or items to be used in the actual screening. For example, in screenings of *The Room*, audiences were given a print out of a “to do list” that are specifically related to certain scenes of the film. Plastic spoons were also handed out to audiences to supplement the well-established ritual of throwing spoons towards the screen when framed spoons comes into the frame. With these paraphernalia entering the fold of the film screening, the seemingly distant elements of spoons or shouting in relation to watching movies then “begin to conjugate sense” (Tawa, 2022, p. 195). No longer are audiences left to wonder as to how they should behave in the auditorium, as such ambiguities were laid to rest by the introduction of the theatre’s initiative of facilitating the collective effervescence.

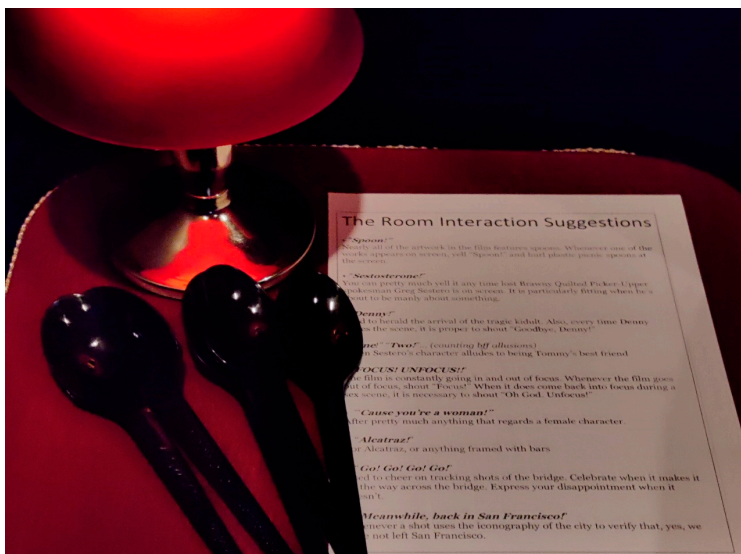


Figure19
Plastic spoons and a guide given out by Spiegeln for a screening of *The Room*

In the case of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Spegeln, Malmö, their foyer outside the main auditorium was transformed into an accessory handout centre with staff standing by a table stacked with paraphernalia related to the movie (as seen in Figure 20 below).



Figure 20

Party hats and other paraphernalia for a *Rocky Horror* screening at Spegeln, Malmö

Items such as newspapers, uncooked rice, and party hats were neatly packed inside a brown paper bag to be utilized by audiences when the time is right during the movie. Furthermore, screenings of *Rocky Horror* often feature a dedicated staff who “leads” the audiences into conducting certain actions. In fact, in one instance of the film’s screening the “leader” played an actual piano inside the auditorium to warm up the audiences with song and verses. This echoes Hill’s (2019) writings on the role of warm-up acts in the context of live audience television shows, where it was acknowledged that these individuals ready audiences by creating a “meaningful connection with crowds and makes

people feel recognized and valued for their performances *as audiences* [self-emphasis] at a live event” (p.182). In both this thesis’ and Hill’s case, those who are working on the production (i.e. the cinema itself or the television program) place a great importance in the involvement of the audience. Because if the audience is not involved in some ways or are merely observing, the atmosphere becomes deplete of excitement and hence a less meaningful experience for the audience.

Having a cinema staff member in attendance for a screening of a cult film also extends beyond *Rocky Horror*. For screenings of films that are a part of The Bad Film Festival in Gothenburg and The B-Film Club in Malmö, a member of the staff would always prelude the screening of the actual film by going to the front of the auditorium and present the films in question. In addition to safety information (e.g. emergency exit locations, etc.), the cinema staff would usually give a brief synopsis typically in a joking manner, often making fun of the film’s preposterous plot or drawing the audience’s attention to certain scenes that are noteworthy. They would also occasionally tell audiences that it is acceptable to laugh and make off-hand comments during the duration of the film instead of asking them to be completely silent. But most importantly, the staff members would emphasize their wish for audiences to *have fun*.

This sets the stage for audiences to embrace an experience that diverges from the typical film screening, where they are conditioned by staff members to expect a more stimulating and convivial experience shying away from “the usual, common sense experience of the world” (Edensor and Sumartojo, 2015, p.257). Pernilla Nilsson, the operating manager of Spegeln recalled a personal experience of watching a party along of *Dirty Dancing* with one of her colleagues, which gave her inspiration in approaching the event films at her theatre:

[We] went to Dirty Dancing, the party along screening. Because we were curious what is this, how does it feel? We love the movie and we went in there and there were two men, and the rest of us were women. Umm...but my god! I was like umm...blushing and laughing my socks off, but I was also like embarrassed because how we behaved as a group when he came in with his shirt off for the first time, someone was roaring [laughter]oh Johnny!! [laughter].

(Nilsson, 2019)

Based on Nilsson’s experience, she found inspiration from the screening of *Dirty Dancing* in creating similar events for Spegeln that places crowd participation and an intense form of engagement at the forefront. It is in

moments such as this that one's internal wish for freedom to express themselves become inseparable from the "exterior freedom" of their surroundings (Bakhtin, 1984, p.271).

Anna Reimegård, who was the operating manager of Bio Roy in Gothenburg, believed that watching cult films –much like sing-alongs or party-alongs– should be considered an activity that you do with your friends, "and then the movie kind of secondary." She said, "Sometimes it's a secret desire to sing along with your favorite movies at cinema, but you can't really do it." Because of this, Reimegård together with her colleagues placed an added focus on screening films that contain elements of participation, noting, "Now we have the possibility to act [it] out." This again signals towards an ontological facet of being human, which is possessing a fundamental need to express themselves emotionally, albeit oftentimes they are inert due to the limitations of societal norms and contexts. However, in the case of the thesis it has been shown that cult film screenings can be considered a domain where expressions are not only accepted, but also encouraged by those who are arguably in positions of power.

It exemplifies one of the conditions for effervescence to take place as explained by Tutenges (2023), in that "physiological stimulants" can be present in order to transport people's mood to "surpass the confines of their habitual ways of behaving and experiencing" (p.28). In this case, stimulants do not necessarily have to take the form of alcohol, drugs, or loud music –although they can be, but also include items that are not typically found in the movie theatre. Most importantly, the cult film effervescence is anchored in the shared reading of the movie being screened in a space that is oftentimes not socially associated with such, but was made possible due to the conscious structuring of the ambiance and mood. Therefore, we can surmise that it is in the best interest of the exhibitors to pursue a collective effervescence occurring among the audience during cult film screenings because it increases the sense of enjoyment and ultimately generates a positive atmosphere.

The Effervescent Atmosphere

Cult film audiences are able to conduct participatory actions that have become hallmarks of the cult film experience. For example, in the case of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, grains of rice can be thrown at the beginning of the film when the characters of Ralph and Betty walk out of the church after their matrimony or the use of water pistols to simulate the rainstorm that Brad and

Janet are caught in. This is in addition to many audiences dressing up as certain characters, which only adds to the generation of the effervescence. Furthermore, in the film's screenings at both Spegeln and Bio Roy, audiences are encouraged to stand up and dance during the film's eponymous musical numbers such as "The Time Warp" where many would follow the established routine of mimicking the dance's exact motions. These musical numbers are also accompanied by audience members singing along to the lyrics, creating a surge of energy where different individuals are united through practice, much like the experience of being in a nightclub or bar when a famous song comes on the speakers. This was highlighted by Lena (37, F researcher) who admitted that going to a *Rocky Horror* screening after COVID restrictions was such a relief because she was fond of "Halloween-related traditions," and that the months of October and November were "awful in Sweden." In this way, she utilized the screening as a way for her to express herself through the "collaborative experience" of the screening as an extension of her love towards singing. She said, "Any kind of singing that's unpretentious is the best kind of singing. [...] I think it's quite important for me, in building a sense of, or maintaining a sense of who I am as I grow older." Lena's experience with *Rocky Horror* exemplifies how individuals in cult film screenings, similar in spirit to that of the religious cult, can obtain a sense of being rewarded and gratification for partaking in the rituals (Banbridge and Stark, 1979, p.284).

When it comes to *The Room*, another cult film with an established collection of rituals to be carried out during the screenings, the effervescence is materialized primarily through talkbacks and the dispensing of plastic spoons aimed at the screen while yelling "SPOON!!," whenever a framed picture of a spoon shows up. The screening experience is also replete with other types of shouts that have been codified into the film's ritual guidelines that are commonly communicated in cinemas but also as found on the internet. This includes for example, shouting "Meanwhile back in San Francisco!" whenever the movie's many establishing shots of random neighbourhoods pop up, greeting the character of Denny with "Hi Denny!!" every time he shows up on-screen, or shrieking "You are tearing me apart Lisa!!" along with Tommy Wiseau's character. The experience of watching *The Room* is undeniably more comedic in nature where laughter becomes the primary source of enjoyment due to the film's "failed conventions and incoherence" portrayed through its "narrational inconsistency" (MacDowell and Zborowski, 2013, p.21). This typically evokes an emotional feeling of confoundedness and befuddlement on the part of those watching, which enables the comedic mode of reading to take centre stage. In this sense, audiences' reading of the film also signals a "refusal" of conforming (Hebdige, 1979, p.3) with how filmic conventions are

supposed to be perceived, such as sympathy towards the wronged protagonist or sex scenes are supposed to be erotic. Additionally, audiences are not expected to strictly follow the guidelines as provided by the cinema or the internet, but are also afforded the opportunity to be creative in making their own jokes or one-liners that correspond to what is unfolding onscreen.

Therefore, such screenings are illustrative of a situation where the intense audience engagement is “a response to the utterly changed conditions of the familiar, triggering the suspension of reserved behaviour” (Edensor, 2015, p.334). As Malin (31, F, student) admitted:

That's the good thing about bad movies or cult movies, is that you can definitely discuss the movies out loud, actually, for the entire room to hear in a completely different way than you can do with a normal movie. So I think the engaging part is a lot of fun at the movies. People laugh out loud, and people comment things out loud for everyone to hear it. That's a lot more fun than watching it at home.

(Malin, 31, F, student)

Although it has been acknowledged the cult film effervescence is intense in nature, it is worth recalling that intensities are always in flux and seldom remain constant throughout the duration of a film. If anything, this research has found that intensities often build up and are not always cranked up to maximum levels right from the onset. Nor do audiences sustain a continued state of rowdiness and boisterousness where everyone are always clapping or yelling at the screen. In almost all of the screenings that were observed, audiences took their time to warm up and settle into the expectations and mood of the auditorium as a generator of the atmosphere. Considering that the composition of the audience are not wholly populated by “experts” or “connoisseurs,” those who lack the cultural know-hows of cult film screenings often lag behind in their actions. Essentially, it was found that most, if not all audiences were apprehensive in initiating the chants, whoops, or hurling random comments aimed at the movie. Interestingly enough, this notion is sustained when it comes to Swedish audiences but the opposite may be observed in regards to previous, pre-COVID experiences of watching cult films in the US and Denmark where audiences were prepped and initiated the participatory actions much earlier. For example, in one of the first screenings of *The Room* I attended in New York City, the audience was already conducting chants and yelling the movie’s lines well before the first frame of the film was projected. Alternatively, a screening at Husets Biograf in

Copenhagen circa 2018 had audiences already throwing spoons at the sight of Tommy Wiseau's name in the credits.

The easing into the participation was illustrated by Sebastian's (30, M, software engineer) reflection on watching *The Room* for the first time, where he tried to "establish a pattern" by questioning, "Are they booing the actress? Or are they booing when somebody specific shows up on the screen?" This was also echoed by Brian (36, M, administrator) who thought the experience of watching *The Room* "gets louder and more intense" as the movie progresses and different iconic scenes play out onscreen, in addition to the spoon throwing that becomes more and more uninhibited. The idea of gradually being acclimatized to the film screenings was especially pertinent in the cases of films that do not have a long-established set of rituals such as *Miami Connection* or *Birdemic*. For in the cases of *The Room* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it can be argued that audiences receive adequate assistance in navigating the procedural flow of the screening as contributed by the exhibitors and fellow audience members. However, for other films encompassed in this research, the aforementioned assistance was rather sparse even though—as mentioned before—cinema staff "ease" the audiences into the screening with jokes or emphasizing fun.

Therefore, the dynamic intensity of the cult film effervescence can be seen as avalanching in terms of its conception, where in Durkheim's (1995) mind there usually is an "initial impulse" that are eventually "amplified each time it is echoed, like an avalanche that grows as it goes along" (p.218). The notion of the avalanching effervescence is exemplified by the experience of Bengt (39, M, filmmaker) who watched a screening of *Birdemic* at Spegeln. He noted that he usually "hates it when people talk during movies I haven't seen." Coming into the screening, he had already set his expectations that the movie was going to be bad and contrasted it with the experience of watching newer bad films such as *Dolittle* and *Geostorm* where he knew it was going to be bad but they're a "new movie and you still expect something for it." He continued, "[In *Birdemic*], you knew that it was going to be bad. You expected everything to be like that. So this is the first time I want to see an older bad movie with people I've never met." Nevertheless, in this particular instance, he did not really care about other people talking or commenting simply because in his mind "this is not the movie where the plot matters." He said:

So it doesn't matter that people talk over the film. So to that in mind, but yeah, I heard people talk. I heard laughing even when there maybe shouldn't have been laughing, because they talked to each other and

laughed. I didn't care because the movie, yeah. I don't know what to say. It wasn't something that it mattered. It was just fun.

(Bengt, 39, M, filmmaker)

Bengt then noted that the experience was enhanced because of “everybody else’s reaction to it” and that similar to comedy films, it was “much more fun if you watch it with other people that are laughing with you.” Evidently, this particular screening of *Birdemic* was also an instance where the effervescence avalanched. In the beginning of the movie, audiences mostly only laughed, for example, at the extended opening scene that contained no dialogue and lasted for a good five minutes. However, as the movie progressed, people in the auditorium began to talk audibly with their friends, in which the speaking volume of the conversations also became louder to a point that groups of people started talking without whispering anymore and laughing at their in-jokes. Towards the end of the movie, it was also observed that audiences began clapping and rooting at some of the highly clichéd scenes of *Birdemic*. One such example was when the main characters encounter a “scientist” who was standing alone by the beach, after which he proceeds to preach about climate change and how the birds attacking is a direct result of humanity’s failure to protect the environment.

From Bengt’s response and coupled with Sebastian’s remarks before about people booing during a screening we can see that sound also plays a role in the propagation of the effervescence, and hence the generation of the atmosphere. It is central in the avalanching of the effervescence primarily because sound “goes around” as argued by Bruno (2022), “passing through air, circling, embracing things and people as they view moving pictures projected onto screen fabrics” (p.47). Sound in this case, is not only sourced through the film’s dialogue, sound effects, or music, but also sound emitted by individuals watching the film. When audiences incite laughter or are in constant conversation with their friends or neighbours, the atmosphere shifts because everybody else within the same vicinity are able to pick up these sounds with their sense of hearing. In talking about Chinese festivals, Chau (2006) argues that a congregation of individuals in which there is a “production and consumption of loud noises” can ultimately lead to a heightened social condition that is “red hot” (p.149). This is arguably the case for cult film screenings where sound and noises are persistently bounced off both material properties and human senses. Bruno (2022) then posits, the reception of sound is considered as a process of transduction in which as sonic signals pass through certain mediums, its energy can then be transformed into differing variations, depending on the medium (p.104). In this sense, laughter and

audible conversations of cult film audiences operate on two levels. On the first, these sounds act as –in terms of physics and acoustics- carriers of the melodies, tone, pitches, and other sonic properties. On the second, once the human hearing apparatus perceives these sounds, it is then mentally transformed and inscribed meaning based on a person's dispositions. It is on this second level that audiences are able to notice the social cue that laughter is permitted, or talking will not face repercussions, and thus enabling the avalanching of the effervescence. As Chau (2006) also observes, we are inclined to be attracted to congregations of people, and in turn such congregations can create "a greater convergence of people because people are disposed to be attracted to the noise and colours [of a festival]" (p.155).

For friends Sven (40, M, project manager) and Dean (32, M, programmer), their experience of watching *Miami Connection* at Spegeln resembled the experience of Bengt. Both Sven and Dean already had their expectations set prior to the screening, knowing that the film was anything but good in terms of aesthetic quality. Dean noted that the overall experience was enjoyable because he "went with a good bunch" and "loved the atmosphere in the cinema, it was like everyone was enjoying it, everyone was laughing." This was despite that the screening also began with a settling in timeframe on the side of the audiences as they attempt to ascertain the accepted behavioural expectations in the auditorium. When asked if they talked with each other during the duration of the film, Sven proudly proclaimed, "You have to comment on these movies!" He then acknowledged that the act of commenting itself is "doubly" important for bad movies, "Because it is socially acceptable to come with small comments for these movies or for certain scenes. Like it's okay to just say 'Bullshit!!' or just like 'What?!?'" This led to a small back and forth between the two friends as they reflected further:

Dean: I really remember when the girl next to me turned to me and say, "oh, tits!" [laughter]

Sven: That's almost as good as "oh, ninjas!" [laughter]

Dean: But yeah, in that transition from....crying to backstory, and sadness to just beach party music with tits and ass [laughter]. Yeah, I don't know. There weren't any other comments that stood out in memory. But I know we talked a lot.

(Dean, 32, M, programmer and Sven, 40, M, project manager)

The above, again, illustrates how sound "helps to mount atmospheres of the public or social aspect of a site in mediated environments" (Chattopadhyay,

2017, p.354). It is also an exemplification of instances where audiences were “letting go” of themselves from the restraints of the pre-conditioned norms of moviegoing and also attuning their awareness towards others in the same vicinity, synchronizing “their bodily and mental rhythms” as conditions for a collective effervescence to take place (Tutenges, 2023, p.28). By being aware what others are doing, individuals are able to ascertain newly established rules of conduct that is specific to the film screening and it became increasingly clear to those in attendance that rowdiness was accepted within this context. As such, it builds towards a collective sense of togetherness by “people initiating in familiar intercourse” whom through the course of the screening became progressively “frank and free in expressing themselves verbally” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.188).

Although the idea of “letting go” is a prominent aspect of the cult film effervescence, some audiences were reflecting on how some established rituals or even the guides provided by the cinemas were shaping the spontaneity of the experience. Friends Johanna (43, F, researcher) and Lena (37, F, researcher) recalled that even though they appreciated some guidance in *Rocky Horror* screenings in relations to the rituals, they still valued a degree of freedom to conduct other actions not found in the established guides. In comparing their *Rocky Horror* screening with a screening of *The Sound of Music*, Lena noted that for the latter, “There are no instructions at all there. You're just super free. You just sing if you want to, and you might be dressed as a nun.” Johanna chimed in by bringing her own experience of a screening of the same movie but contrasting terms of freedom, “But I think when I saw it, seen it on Bio Roy before, I'm not sure if they had props, but it did have certain lines that we were supposed to shout out. Like, you were gonna bark every time Rolf was in the picture.” To which, Lena retorted:

It's also so extremely dependent on the movie. [...] I would imagine that still with these instructions, the experience would be very different compared to Rocky Horror. And one thing that I appreciated a lot on The Sound of Music showing was how in certain points of the movie, people didn't sing because they just wanted to listen to the person who was singing. And that was like a collective decision. Like, we don't sing now. Then after a while, people came in and sang the other half of the song or something. And that's really nice. That's also kind of participation. But that kind of participation is not existing in Rocky Horror, which is more like full frontal participation.

(Lena, 37, F, researcher)

In their writings about the cult film experience, Mathijs and Sexton (2011) posit that the moving images of film are present to support the overall experience (p.33), which has been an ongoing theme for this thesis as well. This is because the act of projecting “creates moving, tangible experiences of ambient transformations” (Bruno, 2022, p.41) and ultimately factors into the generation of the atmosphere. However, we can further unpack this notion through the example above by surmising that even if the film itself is the foundation of the experience, we should still be aware that each cult film screening would bring with them different sets of expectations, rituals, and codes of conduct, but still leaving enough leeway for spontaneous participation. A degree of spontaneity was also identified as an important aspect of the experience by Anna (33, F, marketing associate), who noted that if there were written rules or guidelines given out to audiences beforehand it would “feel very formal and not as natural and spontaneous.” She then linked the participatory aspects of *Rocky Horror* to the fact that many in the audience had been to a screening before, which would allow them to yell more or increase the chance for others to hear a comment they have never heard before. “Even though some of the lines, some of the bits are scripted in the sense that a lot of people in the theatre know them and will say the same ones like, ‘where’s your neck?’ That’s the things you say” she continued.

Anna then noted that by having a sense of spontaneity and a sense of comfort to be able to try out new comments or yells, audiences get a chance to build “a little community between you and the other people who are doing the same thing.” In other words, this relates back to the notion that the cult film effervescence is shown to have an avalanche effect where the individuals present play off each other’s energies to magnify the effervescence. As Anna said:

But then there's also the times where someone just yells something completely unscripted, right? And just says something hilarious, like says the right joke at the right time. And that is gold. And if you, if you're the one who says the right joke at the right time, it's like, everybody laughs and you just feel like, I am the funniest comedian on the planet right now. And you don't get that if it's like, here's what you're supposed to say.

(Anna, 33, F, marketing associate)

Anna’s reflections above points towards how audiences are active participants in the creation of the effervescent atmosphere. Here, laughter as a response to

a spontaneous joke is the propellant of the effervescence. Going back to Durkheim (1995), this illustrates how high degree of excitements can be reinforced simply because there are individuals *expressing* such excitements, and with that the chance of generating an intense effervescence and “outlandish behaviour” (p.218). Once one or a few audience members lead the way in terms of expressing themselves through shouting comments or conducting participatory actions, others are more inclined to follow suit. What was at its onset a subdued screening of a cult film would then have the possibility of evolving into a rambunctious experience. By witnessing first-hand what others are doing, people are lulled into an affective state that stimulates a “visceral and intense engagement” from audiences where the creation of a spectacle is increasingly likely (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.38).

In this sense, the composition of the audience and the effervescence generated by and through them becomes an attraction on its own and a source of enjoyment. The being togetherness has the potential to create “social heat” that bestows cult film screenings with “heightened aura and appeal” (Chau, 2006, p.148). Individuals then laugh at other people’s original jokes while at the same time being inspired to belt out their own jokes that they have come up in their minds. Verbal jokes and comments then –in Walter Benjamin’s (2008) word, becomes a “missile,” aimed at inciting a response from others that could jolt (p.39) the audience into an effervescence. As such, the sound of laughter has a role to play in the generation of the cult film atmosphere because sound can “create spaces of their own kind, or endow spaces with a character of their own” (Böhme, 2017, p.76).

In talking about *The Room* screening Brian (36, M, administrator) attended, he noted that there was an element of “people trying to outdo each other and joking about the movie while they're watching it, like different gags from different groups.” He then said the effort of hurling jokes aimed at the movie was greatly appreciated even though he acknowledged there were “bombs,” but other times “there are hits and people that really laugh along, more to the joke said rather than what's going on the screen.” When asked if Brian himself attempted to shout out his own jokes, he quipped:

Oh, definitely. [laughter] I can't really remember what I said. I did three attempts, got two laughs or two hits, and one failure. But I was quite content. But I think when you do it in a communal sense and when you- I suppose that would be like a classic heckling, in a sense. [...] And that's a good part of being the communal experience is that there's no big shame or embarrassment if you sort of say something

stupid, nobody cares. It's just a part of it. So there's no prestige lost. [laughter] So yeah, I did some heckling and I loved it. [laughter]

(Brian, 36, M, administrator)

As Tutenges (2023) postulates, an effervescence is more likely to happen if individuals are not tense nor are they “on guard,” which would release them from “self-censorship” (p.27) and can push people “to do what they would not have been able, willing, or bold enough to do on their own” (p.79). Because of the low stakes of conducting such actions, audiences are then emboldened in their desires to express themselves. Therefore, we can extrapolate how within the cult film effervescence, there is a reoccurring perceptible sense of safety and comfort for the audiences to conduct such participatory actions. By remarking that “there’s no prestige lost” or “no big shame or embarrassment,” Brian understands that the possibility of negative repercussions for conducting such actions are minimal. It is highly unlikely that another member of the audience would call out another because of a joke they made, let alone publicly reproaching or disparaging them. Even if as he earlier states a comment can “bomb” and not producing the desired reaction of people laughing with the joke, it does not dampen the mood nor the effervescence in any way. This embodies a crucial condition for which a collective effervescence can take place due to the audiences’ feeling of being secure in the environment and that no bodily or mental harm can come onto them. It is in accordance to Frith’s (1997) argument regarding the gratification of being a part of the punk music scene, in that the “ideology of leisure has to strike a balance between freedom and order,” (p.173). In the case of cult film screenings, the freedom to shout out comments should always be permissible, but at the same time it should not come at the expense –physically or emotionally- of others in the audience.

There is an element of competitiveness that generates the energy for the effervescence, driven by some audiences’ wish to elicit a reaction from those present in the auditorium. As disclosed by Brian, evoking laughter from others can be seen as an avenue towards compounding legitimization of being a cult film audience by way of passing “audience judgment” (Vivar, 2018, p.127). This is despite the ephemeral nature of such screenings where the likelihood that a person would be acknowledged as the “owner” or “creator” of a specific joke or comment is improbable. Therefore, the clout one would seemingly gain is mostly applicable only to the confines of the cinema space. Evidently, this does not inhibit some audiences to continuously “make a play for status within the group” through their verbal expressions towards the films or other individuals (Ibid.). We can also consider the jousting for delivering the funniest comments as a way for audiences to make the movie their own by

appropriating and imbuing new values on filmic elements that are considered unacceptable in different contexts (Stewart, 2017, p.48). What this means is that certain audiences willingly exhibit their proficiency of comprehending the movie's dialogue, cinematography, or acting as aspects that would not constitute a "good" film. In Collins' (2004) mind, these individuals employ "emotional energy" as a means to steer and energize the gatherings due to their public expression of the aforementioned proficiencies (p.131). Furthermore, they are also indicating their ability to mentally transmute the perceived aesthetic deficiencies into a verbal, witty denigration of the film in question and thus fuelling the effervescence.

If up to this point it has been elaborated how a cult effervescence can avalanche in that it builds momentum and increases in its intensity, it would be prudent to also acknowledge that there are factors that could potentially diminish the effervescence as explained by audiences. Because after all, people have the tendency to gravitate towards events or rituals that would give them the highest chance of experiencing an effervescent rather than those that would fail at doing so (Tutenges, 2023, p.11). For many audience members, one of the fundamental reasons to attend a cult film screening is that they *wish for and expect* a cult film effervescence to emerge in the auditorium. This is especially pertinent to those who know more about the screenings, which has been briefly elaborated in Chapter 6 where it was found that one's identity and cultural knowledge is interlinked with their expectations of a specific film screening. This is because in order for the intense affective engagement to proliferate, there is a need for "collectivities who recognize, endorse, and pass on the affective practice" (Wetherell, 2012, p.79). In this way, we can also consider that if within the collective there is not enough individuals who can "pass on" the practice, then the effervescence may not be experienced as intense for certain individuals. In fact, individuals may partially feel let down by some aspects of the screening.

Across the different screenings that were observed for this research, it was evident that each screening of *The Room* –for example- differs in terms overall energy and atmosphere. There were times when audiences were immediately picking up on the talkbacks towards the movie within the first five minutes and were creative in their banter. Other times, there needed to be a "warm up" phase where it seems people were more observant to begin with, all the while mentally negotiating what is accepted and what is not within the screening due to the long-held norm of watching movies in the theatre under the precedent of being quiet and orderly. Strong is the grip of this societal norm that some individuals do not realize that freedom and impropriety are actually

components of the screenings, which transforms the overall experience beyond what is commonly found in other types of screenings (Bakhtin, 1984, p.187-188).

We can then argue that the expectations for the experience are heightened for those who have been to one before. For those who have never attended, they can come in with a clean slate with minimal expectations, which allows for a degree of flexibility in terms of how they work through their identity. On the other hand, experienced audiences would typically have previous screenings as benchmarks. In talking about his experience watching three films at Spiegeln as part of the B-Film Club, Jon (26, M, warehouse worker) noted there was a marked difference between the audiences. Comparing screenings of *Tammy and the T-Rex*, *Uninvited*, and *Birdemic*, he said, “*Tammy and the T-Rex* was the first movie they showed when they opened the [B-Film Club], so I think a lot of the people in the audience weren't too sure about what this was. They knew it was either a terrible or a bad movie or a very different movie, but I don't think the audience was 100%.” In comparison, he thought that for *Uninvited* there was a 70-30% split where the 30% were not “completely aware of what type of movie it was.” For *Birdemic* however, “that was 100% the correct audience because they knew exactly what type of movie it was”.

Compellingly, instances where expectations were set higher and evaluated in a somewhat critical manner occurred during screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. There was a prevailing –albeit more minor to some– sense of disappointment to some experienced audiences that were in attendance of a *Rocky Horror* screening. Even if during the correspondence they admit that they had a good time or enjoyed the overall experience, there are specific aspects that audiences deemed lacking especially in terms of intensity. Intensity at high levels serves as a lynchpin of enjoyment for some audiences, simply because it is the embodiment of a good effervescence. This is due to the fact the notion of intensity itself is profoundly linked with emotions (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.153), and anything short of the ideal amount would potentially result in emotional distress.

This was evident in the case of Kajsa (40, F, court clerk) and her friend Ingrid (41, F, teacher) who thought the screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Malmö was too tepid and even unenthusiastic. Ingrid acknowledged that one of the main reasons she liked going to *Rocky Horror* screenings was her innate affinity towards “singing along” and considers dressing up as “a way to make [the screening] visual,” and was less enthused about other participatory aspects such as throwing rice or yelling certain lines. She continued, “it gets a bit weird when other people don't take it as serious as you're supposed to because then

it is difficult to be the one who takes it serious. [...] It is a bit weird sitting next to someone who's not dressed up," while at the same time admitting "you get a bit possessive about it." Similar in tone, Kajsa also pointed out to the lack of dressing up as a downside for the screening they attended. She demarcated the boundaries of what a screening of *Rocky Horror* should encompass, distinguishing the experience as opposites with the likes of watching other musical films such as *Bohemian Rhapsody*. "You're not expected to dress up in *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. You're meant to dress up. That's the point of it. That's what you do at a viewing. And I feel like if you're a fan of it, you should know that, and then you should do it," she proclaimed. She compared it to a screening she attended in Portland, Oregon where "everyone dressed up because people understand." In her mind, audiences should be on close to equal levels in relations to the intensity of engagement and participation, and anything short of that would be a disappointment. Kajsa then said:

It's like that's a way for people to express themselves. And if they want to wear a garter and a bra and all the stuff that they wear in the movie, that should be a comfortable zone to do so because that's what the movie is about. Being comfortable about that. But if only half of the people dress up and maybe the ones dress up, a lot of them do kind of half-ass, like maybe put on a party hat or something, then you make the rest of people feel uncomfortable.

(Kajsa, 40, F, court clerk)

From Kajsa's response, we can recognize the factors that tempered the effervescent atmosphere. As elaborated before, one of the conditions for an effervescence to emerge is for participants being able to release themselves from societal restraints (Tutenges, 2023, p.28). In this instance, it can be surmised that Kajsa and possibly others who were dressed up in the audience can feel a sense of discomfort at any given point of the screening. This does not necessarily mean they are at a disadvantage throughout the entire duration, but even one or a few instances of discomfort may not generate the full-blown effervescence that can potentially be had. Nor does it bring out the maximum potential of the cult film atmosphere. As Ingrid then remarked:

Again, if I watch this in private settings with my friends, people tend to go absolutely bonkers. We made a skeleton for the last time, me and Kajsa. We made a skeleton and a coffin it was pretty great. So I was going to say, this is- I had a good time, but it wasn't because of the screening, but because of my own happiness about the screening.

(Ingrid, 41, F, teacher)

Both Ingrid and Kajsa's reflections exemplify a case to which the expectations were not met and thus the experience may be considered, to some degree, a failure. Although Ingrid said that she still "had a good time," it was certainly not up to the standards and expectations that were laid out before.

In talking about atmospheres, Böhme (2017) argues that a person is "tuned" by the prevailing atmosphere of a place and such atmospheres can be generated deliberately "by specific, indeed material constellations" (p.118-119). If we examine the above example further, the friends' experience of watching *Rocky Horror* at the cinema were not optimally tuned as in comparison to their previous experience in a private setting. In that instance, the group of friends were able to control and amp up the generative material factors that would constitute the atmosphere. In the cinema however, the cinema exhibiting the film is likely to not have the capacity logistically or financially, nor the power over audiences to completely assert how a *Rocky Horror* screening should look and feel like. Hence, it can be argued that there is generally a limit or boundary as to how intense a cult film atmosphere can be produced, especially that the cinema can be considered a public place. A situation cannot devolve into complete anarchy because that would defeat the purpose of the effervescent atmosphere, which is to bring enjoyment and fun. On the other hand, the intensity should also be up to a certain ideal level in order for audiences to obtain the aforementioned enjoyment and fun.

Therefore, it is unlikely that audiences uniformly accept or conform to the shared reading of a cult film, or share a resonance or dissonance towards the film based on their identity. There is always a chance for a "rupture" to occur among audiences in which disagreements can proliferate regardless of how "members of the same subculture" are expressing themselves (Hebdige, 1979, p.123). Audiences may experience the screenings differently as there are factors that could potentially "undercut engagement, or at the least inhibit its expression" (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.61) as exemplified by Ingrid and Kajsa. In the case of this research, this is particularly relevant for audiences who have more experience in watching such screenings. There are certain expectations pre-established even before setting foot inside the cinema auditorium. This is because of the very nature of cult film screenings in that even though it is the same film replayed a number of times, each screening brings with them a different experience due to permutations that are never set in stone. Analogous to subcultures in general, the culture around cult films are often "loosely defined" where "clear, coherent identity and structure" may not always be existent or recognizable (Clarke et al., 1997, p.100). As such, each consecutive screening of a cult film may maintain a degree of their "original

elements” (i.e. the film being screened, props afforded by the cinema, material ambiance, etc.), but other elements (i.e. audience composition, spontaneous comments or jokes, etc.) are restructured in order for it to “function within the framework of a new key³⁷” (Traphagan, 2013, p.34).

A Sense of Belonging

The cult film atmosphere is a particular occurrence that is anchored in the shared engagement of a media text within a cinema space, which generates a collective effervescence that is specific to cult film screenings. Audiences experience a heightened form of “shared emotions and moods” (Hanich, 2014, p.345), which amplifies and facilitates individuals’ need to express themselves both verbally and physically that ultimately leads to the effervescent atmosphere. A collective effervescence can occur in contexts separate from that of nightlife, religious congregations, or politics and therefore the cult film effervescence is distinct primarily because it subverts the social norms of watching films in a movie theatre. Its foundational generating factors encompass audiences, the cinema staff, and the material properties of the physical space. We can thus far conceptualize the cult film effervescence as possibly a journey that an individual embarks on. It typically commences before anybody steps foot inside the movie theatre and flows all the way through their time of watching the film. At the same time, remnants of the cult film effervescence and atmosphere may also remain well after the screening has run its course, for example in the form of passionate discussions or the repetition of a film’s most iconic lines. As Tutenges (2023) argues, at the conclusion of an effervescent event those who were involved may “re-experience some of the effervescence” by focusing their attention to particular aspects that reminds them of the event (p.98). Therefore, a sense of affinity and community can be produced as indicative of the consequences of a high degree of engagement with media (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023).

This notion is exemplified by Dean (32, M, programmer) who felt that talking about movies and especially cult films as part of the experience. He reckoned that watching movies in general is “a social thing” and that he “likes discussing

³⁷ Here, Traphagan (2013) argues that the repetitiveness of the Japanese *Nembutsu* cult rituals, can be looked upon using a musical metaphor. The word “key” here is alluding to the musical key and in his mind, the compositionality of music can modulate between keys but “the pitch relationships within the melody remain the same” (p.34).

it afterwards.” In relation to the screening of *Miami Connection* that he attended, he talked about the movie to “everyone” because he had such a great time. He continued, “I mean if there’s nothing to talk about after it probably wasn’t a great movie [laughter].” For Gustav (40, M, technical support), the experience of watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was similarly exhilarating that he felt the need to “post a lot of it on Instagram [and] Facebook.” He also mentioned that along with the group of friends he watched it with, they had post-screening conversation reminiscing “how much fun we had.” Additionally, Micke (30, M, software developer) also admitted to talking about the screening of *Birdemic* that he went to extensively with others who went along with him. However, he believes that in order to fully appreciate the topics of the conversation a person needs to “enjoy that type of movies, which is why he does not really talk about the movie to others who have not seen the movie. He said:

I think we might have mentioned it to some people. They're like, "Yeah, I want to see that weird movie with the birds attacking and stuff." And showing some GIFs of what it's like. But I don't think other than that- I think in depth- because I mean, I think you have to be there kind of to get it or to see it.

(Micke, 30, M, software developer)

Based on Micke’s response here, we can surmise how the experience plays a crucial role in shaping a person’s knowledge regarding the films. Moreover, how the effervescence of being in the cinema for the movie could bring about a sense of belonging as a possible result of the collective actions (Durkheim, 1995, p.216) within the cult film screenings. The atmosphere generated by the cult film effervescence forms “connections that feel ‘kindred’ in some way, or make things kindred” (Mason, 2018, p.1). In this sense, being a part of an cult film audience has the potential to foster a community-like feeling where the rituals that are components of the screenings act as a confirmation of the audiences’ “view of itself,” but also “guarantees the continued existence of the group” (Maffesoli, 1988, p.17).

To illustrate this point we can look towards some examples where audiences feel a sense of belonging, bonding, or unity. The sense of oneness permeates through the experience of watching cult films, which can be attributed to the immersive atmosphere in the screenings that are either sustained by the resonance or dissonance as mentioned before. Similar to Tosca’s (2024) arguments on immersive audiences, there is an element of suspending disbelief and an incorporation in one way or another, of the fictional world into the

practical, material world (p.242). In the case of Nicole's (28, F, student) experience of watching *Birdemic*, she believed a good film experience should elicit emotional feelings, and in the case of the film screening she attended, laughter due to watching it with other people. She noted that it was "a good experience with others," even though she "would not say [*Birdemic*] is a good movie." Nicole further recollected her experience of watching *Troll 2* at the same cinema in Malmö with a number of her friends, "the first time we watched that *Troll 2* movie was kind of like we were more in our little bubble with the people we came with." She likened the experience to having a sense of "one entity [...] with all the people who saw the film at the same time." Anna (33, F, marketing associate) linked the experience of *Rocky Horror* to the cosplay community because she considered both crowds to be in unison in celebrating that may be considered a quirk by many. She said, "[they are both] spontaneous but also like just getting really into something and the people around you are either also really into that same thing, or they just sort of understand what it's like to be like hyper fixated on something and really deep into it."

Taking inspiration from his fascination of the punk subculture, Olaf (45, M, lecturer) put forward the idea that there were parallels between punk and the culture of watching cult films. He linked the two through the apparent "tension" between "commercialization and subculture," and how certain bands can make a name out of themselves "without stopping being punk." This is a direct link to Hebdige's (1979) famous analysis of the punk subculture, in which he posits that punk arose from a "series of spectacular transformations" of a wide array of values and symbols attached to material objects, which positioned themselves as "opposition to dominant values and institutions" (p.116). Much like punk, cult films themselves become the material objects in which extraneous values and meanings are often operationalized to form a viewing culture that is distinct from the normative moviegoing practices. Therefore, as has been elucidated in this thesis, the cult films are the anchor of the experience. As Jancovich (2002) argues, cult film audiences are drawn together through their imagining of a community that is "produced and maintained, *through* the media" (p.318).

However, the aforementioned "tension," as Olaf puts it, is indicative how those identifying as punk and similarly cult film devotees, can form a "unity which is either more or less organic, striving towards some ideal coherence," but at the same time are never constant (Hebdige, 1979, p.127). This can primarily be attributed to the varying degrees of individual identities and the breadth of one's previous experience and knowledge, as elaborated in Chapter 6. Even if

that were so, Olaf is of the belief that the ability to recognize something as being punk for example or recognizing a cult film when one sees it can also be credited to the establishment of a common understanding among those who have been exposed to the culture. Once a person has attended a *Rocky Horror* or *The Room* screening, one is able to better ascertain the value and meanings of specific scenes or rituals in which some cult film audiences centre their practices around, such as *Rocky Horror*'s songs and dances, or *The Room*'s "You are tearing me apart, Lisa!!" These can be considered as "peaks" among a series of images or scenes that serve as mnemonic devices for audiences that routinely remain in their individual *and* collective memory (Eco, 1985, p.4) even after the screening has concluded.

Olaf reflected more by saying that in other times, certain punk bands have transcended the original subculture to which he used the Sex Pistols as an example. In the case of cult films, he narrowed it down to specific scenes "that everybody recognizes and does memes about and so on." However, Olaf pointed out that in order to appreciate the culture fully, one must be exposed to more than just one scene. He said:

I suppose, it's maybe also a matter of a movie where, where there is a group of people who can get some kind of collective identity from kind of claiming that we have a particular relation to this movie, that others don't. That, you know, we, we understand it, we appreciate it in ways that others don't. I think there's something there.

(Olaf, 45, M, lecturer)

This alludes to Durkheim's (1995) arguments in that the result of bringing people together that is anchored in a specific symbol may bring about a collective effervescence and the feeling of "kinship" towards the symbol people are giving attention to (p.386-387). Due to a seemingly shared discernment of the value of cult films, individuals are able to coalesce in a mutual feeling of closeness and that they belong within a certain group. In Mathijs and Sexton's (2011) articulation on cult films, such feeling of belonging, seemingly being in a community is simply fostered through a continued process of familiarization where ideas or themes that may have previously been obscure then becomes a part of their earnest dispositions (p.112). Brian (36, M, administrator) also acknowledged this, by saying that having others present in watching *The Room* is "the best part of watching [the] movie." He reasoned as to why this is because "everybody sort of [laughter] loves and disrespects the source material in the same level in the sense that it is a very communal experience, in the sense that we're all here, we know that

more or less what we're going to get.” When asked about her experience of watching *Rocky Horror* at Bio Roy in Gothenburg in comparison to watching the film at a bigger multiplex, Anna (33, F, marketing associate) quipped that it “definitely makes a difference.” She reflected, “I mean, you know, it kind of emphasizes the cult aspect a little bit in that, you know, if you're a part of this special interest group, [...] this is a small place who gets me and where it feels more like a little community rather than a commercial event.” There is an inherent joy and allure to feel connected with others, as Louis (36, M, doctoral candidate) noted in relation to his experience watching *The Room*:

It was also a very special experience to connect to the other people on The Room because, normally, as I said, when you watch a movie, you're alone, you're on your seat, and then you watch the movie. But, in that case, you really could, I don't know, interact with others. Also, during the screening I talked to a lady, for example, that I didn't know before, and she was laughing and I was laughing. So yes, it was also an experience that could connect people.

(Louis, 36, M, doctoral candidate)

For Louis, the fact he was able to share laughter and have a conversation with another person he was not familiar with was indicative of a common inception point in the formation of social bonds. As such, the very blossoming of community-like feelings can be argued as a consequence of audiences experiencing a form of affinity with the sum of all the parts within their immediate vicinity, which encompasses other audience members, the film itself, and the physical cinema space. Taking inspiration from Mason (2018), such affinities are less concerned about “what is connected” (i.e. the nodes of reception or in this case people in the audience), but pertains more towards “the connecting” forces that are present: the atmosphere, energies of the effervescence, and “the creative role of memory and imagination” (p.180). In other words, affinities that are all-encompassing to the felt experience intricately bind and envelop audiences in an affective state of being that instills a certain degree of closeness and a heightened chance for enjoyment co-facilitated by the presence of others.

Expounding further on these notions, we can look to the experience of a group of friends who saw *The Room* in Gothenburg. Sebastian (30, M, software engineer) was gifted for his birthday a surprise screening of *The Room* by his partner Sofia (27, F, UI/UX designer) and her sister Sara (28, F, barista). Based on their experience, Sara pointed out that she felt they “belong for some reason” and experiencing a “bond with people you will never meet again.” She

contrasted this feeling by comparing it to an experience going to a “fancy place” and subconsciously develop a sense of stress due to the unfamiliarity of the place. She said, “But it's the exact opposite feeling with what happened, for example, [at the screening]. That's what I meant bond. We went there and for me, I feel like I belong.” Sofia noted a shared understanding with others that they could also relate to the actors of *The Room* due to their badness, “I feel all these actors and actresses, they could be my friend in real life. [...] Because they're really bad. I can't explain it. And also the audience, everyone throwing the spoons and- you feel that you're watching it with friends.” In his reflections, Sebastian provided a nuanced reflection of the bonding by linking it to the unusualness of the emotions *The Room* evoked akin to “a fever dream,” which in his mind was what audiences shared during the screening. He believed that the bond formed in the screenings was not commonly found in other societal contexts such as in interpersonal relationships of “a spouse or a family relationship or a friendly relationship.” He elaborated:

I think this is one case where you feel that you develop some sort of weird bond with other people even though it's not normal, right? You will probably never meet those people again. Maybe you will see them in the cinema but you won't even remember them. They won't remember you. You won't be going out for beers next day or something usually.

(Sebastian, 30, M, software engineer)

Sebastian alluded to the fact that the atmosphere that was generated through the cult film screening was contained within the cinema space and did not necessarily bleed out into the outside environment. His remarks on the development of a “weird bond” signifies first, the bond was forged due to the shared experience of watching a film that is aesthetically deficient but also second, that it is atypical for audience members of a cinema to develop sense of camaraderie under normal circumstances. For example, if it were a non-cult film that was being screened. This notion of camaraderie or the feeling of one belongs among and within a group of mostly strangers in a cinema is prevalent among those who were interviewed in this research. It exemplifies how atmospheres “are powerful and that they matter” (Mason, 2018, p.179). For if, audiences were not experiencing a potent sense of enjoyment and entertainment from cult film screenings, they unlikely would not acknowledge the importance of watching with other people present. Coupled with the fact that cult film audiences are actively contravening the commonplace moviegoing etiquette of preserving a degree of decorum, a sense of bonding is seemingly forged based on the idea of breaking the rules *together*. Due to the

effervescent atmosphere of cult film screenings, audiences are afforded the ability to conduct certain actions that otherwise “would not have been able, willing, or bold enough to do on their own” especially in relation to those that are demarcated by societal boundaries (Tutenges, 2023, p.79). Hence, akin to punk before, there is an evident “thrill of challenging norms of proper behaviour” and fostering communities with like-minded individuals (Nault, 2018, p.106).

We can surmise that the formation of this uncanny bond can be attributed to the effervescent atmosphere where audiences such as Sebastian above deem themselves to be “an indissoluble part of the collectivity” and become increasingly aware they are a part of the community (Bakhtin, 1984, p.255). This also harks back to the importance of audience identity considering it can be argued that audiences are “able to appropriate the media representation to position themselves in relation to others” (Geimer, 2016, p.91), in that individuals are able to conduct a litmus test of their identity and determine compatibility, or what this thesis has previously termed “identity checks.” However, such identity work is typically contained within the cinema setting—as reflected by Sebastian, and does not completely permeate into the setting of the everyday life because it would “require significant changes” of their practices and perception on the “values of the social and cultural order” (Ibid.).

Here, we can draw a line to Bey’s (2003) idea of the temporary autonomous zone (TAZ), in which the “zone,” in his words, are localized “spatio-temporally, or at least help to define its relation to moment and locale” (p.103). Much like the TAZ, cult film screenings are instances where the “pleasure of creative play” as a cohering and manifesting force (Ibid., p.130) are allowed and encouraged. It signals that ephemerality is a central factor in the establishment of such “zones” and some elements of the screenings can be considered as asynchronous with conventional modes of film watching. In this sense, we can also consider Foucault’s (1986) concept of heterotopia in surmising cult film screenings as an “other” place that is circumscribed by “slices of time” and possess the potency to juxtapose “several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (p.6). As explained before, such juxtapositions between the norms of the cinema space and the cult film effervescent galvanize audiences towards togetherness. Thus, it is analogous with McCulloch’s (2011) observations in that audiences of any cult film screening “effectively become part of a temporary community, one that exists only in that place and until the cinema has emptied” (p.203). When individuals attend a cult film screening, possibilities are open for them to incorporate or even meld into the new collective identity—one that is valid only as far as the

film's runtime would allow it with a chance that it extends longer after. As audiences vacate the auditorium and people are thrust back into the environment outside the cinema, the effervescent atmosphere felt and experienced inside slowly dissipates.

Of course, remnants of such an atmosphere may remain which in turn may generate semblances of affinity that crosses the boundaries and notions of time, but are in essence still a part of us (Mason, 2018, p.194). This in turn has the potential to “help” some audience members in repeated viewings of cult films in the movie theatre. This can then be argued as a requisite for future *reconstitutions* of the cult film atmosphere through the emergence of the effervescence, because any sort of preparation or previous knowledge would allow audiences to better “tune into one another” collectively amplifying the energy (Tutenges, 2023, p.27).

If we are to ponder how certain individuals are able to “enter the cult” of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *The Room* for example, then acknowledging the affinities—as invoked by the atmosphere, which are felt by audiences within these screenings provide insights into the emotional reasoning behind why people consistently attend the screenings of such films. This is because the above also illustrates how audiences were able to feel a sense of “kinship” through moments that are “highly charged” or “revelatory” (Mason, 2018, p.193). Somewhat circling back to the notion of identity and previous knowledge in Chapter 6, such kinship and sense of belonging may eventually act as a compass in how audiences navigate their future moviegoing habits and the differing gravitational pull they experience from specific genres of film. As such, the experienced effervescent atmosphere that was generated has the potential to “foster new values, beliefs, and allegiances” (Tutenges, 2023, p.129).

Conclusion

Based on this chapter, it was shown that movie theatres, as the exhibitors of cult films, facilitate the generation of the cult film atmosphere through a number of means. For example, they provide audiences with a swathe of paraphernalia or items that are otherwise not commonly brought into the movie theatre. Plastic spoons in the case of *The Room* screenings or rice and party hats for *Rocky Horror* screenings, are paramount to the emergence of the cult film effervescence. Such items signal to audiences that they are allowed to go

beyond the conventional etiquette of watching films at the cinema. Furthermore, staff of the cinemas are also on hand to provide guidance as audiences navigate the conducts of cult film screenings. This would then culminate into the generation of a cult film effervescence as a significant quality to the overall atmosphere. Those in attendance would engage and participate in a number of actions that are specific to these screenings, such as the throwing of objects, dancing, belting out jokes, or just talking loudly with their neighbours during the film. In this sense, the composition of the audience become a spectacle, where it was elaborated that sound plays a key role in the avalanching of the effervescence. As people's laughter and comments become increasingly perceptible, others who perhaps were apprehensive in conducting participatory actions are lulled into a sense of safety with an increasing chance that they too would join in on the action. Because of this, spontaneity on the part of audiences is indispensable if the effervescence is to emerge.

Expanding on this notion, it was argued that the cult film atmosphere plays a role in the formation of an ephemeral bond as felt by audiences, in that they feel a sense of affinity and community. Here, audiences are able to experience said bond due to heightened emotions that are experienced together, creating a shared, immersive atmosphere. It was shown that audiences placed an importance in being able to conduct actions and share jokes or conversations with people they are not familiar with. It again signals towards the screening's atmosphere having the ability to lull individuals into a sense of comfort in that some audience members are willing to seemingly break boundaries and rules that are typically enforced in the cinema. This in turn, further reinforces the bonds that are forged within the screenings. Even if that were so, the bonding are typically demarcated by the duration of the cult film and is similar in spirit to that of a temporary autonomous zones (TAZ), where usual norms of behaviour are suspended, allowing for a unique, ephemeral community-like experience. Because of this, it was then argued that the atmosphere experienced could serve as a benchmark or signpost, which can be utilized by audiences as foundational expectations in future screenings they may attend. Therefore, this chapter has provided insights into how cult film atmospheres are constituted and potentially reconstituted at a different time in the future.

9. Conclusions

On talking about exhibiting badfilms in the cinema:

I mean there's much more like a participation and that doesn't mean you need to be screaming out lines. You just need to umm...there's this sort of collectiveness in the auditorium when you're watching these movies. You're laughing at something that you know is weird and others aren't laughing at. And that builds some sort of subculture that's pretty strong when you get inside the theatre.

(Winsnes, 2019)

On talking about *The Room* screening experience:

I think there is a very interesting thing here that part of experiencing a bizarre movie, or bizarre visual. It's like, you get to experience it with other people together. The experience is completely different. It actually reinforces the feelings of joy, madness, and laughter, and all of that. So I think that maybe has to do why we call it a cult following.

(Sebastian, 30, M, software engineer)

The above reflections, one from David Winsnes who is the programmer of Bio Roy in Gothenburg and the other from Sebastian who attended a *The Room* screening in the same cinema broadly encapsulates this thesis. They illustrate how and why cult film atmospheres matter. The shared experience of watching cult films allow individuals to forge a sense of community with others who are present. Importantly, it points to the fact that co-presence has the ability to shape the atmosphere of a particular film screening but also other types of experiences that are spatially situated. In the case of this thesis, a muted atmosphere was transformed into an effervescent atmosphere due to audiences sharing “the feelings of joy, madness, and laughter” as Sebastian stated. Naturally, as we have seen through the empirical analysis of cult film audiences, exhibitors, and spaces, audiences who partake in cult film screenings are not the sole constitutive factor of the general atmosphere. Particular attention also needs to be given towards the co-existence of material

and non-material elements that are present, felt at any given time and place. Atmospheres then, in Gernot Böhme's (2017) mind, can be defined as the "palpable presence of something or someone in space" (p.163). For cult film screenings, there is a palpable presence of audiences engaging with a live cult film screening, a felt space of ambience, mood, and effervescence. By taking these aspects into account, we understand how a space that is typically delineated by both written and unwritten norms of decorum is temporarily endowed with a characteristic that is seemingly in direct opposition of said norms. Laughter, talkbacks, the throwing of spoons or rice, and the moving images projected upon the screen are the *felt atmospheres* of cult film screenings.

Thesis Contributions

Overall, this thesis has elucidated the nuances and dynamics of how individuals are able to "experience media productions as atmospheres" (Lunt, 2024, p.471). It has investigated from both an audience and exhibitor's point of view, specifically how a cult film atmosphere was generated through audience participation and interactions, but also how cinemas are facilitating such atmospheres. It has attempted to bridge and broach the boundaries between that of media audience studies with the fields of cult film studies, media industries studies, and the distinct field of architectural philosophy. As "cinema continues on its continuum of both shaping and reflecting culture" (Atkinson, 2014, p.233), it was only natural to expand the selection of lenses through which we examine it. By taking inspiration from Lunt (2024), the approach of this thesis is an attempt to highlight the human experience where subject and object can no longer be tangled in a dichotomous relationship, where it was previously thought that the self and the environment stand in contrast (Sigurdson, 2022, p.110). Instead, there is a significance in acceding to the notion that a person's mental and physical state of being is constituted in conjunction with their material environment. As Böhme (2017) argues, material objects "organizes space as a whole, that is, enters into constellations" with other things and human subjects to generate an atmosphere that is all-enveloping (p.51). Therefore, atmospheres is central to understanding how we are able to feel a cornucopia of emotions, from joy to sadness to anger, through the operationalizing of our bodily senses. In the case of this research, it has been shown that the sensing of elements around audiences' bodies has led to the generation of a cult film atmosphere that is often characterized by an

avalanching of boisterous energies in the form of a collective effervescence. As such, the thesis has contributed to the generation of knowledge around the concept of atmosphere as a fruitful lens to which we can consider media audiences and institutional practices.

It is closely linked with taking into account the importance of the physical space, which is often underrepresented in media audience studies and even more so when it comes to cult film audiences. The atmospheric sense one feels within a space can oftentimes be relegated into the realm of the subconscious. However, if we take a step back and slow our thought process, atmosphere “can indeed, create an ecology: an environment of relationality and interrelational movements” (Bruno, 2022, p.286). Here, the thesis has taken great strides in accentuating the components of atmosphere as a concept by dissecting its generative factors. By acknowledging that atmosphere is surely palpable and can clearly be ascribed meaning or value, we are giving attention to something that might otherwise be overlooked. Hence, a key contribution of this thesis is its elucidation on how we can analyse atmosphere by conducting media research primarily through the eyes of those that experience it (audiences) and those that facilitate (film exhibitors).

In addition to the application of atmosphere as a concept, this thesis has also productively utilized the concept of media engagement and specifically its parameters to be applied towards cult film screenings. In the closing arguments of their book, Dahlgren and Hill (2023) urges the reader to apply the parameters of media engagement into our own subjects of research, with the hopes of bringing to the forefront “the centrality and dynamics of media (dis)engagement” (p.157-158). Suffice to say, it can be argued that this research on cult film screenings certainly adds to this discussion by emphasizing a form of engagement that is intense in nature. It illustrates the flexibility and applicability of the parameters (i.e. context, modalities, motivations, intensities, and consequences) to instances that can be considered a subculture that stands apart from mainstream culture. This thesis has also illustrated in practical terms how the concept of media engagement can be conjugated with other theoretical concepts to enhance the analysis. Based on what has been written prior, the parameters of media engagement were interwoven with notions of identity, collective effervescence, and atmosphere. As such, it provides wisdom as to why “engagement matters” in different contexts where we gain knowledge into “the connections across reason and rationality, affect and emotion, and why groups of people connect or disconnect [with culture]” (Ibid., p.156).

When it comes to the field of cult film studies, the thesis has expanded the conversation on how we comprehend cult films and its furnishings. On one hand, this research has qualitatively examined cult film audiences, cult film exhibitors, and cult film spaces in conjunction with each other, which fills a sizeable knowledge gap within this field. On the other hand, it has also provided possible insights into the question: how does a film become a cult film? This question was one of the impetus in the formulation of this research and remains an open-ended question. It stems from the understanding that the many components of cult films are often contradictory and coherence is not guaranteed (Jancovich, 2002, p.315). Because of this, it is unlikely that we will ever find a definitive answer as to what, how, and why cult films are formed. However, this thesis illuminated the community-like dynamics of cult film screenings where bonds and senses of camaraderie are forged. Through the elaboration of atmosphere, we are able to see that such bonds are constituted through the stringing together of cult film “moments” when effervescences erupted, which can be regarded as “multi-sensory glimpses, windows, apertures or revelations into an intriguing and arresting discordance or conglomeration” (Mason, 2018, p.193). The thesis has placed a prominence into the role of these moments as integral in the generation of the cult film atmosphere in which memories of its occurrence often remains with audiences. Thus, it implicates a possible avenue into how and why certain films accumulate a cult following.

Moreover in terms of scope, this research has presented new empirical data, especially within the study of cult films and their screenings by taking into account the role of both audiences and exhibitors in a Swedish context. As elaborated earlier in this thesis, even if cult cinema has extensively been an interest for academic inquiry, there is still a need to examine the phenomenon from a wider angle and not solely focus on a singular constitutive factor. This is in line with Sexton and Mathijs’s (2020) appeal towards scholars studying cult films in that one should ground the research in a solid foundation based on evidence collected in the field that highlights the “elements these films consist of” and bucking the practice of conducting a distant reading of the phenomenon (p.5). Additionally, the thesis situates itself within the context of Sweden, which is a region that has not commonly been associated with cult films and studies on cult films in comparison for example, with the US or the UK. Because of this, the analysis of the data and its findings provide a glimpse of how cult film screenings are propagated outside these regions where screenings are arguably not yet at critical mass.

Key Findings

In order to comprehend what the cult film atmosphere entails, we can purposely recall the significant empirical findings that have been elaborated throughout this thesis. Firstly, there is a media text or film in this case that is perceived by people who watch the film to be authentic or sincere in its production. This is directly linked to the research question: *In what ways do audiences and exhibitors understand cult films, specifically badfilms and cult musicals?* Notably, audiences and exhibitors reflected on how diegetic and aesthetic components of a cult films are often perceived to be subpar in comparison to movies that are typically lauded by the media, the Hollywood academy, and audiences in general. This was shown through audience and exhibitor opinions on the films' script, sound mixing, or lighting. Harking back to Umberto Eco's (1985) analysis of *Casablanca*, cult films are primarily remembered as so and obtain such monikers because they contain "a hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly" (p.3). For example, audiences would not feel entertained upon watching *Miami Connection* because of its moral messaging, flashy fight choreography, or laser sharp dialogue delivery. Rather, audiences enjoy the movie due to the suddenness of fights breaking out, over the top line deliveries, excess blood and gore, and the actors acting as band members that belt out 80s new wave rock anthems among others. Therefore, the aforementioned implausibility is central to how individuals are perceiving cult films.

The aesthetic shortcomings are then interlinked with the notion of failing on the part of the film directors, writers, or producers in creating a movie that is widely lauded. On one hand, it was accounted for that certain cult films were understood to have failed commercially at the box office upon their initial release. The lack of commercial success can be attributed to a number of inhibiting factors such as poor critical reviews, minimal resonance with audiences of the time, or other geopolitical contexts. On the other hand and most importantly, those who were interviewed for this research exhibited a belief that the auteurs were sincere in trying to make a good film or aiming to create something that is "aesthetically valuable" (Strohl, 2022, p.5), but fails spectacularly. This was closely connected with idea of the "so bad it's good" moniker stemming from the notion that viewers of such films are forgiving and tolerating of the films' faults and instead are finding enjoyment beyond their aesthetic deficiencies (Singleton, 2019, p.434). Instead of audiences perceiving the diegetic components of the film at face value, they discern them at a distance and create new meanings that are not aligned with the original

intentions of the producers. Hence, audiences perform a deconstructing and reconstructing of the movies based on their individual dispositions where in Hall's (2002) mind, such dispositions are never "fixed in position" and are always adjusted based on context (p.259). Taken together, the humble beginnings of many cult films and audiences creating their own meanings apart from the original intentions of the film producers give way to the replayability aspect of cult films. Films that were at the onset commercial failures or failing aesthetically or both, are later re-appraised that allows these film to attain a staying power and perpetual interest from audiences well beyond their intended distribution timeframe. Films such as *Rocky Horror*, *Miami Connection*, and *The Room* were prime examples of how they were broadly panned upon release and finding not only a secondary audience, but also a secondary home in different cinemas by way of midnight screenings and event screenings.

Secondly, building upon the aesthetic and diegetic components of cult films, there needs to be an audience that is sufficiently equipped with the requisite cultural knowledge and pass through an identity check, which in turn is operationalized to bolster and sustain the eventual generation of the cult film atmosphere. Here, the second research question was addressed: *What is the role of audience and exhibitor identities and taste in cult film screenings?* The thesis' exploration on identities began with an analysis of cinema identities as exhibitors of cult films. It was found that the Swedish movie theatres covered in this research expressed and materialized their identities in multiple ways and thus they were not in unison in terms of their operational mode in showing films and drawing audiences. In some cases, there was prevalent contrarian approach against the mainstream moviegoing culture in which the cinemas demarcate themselves as the bearers of a distinct taste. In other cases, the cinemas would position themselves as more approachable to a wider audience, but at the same time, their identities are tied with a film-watching experience that is "elevated" from what we would typically experience at a national chain multiplex. This can come in the form of being able to bring alcoholic beverages into the screenings, having tables next to the auditorium seats, or offering gourmet meals and snacks. Most importantly, the cinemas distinguish themselves and pride themselves of being able to offer audiences a slew of film programming that could be considered peculiar or atypical in comparison to mainstream cinemas, which includes having events that are built around specific films. In this way, cinemas are consistently engaged in the establishment of the spatial identity through "the repeated practices which chisel their way into being established flows" (Massey, 2005, p.175).

As such, the cinemas embody the role of the facilitator for which certain audience identities can be performed *if* there is resonance. This thesis has argued that identity checks occur on the part of audiences as they embark on their journey of watching certain films that begins before they actually set foot inside the movie theatre. Here, the aforementioned resonance of identities with both the cinema *and* the film being screened play a central role in one's enjoyment in watching a film. For badfilms, the reverse is applicable in that there is dissonance with one's own personal experiences and cultural knowledge, which commonly results in a comedic mode of perceiving the film instead of taking the narrative seriously. For a cult film experience, not everybody in the auditorium needs to have seen *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *Miami Connection* before, but there should be enough individuals present who are well-versed in the behavioural expectations of such films and have gained "familiarity and competence" through an accumulation of "experience, reputation, and skill" (Bennett et al., 2009, p.259). These "experienced" individuals then take on the role of "connoisseurs" who both set the mood and provide practical examples of actions that are commonly found during a specific screening of a cult film. Their involvement in the screenings shape the "degree of engagement," acting as a preparatory element that nudges the other audience members towards a specific mode of aesthetic disposition (Stewart, 2017, p.45).

Thirdly, the thesis has argued that in order to comprehend the concept of atmosphere, we can purposely consider the concurrence of ambiance and mood as constitutive aspects. This was to answer the research question: *How do exhibitors establish ambiance at cinemas and what is the mood of audiences in cult film screenings?* Taking inspiration from Tawa (2022), atmospheres are "what transpires, emerges and takes place between a circumambient setting and a mooded human being, giving the place and experience a certain colour, tenor and temperature" (p.85). In other words, atmosphere would be indistinguishable if there is a temperance of human emotions and sensations. Even if both ambiance and mood can be deliberated separately, they are practically adjoined through their conflation at any given situation. Ambiance then, alludes to the requirement of having a physical space that is populated with material objects or in Tawa's (2022) words "enabling infrastructures" (p.4) that establishes the aforementioned ambiance. This is in concomitance with cinemas who personify a particular identity, but also endowing audiences with an ambiance through their material features that facilitate the generation of such effervescence. This was shown in this thesis through a consideration on the cinemas' material features such as lighting, the building's history, or the furniture. Based on this, it was found that the cinemas encompassed in this

thesis could be distinguished into three overarching ambiances: luxury, grandeur, and eclectic. Furthermore, this thesis has elaborated that instead of incorporating an ambiance that minimizes distraction, cinemas went towards the other direction where ambiguities and extraneous elements are largely unrestricted. Therefore, this instils a sense of comfort that would possibly stimulate a degree of spontaneity from audiences.

The above notion of comfort was then proclaimed by audiences to be integral in their mood of watching cult films. They link comfort to entering the space of the cinema. It was remarked for example, that audiences placed a high value on the decorations, the architectural features of the cinema, and the cinema chair. These ambiance features not only establish audiences' mood, but also allow the possibility for individuals to express and perform their identities to an adequate degree so that they move "beyond being passive observers to actively taking part" (Collins, 2004, p.82). By being in the same room with others who have had their moods and expectations shaped in a certain way, audiences are able to feel relaxed, reducing apprehension of acting in a certain way within the cinema that has been conditioned by their past moviegoing experiences. In this way, there is a heightened sense of freedom of action and participation that is facilitated by the ambiguous nature of the cinema space. This sets the stage for cult film screenings to embrace sociality as an intrinsic element and provides a "starting point" for further social activities and interaction" (Pett, 2018, p.39). It contrasts the non-cult film experience where sociality may be a component prior to the start of the movie, but later eschewing it when the movie starts in favour of filmic immersion.

Finally, the synthesis and interweaving of film aesthetics, audience and exhibitor identities, and the co-presence of ambiance with mood would ultimately generate an atmosphere that is characterized by a cult film effervescence, which is a specific type of effervescence that occurs within the context of cult cinema screenings. The concluding empirical chapter of this thesis addresses the research question: *What is the role of the collective effervescence in the constitution and reconstitution of the cult film atmosphere?* It was acknowledged that the cinemas act as a facilitator of the potential effervescence. They take on this role by providing audiences with a cornucopia of material paraphernalia such as household items to throw or printed out guides on what to shout that can be considered as "physiological stimulants," which allows audiences to break their typical moviegoing behaviours (Tutenges, 2023, p.28). Because of cinemas arguably taking part in the creation of the effervescence, behavioural expectations on the part of audiences are established and thus the likelihood of energies bubbling up are

increased. It was surmised that even if a rowdy crowd often marks cult film screenings, the effervescence does not reach its peak right from the onset of the screening. Instead, the energy of the auditorium avalanches and is compounded over the duration of the film. Audiences are engaged in a stream of excitement and enthusiasm that ebbs and flows, from complete silence to the eruption of laughter or shouts, but also from muted murmurs to a complete disregard of the norms of being silent in the movie theatre. Therefore, audience participation and actions can be argued as spectacles on their own and act as kindling to the effervescence directly imparting joy and entertainment to individuals through the atmosphere it generates.

By virtue of the generated atmosphere as experienced by cult film audiences, it was argued that it has the potential to evoke a sense of camaraderie and affinity among audiences. This is despite the acknowledgment that for some audience members, there was a disconnection between their expectations prior to the start of the screening with the actual felt experience. Having said that, other respondents were reflecting that there was a prevailing sense of belonging forged through uncanny bonds that are unlikely to occur in non-cult film contexts where individuals were sharing laughter with complete strangers, for example. As such, it was posited that the effervescent atmosphere instils the feeling of intimacy and closeness with other individuals based on their understanding and shared perception that are anchored in the film that is being shown. Furthermore, the closeness felt by audiences can also be attributed to conducting actions that are generally seen as rule-breaking if it were to occur in different contexts. It was asserted that cult film screenings could be considered an exemplification of a heterotopic space or a temporary autonomous zone where “psychological liberation” is a pivotal aspect (Bey, 2003, p.130). Because of the generated atmosphere and the affinities one may feel during the screenings, we can argue that these experiences are then transmuted into a navigational, mnemonic device to which audiences can refer back to in future screenings.

Further Reflections and the Path Forward

The thesis can trace its roots in a curiosity and sense of wonder as to why audiences are able to obtain a heightened sense of enjoyment by watching films that are otherwise considered aesthetically subpar or even obscene. Some individuals, myself included, form a devotion by attending screenings of the films multiple times throughout their lives, worthy of the moniker “cult.” Many

scholars preceding this thesis have provided insights into the cult film phenomenon. However, as elaborated in the earlier chapters of this thesis, there are still new areas to discover.

In the concluding remarks of their seminal book, Mathijs and Sexton (2011) assert that “cult is used in increasingly self-conscious ways and in a number of different contexts” for which does not “extinguish its meanings but rather extends them” (p.242). More than a decade later, these statements still hold true in that the elements surrounding cult films are constantly reconfigured, not always built from the ground up but are in constant dialogue with the differing contexts –much like the atmospheres that are generated in their screenings. Because of this, there are some aspects of cult film screenings and cult films in general that lie beyond the purview of this thesis due to either methodological or practical limitations.

The first of these limitations is the sampling of films that are covered in the research. At the beginning of this thesis, it was acknowledged that the films included in the thesis were chosen primarily due to practical and logistical reasons, in that these were the films that were available to be exhibited in Gothenburg and Malmö during the data collection phase. This is even more pertinent due to the disruption of the COVID pandemic, which further reduced the flexibility of selecting the films as cinemas in Sweden and Denmark closed down for a considerable amount of time in accordance to restrictions on public gatherings. With that said, there is room to examine other cult film screenings that typically involve participatory actions such as *The Big Lebowski*, which is known to have “drink-alongs” or even *The Sound of Music* that is commonly associated with sing-alongs. Hand in hand with this consideration, is the possibility of expanding the film selection to encompass other genres beyond cult badfilms and cult musicals. It could be that additional researches on cult film atmosphere would critically examine the screening atmosphere of cult sexploitation, cult horror, or cult sci-fi. For example, a study on the screenings of John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* or David Lynch’s *Eraserhead* may bring about further insights into how atmospheres of cult films across the genres are generated or if a different type of atmosphere characterizes them.

Naturally, a study on these films is rather dependent on availability in which it has been pointed out that some cult films may not be able to attain an audience if it were not for cinemas willing to exhibit them in the movie theatre. Hence, another factor that can be expanded upon is the geographical region of the study. As this thesis has shown, practices of watching cult films and other films in general are generally relative and specific to the region. In the case of this research, the Swedish audience does not necessarily mean they were born and

raised in Sweden nor are they always Swedish citizens. This implies that the audience makeup of cinemas that exhibit cult films here can be regarded as transnational. This is in addition to considering the movies that were shown feature English-speaking dialogue, without Swedish dubs. With this in mind, a worthy undertaking may take on the form of possible studies that focus on regions where English is not the native tongue nor are they generally as fluent in the language as Sweden. For example, regions where the majority of non-cult film screenings are dubbed such as France or Germany. Additionally, this thesis acknowledges that the study on cult film screenings in Sweden can still be considered a “Western” or “Global North” perspective in that it does not sufficiently account for the wealth of moviegoing cultures found in other parts of the world. Therefore, the study of cult film screenings in Sweden should be considered as just one example among many inroads towards the elaboration of media atmosphere. As Janet Staiger (1985) once argued, we should caution against placing certain perspectives on a pedestal as the primary criteria of selection, where in fact fundamentally, “claims for universality are disguises for achieving uniformity” and by proxy, enabling the suppression of diversity through the power of discourse (p.9-10).

Another point of expansion in regards to the research of cult films can be found in broadening the scope by focusing on cultural actors that are not encompassed in this thesis. It was argued that even if the trifecta of cult film audiences, exhibitors, and the films themselves primarily contribute to the generation of atmosphere, we can still possibly take into account in greater strides the role of online and offline media, for example. On one hand, attention can be brought towards the role of journalistic practices and how both consumer and industry-oriented media shape audiences’ perception of cult films and especially so regarding their expectations prior to attending a screening or even as motivating factors. In writing about media power and their crafting of a narrative, Corner (2011) argues that the act of “storytelling” is central to the operation of the media in that it provides engagement and “bringing out significance and the generation of impact” (p.65-66). Even if some cult films and their audiences position themselves somewhat outside the contemporary orbit of the media, shedding a light on their representation and the discourses surrounding the phenomenon remains a worthwhile consideration.

On the other hand, social media such as TikTok and Reddit have proliferated in terms of their usage and reach over the last decade and therefore establishing them as prime locations of cult audience research. A personal anecdote can be used as an example here where during the tail end of the COVID pandemic, it

was brought to my attention that many users on TikTok had picked up on ridiculing and memeing the *Twilight* movies because of the films' poor cinematic decisions –much like the lampooning of badfilms as elaborated in this thesis. In the words of the person that conveyed this information, “*Twilight* caught fire,” years after their original release. This is in addition to the existence of numerous subreddits that are dedicated to the appreciation of cult films, such as r/BadMovies, r/rhps (a *Rocky Horror* subreddit), and r/TheRoom. Based on this, studies on these sites of audience interaction and the power of the media can be fruitful in expanding our understanding on how the cult film culture is propagated and constituted outside of the cinema space.

Circling back to the nature and dynamics of cult film screenings themselves, much can still be unpacked in regards to the concept of collective effervescence. As elaborated earlier in this chapter, the thesis provided original insights into how a collective effervescence can transpire within a context that is typically not associated with said effervescence. In the closing reflections of his book, Tutenges (2023) notes that the occurrence and thus the examination of the effervescence can be applied broadly across different contexts in which experiences among those contexts vary to a great degree (p.126). As such, we can also take inspiration from this and begin to envision an investigation on collective effervescences of film screenings that could possibly occur in non-cult contexts, such as sing-alongs or even Hollywood tentpole blockbusters. In the case of blockbuster films, audiences may erupt into spontaneous moments of effervescence based on scenes that are unravelling on screen, such as –based on personal experience– audiences clapping and hooting the moment Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield show up in Marvel's *Spider Man: No Way Home* or audiences cheering, yelling, and talking back during a screening of *Scream*. This is of course in addition to possible studies situated in other contexts of media engagement that may examine and “identify injustice, understand resilience, or enhance social and cultural plurality” (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023, p.5).

Much like the notion of collective effervescence above, there are still insights on media atmospheres to be uncovered. Building upon Lunt's (2024) reflections, questions still linger in relation to the study of audiences and their “experience of atmosphere through media as combining sense of place and the constitution of an atmosphere” (p.480). This research has elucidated how a specific and ephemeral type of atmosphere shape audiences' sense of enjoyment and most importantly, their sense of *being in the world* within a delineated period. However, due to the prevalence of media in today's world, possible inquiries into media as generators of atmosphere in our everyday lives

remain open and relatively untouched. The multiplicities of its generating factors can further be dissected and examined from a narrower perspective if one should chose. For example, in what ways do our mobile phones constitute a distinct atmosphere that may be dependent on when, where, and which apps we are using; or do they generate atmosphere at all? What and how is atmosphere generated through the practice of “doomscrolling?” Or how do public service information screens generate the atmosphere at train stations, bus terminals, and airports³⁸? This can be considered an inflection of Böhme’s (2017) argument in that atmospheres are “totalities” that preside over our daily lives, yet “without the sentient subject, they are nothing” (p.159). Hence, the intertwining co-presence of atmosphere, media, and audiences continue to be fertile grounds for future academic interests. As Bruno (2022) also argues, atmosphere “not only reflects or refracts physically, but when cultivated, is a matter that can transform the experience of cultural ambiance” (p.286), and arguably, our everyday life.

In conclusion, we can reflect on the nature of atmospheres, felt yet materially unseen. Much like some of the films that have attained cult status, atmospheres are often taken for granted and not talked about enough in relation to media presence and practices. As Böhme and the swathe of atmospheric scholars have convincingly argued, atmosphere is all-enveloping and intrinsic to our ontological state of being as we navigate the world. Atmosphere is present in both designed and natural spaces, and our bodies immediately sense it. As this thesis has shown, we can harness the underpinnings of atmosphere as a conceptual tool in looking at media and its significance towards audience engagement, and the bursting out of an effervescence. By attuning ourselves to its generative elements, the understanding of our shared presence with the media and environment would be enriched.

³⁸ Taking inspiration from Emiliano Rossi’s (2022) doctoral thesis titled *In-Transit Televisions: Productive Patterns and Urban Imageries of Mobilities*

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Appendices

a. Interviews

Exhibitors

- Agnes Stenqvist, Event Producer – Spegeln, Malmö. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 21/10/22
- Anna Reimegård, Operating Manager – Bio Roy, Gothenburg. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 11/10/19
- David Winsnes, Programmer – Bio Roy, Gothenburg. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 11/10/19, 29/04/20, 09/09/20, 19/01/21, 11/05/22
- Jack Stevenson, Owner and Manager – Husets Biograf, Copenhagen. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 11/10/19
- Jakob Abrahamsson, CEO – NonStop Entertainment, Stockholm. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 18/11/19
- Paul Kraus, Co-Founder and Head of Operations – Hypnos, Malmö. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 12/12/19
- Pernilla Nilsson, Operating Manager – Spegeln, Malmö. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 25/10/19

Audiences

- Anna, 33, F, Swedish, Marketing Associate. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 01/02/23 (Zoom Interview)
- Bengt, 39, M, Swedish, Filmmaker. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 15/09/21 (Zoom Interview)
- Brian, 36, M, Swedish, Administrator. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 22/11/21
- Clara, 37, F, Swedish, Administrator. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 03/12/21
- Dana, 39, F, Swedish, Author. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 10/03/20
- Dean, 32, M, Welsh, Programmer. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 21/10/22
- George, 31, M, Swedish, Software Engineer. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 05/09/21 (Zoom Interview)
- Gustav, 40, M, Swedish, Technical Support. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 10/03/20

Ingrid, 41, F, Swedish, Teacher. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 12/03/20

Johanna, 43, F, Swedish, Researcher. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 26/01/23
(Zoom Interview)

Jon, 26, M, Swedish, Warehouse Worker. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho
04/09/21 (Zoom Interview)

Kajsa, 40, F, Swedish, Court Clerk. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 11/03/21

Lena, 37, F, Swedish, Researcher. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 26/01/23
(Zoom Interview)

Louis, 36, M, French, Doctoral Candidate. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho
24/11/21

Malin, 31, F, Swedish, Student. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 05/9/21 (Zoom
Interview)

Mette, 33, F, Danish, Customer Experience Manager. Interviewed with H.S.
Priambodho 04/06/20 (Zoom Interview)

Micke, 30, M, Swedish, Software Developer. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho
14/09/21 (Zoom Interview)

Nicole, 28, F, Swedish, Student. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 07/09/21 (Zoom
Interview)

Olaf, 45, M, Swedish, lecturer. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 26/01/23 (Zoom
Interview)

Sara, 28, F, Greek, Barista. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 12/09/22

Sebastian, 30, M, Greek, Software Engineer. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho
12/09/22

Sofia, 27, F, Greek, UI/UX Designer. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho 12/09/22

Sven, 40, M, Norwegian, Project Manager. Interviewed with H.S. Priambodho
21/10/22

b. List of Films Mentioned

1990: The Bronx Warriors (dir. Enzo G. Castellari, 1982)
8½ (dir. Federico Fellini, 1963)
A Clockwork Orange (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971)
Anton Lavey – Into the Devil’s Den (dir. Carl Abrahamsson, 2019)
Atlantic Rim (dir. Jared Cohn, 2013)
Attack of the Beast Creatures (dir. Michael Stanley, 1985)
Avengers Grimm (dir. Jeremy M. Inman, 2015)
Batman and Robin (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1997)
Billy Elliot (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2000)
Birdemic: Shock and Terror (dir. James Nguyen, 2010)
Blade Runner (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982)
Bride of the Monster (dir. Ed Wood, 1955)
Casablanca (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1942)
Cats (dir. Tom Hooper, 2019)
Citizen Kane (dir. Orson Welles, 1941)
Coffee and Cigarettes (dir. Jim Jarmusch, 2003)
Cry Wilderness (dir. Jay Schlossberg-Cohen, 1987)
Dirty Dancing (dir. Emile Ardolino, 1987)
Dolittle (dir. Stephen Gaghan, 2020)
Donnie Darko (dir. Richard Kelly, 2001)
E.T. (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1982)
El Topo (dir. Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1970)
Emmanuelle franchise (1974-2024)
Eraserhead (dir. David Lynch, 1977)
Escape from New York (dir. John Carpenter, 1981)
Fatal Deviation (dirs. Shay Casserley and Simon Linscheid, 1998)
Female Trouble (dir. John Waters, 1974)
Geostorm (dir. Dean Devlin, 2017)
Gone with the Wind (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939)
Grease 2 (dir. Patricia Birch, 1982)
Gunda (dir. Victor Kossakovsky, 2020)
Hairspray (dir. John Waters, 1988)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (dir. John Cameron Mitchell, 2001)
Howard the Duck (dir. Willard Huyck, 1986)

In the Mood for Love (dir. Wong Kar-Wai, 2000)
Inception (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2010)
Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (dir. Chantal Akerman, 1975)
Joker (dir. Todd Phillips, 2019)
Jurassic Park (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1993)
Koyaanisqatsi (dir. Godfrey Reggio, 1982)
Léon: The Professional (dir. Luc Besson, 1994)
Little Shop of Horrors (dir. Frank Oz, 1986)
Mamma Mia! (dir. Phyllida Lloyd, 2008)
Miami Connection (dir. Y. K. Kim, 1987)
Moonstruck (dir. Norman Jewison, 1987)
Moulin Rouge! (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 2001)
Mulholland Drive (dir. David Lynch, 2001)
Natural Born Killers (dir. Oliver Stone, 1994)
Night of the Living Dead (dir. George A. Romero, 1968)
No Country for Old Men (dirs. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2007)
Pink Flamingos (dir. John Waters, 1972)
Pinochet Porn (dir. Ellen Cantor, 2016)
Plan 9 From Outer Space (dir. Ed Wood, 1957)
Pulp Fiction (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 1994)
Raiders of the Lost Ark (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1981)
Reefer Madness (dir. Louis J. Gasnier, 1936)
Samurai Cop (dir. Amir Shervan, 1991)
Scream (dir. Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett, 2022)
Sharknado (dir. Anthony C. Ferrante, 2013)
Shivers (dir. David Cronenberg, 1975)
Showdown in Little Tokyo (dir. Mark L. Lester, 1991)
Singin' in the Rain (dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952)
Slumber Party Massacre (dir. Amy Holden Jones, 1982)
Spider Man: No Way Home (dir. Jon Watts, 2021)
Star Wars franchise (1977-2019)
Tammy and the T-Rex (dir. Stewart Raffill, 1994)
The Big Lebowski (dirs. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 1998)
The Day After Tomorrow (dir. Roland Emmerich, 2004)

The Dragon Lives Again (dir. Chi Lo, 1977)
The Empire Strikes Back (dir. Irvin Kershner, 1980)
The Fly (dir. David Cronenberg, 1986)
The Hobbit trilogy (dir. Peter Jackson, 2012, 2013, 2014)
The King's Speech (dir. Tom Hooper, 2010)
The Lord of the Rings trilogy (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003)
The Rocky Horror Picture Show (dir. Jim Sharman, 1975)
The Room (dir. Tommy Wiseau, 2003)
The Sound of Music (dir. Robert Wise, 1965)
The Terminator (dir. James Cameron, 1984)
The Wizard of OZ (dir. Victor Fleming and King Vidor, 1939)
Troll 2 (dir. Claudio Fragasso, 1990)
Twilight franchise (2008-2012)
Under the Volcano (dir. John Huston, 1984)
Uninvited (dir. Greydon Clark, 1988)

c. Interview Guide Sample

- Pre-Screening

- What was the reason you came to this screening of “X”?
- What did you know about “X” before seeing it at this screening?
- Tell me about how you first heard of “X” movie
- What were your expectations before the screening of “X”?

- Background

- How would you describe your movie-going habits over the years?
- What are your favourite movie genres?

- On Cult and Taste

- What is a good film?
- What is a bad film?
- How familiar are you with the term “cult film”?
- How would you define a cult film?
- Are you aware of any other places in the region that are doing these sort of screenings?
- How would you describe the film culture in Sweden/Denmark/Scandinavia?
- What is the mindset when going to see these movies?

- The Screening

- How would you describe the atmosphere of the screening?
- How would you describe “X” as a movie?
 - Aesthetics? Colour? Dialogue? Shots? Music?
 - What were your favourite parts of the movie?
- What are your thoughts on the participatory aspects of the event?

- What was your favourite thing about it?
 - Did you carry out any actions during the screening?
 - What were your reasons in doing so?
 - Would you do things differently in future screenings?
 - How did you feel when you did such actions?
 - What makes it important?
 - Since the screening, have you talked about “X” with anyone else?
 - What did you talk about?
 - What were your reasons in doing so?
- **The Individual and Collective**
 - How would you describe yourself as a person who watches movies?
 - What are your thoughts on the people who were at the screening?
 - What are your thoughts on watching it with other people compared to alone?
 - How would you describe the culture around “X”
 - Have you been to other movie screening such as this?
 - What was that like?
- **The Movie Theater**
 - What are your thoughts on “X” movie theater?
 - How would you describe the atmosphere of the theater?
 - How would you describe the decor? Architecture?
 - What’s important to you?
 - What does it mean to you watching these movies in this theater?
 - How did you first find out about this movie theater?

- Have you watched other films or gone to any other events in this theater?
- **Online Aspects**
 - Do you engage with the theater in any way (online or offline)?
 - Where do you like to go on the internet to find resources for these types of movies?
 - Did you use online media in any way in regards to the screening of “X”?
 - Social media?
 - What did you post/write about?
 - What was the response from your friends?

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Cult Film Atmospheres

Cult film events like *The Bad Film Festival* (Gothenburg, 2019 and 2023-2025) and *The B-Film Club* (Malmö) offer unique atmospheres to audiences. In the two Swedish cities of Malmö and Gothenburg, exhibitors run regular festivals and standalone screenings of cult films such as *The Room*, *Birdemic*, *Miami Connection*, and others where an effervescent atmosphere is generated, often featuring audience participatory actions such as talkbacks, shouting out jokes, or dancing as part of the live screening events. This contravenes the commonplace norm of watching movies in the cinema where a degree of decorum and propriety are typically emphasized. With this as a backdrop, this thesis highlights the intertwining roles of cult film audiences, exhibitors, and the material cinema space as generative factors of the cult film atmosphere. It argues for why and how media atmospheres matter especially in relation to audience engagement in that there is an element of liveness through an intense form of engagement as constituted by ambiance, mood, and atmosphere.

Through an empirical qualitative multimethod approach, this thesis contribute insights into how audiences and exhibitors are perceiving cult films, namely how they are defining them based on individuals' aesthetic appraisal, the perceived failures, and the replayability aspect of the films. It enriches the understanding on how identities from both audiences and exhibitors play a crucial role in the eventual generation of the atmosphere. There is an emphasis on the importance of examining the co-existence of ambiance and mood as integral constitutive elements, in which both are required to be present if an atmosphere is to be felt. The idea of the cult film effervescence is elucidated as a key argument of the thesis, which is the primary characteristic of the cult film atmosphere and has the potential to facilitate audiences in forging uncanny bonds and a sense of community with others in the theatre. At its crux, the thesis advances academic research on how we can examine media as atmospheres as experienced by those who are bodily present within a specific space.

HARIO SATRIO PRIAMBODHO is a media studies researcher with an interest in audience studies, media industries, film, popular culture, and media technologies. His research addresses the intertwining nuances of media with atmosphere, engagement, collective effervescence, material space, taste, identity, and participatory practices.