
I WAS A TEENAGE SURFER ZOMBIE FROM MARS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CULT CINEMA

Andrew Graves

Week 2: Ed Case: The Low Budget Cinema of Edward D Wood Jr

"One is always considered mad when one perfects something that others cannot grasp."

Edward D Wood Jr

Queer Cinema

'Sociologically, the term queer has been used to describe an "oxymoronic community of difference" which includes people who might also self-identify as gay and/or lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transvestite, drag queen, leather daddy, lipstick lesbian, pansy, fairy, dyke, butch, femme, feminist, asexual, and so on - any people not explicitly defining themselves in "traditional" heterosexual terms... Queer activism itself has been seen as unruly, defiant, and angry: like the mad scientists of horror films, queer proponents do want to restructure society by calling attention to and eventually dismantling the oppressive assumptions of heterocentrist discourse.'

Harry M Benshoff

Monsters in the Closet

'...the queer, unlike the rather polite categories of gay and lesbian, revels in the discourse of the loathsome, the outcast, the idiomatically proscribed position of the same-sex desire. Unlike petitions for civil rights, queer revels constitute a kind of activism that attacks the dominant notion of the natural. The queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny. Like Phantom of the Opera, the queer dwells underground, below the operatic overtones of the dominant; frightening to look at, desiring, as it plays its own organ, producing its own music...'

Nancy Wride

"A Family United" The Los Angeles Times

Ed Wood and Queer Cinema

'Wood's best-known films, all of which are independently financed and shot outside of the studio system, were poverty-stricken genre epics or cheap exploitation films; refracted through Wood's particular queer sensibility and apparent lack of artistry, his films are championed by many movie fans precisely because of their ability to baldly to expose the the clichés and formulas of the Hollywood system. Almost all of Ed Wood's work had an interesting way of conflating the monstrous and the sexual...'

Harry M Benshoff



Edward D Wood Jr (1924-1978)

- Born in Poughkeepsie, New York
- He joined the US Marine corps in 1943
- He was, by all accounts a good soldier – he was wounded in battle
- A transvestite, he also claimed to have been wearing women's underwear when he was storming the beach at Tarawa
- An eternal optimist despite his limited talents, he moved to LA in the 40s and attempted to get involved in the film industry
- Eventually in 1952 he got the chance to direct a film based on the life on Christine Jorgenson
- Wood was a 'cross dresser'
- According to Kathy Wood, Wood's mother used to dress him in girls' clothing
- Apparently, his 'transvestism' was not a sexual inclination but based on a 'nonmaternal' comfort – particularly from angora.
- A had the knack of finding outcasts that would join him in his mad quest
- Wood relocated to LA and tried to break into the film industry
- He worked as a writer on micro-budget westerns and unmade TV pilots

Bela and Ed

- In 1952, he was introduced to Bela Lugosi by Alex Gordon, who would go on to be a major producer in Samuel Z Arkoff's American International Pictures
- To alleviate the chronic pain from his sciatica Lugosi became addicted to morphine
- To try and get himself off morphine he switched to methadone – which he picked up whilst on a trip to Germany, however he destroyed his attempt to do this by mixing the methadone with Demerol, he would also regularly take barbiturates
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Glen or Glenda? (1953)

- Directed by Ed Wood
- Produced by George Weiss
- Written by Ed Wood
- Cinematography by William C. Thompson (*The Astounding She Monster* and *Satan Jr*)
- Edited by Bud Schelling
- Music by William Lava

- Originally, Ed Wood had offered Lugosi \$500 to appear in *Glen or Glenda*, though there was no logical part available for him
- Lugosi, refused the offer – not wanting to play another role where producers could just exploit his name and (fading) legend
- However, Lillian, Lugosi's fourth wife (partially divorced) knew that he needed to work and he needed the money
- She asked Wood to try secure a fee of \$1000
- Wood managed to persuade George Weiss to increase the fee in light of Lugosi's 'stardom'

***Glen or Glenda?* (1953) CONT...**

- Glen or Glenda is a 'messy' yet bizarre mix of ideas
- Basically, there are two stories going on within the narrative
- In one, character Glen, wrestles with his own transvestite leanings in an extremely autobiographical segment
- In the other, a detective and psychiatrist discuss the recent suicide of a transvestite
- It's presented in the exploitation documentary/drama style
- A strict sounding narrator dominates much of the action
- It features Lugosi as a sort of omnipresent 'god-like' watcher
- Shoddy set design
- Masses of stock footage
- It was shot incredibly cheaply – much of it done in one take regardless of whether it was any good – it usually wasn't
- It's hammy, disjointed and nonsensical
- But the film does at least push a much more 'liberal' agenda – certainly out of touch with the public's attitudes to such thinking at the time
- It is very innovative in its structure
- Though its rough and amateurishly 'thrown together' it retains a certain charm and fascination
- Its use of odd transition shots and Lugosi's character flourishes furnish the film with an unforgettable appeal
- It may be bad but it's not boring

Bride of the Atom* (1955)*Directed by Ed Wood**

- Produced by Ed Wood
- Written by Alex Gordon and Ed Wood
- Cinematography by Ted Allan and William C Thompson
- Edited by Warren Adams
- Originally scripted by Alex Gordon and called *The Atomic Monster* the project was shelved due to lack of financing.
- Wood then picked up the project re-titling the project as *Monster of the Marshes*
- Shooting began in 1954 but then the film ran into money problems again.

"Ed never started with a budget, he raised a certain amount of money, and then went into production. He'd get this far, and then he'd buy six more cans of film and pay off Lugosi a little bit, so he could go down to see his chiropodist and pick up his drugs, and then they'd work for a while and then he'd run around and get some more money just to keep everybody happy."

Robert Cremer

Bride of the Atom (1955) CONT...

- Rancher Donald McCoy, provided much of the funding, he was made one of the film's producers.
- His son Tony also went on to star in the film
- This was almost certainly part of the terms and conditions of the financing deal
- It is rumored that the film was released because of a deal with Samuel Z Arkoff
- Apparently, Arkoff profited from the film much more than Wood and he used the earnings to finance new company American Independent Pictures
- It's very much a poverty row feature
- Its use of stock footage and cheap props such as the rubber octopus mark it as a distinctly low rent production
- The acting again, is ropey to say the least
- Wood's hurried directorial style, replete with its mistakes and inability to pick up on basic continuity errors don't do the final film any favours
- It seems to be suffering an identity crisis – is it Dracula or Frankenstein or a 50s-monster movie?
- It could also be seen as a Cold War propaganda film
- Its villain (Lugosi) has been expelled from an unnamed country but his talk of a super race certainly alludes to Germany and the Nazis
- The film plays with the idea of an 'old European' threat implying that our enemies are the Soviets and other Eastern European communist countries or states

Plan Nine from Outer Space (1959)**Ed Wood**

- Directed by Ed Wood
- Produced by Ed Wood
- Written by Ed Wood
- Cinematography by William C. Thompson
- Edited by Ed Wood
- Originally, Wood had intended to shoot a film called *The Ghoul Goes West* – starring Lugosi.
- As Lugosi couldn't ride a horse, he switched tack and started putting a few shots together for *Grave Robbers from Outer Space*
- He shot several scenes featuring an aging Lugosi
- Wood cobbled together his usual collection of 'actors' including Tor Johnson, Bunny Breckinridge, Lyle Talbot, Criswell, Joanna Lee and Dudley Manlove.
- Though Vampira (Maila Nurmi), had previously turned down Wood's offers of work, considering his films beneath her, by this time she had been effectively blacklisted by Hollywood and was desperately in need of work
- She agreed to commit to one day of shooting, insisting that her role would be a non-speaking part

"If someone had said a year or two before that you're going to work for him, I would have said 'you're mad, never in a million years'"

Vampira (Maila Nurmi)

Maila Nurmi (1922 – 2008)

“By the time, she came into her stunning beauty, she had imbibed the power dynamics of parents and children, men and women, oppressor and oppressed.”

Sheri Holman

“Vampira dripped sexual power and aggression...she completely subverted the image of the 50s housewife, turning her into a rebellious monster.”

W. Scott Poole

Back to *Plan 9*...

- At Edward J Reynolds insistence, the title was changed from *Grave Robbers from Outer Space* to *Plan Nine from Outer Space*
- The cast had to agree to be baptized before filming began
- To shoot took 4-6 days

“...I thought it was alright but I think I made a big mistake doing it. Because it was a lot of rubbish.”

John ‘Bunny’ Breckenridge

“I remember the preview night; I sat next to Ed Reynolds and I felt sorry for the poor guy. Reynolds tried to sell it to the distributors. Nobody would buy it, nobody would touch the darn thing...I don’t think anybody got a dime out of it.”

Gregory Walcott

Criswell told me that Plan Nine opened in New York on 41st street, in a tiny little theatre, and that it played there for a year and a half. Tiny theatre, but it filled it. He said it made a ton of money. Not for Ed Wood, for Criswell. ‘Cause he had invested”

Maila Nurmi

Ed Wood’s Sad End

- Suffering from chronic alcoholism, and unable to pay the rent he and Kathy, his wife, were evicted from their apartment
- Drunk, he died in a friend’s bedroom of a heart attack