
I WAS A TEENAGE SURFER ZOMBIE FROM MARS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CULT CINEMA

Andrew Graves

Week 7: American Extremes: Russ Meyer and John Walters

Russ Meyer

- Born in San Leandro, California
- His parents were of German descent, but they divorced soon after he was born
- He had virtually no contact with his father
- At fourteen he received an 8MM camera which his mother bought for him after pawning her wedding ring
- He made a series of amateur films in his teens and during the WWII he became an army combat photographer for the 166th Signal Photo Company
- On his return to civilian life he was unable to pick up cinematography work in Hollywood as he no contacts in the industry
- Instead, he made industrial films and freelanced as still photographer on several mainstream Hollywood films
- He became a successful glamour photographer and his work appeared in Playboy
- Meyer was the cinematographer for the 1950 Pete DeCenzie film *French Peep Show*, and the 1954 Samuel Newman production, *The Desperate Women*.

The end of the Nudie Features and the beginning of his 'gothic' period

- 1964 marked the end of Meyer's "nudies" and his first foray into serious film making.

Faster Pussycat Kill Kill! (1965)

- Directed by Russ Meyer
- Screenplay by Jack Moran
- Story by Russ Meyer
- Produced by Russ and Eve Meyer
- Cinematography by Walter Schenk
- Edited by Russ Meyer
- Music by Paul Sawtell and Bert Shefter

Plot

- Three Go-Go dancers, who also have a thing for racing cars in the California desert come across a young couple
- After breaking the boy's neck in a fight, they kidnap the young girl
- Later they run across a father and two sons, who have also have an unhealthy interest in the kidnapped girl

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Faster Pussycat Kill Kill! (1965) CONT...

- This film has 'cult' written all across it
- It has a kind of inexplicable 'coolness'
- It is combination of mid-60s underground filmmaking, music and definitive style
- The characters, setting and costumes are also deliciously memorable
- The dialogue, at times rivals Raymond Chandler

Shooting Problems

- Meyer's military background, meant that his strict directorial style often clashed with his more 'relaxed' artists
- There was also friction between Susan Bernard, Russ Meyer and the other cast members
- This was largely due to her being a 16-year-old minor and her mother having to be present
- Bernard insisted later that she was genuinely scared of Tura Satana (Varla)

"Everybody [on set] did everything from moving props to marking scenery and marking spots where we had to be in the next take. I had to stage the fight scenes because nobody else knew how to do them, and so literally when I did the fight scenes, I really had to pick up each and every one of those guys and carry them through in order for them to look realistic. Basically, I had to lay one guy on the floor because he was afraid he was going to get hurt. A lot of it actually had to be done in reverse, so try to imagine doing a fight scene that way"

Tura Satana

Tura Satana

- She was born in Japan
- Her mother was a circus performer, part Native American, (Cheyenne) part Ulster Scots
- Her father was a Japanese silent movie star
- They all moved to America when she was two
- After the end of WWII, she and her family were moved into an internment camp
- She was gang-raped coming home from school one day when she was nine years old
- Though there was a court case – she later maintained that her attackers got off because the judge was paid off
- She learned how to fight and allegedly went after her attackers' years later and exacted her revenge
- She formed a gang called 'The Angeles'
- Because of frequent delinquency, she was sent to reform school
- When she was thirteen, her parents arranged for her to marry a seventeen-year-old
- The marriage lasted nine months
- When she was fifteen she created a fake ID, and began working as a burlesque artist

- She became a photographic model and posed for Harold Lloyd

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Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (1970)

- Directed by Russ Meyer
- Screenplay by Roger Ebert
- Story by Russ Meyer and Roger Ebert
- Produced by Russ Meyer
- Cinematography by Fred J Koenekamp
- Edited by Dann Kahn and Dick Wormel
- Music by Stu Phillips
- Originally *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* was intended to be a straight up sequel
- *Valley of the Dolls* had been well-received by the public but savaged by the critics
- In June 1969, the studio announced that the project would be made in 18 months and be helmed by Irving Mansfield
- A script was written by Jean Holloway
- Two months later, Fox decided that Mansfield would no longer be making the film
- Instead, they hired Russ Meyer, whose X-rated indie *Vixens* had become a financial success
- Holloway's script was dismissed and Roger Ebert was given the task of writing the story
- Richard Zanuck, head of Fox, gave Meyer a weekend to rework the idea, with the emphasis on 'cheap' and R-rated
- Meyer and Ebert thrashed out the basic idea deciding to do an outright spoof of *Valley of the Dolls*

"...a satire of Hollywood conventions, genres, situations, dialogue, characters, and success formulas, heavily overlaid with such shocking violence that some critics didn't know whether the movie 'knew' it was a comedy"

Roger Ebert

"...by creating characters and then working out situations to cover the range of exploitable content we wanted in the film. Meyer wanted the film to appeal, in some way, to almost anyone who was under thirty and went to the movies. There had to be music, mod clothes, black characters, violence, romantic love, soap opera situations, behind-the-scenes intrigue, fantastic sets, lesbians, orgies, drugs and (eventually) an ending that tied everything together"

Roger Ebert

"...simultaneously be a satire, a serious melodrama, a rock musical, a comedy, a violent exploitation picture, a skin flick, and a moralistic expose (so soon after the Sharon Tate murders) of what the opening crawl called 'the oft-times nightmarish world of Show Business'"

Russ Meyer

"...a mess, a disaster, a stinkeroo, the most wretched of wretched movies. Disregard anything you hear in the so-bad-it's-good or it's-all-a-put-on veins. It's a depressing picture — witless, hysterical, gratuitous, technically inept, needlessly brutal"

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"...corny, moralizing, guileless, and visually about as appealing as a Christmas wrapper. It is also perversely enjoyable if one is prepared to laugh at it as well as with it"

Mike Wallington
The Monthly Film Bulletin

"One of the best movies ever made"

John Walters

John Waters

- Born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1946
- Made in his first short film in 1964 *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*
- He enrolled at New York University, but found the film course, not to his liking

'I was always drawn to forbidden subject matter in the very, very beginning. The Wizard of Oz opened me up because it was one of the first movies I ever saw. It opened me up to villainy, to screenwriting, to costumes. And great dialogue. I think the witch has great, great dialogue.'

John Waters

Early Work

- Camp
- Sleazy
- Exploitation
- Pushed the boundaries of taste and censorship
- *Pink Flamingos/Female Trouble/Desperate Living* – The Trash Trilogy

Divine

- Born Harris Glenn Milstead in 1945
- Was raised in a fairly well to do family of conservative Baptists
- He enrolled into beauty school
- Whilst there, he got into the habit of throwing lavish parties, where he would often 'drag up' as Elizabeth Taylor

'I was an only child in, I guess, your upper middle-class American family. I was probably your American spoiled brat.'

Divine

Multiple Maniacs (1970)

- At pre-screening publicity events Waters would introduce Divine as 'The most beautiful woman in the world'

- He would walk on stage pushing a shopping trolley full of dead mackerel, which he'd proceed to throw into the audience
- He would then announce that '*I give blow jobs to serial killers*'

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***Pink Flamingos* (1972)**

- 'An exercise in poor taste'
 - *Pink Flamingos* is notorious
 - Outrageous
 - Nudity
 - Profanity
 - Scatology
 - Exhibitionism
 - Voyeurism
 - Sodomy
 - Masturbation
 - Vomiting
 - Rape
 - Incest
 - Murder
 - Cannibalism
 - Foot fetishism
-
- It's seen by some as an example of 'Abject Art'
 - It's the very definition of cult
 - It's the perfect midnight movie
 - The film was well received by film critics and embraced by the LGBT community

Plot

- The notorious criminal Divine lives under the pseudonym "Babs Johnson" with her mentally ill mother Edie, delinquent son Crackers, and traveling companion Cotton. They share a trailer on the outskirts of Phoenix
 - After learning that Divine has been named "the filthiest person alive" by a tabloid paper, jealous rivals Connie and Raymond Marble attempt to usurp her title.
-
- Shot on a budget of only \$10,000
 - Inspired by underground filmmakers like Andy Warhol and Kenneth Anger
 - It's a mix of drag show pageantry and 50s rock n roll kitsch
 - Rough editing
 - Sound delays
 - Shambolic style
 - 'Homemade' Technicolor

'The trailer cleverly positions the film as an event: Hey, you may like the movie or hate it, but at least you'll be able to say you saw it! Then blurbs flash on the screen, including one comparing "Pink Flamingos" to Luis

Bunuel's "The Andalusian Dog," in which a pig's eyeball was sliced. Yes, but the pig was dead, while the audience for this movie is still alive.'

Roger Ebert

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Pink Flamingos (1972) CONT...

- Was initially banned in Australia, Canada and Norway

'That scene'

- Placed at the end of the film
 - It was real
 - Was designed to increase publicity for the film
 - Became a huge cult hit at midnight showings
 - Made a star out of Divine
-
- Divine (Harris Glenn Milstead) died in his sleep of an enlarged heart on March 7th 1988