

On Understanding Cult Films: A Literatures Review

By

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Discussions among critics and film theorists about definition of term 'Cult' in 'Cult Film' have already taken place for decades. One of the important works, in my sense, can be 'Cult' by itself¹, was in an article by Umberto Eco; *Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage* (1985). Eco's work inspires me to quest more understanding on what film represents and how human perception interprets the representation and actualizes it into their part of existence in society. Nevertheless, I find that questions also have relation within film semiotics, thus, I guess, I am not the only one who is doing this.

In my opinion, so to speak, the term 'Cult Film' as one of the aspects in entire Cult Media, gains influence from cultivation theory, this was developed by Prof. George Gerbner and Prof. Larry Gross, and has been studied among communication scientists since 1960's. This theory emphasizes on the effect of television program on perception of viewers. It assumed, exposure that viewer received, subtly "cultivates" viewers' perceptions of reality.² The term 'cultivation' derived from term 'cult', thus if we refer to its terminology came from the Latin 'cultus' which means care, or adoration, or in addition, veneration.³ Despite of the meanings, in some literatures, the word 'cult' in 'cult film' itself was vague and disputed, and in my sense, usage of the words underpins more its justification as a label rather as a reference.

Phillipe Le Guern (2004) referred term usage 'cult' on television series, films, novels, and musics which had been praised in such a way, they had groups of fan, and in some

¹ I took this idea from Le Guern (2004) notes on what Umberto Eco wrote in his preface to the French translation of *A Small World*, Umberto Eco describes it as a 'cult' text: "Even though it was only published in 1984, this book is a *cult* book. The reasons why a book becomes a cult objects are many and I have no wish to discuss them here." See Guern, P. I. (2004). *Towards A Constructivist Approach to Media Cults*. I S. G.-J. Pearson, *Cult Television* (s. 242). Minnesota, US: Univ. of Minnesota Press. Page 20.

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultivation_theory

³ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult>

aspects symbolized values, social status and subculture of themselves. Nonetheless, he also mentioned contemporary usage of the word on more religious practice which brought ambiguity and made many attempts at the definition and delimitation of the concept and its usage are more difficult.⁴ However, the difficulties' that Le Guern mentions were derived from two causes; first, subordinate disposition by sociology approach in social environment and an inability to reflect the meanings of its own practice. Second, its concern on analogy of media cults and religious cults. He noted Walter Benjamin thoughts about the idea of an art, such as cinema, can only exist on level of reproduction (as opposed to unique reproduction) in which reproduces invalidates the 'cult value' of art.⁵

Therefore, Le Guern proposed a question whether the concept of 'Cult' should be reduced from a nominalist perspective to the product of linguistic game, to one of those classification schemes created by the observer but devoid of reality. He argued this sublimation of film, in generally speaking, functioned as an unifier that produced groups and spectators, by its expression of attributed values, thus maintain their enthusiasm for the cult text. In spite of cult film as reducible text, Le Guern emphasized the role of, in his term, 'participatory culture' of fans, communities, and by rituals as a social construction of cults. This niche distinguished the authentic/original cults and inauthentic/planned cults based on historical concept which point of transitions is the rationalization and exploitation of tastes. These tastes however, must be relativized in order to be understood and taken place in the procession of successive generations, their cultural practices, and the conditions and context of these practices.⁶

This fandomness, however, had attracted Hills (2002) to bear the relation between fandom and cult culture in academic perspective. He argued that actually it was not an easy task to define fandom itself because of 'everydayness' of term.⁷ Nowadays everyone knows

⁴ Guern, P. I. (2004). *Towards A Constructivist Approach to Media Cults*. I S. G.-J. Pearson, *Cult Television* (s. 242). Minnesota, US: Univ. of Minnesota Press. Page 4.

⁵ Ibid, page 5

⁶ Ibid, page 17

⁷ Hills, M. (2002). *Fan Cultures*. England: Routledge. Page 1-2

what a 'fan' is. Of course, Hills took Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) attempt by linked the concept of 'fan', cultist, and 'enthusiast'. He also mentioned Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) less contradictory definition, despite the term 'cult', of 'fan and 'followers. In addition, Hills noted Brooker and Brooker (1996: 141) preposition "Tarantino's admirers might not all be fans.....and not all fans will be cult fans'.⁸ Hills proposed that this thought made a clear separation between the committed fan and the presumably fan even more knowledgeable and fan-community-oriented.

Nonetheless, he realized that the concept of 'fandom' and 'cult fandom' sometimes overlapped.⁹ 'Cult fandom' more likely implied cultural identity which was partially from the concept of 'fan' in general. Thus, he suggested that this duality related not to the intensity, social organization or semiotic/material productivity of the fandom concerned, but rather to its duration, especially in the absence of 'new' or official material in the originating medium.¹⁰ He showed how delicately some instances of how *Star Trek* and *The X-Files* had been adored by their fans and become 'cult fandom'. Hence, Hills stated that cult fandom can be made up from three dimensions, which can, in specific cases, contradict one another. These dimensions, first, is tautological definitions which is the use of 'cult' discourses within fandom. Second, temporal definitions which are usage of cult endured. Third, affective definitions, defines 'cult' fandom as an intensely feel fan experience.

Indeed, how those dimensions above arise, in my sense, involve subjectivity¹¹ from subculture in that cult fans belong which , according to Christian Metz thoughts, derived from process of identification, voyeurism, and fetishistic. This perception, despite of the 'product' of cult itself and geographical means whatsoever come up as collective conscious. This

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, page 2

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ I used the concept of subjectivity from Gillian Rose in her book, (2007). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Interpretation of Visual Materials, Second Edition*. London, England: Sage Publication. Page 110. She referred *subjectivity* to a viewer's characteristics. Subjectivity she said, "... entails the acknowledgement that individuals are indeed subjective; that we make sense of our selves and our world through a whole range of complex, and often non-rational ways of understanding. We feel, we dream, we fantasize, we take pleasure and are repulsed, we can be ambivalent and contradictory, panic-stricken and in love; and we can react to things in ways that feel beyond words."

collective conscious claims to be the institution through symbolization process which the term 'cult' presents as the label. In other words, inter subjectivity with society, particularly in culture where the fans belong, makes a film being adored. Thus, cult film can not be separated from cult fandom because fandom makes film 'cults' vice versa. However, the process within film and its fandom is not as disputed or overlapped as Le Guern and Hills proposed, in my perspective; nevertheless semiotic can clearly distinguish among those labels.

One of the film theorists, who wanted to mediate whether are cult films/movies, is Mark Jancovich. Jancovich (2003) underpinned usage of term 'cult movies' as the celebration of 'bad movies' covered with multitude of sins and the category had been viewed by its sheer of variety.¹² He pointed 'cult movies' as the subject in binary structure, the structure of middle high and middle low class of taste in society, where cult film usually struggled as oppositional taste of 'mainstream', the middle low one. By using Pierre Bourdieu thought of formal defamiliarization in the central of bourgeois aesthetics and its relation to material security of the class, Jancovich argued that rather than subaltern challenge to the bourgeois, the oppositional taste of cult movies fans could be seen in part, as a conflict within (rather than against) the bourgeois.¹³

However, ironically he said, instead of facing the clash directly, the lower middle class are frequently made the scapegoat, so that this challenge worked to secure the authority of the upper middle class rather than to threaten it.¹⁴ Even though it is indeed really interesting to discuss, this scapegoat as a part of class struggle of cult fandom, nonetheless I prefer to be out of discussion about it, and back to discourse of cult films. That discourse, also had been emphasized by Jenkins (2006). He criticized *The Matrix Trilogy* by referring to Umberto Eco's thought whether makes film being loved; transform such film like *Casablanca*

¹² Jancovich, M. (2003). *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*. England: Manchester University Press. Page 1-4

¹³ (Sconce, 1995; Jancovich, 2002) in *ibid.*

¹⁴ (Jancovich, 2002) in *ibid.*

into a cult artifact. Hence, later I would like to include Eco's thoughts about cult movies from the original article therefore it would bring more comprehensive argument.

Jenkins argued, if *Casablanca* exemplified the classical of cult movie, one might see *The Matrix* as an emblematic of the cult movie in, his term, convergence culture. He quoted a science fiction writer, Bruce Sterling fascinations of how *The Matrix* had put all the pop appeal elements, from suicidal attacks by elite Special Forces, crashing helicopters, to the Buddha, Taoism and Godelian mathematical metaphysics.¹⁵ Those elements emerged layers of response by audience and "...spring up many knowledgeable communities to display their expertise, dig deeply into their libraries, and bring their minds to bear on a text that promises a bottomless pit of secrets."¹⁶ That response makes the films have their position as an open source of experiences in the eye of their spectators and, in my sense, which exactly what Wachowski brothers intentionally want.

According to Jenkins,¹⁷ the more we try to look deeper, the more secrets about the films will reveal, all of which can be seen at any moment is the key to the film. He took an example; Neo's room number is *101*, which is the same room number of the torture chamber in George Orwell's film *1984* (1949). Once the audiences realize it, then they will find out that *101* are also the floor number of the Merovingian's nightclub and the highway number where the characters clash in *The Matrix Reloaded*, then the audiences cannot help but believe that all the various numbers in the film may also carry hidden meanings or connect significant characters and locations together. The billboard in the background of shots contains cheat codes that can be used to unlock the levels in the video game; *Enter the Matrix* (2003).¹⁸ In his words, "The sheer abundance of allusions makes it nearly impossible to any given consumer to master the franchise totally."¹⁹

¹⁵ Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. US: NYU Press.

Page 93 - 114

¹⁶ *Ibid*, page 99.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

The allusions makes fans can not really answer, *what is Matrix?* Because there are many ways to express it, and that is also what make the films being 'cult'. However, Jenkins emphasized that the key of the 'cult' process was in, his term borrowed from Ivan Askwith, "synergetic storytelling".²⁰ He noted the usage of franchise concept into film production by convergence all possible media and the power of distribution to emerge the films aura, from PC game to plastic figurine in McDonalds Happy Meals. He had cross referenced *The Matrix* with *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), a small budget independent film that became a huge moneymaker.

The Blair Witch Project had created a fan following on the web more than a year before it hit any theaters. The film's creative team, called themselves, the *Haxans* have set in such ways arbitrary pseudo documentary plot just to make their followers on web more curious, therefore they will search and explore to have more conception about the project, so on and so forth. And it worked, all the elements which are mostly documents, made the world of film more convincing, enhancing the immediacy of the Haxans had through their distinctive hand-held-video style and improvisational acting.²¹ Although, Dan Myrick, one of the film's producers said, "We tried to create a fake legend..."²².

In his article about *Casablanca*, Umberto Eco argued, to be cult, the work must come to us as a, first, "completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the private sectarian world." Second, as an encyclopedic, contained a rich array of information that could be drilled, practiced, and mastered by devoted customers.²³ Regarding to the first causes, later he pinned a question whether elements, in a movie, can be separated from the whole and adored for themselves.

²⁰ He has also pointed that there are strong economic motives behind transmedia storytelling. For more explanation see *ibid*, page 104 – 108.

²¹ Such style also has been followed by film *Cloverfield* (2008).

²² This quotation based on interview between Henry Jenkins and Dan Myrick in November 1999, for more information See (Jenkins, 2006), page 102.

²³ The translation version of Eco's work regarding this matter was in Eco, U. (1986). "*Casablanca*": *Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage*. In U. Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays* (p. 197). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. However, quotation I taken was from selected articles in BFM Film Semiotics class (spring 2008) reading requirements and nevertheless it was same article from different books.

In addition to such semiotic categories that had been proposed by Russian Formalist, which are motif and theme, Eco bare the concept of '*common frame*' and '*inter-textual frames*' as visual narrative variables in order to analyze films.

What he meant by '*common frame*' was "a sequence of actions more or less coded by our normal experience",²⁴ and by '*inter-textual frames*' he said "I meant stereotyped situation derived from proceeding and recording by our encyclopedia, such as, ...duel between the sheriff and the bad guy or the narrative situation in which the hero fought the villain and won....".²⁵ Moreover, he proposed, instead of just recognized conventional inter-textual frames, audience apt to find more 'magical flavors' in a film. Those 'magical flavors' which are been textualized in film frames indeed transform a movie, such *Casablanca*, into a cult object. Although he admitted in *Casablanca*, there were more inter-textual frames, what he later called 'inter-textual archetypes', than 'magic' inter-textual frames.²⁶

What Eco referred as 'archetype' neither had relation with Freud psychoanalytic nor mystic connotation, instead the term "...served only to indicate a pre established and frequent reappearing narrative situation, cited or in some way recycled by innumerable other text and provoking in the addressee a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of *déjà vu*, that everybody yearns to see again."²⁷ The archetype also had not necessarily needed to be understood as 'universal' feeling; nonetheless it might belong to particularly recent textual tradition or slapstick comedy whatsoever, or appeal to a given cultural area or a historical period.

Since the archetype can be analyze particularly and the presence also may not attach the entire 'film universe' thus away from being cult, therefore Eco argued that not all movies would be semiotically interesting to look of its archetype and being quoted. He took an example of inter-textual between *Casablanca* and *Raiders*, "...*Raiders*... was conceived within a metasemiotic culture, and what the semiotician could find in them exactly what the

²⁴ Ibid, page 396.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ What Eco meant by *déjà vu* was something that already seen, *ibid*.

directors put there.... In *Casablanca* the situation was different. So *Casablanca* explained *Raiders*, but *Raiders* did not explain *Casablanca*...²⁸. Despite of the economic motives, this proposition explained distinction among the films themselves which one was the Cult Film and which one was not to be cult.

Conclusion

Le Guern and Hills showed us that the concept of cult film could not be separated from the very existence of their fandom. In fact, through their participatory a film can be sublime and distinguish from other film instead of just being adored. Thus, cult film no longer must only be seen as a celebration of bad movies or other sheer of label nevertheless as symbol of human appreciation of thoughts. Since we entangle in a very convergent culture where every things apt connect each other therefore roles of distribution also play significant contribution to construct a film to be cult as Jenkins has argued in *The Matrix Trilogy* and *The Blair Witch Project*. However, the most comprehensive reference, and which personally for me is a cult article since many theorist 'cultic' it, was Umberto Eco's work on *Casablanca*. His proposition about 'common frames' and 'intertextual frames', or later he called 'intertextual archetype', has brought better understanding and inspired me to have a wider perspective to see films, cult films.

²⁸ Ibid, page 402.

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