

The Recipe for a Cult Film

I. The Intro

You may know them, you may not. You may love them, you may not. That's kind of the point. Cult films aren't for everyone, but those who do enjoy them *really* enjoy them. Hence the name. To understand cult films, you must first understand what does *not* constitute one. The antonym of a cult movie is the blockbuster. Blockbusters like *Jurassic Park*, *James Bond*, *Indiana Jones* or *Forrest Gump* - while considered to be great movies - are not exactly cult movies because they're made with big budgets, cast the biggest stars of the year, and most are marketed to become big franchises. Transformers, most Marvel movies, and movies like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy would also fit into this category as while they have fanbases, they are ultimately blockbuster films.

Cult movies are a little harder to pin down, mostly because there is no right or wrong answer in cinema, but also because there are so many sub-categories, subgenres and subgroups. Broadly speaking, a cult film is a movie that's been brushed off by the mainstream, but has a dedicated group of fans that would go to the ends of the earth for it. Some believe they can only be small-budget or more "indie" films, while others include movies with massive budgets that ended up being initial box-office flops. They trace their origins back to when the movie industry was much more restrictive and it was harder to break out of the mold Hollywood set for acceptable films. Since lots of films couldn't rise above the harsh censoring laws, they began to gain underground followings, shown after hours at theaters and circulating as illegal bootlegs kept alive by fans.

As the years went on and Hollywood relaxed, it became easier to get a more violent, profane, or sexually suggestive movie made, making it even harder to define what exactly a cult film is.

II. The Recipe

It was my task to find out exactly what the recipe for a perfect cult classic would be. I spent a week in which I watched 21 movies that have achieved "cult status" across the past 60 years. Movies about soldiers, spacemen, salesmen, cops, criminals, degenerates, and everything in between. Movies directed by acclaimed masters of their craft, and the guy who went on to direct the 50 Shades of Grey sequels. Overnight hits, film festival darlings, and box office flops. How are they all connected?

Turns out, there are three elements, or as I like to call them : the holy trinity of cult films. Three things all these widely different films have in common.

Firstly, and most importantly, you must expect the unexpected, as these movies **cross over into the surreal**. Whether it be a story like *Eraserhead* with that freaky baby, *The Evil Dead* in which a group of friends becomes possessed by a demonic book, or even something simpler like *Beau Travail* which

takes war and turns it into a choreographed dance. Each one of these movies suspends belief and transcends reality by a little or a lot. Next, it **must be a money paradox**. Either made on a shoestring budget and then becoming a huge hit like *Clerks*. Or maybe it's a movie with a huge price tag that completely flopped and even lost enough money to nearly bankrupt an entire studio like *Heaven's Gate*. Maybe it's something like the *Boondock Saints*, which did poorly on its initial run in theaters, but made a splash with DVD sales years later. Lastly, and most importantly, these movies have to be made by **those on the fringe of fame**. Of course these movies shine, but not really with star power. No Brad Pitts, Leonardo DiCaprios or Meryl Streeps in these movies. Maybe directors like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola made cult hits back in the day, but they are now some of the most prestigious and revered directors in the world. When thinking about the fringe of fame, think *Uncut Gems* directed by the Safdie Brothers. They found the antagonist for the film – Keith William Richards – walking to the subway one day and approached him to offer a role in the film. Abel Ferrara, one of the greatest cult directors of his time, worked with many people he pulled from the streets of New York while making the dark, gritty films he is known for.

There are other conditionals too, such as a quotable script, like *Glengarry Glen Ross* directed by James Foley, or *This Is Spinal Tap* directed by Rob Reiner. Movies that are “campy” – or over the top – like *Rocky Horror Picture Show* or “so bad they’re good” like Paul Verhoeven’s *Showgirls* are also sure to become cult classics. Even movies that are downright terrible like Tommy Wiseau’s *The Room*. Directors who cast the same actors over and over like the Coen Bros or Quentin Tarantino make lots of movies with familiar faces we love, keeping us coming back to see what weird situations they get themselves into. A distinct aesthetic like Wes Anderson, David Lynch, or Stanley Kubrick’s can also be a marker of cult status.

III. Applying the Formula

Let’s apply this formula to a specific film : *The Florida Project*, directed by Sean Baker. This is not exactly a cult classic yet, as it only came out a few years ago, but I think it’s a safe bet *The Florida Project* will soon be joining the cult ranks amongst some of the greatest as it has every element of the holy trinity and then some. It’s the story of an impoverished single mother (Halley) and her daughter (Mooney) who are living in a motel on the outskirts of Orlando, Florida. The fact that it is mostly told from the perspective of six-year-old Mooney rather than her mother, Halley, make this a rather unique and bittersweet story. The juxtaposition of the harsh reality of Halley’s situation with the dreamlike color palette and Mooney’s childlike viewpoint give this movie its surreal quality. This movie was made for about two million dollars, which is a relatively small budget compared to the 100 million dollar price-tags

on the movies usually released in theaters these days. It didn't bring in much money either, ultimately grossing only 11 million in its theatrical run. Director Sean Baker stumbled upon the perfect woman to play Halley on Instagram. Her name is Bria Vinaite, and this was her first time acting. Baker didn't want a recognizable face and reportedly just "loved her energy," so he DM'd her to offer her the part. If that isn't "fringe of fame," I don't know what is. This movie checks every box, and is also just a fantastic film in general, so I predict it as a definite future cult classic.

IV. Are Cult Films Made or Born?

Now that we've established the definition, found the recipe, and applied the formula, I believe it's safe to say both you and I are unofficial experts in the field of cult classics. The next question: Is a cult film made? Or is it born? Does one ever set out to *make* a cult film on purpose? That's a tricky one. A cult film doesn't usually find its audience until years after its initial release. Most of the time, a movie gains cult status by accident. Even more of the time, a cult movie is cult because it includes themes or content that is deemed "taboo" even though it shouldn't be, or appeals to a very specific group of people. To try and manufacture a movie with the intention of making it "cult" would go against everything cult films stand for. Even *Waterworld*, a major cult classic, was supposed to be the movie of the year before it flopped astronomically. It just kind of... Happens. It's not for any marketing team or studio to decide what a cult film is, and one size certainly does not fit all! That's part of the fun.

V. The Commodification of Cinema

The film industry is constantly growing and changing, and a lot of good has come with these changes. However, in my opinion, a lot of bad has come with it too. For one thing, equipment has gotten a lot more accessible, making it easier for anyone to pick up a camera and make something great. On the other hand, it's made it easy to make an entire movie in front of a greenscreen. People rarely shoot on real locations for big budget films anymore. Corporations have become a big part of all aspects of American life, from the food we eat to the clothes we wear, and the film industry is no exception. It's called the movie business for a reason, and executives at companies like Disney and Comcast have more creative control these days than directors themselves. In fact, 5 major studios have a monopoly on the whole industry. Their main goal is to turn a profit, after all. Televised award ceremonies like the Golden Globes and Oscars have also added fuel to the fire, making directors and actors feel the need to compete against one another to take home the most statues, causing Oscar bait movie after Oscar bait movie to be released

when award season rolls around. So it seems that almost the entire industry has boiled down to pocket money and prestige.

I spoke to Dr. David Thorburn, a professor of Communications and Media Studies at MIT, about his thoughts on these trends. (Interesting Parts of Interview Plays, of course all parts are interesting, just the more pertinent parts to the documentary)

To Include

CALL TO ACTION - Make sure to branch out and find your own film taste! Don't listen to the critics, don't listen to the prestige or awards! Focus on yourself and what you like!