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HIGHBROW & LOWBROW TRANSGRESSION  
IN CINEMA'S FIRST CENTURY

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FROM THE  
TO THE

# ARTHOUSE GRINDHOUSE



EDITED BY  
JOHN CLINE AND ROBERT G. WEINER

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From the Arthouse  
to the Grindhouse

*Highbrow and Lowbrow  
Transgression in  
Cinema's First Century*

Edited by  
John Cline  
Robert G. Weiner

*Foreword by Chris Gore*



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In memory of Bill Landis,  
a true pioneer and historian  
of transgressive cinema.



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## *Foreword*

### Grinding Out a New Form of Entertainment

Chris Gore

I've never understood moviegoers who wish merely to be "entertained." Where's the joy in that? What do you get out of it exactly? And how will seeing something mildly "entertaining" move you or change you or open your mind to experiences only possible through an infusion of celluloid to the brain? Sure, a traditional romantic comedy or a drama may be *somewhat amusing*, but once it's over, it's just as easily forgotten. You may even encounter this flick again as you randomly flip the channels and wonder why you thought it was such a *good* movie.

The truth is that you were cheated, because those movies aren't entertaining at all. They are milquetoast. They are time killers at best. And worse, they lack balls. The inoffensive movie that appeals to everyone and no one seems to me a crime. That's why I have always sought out the extreme in film experiences: movies that make one feel afraid, aroused, grossed out, terrified, disgusted, embarrassed, broken, and stunned into silence. I like movies that fuck with my head. And there's no film genre that embodies these virtues more than grindhouse and arthouse cinema. These movies don't just open your mind—they drill through the skull and into the brain, leaving the bloody pieces splattered on the theater walls.

Grindhouse films are never safe. They have the power to alter your perspective by exposing life's brutal truths: the cruel consequences of a life of crime; merciless monstrosities terrorizing innocents in ways that will haunt your dreams and your nightmares; bizarre and strangely erotic fetishes that you'd never heard of and perhaps wish you'd never seen. You'll even be exposed to the documentation of real death in horrific forms.

Once you've seen a great grindhouse film, it can never be *unseen*. And you will be forever changed. So the next time you choose a film, consider what you would gain from a grindhouse fix. You'll see from this book that grindhouse cinema and arthouse cinema are not that far apart. Kudos to John Cline and Rob Weiner for having the courage to put this volume together. Once you read this volume or see any of the films discussed, if you are anything like me, you will be hooked.

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## Introduction

John Cline and Robert G. Weiner

Like our companion volume *Cinema Inferno: Celluloid Explosions from the Cultural Margins*, the project that has become *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema's First Century* started with a panel at the 2006 conference of the Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Association (SW/TX PCA/ACA) held in Albuquerque. Organized by Rob Weiner, the panel on "Transgressive Cinema" ended up with only two panelists, one of whom was John Cline. It was, however, one of the best-attended panels that any of those present had been witness to. Over the next few months, we corresponded via e-mail and phone across the expanse of Texas about our mutual desire to expand the "Transgressive Cinema" panel the following year, and the idea for this project arose from those discussions. Since that time, the Transgressive Cinema area has grown from just one conference section to as many as five, and it is now—we believe—a stable forum for cutting-edge cinema studies.

This book, like its companion, is somewhat different from what we had initially conceived. However, some guiding principles continued to underscore the project's overall structure. First, we wanted to create a collection of essays that dealt with the concept of "transgression" in film. Second, we wanted the "transgressive" films that we covered to come from both the high and low ends of the cultural hierarchy. Third, we wanted to include films from as close to the whole history of cinema as possible. Finally, and most importantly, we wanted to include authors from inside and outside academic film studies. Some of the authors contained herein we sought out personally; others were fortuitous submissions to a call for papers. We had a wish list of subjects, films, and



filmmakers, but for better or worse, not all of our desired subjects found an author. We were especially keen on finding authors to cover female and minority filmmakers in addition to those filmmakers who still had a limited place in the critical literature. Within the parameters of the present volume, for instance, we searched hard for, but failed to find, anyone to cover filmmakers like Monika Treut, Genesis P. O. and Psychic TV, Ken Jacobs, Kenneth Anger, Craig Baldwin, Tony Tenser, Julien Temple, Pete Walker, Herbert Biberman, Jane Campion, or even Alfred Hitchcock, who made some very transgressive films in his time. However, in the end, we are quite happy with the chapters we have.

The inclusiveness of this and its companion volume is warranted, we believe, because the final principle guiding our project's structure—the mixture of journalistic and academic film criticism—reframes the field of film studies in some important ways. In an essay published in *Screen* magazine nearly fifteen years ago, Jeffrey Sconce inaugurated the study of what he termed “paracinema.” According to Sconce, paracinema is a broad category that includes film genres outside mainstream commercial filmmaking.

In the wake of that publication, there has been a steady increase in the number of scholars and academic publications that have covered previously disregarded forms of film like pornography, exploitation films, educational films, and so on. At the same time, many of the academic writers on these subjects treat these kinds of films as if they need to be judged according to the narrative standards of Hollywood. Even Jeffrey Sconce argues for that kind of pedagogical usefulness in an article on Dwain Esper's *Sex Maniac* (1934), basing his claim primarily on its ability to help students understand continuity editing. Rob Weiner critiques this in an essay in this volume. Sconce's inauguration of a new territory within the field of film studies, “Trashing the Academy,” was compounded and complicated by Joan Hawkins's essay, “Sleaze Mania, Euro-Trash, and High Art: The Place of European Art Films in American Low Culture,” in which she suggests that many of the consumers of the lowest-of-the-low trash cinema are also among the likeliest of American film audiences to be familiar with the films of Fellini or Godard. Despite this necessary revision to the sounding call of paracinema studies (and by proxy, to “transgressive” film), to our knowledge no other collection has attempted to place critical examinations of vaunted directors of arthouse classics like Erich von Stroheim and Pier Paolo Pasolini alongside “snuff custom fetish videos” and Mondo films

like *Des Morts*. However, despite what we see as the flaws in Sconce's and Hawkins's individual works, our project has benefited greatly from their general theses: Films outside the mainstream are worth studying, and avant-garde and low-budget horror films are often similar, not only in terms of subject matter or transgressiveness, but also in their technique.

There are more than a few films examined in the pages that follow that we would be wary of showing to our loved ones (especially our mothers), and the truth is that even we don't necessarily "like" all the films under review. The editors are equally happy watching classics with actors such as John Wayne, Gregory Peck, and Ingrid Bergman, or the works of directors like William Wyler, Billy Wilder, and Steven Spielberg. But that is ultimately irrelevant to the nature of this kind of cinema studies. While we are in no way endorsing the kind of critical "neutrality" of fan literature like the *Psychotronic* publishing empire, the concept of transgression allows—through the work of these authors—each film and filmmaker the opportunity to be understood in a context that grants them their proper significance, regardless of personal taste.

If societies are defined by the limits they place on personal behavior, then acts of transgression are necessary to identify just where those limits lie. Significantly, films that exist outside of the multiplex mainstream often traffic in representations of such taboo breaking. Although the vast majority of "transgressive" content centers on the usual suspects of sex and violence, films can also illustrate certain restricted concepts that, retroactively, seem perfectly acceptable to the majority of people in a society. Herbert Biberman's 1954 film *Salt of the Earth* is an example. Despite the fact that its basic claims—that people regardless of race are equal, that women have rights, and that people are entitled to decent working conditions—are hardly the stuff of Sodom and Gomorrah, when the film was released, the reactions it provoked among certain powerful individuals and factions make it tempting to say that it is, perhaps, the most controversial film ever made. (Howard Hughes once asked Congress to physically stop the filmmakers from making this movie.) It is certainly the most politically persecuted film. After an initial viewing, one might ask why a film like this is transgressive. The answer is—it isn't. At least not to people today, but it *was* at the time it was created. Society changed around this film, even if the imprint on the negative remained the same. This is the very essence of transgression; societal limits are crossed, and then they are reinforced or redefined—sometimes both.

What distinguishes this book from others in the field is that, in its very structure, it makes an argument not just for the films and filmmakers worthy of critical consideration, but for how we as scholars come to watch and write about these kinds of films in the first place. Take for instance the case of Doris Wishman. An important argument about a previously unexamined proto-feminist filmmaker was made with the publication of Tania Modleski's essay "Women's Cinema as Counterphobic Cinema: Doris Wishman as the Last Auteur" in the book *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, edited by Jeffrey Sconce. And yet, Wishman's work had existed as a cult favorite among trash cinephiles for some time before the book was released. The same is true for the piece on Arch Hall Jr. written for this volume. Hall is a cult figure for a certain audience, but until the publication of an initial article like Modleski's, or ours, there is very little critical material available about him or other such filmmakers.

What does exist is largely part of an underground of professional and semi-professional magazine and zine articles, or simply the information available from the catalogs of places like Something Weird Video. These kinds of publications include *Film Threat*, founded by Chris Gore (who contributed our foreword), *Scream*, *Rue Morgue*, *Videohound*, *Fangoria*, and a hundred thousand fanzines. We believe that, for the most part, scholars who write about exploitation or experimental cinema first come to the subject as fans. For fans, it is both a pleasure and an act of politics to bring the cinematic "trash" to the academy. However, part of the difficulty with that process comes in acknowledging that there is an inevitable interdependence between academic film studies and the publications in which we first hear about an obscure Z-movie (a film with a lower budget and lower production values than a B-movie), before we subject that film text to all of the theoretical tools at our disposal. There are books like the *Eyeball Compendium*, edited by Stephen Thrower, that do, at times, show the thin line between the art film and exploitation and try to combine the two, but our book takes it even further by trying to combine the academic with the journalist.

Our attempt to bridge this previously unacknowledged gap has been manifested in whom we've included as contributors. We have included established academics and zine writers, professional journalists and graduate students. As a result, reading their contributions in sequence produces some interesting clashes in style. They may differ in their use of

primary or secondary sources. When the writer is primarily a professional journalist or critic, there may be a list of resources, but sometimes there is none. As often as not, this is because our contributor is the first person to write anything worth citing about the particular subject. Significantly, however, when a future scholar decides to pursue the subject of one of the essays in this volume, there will be a source of information for an endnote or bibliography. As academic scholars, we are fully aware that this approach may seem unorthodox, but we also believe that it more accurately represents the real processes of critical reception that occur within the paracinematic fold. Fan-based criticism and academic analysis in this field are interdependent.

This is our project's argument at the general level. At the micro-levels of the organization of individual sections and the content of specific chapters, this book includes chapters that make a variety of specific arguments that cover a broad scope. What unites each of the sections and the individual pieces is that they all deal with films that are in some way "transgressive." Our definition and our contributors' definition of transgressive can be quite fluid. In general, however, we have used this concept to mean films that in some way push or break social boundaries and taboos, whether in the realm of bad taste, political representation, or certain kinds of formal techniques. For example, we have included Rene Searfos's piece about Lon Chaney's empathetic portrayals of society's marginalized in a time of great national xenophobia, which exemplifies our earlier point regarding transgression and social justice. Some of our contributors do utilize the big names of transgression-in-theory, including Mikhail Bakhtin, Georges Bataille, and Michel Foucault, in order to explain the transgressiveness of their subjects, often in a very specific historical context. Some of them stay more within the quotidian, explaining how and why a particular movie is "messed up."

As we stated, one of our goals was to produce a volume that covered a lot of historical ground. We cover pre-World War II films in our first section, which includes Mel Gordon's piece on Weimar-era erotic cinema and Gary Don Rhodes's look at trickery in Tod Browning's *The Thirteenth Chair* (1929). Rob Weiner tries to find the "art" in exploitation's Dwain Esper, and silent film expert William B. Parrill tackles the perversity of Erich von Stroheim.

We follow this up with a section on sexploitation, which includes Stephen Barber's cross-referencing of the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of*

*Sodom* with Pasolini's last film, *Salò* (1975). Cynthia Miller explores the partnership of Sonney and Friedman, two of exploitation's kings, while Jack Sargeant looks at Shaun Costello's notorious *Waterpower* (1976). Rebekah McKendry begins the section with an overview of the films of Doris Wishman.

Our third section, on exhibition, was particularly important to us because it is very easy in the era of video and DVD to neglect the phenomenological experience of going to the movies. In this section, Dennis Nyback, Johannes Schönherr, and Jack Stevenson give personal histories of grindhouse theaters, while Mark Jancovich and Tim Snelson provide a scholarly look at New York's Rialto during the 1940s.

Our fourth section, on transgressive stars, is a significant part of this project's organization. It provides a kind of contra-auteurism and helps to match up the book with cult fandom's relationship to particular actors. And, of course, it was more than a little influenced by Richard Dyer. It includes Michelle Clifford's look at porn star Jamie Gillis, and it provides a study of contemporary cult stardom with Anna Siomopoulos's analysis of *Borat* (2006) and Sasha Baron Cohen. Together, the editors contribute the first in-depth examination of Arch Hall Jr. and his finest film performance—in *The Sadist* (1963). We argue that this provides significant insight into postwar American culture. Also in this section, Rene Searfos looks at silent film star Lon Chaney.

Our final section, on reality and documentary films, looks at transgression in films that push the boundaries of what constitutes the "real." Following Eric Schaefer's arguments in the book *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* regarding the significance of "expository prefaces" (e.g., "What you're about to see is based on real events") in exploitation cinema and the historical importance of the Mondo genre, we have included a rather broadly defined section on the role of the real in transgressive cinema. Here, David Kerekes discusses "made to order" snuff fetish videos, and Mark Goodall looks at the Mondo genre through the lens of one of the more extreme examples, *Des Morts* (1981). Nick Muntean tackles the critically underrepresented leftist "reality" cinema of Peter Watkins (a longtime favorite of the "art crowd"). Emily Edwards focuses on Deadhead documentaries and filmed transgressions of the Grateful Dead and its fans. Lastly, we have David Ray Carter's summary of the "reality principle," moving through the various iterations of this device all the way up

to the notorious *Guinea Pig* series. He reminds us, however, that “it’s only a movie” and that we are not to be deceived by first appearances.

As a collection and as individual pieces, these chapters are vital additions to the study of cinematic transgressions. Many of these chapters provide a much-needed addition to the critical literature on particular films and filmmakers. Furthermore, these chapters offer a variety of alternatives to the work of established paracinema scholars like Jeffrey Sconce. Professor Sconce is well represented in film studies publications, and we believe that audiences who have followed his and related scholars’ work will be interested in other potential methodologies. After all, we all come to these kinds of films as fans, and nothing makes a true fan happier than a lively debate.



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*Part I*

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***EARLY TRANSGRESSIONS***



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