

MARTIN FRADLEY

***Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins
of Taste, Style, and Politics*
ed. Jeffrey Sconce**

***Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound
and the Origins of the Horror Genre*
by Robert Spadoni**

Like Ken Feil's *Dying for a Laugh: Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination* (Wesleyan University Press, 2005), Joan Hawkins's *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), and the anthologies *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste* (Manchester University Press, 2003) and *The Cult Film Reader* (Open University Press, 2008), *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics* blends scholarship and fandom to explore alternative taste cultures and celebrate the political potential of "trashophilia."

Though these essays are rigorous and nuanced, they also exhibit the gleefully geeky tone of online fan forums, whose contributors tend to hold the mainstream in contempt and delight in rehabilitating marginal works. Sconce's influential concept of "paracinema"—those movies, in other words, that exist outside the canons of film criticism—informs the agenda of many of the essays gathered here. The contributions by Sconce himself, which bookend the volume, are good examples of the way conventional hierarchies of taste are questioned. *American Beauty* (1999) is scorned for its "midcult pomposity" (278), while *Josie and the Pussycats* (2001) and *Gigli* (2003) are defended. Regarding such scenes as Milla Jovovich toting an Uzi while wearing a bath towel amid post-apocalyptic debris, Sconce declares: "These are the great moments in

our current cinema—symptoms of a cultural imagination unfettered in exploring the depths of its own confusion and bankruptcy . . . profoundly bizarre, disturbing, inane, and epiphanal moments that characterize our current cinematic plight" (305). *Sleaze Artists* also revels in bringing together sleaze and theory. Where else could you possibly find as unlikely a grouping of cultural bedfellows as *femme castrice* Lorena Bobbitt, Susan Sontag, Jason Voorhees, Pierre Bourdieu, Mario Bava, and sexploitation icon Chesty Morgan?

The strongest essays reconsider long-forgotten movies. Harry M. Benshoff offers a lively, impressively researched analysis of the surprising complexity and sophistication of some mid-century depictions of homosexuality in the military. In pre-Stonewall films such as *The Strange One* (1957) and *Billy Budd* (1962), Benshoff finds a progressive political dynamic that subverts official homophobic paranoia of the time. Equally engaging is Eric Schaeffer's work on 1960s "nudie cuties" and their relationship to the emergent sexual revolution. His essay on the marketing of softcore movies, allegedly produced in "Feel-a-Vision" and "Skinemascope" and with titles like *The Big Snatch* (1968), is an evocative slice of cultural history. Elsewhere, Kay Dickinson is perceptive on the aural semiotics of the synthesizer score for *Cannibal Holocaust* (1979); Joan Hawkins convincingly maps the presence of a camp sensibility throughout Todd Haynes' acclaimed *oeuvre*; while Tania Modleski provides a cautiously reflexive but incisive commentary on the gender politics traceable in the work of grindhouse auteur Doris Wishman. Working within the limitations of a genre that Modleski considers "more misogynist and brutally violent in its treatment of women than even . . . standard hardcore films" (49), Wishman's output reveals a tentative proto-feminist politics that finds its mirror image in Modleski's own ambivalent critical response to notorious examples of "sick cinema" such as *The Defilers* (1965).

Refreshingly, two of the collection's most valuable contributions serve to gently critique the academic exercise of rehabilitation. Matt Hills's essay on the long-running *Friday the 13th* franchise (1980–) usefully notes the ways in which scholarly accounts of trash fandom have regularly overemphasized its implicitly democratic challenge to mainstream film culture. Although delivered with caution, this is an important (and arguably long-overdue) line of critique; enjoying paracinema is not necessarily an oppositional pursuit. Greg Taylor discusses "geek chic," noting



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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Please turn to page 84 for more information
about *Film Quarterly*

the way in which cult cinephilia is arguably no longer a subcultural practice because "oppositional connoisseurship" (260) has itself found a place in the mainstream, as *Grindhouse* (2007) demonstrates. As, of course, do all the academic books on the subject, including this one, in which sleazy material inevitably loses much of its salaciousness. In the spirit of old-fashioned geeky self-deprecation, it is perhaps worth remembering that there are also few things less likely to arouse prurient interest than would-be academic hipsters lurking furtively at the margins.

At the heart of Robert Spadoni's well-researched and persuasive *Uncanny Bodies* is an iconic cult film. Despite the huge critical and commercial success it achieved upon release in 1931, Tod Browning's adaptation of *Dracula* has since gained a reputation as pure kitsch, a film hampered by stagy direction and the overacting of its star, Bela Lugosi. Spadoni argues instead that to truly appreciate *Dracula* it is necessary to go back to the context of its original release without revisionist critical baggage. His rewarding and original contribution is to look beyond the socioeconomic backdrop of the Great Depression in which cultural historians of the horror genre typically situate the movie. Instead, *Uncanny Bodies* combines aesthetics, reception study, and production history, repeatedly emphasizing that the appearance of both *Dracula* and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) occurred during the industrially transitional period between *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and the close of the 1930–31 film release season; the period, that is, of the coming of sound.

Spadoni evocatively describes "the creaky, majestic slowness of *Dracula*" (1) and the "luminous gray worlds and yawning silences" and "tangible and delicious weirdness" of these movies. Yet the frighteningly modern world of synchronized sound paradoxically created a haunting aural chasm in the film. With only minimal ambient sound

and without the musical score to which patrons of silent cinema would have been accustomed, the "voluminously empty soundscape" (78) of *Dracula* underscored the artificiality of cinema. According to Spadoni, it is precisely this primitive, ghostly unreality which gave the film its immediate power, reliant less on narrative than on uncanny audiovisual ambience created by the liquid strangeness and "bizarre textures and halting rhythms" (63) of Lugosi's voice; the expressive close-ups of tortured faces; the soporific pace and torpid editing; the long periods of silence and disturbing flatness of the mise-en-scène. Like the undead vampire himself, *Dracula* is caught between two (cinematic) worlds, fully belonging to neither. As Spadoni puts it: "The tumult of the sound transition produced not only talking ghosts but also silent ones—in silent sequences in part-talking films and in the all-silent films that continued to be screened throughout the transition period" (115); for film audiences also caught in this transitory moment, films like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* "evoked the uncanny of early sound cinema at the same time that [they] evoked a silent cinema newly estranged by the same."

Uncanny Bodies posits that *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* represent the origin of the modern horror genre. Marketed initially not as a "horror" film but as a "mystery" or a "romance," *Dracula* nevertheless demonstrated that depictions of the monstrous and macabre could be seriously popular. In stressing the long-term historical affinity between low-budget production practices and the genre, Spadoni thus argues that "the technically challenged sound transition cinema was the birthplace of the horror film" (124). *Uncanny Bodies* impressively persuades one to think anew about films which have attracted a terrifyingly voluminous literature over the years. Like Alexander Nemerov's *Icons of Grief: Val Lewton's Home Front Pictures* (University of California Press, 2005), with which it shares an old dark publishing house, *Uncanny Bodies* carefully marries a precise and focused scholarship with intense but modestly expressed fandom. Self-defined *enfants terribles* of sleaze study should take note. © 2010 Martin Fradley

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BOOK DATA Jeffrey Sconce (ed.), *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. \$84.95 cloth; \$23.95 paper. 352 pages.

Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound and the Origins of the Horror Genre*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. \$60.00 cloth; \$26.95 paper.