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MIDNIGHT MOVIES

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They aren't designed to provoke goatee-scratching discussion. Film studies courses, most likely, won't be including them in a lecture wedged between "Citizen Kane" and "The Godfather." They won't be winning any Oscars.

Hell, they even won't be winning any Golden Globes.

More often than not, they're just flat-out bad movies.

But with the recent advent of the perhaps over-hyped "Snakes on a Plane," one thing's for certain: Cult movies have, at least temporarily, conquered the mainstream.

Of course, "Snakes" ate venom at the box office, churning up a paltry \$26.9 million by early this week (or about one dollar for every million YouTube parodies, if you want a rough estimate).

This would seemingly put a bit of a damper on its "cult classic" status, minted even before release. But while that might be true in the real world, cult movies exist in some sort of bizarre Hollywood, where gory is the new tasteful, cheesy is the new intelligent, and the box-office bomb is the new smash hit.

That just begs one little question:

What in the name of Bruce Campbell is a cult movie?

Some say all it takes to be a cult movie is a legion of faithful fans, but in that case, wouldn't "Star

Wars" qualify? Others will claim it's the cheese factor — that "so bad it's good" quality that makes for fun viewing and even better drinking games.

And while that sense of playful condescending can't hurt, c'mon, does anyone still care about 1997's critically panned "Anaconda"? Exactly.

Stacey Gamble, video buyer for VisArt Video in Carrboro, has her own definition for cult movies.

"I think it's something that doesn't really have a large box-office appeal when it was first released, but has found a large following with moviegoers. Things like 'Hedwig and the Angry Inch,' or 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' that people just gravitate toward, because it's unlike typical Hollywood standard fare that you're used to seeing," Gamble says.

So it need not necessarily be the campy horror schlock or inept sci-fi romps that are the staple of cult film lists. It should just be something you won't find Billy Bush hawking on "Access Hollywood."

Of course, Gamble says, being a box-office reject certainly adds to the appeal as well.

The quintessential cult classic, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," was a glorious bomb upon release, with critics not quite knowing what genre to pigeonhole it in. Audiences slowly began to gravitate around its charm until now, when it has made approximately \$140 million on its

initial \$1.2 million estimated budget, despite never playing in more than 200 theaters at a time.

Yes, audiences who see it once a month at the local midnight cinema have seen it more than a dozen times. Yes, they know every line by heart. Yes, usually they even can anticipate what their fellow audience members are going to say or do during the showing. That's not the point.

As with most true cult movies, the movie itself is almost immaterial. It's the collective atmosphere among fellow fans that makes the late bedtime worthwhile.

"I think the routine is part of the appeal for some people," says Amanda Phillips, a 21-year-old N.C. native who regularly plays Magenta in her local "Rocky Horror" screening.

"The people who have been doing this for years, the ones who know all the callback lines by heart, they like being a part of something that has endured for so long."

The \$2.4 million (initial gross of "The Evil Dead") question, however, lies in the inherent paradox of cult movies: At what point does a movie cease to be a cult favorite and become a widespread hit?

"Snakes on a Plane" might not have raked in the heavy dough, but it certainly garnered enough magazine covers to drape one of Samuel L. Jackson's walls. And there's hardly a film lover alive who hasn't at least heard of "Rocky Horror."

So if a film eventually finds mainstream prominence, must it be forced to drop its cult moniker?

"If it were a huge, phenomenal, worldwide, universal success, there would be no value in being a member of a cult," says Bruce Stone, co-owner of Chapel Hill's Varsity and Chelsea theatres.

"The more obscure it was, the better it becomes the object of a cult."

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