

Cult Movies

A History

By Rebecca Brodegard



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Cult movies have been around since around the 1950s. They exploded when videotapes came out and made movies from the theater readily accessible to people's homes. So, what are cult movies? "Cult movies are usually strange, quirky, offbeat, eccentric, oddball, or surreal, with outrageous and cartoony characters or plots, garish sets and they are often considered controversial. They elicit a fiery passion in devoted fans, and may cause cultists to enthusiastically champion these films, leading to audience participation and repetitive viewings and showings."¹ Cult movies usually don't do well in the theaters, but they explode in video sales. There is usually a group of people that group together and watch a movie together, dress up like the characters, and incorporate quotes from the movie into their daily vocabulary. Any kind of movie can be a cult movie—comedies, romances, horror, Sci-Fi, anything. Most of them are "B" movies, movies made with little budget and fall in the shadow of the A-listers.

Although there were some cult movies around the 1950s and 1960s, the biggest one, and the one that had the most impact, came in 1967—*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The plot was crazy and new, with rock 'n' roll musical numbers scattered throughout. People flocked to it. Even today theaters show late-night showings of the movie with cult fans filling the seats. It is a cult classic that made the genre come alive.

Since then, more and more movies have achieved the fame and cult following that *Rocky Horror Picture Show* achieved. Today, it could be contested that the description of cult movies has changed a bit. They can be successful in the theater, gaining more and more followers, and have a huge video/DVD release.

One of the greatest cult classic movies the today is *Star Wars*. When *Star Wars* first appeared in 1979, it was a modest success. With the two sequels, *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, *Star Wars* was launched into huge success. The following grew and grew. When George Lucas decided to do the "prequels," every *Star Wars* fan cheered. People lined up at theaters for months before the first showing, just to say they were the first to see the "new" *Star Wars*. People dressed in costumes, and even acted out scenes from the original three movies, to pass time in line. These are definitely signs of a cult classic.

The cult movie has been around a long time and has given us a rich history of movies to watch, follow, and parody. As long as fans create a loyal following to any movie, cult movies are here to stay.

¹ <http://www.rockyhorror.it/webring/cultring.html>

Some of the Major Cult Classics

- The Rocky Horror Picture Show
- Star Wars (and all sequels and prequels)
- The Texas Chainsaw Massacre
- The Pink Panther
- Harry Potter (movies and books)
- Pee-Wee's Big Adventure
- UHF
- The Princess Bride
- Monty Python and the Holy Grail
- Heathers
- Scarface
- The Matrix
- Willa Wonka and the Chocolate Factory
- American Pie (and sequels)
- Better Off Dead
- Rushmore
- Spider-man
- Superman
- Gone With The Wind
- Indian Jones (all three movies)
- The Lord of the Rings
- Any Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee movie

Entertainment Weekly came out with a list of the top 50 cult movies. This list can be seen at <http://listsofbests.com/list/48/>

Spotlight on Napoleon Dynamite



“Gosh!” With Napoleon’s quirky actions set in middle-of-nowhere Idaho, this movie started from a low budget independent film and morphed into a huge hit. It was written and directed by Jared Hess, a relative unknown. This film was at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. While it didn’t win any awards, it made a huge splash. Fox Searchlight picked it up and distributed it around the country. Teenagers and young adults ate it up. The comedy is very dry but those who grew up in the ‘80s and ‘90s will get every joke.

The storyline is of a high schooler that is out to help his friend Pedro become class president while dealing with two annoying uncles at home. There’s even a little romance involved. Napoleon is a quirky hero that saves the day.

This movie has gained quite the following from college students. It is common to see “Pedro for President” t-shirts and Napoleon Dynamite movie parties. Definitely not for everyone, this movie is quickly finding itself as the newest college cult classic.

Official site:

<http://www2.foxsearchlight.com/napoleondynamite/>

Keeping Up

- www.hollywoodteenmovies.com
- Keep your eyes on the theaters and magazines. What are the top DVD sales? What are people quoting? What has a loyal fan base? What are comedians making fun of?

Thought Questions

- 1) What are the characteristics of a cult movie?
- 2) How can teachers and librarians capitalize on the intense interest in a cult movie to move teens in other interesting or instructional experiences?
- 3) Have relatively unknown stars of cult movies gone on to achieve success as actors and actresses?