Reception:texts, readers, audiences, history

Janet Staiger, "The Revenge of the Film Education Movement: Cult Movies and Fan Interpretive Behaviors," pp. 43-69.

In an on-line discussion group of the David Lynch cult movie favorite, *Eraserhead*, Halloweennumonefan posted a note under the thread title, "Explanation!!! *spoiler*":

when i was watching this i thought of an explanation.

throughtout the movie it is extremely depressing , dark and nightmareish ,i think jack is depressed ,he is lonely.jack is actually an alien from a diffrent planet the planet that you see at the very beginning of the film, but jack is now living on earth,he finds out that his fiance mary is pregnant and has an alien baby ,mary is actually a human,but jack is an alien , he looks like an alien but you dont find this out until the end of the movie we think he looks like a human but he actually dosent. . . .[1]

Rather promptly, B-J-C, who appears on several threads of the *Eraserhead* discussion group, replies:

The first hole in your theory I can think of is: If an alien-human hybrid is so-looking, why does Henry look so human?

edit: I first read all through your post without realizing that you were referring to Henry as 'Jack' (lol)

Halloweennumonefan responds:

ok, henry is actually a alien ,henry wants to think he is human ,so we also think he is human , we relise that he is an alien when the girl next door is bring a man into

her apartment and looks at jack ,when it cuts he is an alien , when it cuts back he

looks like a human ,do you think the film-makers would add this in for

nothing,also in henrys dream he head falls off and he is actually an alien, the head

looks fake because it is auctually a disguise and he relises he is an alien

i8inigo suggests, "Ummm….I don't think it's a sci-fi film somehow (how old are you?))."

Halloweennumonefan counters,

neither do i think it's a sci-fi film ,but that is just the main idea ,david lynch

turned a sci-fi into a horror by creating the dreams and making it scary like a

horror film ,the plot is the only element of sci fi nothing else ,and he changed the

rest of it into lots of different genres,i would never regard it as just sci-fi but more

as a surreal horror film

In some sense, Halloweennumonefan has a strong interpretive point. Indeed, the opening

scene of *Eraserhead* does present Henry floating in space before something that could be taken

to be a planet.   Fig. 1: The opening of *Eraserhead*

Additionally, Halloweenumonefan appeals to the notion that filmmakers make editing choices for story-telling reasons and that some shots are literal point-of-view shots. On the contrary, B-J-C and i8inigo find this interpretation disturbing and try subtly to counter it by appealing to:

- logic (why does Henry look like a human if he is an alien?);

- academic film practice (you should refer to a character by the character's name not the actor's name—Henry is played by Jack Nance)—a sort of one-ups-manship;

- genre category (*Eraserhead* has never been labeled as sci-fi); and

- a bit of *ad hominem* attack (how old are you?).

Halloweenumonefan has good counters. He or she argues that (1) the title sequence is foreshadowing, (2) the plot slowly reveals this to other characters, to Henry himself, and to us, and (3) in the genre of science fiction, aliens often look like humans.

Fig. 2: The "alien" baby in *Eraserhead*

Moreover, Halloweenum-onefan appeals to auteurism. Lynch is a director well known for genre bending and for interest in surrealism. In every way, this fan debate is proceeding much like any parley among scholars.

In his analysis of scholarly interpretations in film studies, David Bordwell points out numerous rhetorical strategies that we use to justify interpretations, including what he considers to be the primary process:

1. *Assume the most pertinent meanings to be either implicit or symptomatic or both*.

2. *Make salient one or more semantic fields*. . . . (for example, thematic clusters, binary oppositions).

3. *Map the semantic fields onto the film at several levels by correlating textual units with semantic features*. . . . (building analogies, . . . hypothesizing unity and pattern, picking out relevant passages . . .).

4. *Articulate an argument that demonstrates the novelty and validity of the interpretation* (41; emphasis in the original).

Bordwell argues that this process for interpreting movies comes out of film criticism courses in universities in the 1960s and is the socialized norm for academics engaging in "Interpretation, Inc." (21-2).

Thus, one explanation for the fans' behavior on the *Eraserhead* discussion thread is that they have taken college film courses and are on their way to entering into our occupation. That explanation, while possible, does not account for the ubiquity of fans interpreting like academics. Instead, I think the answer lies in the larger and more long-lasting impact of the general film education movement that began in the United States in the 1920s. This pervasive project to create better consumers of movies, which would hopefully also improve their tastes and consequently the quality of the films, has also produced rather skilled fan interpreters of modern, if not "better," cinema.

This essay will have two parts: first, I will briefly review the history of the film education movement, focusing on parts of it not previously considered. I will then look at what we know about contemporary fan interpretative behaviors to see the continuity between the pre-World War II era and the present-day.

The Film Education Movement

Several film scholars have studied the various early organized attempts to influence film consumption through what we would now call media literacy projects. As I noted in *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema*, the U.S. middle class was split in the early twentieth century on how to respond to films. Liberals, influenced by early twentieth-century Progressive theory, argued that films could provide positive role modeling and argued for a "whole-movie" approach to regulation: films should show individuals making mistakes but learning from their bad behavior or being punished. Conservatives saw those represented mistakes as potentially providing poor role models for youth, leading them into criminal behavior and unrestrained consumption: this I call a "pointellist" theory of effect against the liberal's "whole-movie" theory (78-9).   In the period of 1907-1915, these two approaches warred, but eventually the liberal method won out, assisted by vows from the motion picture companies that they would appropriately self-regulate the subject matter and plots of their films. The history of American cinema has been one of occasional conservative protest but liberal victory.

The liberal method, tied as it was to Progressive theory, did not count on the movie plot lines and resolutions to do all of the work. As Richard deCordova, Lea Jacobs, Anne Morey, Eric Smoodin, and Charles Acland ("Mapping" and "Classrooms") have recounted, organizations, sometimes supported by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors

Association (the MPPDA), initiated various programs to train youth and immigrants to be discriminating purchasers of screen entertainment. In 1920 the National Board of Review—a sort of U.S.-wide rating system and critical authority for "good" cinema—founded a movie periodical, *Exceptional Photoplays*. This magazine encouraged viewing worthy films and particularly recommended "early European art cinema" such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Germany, 1919[Jacobs 31]). Additionally, in 1925, the MPPDA organized assistance for Saturday morning children's matinees, which had been going on sporadically from the 1910s. The MPPDA provided a full, certified program, conveniently in one film can (deCordova 97-100).

In the late 1920s, conservatives wanted to provide social-scientific evidence that films might harm viewers and found funding for a series of research projects that have become known as the Payne Fund studies; meanwhile, Progressives believed that education would assist their position.[2] The aftermath of the publication of this research was at least two major film education curricula. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) supported, and "Edgar Dale's research at Ohio State University" inspired, the better known of the two. Dale's goal was "to place film in the tradition of belles-lettres"(Jacobs 36). As Jacobs describes the curricula's ideology, it was a "set of exercises designed to introduce standards for evaluating all of the films," and it "included an emphasis on realism intended to circumvent the process of over-identification or what [Herbert] Blumer [of the Payne Fund] called emotional possession"(Jacobs 38; also see Morey 151-52). As Morey explains, the curriculum also emphasized knowledge of how films were made and encouraged amateur filmmaking as a sort of consumer-protection system, on the assumption that such knowledge reduced movies' "power of illusion" and "inoculated" children against melodrama and over-exaggeration (Morey 163, 173). Both Morey

and Smoodin note that these curricula emphasized the roles of various workers and instituted a sort of early directorial auteurism—a point to which I will return.

By 1935, an NCTE-approved curriculum designed by William Lewin was in use by 3,500 high schools. Study guides had been sent to 17,000 teachers of English (Morey 159). In a study of a film appreciation class's response to a 1934 Frank Capra movie, Smoodin points out that the film guides not only tried to influence "'taste,' consumption practice, and even family relations," but they were also concerned about films that portrayed racism, attributed the causes of the economic depression to individuals rather than structures such as the Morgan-Rockefeller combine, and glamorized war (Smoodin, 21,23; see also Rand and Lewis 1-12). The curriculum had a decidedly Progressive flair, even a "popular front sensibility" (23). After World War II, hundreds of film societies blossomed, with nearly every college having one, and 16mm films became easily available though the Museum of Modern Art and Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 cooperative (Ackland, "Classrooms 3-4). The modern-day nurturing of cinephiles continued, and the NCTE maintained its interest in including film education within both high schools and colleges.

deCordova, Jacobs, Morey, and Smoodin explain how the film education movement tried to train youth toward a "distanced" viewing of movies, believing that emotional involvement would reduce rational evaluation of the events and potentially increase role modeling of bad behavior (of course, film educators always worry about bad behavior rather than considering the possibility of modeling of good behavior). The movement tried to teach students to develop refined tastes, and build good character by example, and to see and refute racist and pro-war sentiments. These scholars have pointed out the ideological investments of the film education movement. However, one area that has not been covered is how the curriculum taught these

youthful filmgoers to interpret movies and to engage in arguing for certain readings.   The

methods, not surprisingly, are very familiar to us.

I looked at manuals from the 1930s considered to be the most widely used and supported

by the major education groups to determine features pertinent to their training of the

interpretation process (See Barnes, Dale, Lewin, Mullen, and Rand and Lewis). What I shall

show is that the manuals imply that (1) the movie should have a theme to which the various

textual features contribute, (2) the viewer should look to the director as the primary cause for the

movie, and (3) even an average viewer ought to engage in organized critical discussion, and even

creation of, movies.

The manuals all emphasize to their readers that learning more about film techniques will

increase enjoyment of the movies (See Dale 5 and Mullen 8-9). Helen Rand and Richard Lewis

reason that, as people understand the films, they'll have a "larger enjoyment, for they help create

the pictures as they watch them."[3] Dale advises finding one's own system to evaluate movies,

which he cautions might differ from other people's methods but that is quite all right.

In these manuals, evaluating is not always just a democratic difference of opinion,

however. Derived from the Progressive education movement (see Morey), evaluation might

have some empirical grounding, and, as I shall discuss below, educators went so far as to score

numerically a movie on the basis of specific features. In that way a filmgoer could create his or

her own canon and also compare films with other viewers who used the same method. The

primary question for evaluation, which leads into how to interpret films, is this: "what is a good

story?" An ad hoc answer comes from Dale who explains, "*a good motion-picture story must

really do what it sets out to do*" (86). This is the standard 1930s intentionality proposition that

New American critics W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley will criticize in the next decade. However, Dale's standard does not provide much guidance about how to analyze the movie text.

Walter Barnes, professor of English at New York University, does provides a much more detailed guideline in 1936. It is worth looking at Barnes's eight principles for what they imply about how to take apart a movie (12-30; emphasis in original here and below).

"*First principle: The photoplay must have unity, coherence, and proportion*. This principle will seem entirely reasonable and familiar to any literary scholar although students of modern criticism will recognize that it derives from a classical notion that unity, coherence, and proportion yield beauty. Barnes does explain what might disrupt this from occurring: (1) many people make photoplays (in other words, multiple authors may have different visions), (2) the star system, and (3) "the supposed necessity of providing a rapid variety of emotional effects" (14). So, Barnes notes specific standard features of the Hollywood system that could inhibit a proper outcome and calls attention to those factors as worthy of notice when explaining what is on the screen.

Second Principle: *The techniques and mechanics of the photoplay should be mastered, then made subsidiary to the theme and purpose* (16). The theme or purpose of the story needs to dominant style and handicraft. Unless they are part of the theme or purpose, reflexivity or flaunting of technique would be inappropriate.

Third principle: *The sensation and emotional elements, though indispensable, must be restrained and controlled, and generally are utilized to suggest mea*nings (19). Again, theme should be dominant, and elements of spectacle need to remain subordinate.

Fourth Principle: *Musical accompaniment, if appropriate and restrained, may be used to intensify dramatic effects* (25).

Fifth Principle: *The photoplay should present a story interesting and skillfully constructed* (26).

Sixth Principle: *The scenery and the setting should be appropriate to, contribute to the narrative design* (27-8).

Seventh Principle: *The dialog should be interesting and effective, and should reveal the character and advance the plot* (29).

These fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh principles continue what is fundamentally Aristotelian dramatic analysis:[4] music, mise-en-scène, characters, rhetoric—all these support, here, not only the plot but also the theme, or, in Aristotelian terms, the "thought." Moreover, the assumption is that all of these features most likely *could* enhance the theme, or, in Bordwellian parlance for Interpretation, Inc., a relation exists between the meanings/semantic fields and the textual elements.

Eighth Principle: *When the photoplay presents themes, character, and problems ostensibly realistic, it must, with certain reservations, reveal the truth* (30).

This principle is perhaps a bit opaque on the surface. What Barnes is claiming is that if the film is addressing social issues, then it is obligated to touch on fundamental humanistic values.

Other manuals reproduce Barnes's principles, and what he lists seems very familiar to any scholar of literature or film as typical guidelines for textual analysis and evaluation. Sarah McLean Mullen's 1936 *How to Judge Motion Pictures* replicates the principles in a chattier manner when she advises students:

Let us settle down in the exciting dark and pay strict attention to the all-important first five minutes. If the play has been well directed, we shall learn a great deal at once. We shall find the motives and the natures of the characters; . . . we shall

know by the costumes and settings when and where the play takes place; and we

shall learn through the dialogue something about the beginnings of the story and

the trend of the plot (12).

Halloweenumonefan has followed her advice! Mullen also describes how to consider the theme,

genre, conflict for the central character, "opposing force," and person with whom we are to be

sympathetic.   Mullen gives us a rating chart, which Rand and Lewis also reproduce:

Fig. 3: Mullen's rating chart

SCHOLASTIC SCORE CARD
For Rating Photoplays
By

Name ..Syms C. Armstrong..... School and Club Bura H.S. Photoplay....

Name of Picture.... I Dream Too Much.. . ...Admission Paid .35 ¢.

Producer... ..R.K.O.............. ....

Director ... ..John Cromwell.................... .

	Multiply Score by Weight to get Weighted Score		
	Score	Weight	Weighted Score
[Item 1] ENTERTAINMENT VALUE +3 A first-class photoplay from beginning to end. An entirely satisfactory entertainment. No dull stretches. +2 As a whole, it was good entertainment, but there were one or two places where it lagged. +1 Fair enough, but not up to the standard I like. Second rate. 0 Poor entertainment. Not worth the price of admission.	+3	10	30
[Item 2] BASIC THEME (What the picture is about) +3 Significant and timely, consistently developed, challenging. +2 Significant, but being overworked in current photoplays, or not well developed. +1 Not made clear. 0 Of slight significance, or pointless. —1 Of no significance.	O	10	OO
[Item 3A] STORY +3 Interesting throughout, vital, true to life, of wide appeal. +2 Interesting for the most part, good adaptation of story +1 Lacks vital situations, ordinary in incident. 0 Trite, dull, lacks action. —1 Disgusting, boring, trashy	+1	5	5
[Item 3B] TITLE (Name of picture) +3 Appropriate and attention-getting, novel. +2 Appropriate. +1 Commonplace 0 Misleading. —1 No connection with the picture whatever, or sensational.	+3	5	15
[Item 4] DRAMATIC PLOT STRUCTURE +3 Flawless in development and continuity, inevitable ending. +2 Generally well developed, well-ordered sequence, good climax, sincere ending. +1 Apparent weaknesses, but manages to hang together; climax weak; ending unsuitable. 0 Many glaring inconsistencies; no conflict established. —1 Incoherent, lack of motivation.	+1	10	10
[Item 5]—SOCIAL VALUE +3 Makes definite contribution toward improving social outlook of audience. Makes audience more tolerant of other people (other races and religions). Shows horror of war. Exposes injustice, snobbery, greed, jingoism. Free from subtle propaganda for special interests. Avoids undue emphasis on sex or crime. Gives insight into real life. +2 Does not take fullest advantage of its opportunities to make above contribution to society. +1 Makes some slight contribution. 0 Neutral, harmless. —1 Destructive, insidious, conducive to brutality, bigotry or irreverence, scoffs at law. Undue emphasis on sex, drinking	+1	10	10
[Item 6] DIRECTION +3 Gives illusion of reality, well-balanced, clever touches, proper emphasis. +2 Convincing, varied, consistent, appropriate tempo. +1 All characters and materials made to function, but mechanical in effect; lacks individuality. 0 Irregular, spotty, incorrect emphasis; lacks unity. —1 Dull, loose ends not unified to fit; slow, stupid.	+2	10	20
[Item 7] CHARACTERIZATION (Acting and speech) +3 Sincere, convincing, at times rising to thrilling interpretation of characters, clarity and beauty of speech. +2 All acting adequate, some exceptional, consistent in speech and manner. +1 Poor acting by one or two, type casting evident, voices indifferent. 0 Whole cast below standard, stereotyped acting, voices displeasing. —1 Poor, ham acting, over-acting, incoherent speech.	+2	10	20
[Item 8] SETTINGS, COSTUMES, MAKE-UP, PROPERTIES +3 Note-worthy for beauty, authenticity, and contribution to interpretation. +2 Appropriate, consistent with characterization and plot. +1 Acceptable, little individuality. 0 Inappropriate, inaccurate, artificial. —1 Crude, hackneyed, flagrantly wrong, overdone, omission of key details.	+3	10	3c
[Item 9] LIGHTING AND PHOTOGRAPHY +3 Of high artistic merit, luminous, beautiful composition, suited to mood and action; gives effect of third dimension. +2 Exceptionally good, lighting motivated, varied to suit scene. +1 Good, but not unusual, lacks variety, lacks contrast. 0 Ordinary, lack of definition and depth. —1 Meaningless use of light, freakish angles, dull.	+2	10	20
[Item 10] SOUND AND MUSICAL EFFECTS +3 Natural, true to situation; music, if any, outstanding in artistry, well reproduced (recorded and projected). +2 Satisfying; good effects, definitely contributory to interpretation, some novelty. +1 Adequate, appropriate. 0 Blurred, poor recording of sounds, distracting. —1 Unnatural, ugly, false tones, not carefully synchronized, interferes with story.	+3	10	30

Total weighted score ———→ | 190

[Divide Total Weighted Score] Percentage
[by 3 to get Percentage Score.] Score | 63⅓

Again, I want to stress that the writers' emphasis is on how textual materials contribute to the interpretation of what the film is about and how that leads to the film viewer's final evaluation of the movie.

Having established that the various parts of a movie should be considered as contributing (or not) to its unity of theme, the manuals point out who is responsible for this happening. Covering the various workers in the film industry including the central role of the producer in the 1930s—as Mullen says, the producer is a "key man" and "every producing company has a style of its own"(9-10), the manuals invariably focus on the director.   Mullen uses an analogy that re-appears in 1970s film scholarship on auteurism (See Wollen 105-15). She writes, "a director of a motion picture is like the director of an orchestra: he determines the effect he wishes to produce. . . . The director must build up the fractions into a complete photoplay, a living and harmonious whole. Every part must grow naturally out of the part which went before it and must blend beautifully into the next part"(40-1).   A skilled film viewer will be able to observe this and communicate it to others.

As Dale describes this, he envisions two young high-school males leaving a motion picture and one youth saying: "'. . . but wasn't the direction unusual?'" To which the other replies, "'What do you mean?'" The first lad answers, "'Well, didn't you enjoy the clever way by which the director had a character back into the camera, in this way fading out the action and beginning a new type of scene in a different place on the boat?'"(3) The knowledgeable film viewer then gives two other innovative ways by which the director introduced characters and did shot transitions. Dale remarks, "Many people who attend motion pictures really do not see everything that happens on the screen. They miss some of the most enjoyable parts of the

picture. All they do is follow the story or plot; they pay almost no attention to the settings, to the musical accompaniment, to the clever handling of the camera, and to the skillful transition shots" (4).

Dale even says that a knowledgeable film viewer can tell the differences between directors, describing their innovations as "touches" which other directors will soon be adapting, and provides photos of some of the most important men currently working in filmmaking:

Fig. 4: Dale's important directors

Courtesy of Motion-Picture Herald
A GROUP OF OUTSTANDING
1. Frank Borzage; 2. Herbert Brenon; 3. Frank Capra; 4. Charles Chaplin; 5. René Clair; 6. Cecil B. De Mille.

Courtesy of Motion-Picture Herald
MOTION-PICTURE DIRECTORS
1. Sergei Eisenstein; 2. D. W. Griffith; 3. Ernst Lubitsch; 4. Lewis Milestone; 5. King Vidor; 6. Josef von Sternberg.

Lewin notes that one of the important outcomes of a good film appreciation course is that 90% of the people taking the course will appreciate the significance of the director afterwards(17-20).

Beyond expecting the parts to cohere into a whole and realizing that the director insures this occurs, perhaps with personal methods of doing this, is encouragement of organized critical

discussion and even amateur film production. A significant portion of Mullen's book is a guide

to starting a "4-Star Club, the junior member body of the National Board of Review of Motion

Pictures"(51). The club's purposes are to engage in criticism of films and other such activities.

Mullen explains what these might be:

> Girls are usually interested in seeing photoplays in theaters, learning how
> to shop for the best picture programs, discussing pictures which they have seen
> and judging them by the standards which are set forth in this manual, keeping
> scrap-books and diaries of their movie experiences, learning how to write
> scenarios, reading books and magazines about films, and voting for their favorite
> photoplays.

> Boys are more likely to be interested in the technical side of the movies.
> They want to learn how to operate cameras and projection machines, to solve
> problems of lighting and angles, to visit projection booths in neighborhood
> theaters to see the big professional machines. They like to arrange and run the
> school shows, and to direct the practical business affairs of the club.

> However, both boys and girls enjoy many phases of the club in common...
> Eventually, they will all come to enjoy the various parts of the club work—
> learning how to make films of their own, learning how to serve as amateur
> directors, leading discussions and debates at club meetings, and casting votes for
> the best film on a given list (53).

While 4-Star Clubs were not widely present in 1930s America, this explicit encouragement by

educators of what we would now take to be fan activities is valuable in understanding that fan

behavior that seems so apparent in the present-day is actually a very long-standing feature of the U.S. entertainment and leisure complex and one literature educators promoted.[5]

One NCTE manual from 1965 indicates the impact of New American Criticism on the film appreciation movement after World War II. A manual prepared in 1965 from a grant from the NCTE repeats all of the above endorsements of audience interpretative behavior. Additionally, it introduces looking for symbolism, even in how the film is edited. As it points out, "As in literature, a film simile or metaphor may rise to the height of symbolism, pointing to wider meanings on another level." Thus, the opening setting of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* points to "human alienation and loneliness"; the rickety car in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* "symbolizes the precariousness of the family's economic condition, of the whole trip to California, and of the country's economy during the depression"(Sheridan and others 5-7). Note the enlargement here from the car's features to the family to the trip to the country's economy. Furthermore, directors not only harmonize the parts but a great film director will explore "great ambiguities"; Cleanth Brooks would be pleased.

Contemporary Fan Interpretive Behaviors

The explication of how holloweennumonefan interprets *Eraserhead* is partially a question of the critical methods he/she and his/her peers use; it is also a matter of what is going on among these people in terms of their social behavior that affects their methods of engaging movies in order to have such exchanges among themselves. One of the lessons post-World War II audience research turned up was that the primary viewers of movies in the U.S. were increasingly young adolescents and adults, *in groups*. A 1953 mass communication researcher argues that movies should not be thought of as a "mass" phenomenon but a "social" one: "'being a member of a local audience is a social activity in which interaction with others before,

during and after any single occasion of spectatorship has created definite shared expectations and predisposing definitions" (Garrison148, quoting Freidson 317). Scholars have emphasized recently that reading groups teach not only aesthetic but also emotional responses to texts, and this surely is occurring for movies as well.

Moreover, a surprising number of these youthful moviegoers were repeat viewers. Lee Garrison provides a summary in 1972 to the Hollywood industry of the situation after a rather disastrous decade of box office returns. A 1967 study for the Motion Picture Producers Association "found that only 18 percent of the 138,000,000 Americans over sixteen years of age were habitual moviegoers. . . . [But] this group accounted for approximately 76 percent of the total admissions." Moreover, "most people attend motion pictures in the company of others"(Garrison, "The Needs" 147-48). And repeat viewing was common. Information as of 2005 is that about 20 percent of filmgoers in a theater audience are repeaters (Klinger 135).

This lesson—when it is remembered—has become part of the solution of profit maximization for the film industry. Scholars generally agree about its multiple effects:

- Movies are mostly geared toward those who attend: youth up to about age 29.

- Enhancement of the going-out-to-the-movies, the <u>social,</u> effect is important in terms of the theatrical experience, with stadium seating, state-of-the-art sound, etc.

- Since repeat viewing is common, it is being encouraged in advertising.

Recently, Vinzenz Hediger has argued that movie trailers have shifted their construction from displaying all possible genres as teasers to attend the film to mini-narratives. He believes that marketers have concluded that giving away the movie's plot is not a problem. Rather viewers are given the skeleton version of the narrative that they will begin to consume multiple times.

Also, technology is constructed not only to allow viewers to capture favorite titles but also to permit replay at the consumer's will. The VCR emerged in 1975, and although some use has been for timeshifting, its major home-entertainment function is to view movies (Wasser 3). While the Hollywood studios were a bit slow to catch on, now estimates are that 58 percent of studio revenues come from selling movies on video and DVD, with no impact on the original theatrical market.[6] In fact, although the notion was that straight-to-video would make back costs for most films, that belief has not proven to be the case; movies need theatrical release for adequate home video sales.   Moreover, consumers will buy multiple versions of the same film if the new versions or the extras (directors' commentaries, concealed elements called "Easter Eggs," etc.) warrant it (Klinger 70). VCR players are ubiquitous in U.S. households. In 2002, 90 percent of U.S homes had a VCR, and in 2003, DVD players were already in 57 percent of the households (Klinger 58).

In a survey in 2000 to her college introductory course, Barbara Klinger asked her students about repeat viewing. Of the 354 students, about 50/50 male and female, 98 percent self-reported viewing films repeatedly, with favorites watched as few as 5 times and up to 100. Of the favorites, Klinger summarizes the class's response:

Fig. 5: Klinger's "Teen" Canon
Films Students (in 2000) Indicate They Re-Watch Repeatedly[7]

	TOTAL (354)	FEMALE (184)	MALE (170)
ACTION/SPECIAL EFFECTS			
The Matrix	32	7	25
Titanic	30	24	6
Top Gun	24	15	9
CHICK FLICKS			
Pretty Woman	40	38	2

The Breakfast Club	37	32	5
Sixteen Candles	30	27	3
Dirty Dancing	21	21	0

SPIELBERG/LUCAS

Star Wars first trilogy	52	11	41
Indiana Jones trilogy	22	4	18

COMEDY

Austin Powers: Internat'l Man	30	21	9
American Pie	24	4	20
Friday	24	12	12
Billy Madison	22	12	10
Dumb and Dumber	21	8	13
Ferris Bueller's Day Off	21	10	11

DRAMA

Braveheart	26	4	22
The Shawshank Redemption	23	9	14

NEW AMERICAN CINEMA

The Godfather	20	15	5

INDEPENDENTS

Pulp Fiction	44	17	27
Dazed and Confused	24	12	12
Mall Rats	20	11	9

Her data seems very credible in light of my sense of my cult movie students' self-reports about repeat viewing.

As Klinger's data and many other studies of fans indicate, people watch films over and over. So, what are they doing? In my teaching and research about cult movies, I have found the most fan common behaviors to be:

- Intensive textual investigation for the purposes of interpreting the film, often seeking small details or trivia to use in making interpretations

- Re-watching to memorize dialogue which will be used in conversations with peers

- Re-watching to master the plot for

  o creating alternative dialogue (joking with peers) or

  o making fan-produced fiction, videos, and songs

- Scopophilia—the sheer pleasure of watching

- "Emotion-on-demand"[8]

- Ritual collectivity

I am not going to draw out here psychoanalytical and sociological explanations for these behaviors, but it is easy to hypothesize where both sorts of theories can account for various aspects of what I have listed. When teaching this list of common fan behaviors over the past fifteen years, I have found that my students gravitate toward hybrid explanations. In Klinger's 2000 survey, she asked the students to explain why they watched, and the results echo my list.[9]

Audiences often indicate that some films just cannot be seen adequately in a single viewing. A fan writes about *The Matrix*, "God is in the details. . . . The sci-fi thriller is a veritable 'Where's Waldo?' of religious symbolism" (Klinger 159). Klinger notes, "Whether the media industries or fans first introduced the importance of trivia to mass cultural pleasures is unimportant; trivia has become a significant part of the feedback loop between industry and fan"(72). Indeed, we do not know the answer to that chicken-or-egg question, but, as I am pointing out, this phenomenon of seeking textual trivia did not begin recently: educators primed youth to watch for it for aesthetic pleasure since at least the 1930s.[10]

It is the case, however, that one direction of causality between fans and the industry can be claimed. Scholars are attributing the increased number of complex narratives and psycho-logical puzzle films post-*Pulp Fiction* (1994) to factors that include the easy ability to re-watch

movies on the VCR or DVD player and the social normalcy of repeat viewing. Films such as

Donnie Darko and *Memento* have been built to give contemporary youth something to decipher,

discuss, and debate (see, for example, Berg). This occurs for both film and television. Derek

Kompare argues that the DVD revolution has solved the problem of accessing series television

programs. While the nine seasons of *The X-Files* on VHS would take up 100 cassettes (and ten

feet of bookshelves), DVDs can fit a whole season into a single package, with extras to boot

(Kompare 200). Media crossover is also producing and taking advantage of this audience

interpretive quest. The U.S.-hit television program, *Lost*, not only has an extremely active

discussion community, supported by fans and by the ABC network, but, in its promises at the

end of the 2006 season to resolve some of the mysteries propelling the narrative, creators hid plot

clues about a fictitious institution, the "Hanso Foundation," in commercials that aired during the

last episode and in a same-day half-page ad in *The New York Times.*

    If media educators of the 1930s were to observe today how these fans, these cinephiles,[11]

interpret movies, they would, I am sure be quite pleased. Studies of fan interpretative behaviors

note variations for different sorts of texts (we really have subcultures operating), but in general,

these audiences engage in the following:

- Make aesthetic associations of the film/TV program with

  - The larger film/TV world (for instance, genre considerations or plotting

    requirements),

  - Contemporaneous political or social situations, and

  - The biographies of the filmmakers' lives.

- Debate justifications for interpretations by referencing

  - Other texts in which the film/TV program exists in a series,

- o Interviews with the filmmakers, and

- o General social and cultural knowledge.

- Articulate specific standards of aesthetic judgment, often "coherence," "complexity" and "authenticity."

- Construct within their social group hierarchies of authors and films (Staiger, *Media*; Mittell; Hunt 196-97; Jenkins.

Moreover, the 1930s film educators would perhaps see the Internet as a wonderful facilitator of 4-Star Film Clubs. On-line these audiences can access detailed episode guides for extended serialized television or multiple-episode films; libraries of digitized sounds from the texts; collections of favorite quotations to use as signature lines on e-mails or in conversations with other group members; auteur information and even interviews or scheduled instant-messaging with program creators; and group-member authored stories, artwork, and music.

I would be remiss not to return briefly to the point that just as academics debate interpretations so do these audiences. As several people have pointed out, trivia can become a weapon of status, and "flame wars" occur (Jenkins, Hunt, and Campbell). My opening example is a good instance in which Halloweennumonefan proposed an interpretation that certainly distressed B-J-C and i8inigo. B-J-C has an answer to Halloweennumonefan about the point-of-view shot by the woman across the hall, and Halloweennumonefan replies, "well how do you explain all the other thing in the movie?? that could be a good explanation but you need to explain the rest." Halloweennumonefan does pull back somewhat: "besides im not saying that my explanation is 100% true all im saying [is] it could be a possible explantion,and what i think is the right explanation." B-J-C replies, "Well, each to their own. I can't force my opinion on

you, nor would I want to, but there are many explanations for the things in this film that do not

involve aliens."

Although scholars have looked at these sorts of fan discussions, I do think we need to

analyze not only what sorts of textual operations are occurring but also the sociology of debating

textual interpretations. Of course, we could also go to another interpretative thread, the one

entitled, "*Eraserhead*/What the Heck are those worm-like things?"

Notes

[1] Halloweennumonefan, "*Eraserhead*/Explanation!!!!*spoiler*."Ttyped as in original. Subsequent discussion is at the same place and accessed the same day.

[2] For a short survey and introductory bibliography, see Janet Staiger, *Media* 24-7.

[3] Rand and Lewis, 1; Morey discusses the Deweyian educational theory underpinning these film education courses which promoted active viewership.

[4] Aristotle's list of the six parts of the tragedy are: 1. fable or plot—combination of incidents, or things done; 2. characters; 3. diction (how actors give their lines); 4. thought—proving a particular point . . . or general truth; 5. spectacle; and 6. melody.

[5] On the history and activities of fans, see Staiger, *Media* 95-114.

[6] Wasser, 4, has the figure as 40 percent in ca. 1999; Klinger, 58, has it at 58 percent in 2002.

[7] Klinger, 137-38; she did the survey in 2000; 184 females and 170 males responded; 8 percent of the group were people of color.

[8] Martha Tauke coined the phrase in one of my classes, Spring 2006.

[9] Janet Staiger, list used in Cult Movies class for about ten years and presented in a lecture, "'You Gotta See This' (Again and Again): Cult Fandom and Media Theory," Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 7 October 1999. Klinger was present at the lecture and did her survey in 2000 although she does not reference my lecture in her text.

[10] Thus, I agree with Klinger who argues against Henry Jenkins's view that fans seeking trivia are transgressive (although I would say that Jenkins views it as an alternative, not counter-cultural behavior).

[11] Cinephilia is going strong. Two recent books on the phenomenon are Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener and Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin.

Fig. 1: The opening of *Eraserhead*

Frame grab from *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977)

Fig. 2. The "alien" baby in *Eraserhead*

Image from *Eraserhead*

Fig. 3. Mullen's rating chart

Mullen, p. 48

Fig. 4. Dale's important directors

Dale, pp. 182-83

Fig. 5. Klinger's Survey

Revised from Klinger, pp. 146-47.

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