

‘It’s just one abomination after another’

A Preservation History of Joe Dante’s *The Movie Orgy*

by

David Ruane Neary

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Moving Image Archiving and Preservation Program

Department of Cinema Studies

New York University

May 2015



Figure 1: Title card to *The Movie Orgy*, believed to be the only original image in the entire production

Acknowledgements

This thesis concludes a remarkable two years for me, and I could not have gotten to this point without the help of everyone connected with MIAP. Of my classmates, I must especially thank Michael Grant, Ethan Gates, Karl McCool, Carmel Curtis, Benjamin Peeples, and Lorena Ramírez-López.

Of my instructors in MIAP, Howard Besser, Dan Streible, Kara Van Malssen, Kim Tarr, Peter Oleksik, and Bill Brand, have all provided invaluable support. My adviser Anna McCarthy has been a remarkable sounding board and cheerleader from day one, and I remain enormously grateful.

Others whose help has been hugely appreciated are Phoebe Kowaleswki at the archives of University of the Arts, Philadelphia, Cassie Blake at the Academy Film Archive, Jim Thompson, Jonathan Sloman, and Cathie Horlick-Wilson.

At MoMA, special thanks to Ashley Swinnerton and Sally Berger, and especially to Josh Siegel, both for introducing me to *The Movie Orgy* and subsequently making my introductions to Joe Dante.

At Renfield Productions, Mark Alan has been a tremendously patient and helpful contact. Special thanks also to Danny Mears, for working so hard on providing me with a screener copy of the *Orgy*.

On a personal note, a huge thank you to my family and friends, especially Trevor Williams and Lauren Greenhall, and to the endlessly supportive Missy Gouverne. As with everything in my life, without the backing and belief of my mother, Frances Ruane, I could not even imagine having ever come this far.

Finally, I will never be able to express the depth of my gratitude to Joe Dante for his generosity with his time and his memories, without which this thesis could not have been possible. In addition to the lengthy interviews he gave me on *The Movie Orgy*, he was always available via email with quick-as-a-flash replies to any queries I had. I have been a huge fan of his films since my childhood, and it has been a pleasure and a privilege to discover what a gentleman he is on top of being a remarkable film artist.

Introduction

What is *The Movie Orgy*?

“*The Movie Orgy*... [is] a work of pure reflection, not only on cinema and mass media in general, but on the act of editing itself.”

- Dušan Reboli, ‘Dante’s Agents’ (Reboli 2013)¹

“It’s just one abomination after another.”

- Unknown, sampled in *The Movie Orgy*

In 2011 The Museum of Modern Art in New York opened its ninth annual festival of film preservation, To Save and Project, with *The Movie Orgy* (Joe Dante, 1966-2009², often listed as 1968³). The film had undergone a new digitisation and preservation project two and a half years earlier, and was slowly travelling from special event to film festival around the world, being seen by multiple audiences for the first time since the late 1970s. Because of its remarkable length, four hours and 40 minutes, screenings tend to be attended by the passionate and overtly curious – David Bordwell has called it “a sort of amphetamine *Intolerance*”.⁴ Because *The Movie Orgy* contains almost no original material, with every clip within it (some lasting minutes, many just a few seconds) sampled from more than 200 film or TV (kinescope) works, screenings of it have been restricted to special, *free*, events, to avoid engaging copyright complaints.

¹ Dušan Reboli, ‘Dante’s Agents’, in *Joe Dante*, ed. Nil Baskar and Gabe Klinger,

² Howard Prouty, ‘The Movie Orgy’, in *Joe Dante*, p. 196

³ IMDb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0270523/?ref=fn_al_tt_1

⁴ David Bordwell, ‘Dante’s cheerful purgatorio’, in *Observations on Film Art* (blog), November 9, 2011, www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2011/11/09/dantes-cheerful-purgatorio/

At MoMA part of what amused me most about *The Movie Orgy* was that the major films that formed its backbone – campy B-movies that would today be dismissed by many as trash – seemed so divorced from the intellectual, experimental, or at least glossy films that tended to play on its screens. And yet, while clearly a non-professional production (Joe Dante and *The Movie Orgy*'s co-creator/producer Jon Davison were still in their teens when its first seeds sprouted), here was a collagist work that echoed the art cinema of Bruce Conner, and foreshadowed the colossal 24-hour found footage work, *The Clock* (Christian Marclay, 2010), which would not arrive at MoMA until 2012. Like many others, I emerged from that screening delighted but delirious, and suffered a physiological experience akin to a hangover the next day.⁵ Since then, my interest in *The Movie Orgy* has driven me to undertake long searches for information about its earliest presentations, as well as its recent revival. Since embarking on this thesis, Joe Dante has made himself available to answer questions that have arisen during my research.

While the backbone of *The Movie Orgy* is 1950s B-movies (mostly science fiction), there is a great deal more to it than that. John Sayles writes: “Joe’s editing skills... [layer] flying creatures, fellow-traveler aliens, vindictive, glandular females, public service admonitions from the straight and narrow, and Madison Avenue sales campaigns into a kind of found-object cultural epic.”⁶ This “hand-spliced cultural

⁵ David Neary, via Twitter: “Suffering a monstrous Movie Orgy hangover. Damn you Joe Dante! #movieorgy”, 12:21pm, October 15, 2011, twitter.com/DeusExCinema/status/125245036580446208

⁶ John Sayles, ‘A Soldier in the Field’, in *Joe Dante*, p. 9

potpourri”⁷ was first screened with reels of full features beamed from one projector, while a flurry of cultural oddities Dante and Davison had dug up and cut together was projected from the other interchangeably. Originally this allowed the audiences’ reactions to shape the format of the evening, switching away from the features when they got dull; eventually it would become a means of trimming the *Orgy* down from its initial seven-hour duration, removing what wasn’t getting laughs.

The Movie Orgy’s unique history extends far beyond its offbeat origins. The *Orgy’s* expansion from an event held just for the filmmakers’ friends, to an underground cult cinema event, to a corporate-sponsored touring promotion used to sell beer to college students, is so idiosyncratic it is hard to imagine any work of American cinema with quite as rich, complex, and layered a history. That both Davison and especially Dante went on to have successful filmmaking careers in Hollywood adds a greater air of mystery to the largely unseen *Movie Orgy*, and thankfully is one of the only reasons a preserved digital copy has come to exist, saving the content of the original 16mm print, “ravaged by countless splices and projections”.⁸

This thesis will trace the history of *The Movie Orgy*, from its inspirations in 1960s counterculture and early existence as a live-performance 16mm projected work, through its journey on the campus circuit, to its recent revival as a cultural relic granting visions into the past as well as into the heart and mind of Joe Dante. The variety of versions *The Movie Orgy* has existed in through the years will be an

⁷ Melbourne International Film Festival 2010 programme notes, ‘*The Movie Orgy*’, miff.com.au/festival-archive/film/23592

⁸ Joshua Siegel, ‘*The Movie Orgy*’, MoMA, 2011, moma.org/visit/calendar/film_screenings/13622

issue that crops up again and again, a preservation problem that will be fully addressed, if not solved, by the conclusion. The first chapter will look specifically at what makes *The Movie Orgy* unique, focusing on the content within it and how it is used, borrowing from the archival theories of Jamie Byron, who writes: “By looking at the ways in which found audiovisual documents function within the films that appropriate them and at the various relationships established between the viewer of these films and the documents mobilized within them, we may come closer to an understanding of how these films generate particular conceptions of the past and, ultimately, of history itself.”⁹ Chapters 2 and 3 will tell the history of *The Movie Orgy*, on film and in digital form respectively. The final chapter will examine both the legal issues surrounding Dante’s appropriation of commercial footage and the larger archival concerns of works within *The Movie Orgy* that may in fact be unique to it; orphan films saved, or trapped, within a grander work, essential to *its* meaning.

In the conclusion I will lay out a series of recommended steps for how future preservation projects on *The Movie Orgy* might be undergone. It is hoped that these recommendations may also be of service to other filmmakers or archives hoping to preserve found footage films, in the cases where there are complex format histories and/or uncertain footage provenance.

⁹ Jamie Byron, *Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 7-8

As a note on terminology, I would briefly like to clarify the difference between “*The Movie Orgy*” and “a Movie Orgy”: the former being the work, as a whole, in whatever form or format; the latter being an event at which *The Movie Orgy* is screened. Thus there is only one *Movie Orgy*, despite its many guises, but there have been several Movie Orgies all over America (and more recently, abroad) in the past 50 years.

Chapter 1

What's makes an *Orgy*? – Why the collage of camp demands attention

“[Films are] like time capsules – temporal containers – that convey artistic achievements that are away in space and/or time from us.”

Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*¹⁰

“Without the need for narration, it doesn't only contextualize '50s movies, but explains the psychic and political life of the era.”

- John Sayles, 'A Soldier in the Field'¹¹

In an ideal world all art and text would be preserved faithfully and eternally. Ideally it wouldn't cost a penny to undertake this goal, and the results would fit comfortably in existing archival space. But wishful thinking is not going to solve any problems. As such, with limited resources at our disposal, every film (or other work, whatever the medium) chosen to be preserved for future generations has to be funded, and therefore defended. So while we have already looked at what *The Movie Orgy* is, this chapter will delve deeper and argue its importance as a work of popular culture and for study. In order to make a case for *The Movie Orgy*, it is necessary to look in some detail at what material is found in it, but also to address how Joe Dante and Jon Davison used that material. If *The Movie Orgy* is just “a series of stuff”,¹² as Dante puts it, we cannot hope to critique the work as a whole without examining that stuff from which it is made. Leo Enticknapp sums it up when he writes: “Critical

¹⁰ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, p. 9-10

¹¹ Sayles, 'A Soldier in the Field', p. 9

¹² Alex Fitch, 'A Lifetime of Cult Films by Joe Dante', radio interview on *Ready for My Close-Up*, Resonance 104.4FM, London, April 30, 2010

canonisation is a crucial factor in determining which films are selected for restoration (or preservation) activity.”¹³

At this point it is worth reiterating that the *Orgy* took many forms during its original nationwide campus tour. Not only would the projectionists have been cutting from reel to reel at different times each night, leaving some clips bypassed in the process, but also sequences would be cut and others added between screenings. Several hours of material have been discarded over the years. Because of this, discussion of content regarding the works found and sampled in *The Movie Orgy* must be limited to those found in the current digitally preserved copy. However, while many films and television works that once comprised the *Orgy* no longer feature in this most recent edition, there are no themes from previous Orgies that are not encapsulated in it. As such the digitised copy of *The Movie Orgy* serves as a 280-minute ‘greatest hits’, hitting all the key themes of 1950s camp, anti-commercialism, leftwing politics and anti-Vietnam commentary, and genuine admiration of classic comedy.

How to B camp

“The essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration,”¹⁴ wrote Susan Sontag in her seminal work ‘Notes on “Camp”’. Sontag specifically addresses cinema as the art form in which camp is most easily recognised and appreciated, justifying her point by suggesting that audiences still go the cinema “in

¹³ Leo Enticknapp, *Film Restoration: The Culture and Science of Audiovisual Heritage*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, p. 78

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, in *Partisan Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Fall 1964, New York, p. 515

a high-spirited and unpretentious way”.¹⁵ Dante and Davison seized upon the baby-boomer hunger for camp, turning this regurgitation of the campest highlights of the previous generation into a marketable enterprise. “It’s kind of like an Ed Wood movie,” Dante said of *The Movie Orgy*. “The fact that [the clips are] being taken seriously by the people who made [them] is one of the things that makes it funny. That’s the essence of camp, really.”¹⁶

There are eight features which make up the backbone of *The Movie Orgy*, remnants of the reels Davison would project from his projector during the first Orgies, counterweights to Dante’s reels of random ephemera. These films are: *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (Nathan H. Juran, 1958), *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (Fred F. Sears, 1956), *Speed Crazy* (William J. Hole Jr., 1959), *The Giant Gila Monster* (Ray Kellogg, 1959), *The Giant Claw* (Sears, 1957), *Tarantula* (Jack Arnold, 1955), *College Confidential* (Albert Zugsmith, 1960), and *Beginning of the End* (Bert I. Gordon, 1957). Together they add up to more than an hour of the *Orgy*’s nearly five-hour running time, despite being only eight of more than 200 works. As such we can gather a great deal of understanding of what Dante and Davison were doing by just studying these eight films, what Byron calls “a reflexive interrogation of media images”.¹⁷ Six of them are B-movie sci-fi monster movies, all but one of those (*Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*) featuring an assault on an American town or city by a gargantuan version of a barely monstrous creature. The other two (*College*

¹⁵ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 518

¹⁶ Ben Sachs, ‘The orgiast: an interview with Joe Dante (part two)’, *Chicago Reader*, August 9, 2012, www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2012/08/09/the-orgiast-an-interview-with-joe-dante-part-two

¹⁷ Byron, *Archive Effect*, p. 8

Confidential and *Speed Crazy*) are both representatives of camp teen-targeting fads from the late '50s and early '60s – co-ed beach pictures, and teen delinquency movies. In all eight cases, society is challenged by a “monster” opposed to the status quo.

“Camp theory is a limited analytic strategy for studying B-movies because it generally does not take into account economic contexts of filmmaking,”¹⁸ writes Blair Davis, author of *The Battle for the Bs*, an economic study of the American B-movie. He posits that the rise of television and the end of vertical integration in the Hollywood studio system meant the financial risk of making movies became far greater during the 1950s,¹⁹ leading to the emergence of several B-movie studios who kept their budgets low and targeted a teenage audience, “who had largely been neglected up until then”.²⁰ These economics play a small role in the creation of *The Movie Orgy*, in that the brief temporal relevance of these films to their audience made reels of them readily disposal during the 1960s, and suggest how Dante and Davison were able to collect prints of so many of them.

While Davis’s writing implies a negative undertone to a camp reading of these films, there is nothing but respect for them in the way Dante and Davison have utilised them. Camp “find[s] the success in certain passionate failures”²¹ says Sontag, and the two filmmakers clearly demonstrate their passion for these works, the likes of which they had grown up watching in cinemas or on late-night TV programming, such as *Million Dollar*

¹⁸ Blair Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012, p. 14

¹⁹ Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, p. 23

²⁰ Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, p. 38

²¹ Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, p. 530

Movie. Peter Sobczynski writes: “While Dante is clearly willing to have fun with some of the sillier things on display, “The Movie Orgy” never stoops to mocking the material... In fact, he is downright democratic in the way that he demonstrates his fondness for all the meats of our cultural stew.”²² *The Movie Orgy* is a work of pastiche, not parody. Sometimes the camp value has added layers. Referring to 1957’s *Beginning of the End*, in which city dwellers are attacked by a swarm of truck-sized locusts, Dante recalls an early screening of *The Movie Orgy* at which “when Peter Graves says... “You can’t drop an atom bomb on Chicago!” it brought down the house, because the Chicago riots had just happened.”²³ Later in his career, Dante would have a military character recycle that line in *Mant!*, the film-within-the-film in his 1993 B-movie homage *Matinee*, set against the backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Speed Crazy is perhaps the most memorable work featured in *The Movie Orgy*, judging by audience reactions online. It stars Brett Halsey as no-good greaser Nick Barrow, a “rebel without a brain”.²⁴ The plot, as can be deduced from a dozen two-minute segments spread out over four hours, sees Barrow drift into a small town, where he murders a gas station attendant in a botched robbery, picks fights with local guys over their girls, and engages in some thoroughly reckless driving before plummeting off a cliff to his death during a police chase. Cashing in on the success of juvenile delinquency films like *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955), and aiming for its target audience

²² Peter Sobczynski, ‘Nobody Crowds Joe Dante: “The Movie Orgy” Comes to Chicago’, on eFilmCritic, August 10, 2012, www.efilmcritic.com/feature.php?feature=3413

²³ Dennis Cozzalio, ‘Joe Dante, Your Movie Orgy M.C.’, on *Sergio Leone and the Infield Fly Rule* (blog), April 14, 2008, sergioleoneifr.blogspot.com/2008/04/joe-dante-your-movie-orgy-mc.html

²⁴ Drew McWeeney, ‘Moriarty’s One Thing I Love Today! Joe Dante And The Movie Orgy!’, on Ain’t It Cool News, April 25, 2008, www.aintitcool.com/node/36526

with excessive precision (a rock 'n' roll soundtrack, fast cars, and a diner as its primary set), *Speed Crazy* is the epitome of camp. Halsey's all-too serious delivery of hackneyed dialogue perfectly lines up with Sontag's definition – "In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails."²⁵ Barrow's ridiculous, kitschy catchphrase, "Don't crowd me, Joe" is delivered in some variation more than a dozen times during the movie, and in repurposing the footage Dante is certain to leave in as many uses of the line as possible – 12 of them, with more than four hours of the *Orgy* in between the first and last use. Dante recalled that when he and Davison first found *Speed Crazy*, "we knew we'd struck gold".²⁶

Other highlights from this collection of camp: a heroic hot rod racer crashing his ride full of nitroglycerine into the giant gilla monster before complaining he had just finished paying for it; a horse called Midnight in an old Western charging riderless after a cowboy, tackling him off his horse and then trampling him to death via some very unconvincing editing; and a 1958 film from Coronet Instructional Media called *High School Prom*, advising youths on the best way to enjoy their big night. There are too many clips to mention (See Appendix B for a more complete list). What Dante and Davison did was seize upon the fascination with camp that emerged from Sontag's work and create a presentation format that underlined the campest moments of these works, interweaving them. The clips served as an insight into the world of the original *Movie Orgy* audience's parents, while also showing them clips from TV shows they had not seen since childhood and could now view in

²⁵ Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', p. 522

²⁶ J. Hoberman, 'Across the Movi-verse', *Film Comment*, vol. 48, no. 2, March-April 2012, p. 36

a very different light – what Byron calls the “temporal disparity” of archival footage.²⁷ Dante said: “The reaction that you would get was a combination of nostalgia and hilarity.”²⁸

It’s all politics

The Movie Orgy emerged at a fiercely political time in American history, and its creators were similarly electrified by the spirit of the times. “Politically [*The Movie Orgy*] was very anti-war and anti-establishment because those were the times and those were our politics – and still are,” Dante said. “So, there was a lot of anti-government stuff and anti-war stuff, which suited the tone of the time.”²⁹ The war in Vietnam was then dividing the nation, and only 10 days after *The Movie Orgy* first premiered at NYU, Richard Nixon would be sworn into office as President. Any reading of *The Movie Orgy* that fails to address it as a work of political satire would be failing to see the forest for the very campy trees.

Baskar and Klinger call Dante “a fierce satirist whose political awakening came in the countercultural years of the late ’60s... [who] understood early on cinema’s ability to powerfully and meaningfully effect change”,³⁰ and indeed some of Dante’s most pointed cuts in the *Orgy* derive their power from, and grant power to, political commentary. Early on, for example, we see *Bye Bye Birdie* star Ann-Margret

²⁷ Byron, *Archive Effect*, p. 18

²⁸ Tom Stockman, ‘WAMG Interview – Director Joe Dante On THE HOLE And THE MOVIE ORGY’, on We Are Movie Geeks, November 5, 2012, www.wearemoviegeeks.com/2012/11/wamg-interview-director-joe-dante-on-the-hole-and-the-movie-orgy/

²⁹ Interview with David Neary, via phone, November 24, 2014

³⁰ Nil Baskar and Gabe Klinger, *Joe Dante*, p. 4

in a PSA calling for the purchase of savings bonds to support the war in Vietnam. Dressed demurely in a cardigan buttoned up to her neck, and standing in front of a doorway that appears to be part of the set from a mediaeval drama or horror movie, she appeals to those who have fought “earlier tyrannies” before her time, while ‘America the Beautiful’ plays mournfully in the background. As the clip ends, it cuts suddenly to a U.S. Army recruitment film, advertising the Army as a place where young men just out of college can quickly find themselves in a position of responsibility. “He commands nine men and 250 tons of POWER,” the voiceover states, as a tank is shown performing exercises. The shy reserved tone of Ann-Margret calling for funds clashes uproariously with the jingoistic, militaristic ad calling for recruits, and yet both represent the same socio-political system at that time. In a later sequence, American soldiers are seen patrolling a forest; in perhaps the most audacious manipulation of material in the entire *Movie Orgy* Dante overlays a new soundtrack, ‘War Baby’ a pro-Vietnam song from 1967 by country music artist Dee Mullins. As the lyrics tell the tale of a child of WWII growing up to understand the importance of war, we see the soldiers suddenly attacked by... giant locusts! Yes, we’re back at *Beginning of the End*, watching actors hammily fend off grasshoppers, “ineptly enlarged by trick photography and added to the shots of the actors by overexposed mattes”.³¹ Combining this patriotic call-to-arms with footage of a massacre of American soldiers by an unbeatable (and downright silly) foe reveals Dante’s subversive wit while also capturing the mood of so many young men and women of his time. Elsewhere Dante presents a Warner Pathé newsreel which

³¹ Bill Warren, *Keep Watching the Skies!*, Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1982, p. 325

follows a story about events in pre-war Vietnam with a section on the latest Hollywood fashions; the media, Dante seems to argue, is just as culpable for the military quagmire that America had found itself in. Critic Ben Sachs writes that in the context of *The Movie Orgy*,

“the difference between a pro-military fantasy of soldiers gunning down giant bugs and the pro-military fantasy of Vietnam recruitment ads is only a difference in kind... On second thought, maybe *The Movie Orgy* isn’t “antiwar” so much as “pro-peace”, turning film exhibition into a party where strangers come together in good cheer and laugh at old images together.”³²

No public figure receives more flak in *The Movie Orgy* than Richard Nixon. At one stage a quick cut has the villain Fu Manchu (played by legendary screen villain Christopher Lee) introduce Nixon, while one of the *Orgy*’s closing clips is a kinescope of Nixon telling the press they “don’t have Nixon to kick around any more” after losing the 1962 California gubernatorial election. In a scathing sequence, Dante uses a scene from *College Confidential* to show exactly how he feels about Nixon. In the scene, a college sociology professor (played by Steve Allen) throws a party for some students as part of a study he is doing on the behaviour of contemporary youths. The professor ends up the most drunk at the party, and when he goes to show a film to the students, he is caught off guard as one of the teens has switched the picture with a stag film. The students are improbably horrified. In Dante’s version, however, the director has pulled a switch of his own, replacing the stag film with Richard Nixon’s infamous ‘Checker’s speech’, dating from 1952 but

³² Ben Sachs, ‘What I gained from *The Movie Orgy*’, *Chicago Reader*, August 13, 2012, www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2012/08/13/what-i-gained-from-the-movie-orgy

only 'liberated' during the *Orgy's* original run, in 1970.³³ Chopping up the speech to keep the highlights, Dante is sure to retain all of the reaction shots from *College Confidential*. Mutterings of "That's pretty crude" and "I never thought he would go that far" are heard as the teens get up and storm out of the party. Like *The Movie Orgy*, the Checkers speech film would also tour American colleges, screened for ironic thrills to left-leaning students. It's hard to imagine there was ever a *Movie Orgy* without it.

Politics isn't the only realm the *Orgy* is willing to clamp its satirical teeth into. The commercialisation of America is lampooned by using its most preposterous ads for overtly bourgeois products against it. Dante's curated clips from TV programmes are rarely seen without a parade of messages from their sponsors. Often he has edited them so that we see more of the products than we do of the shows in question. Thus a clip from *The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin* (1954-59) suggests the show may be more about Nabisco brand cereals than a courageous dog. But there is some far more cutting social commentary found hidden within *The Movie Orgy*. In one of Dante's brilliant experiments with using a title card, a brief clip, and then a 'The End' title, Dante makes use of the title card from an entry in the RKO-Pathé series *This Is America*. Between this and 'The End', he sandwiches a scene of startling racism from the film *Wives Under Suspicion* (James Whale, 1938), in which a waspish housewife begrudgingly admits that her black maid "certainly can cook... that's more than most of them can do". The instantaneous cut to 'The End' leaves the

³³ Randolph Lewis, *Emile de Antonio: Radical Filmmaker in Cold War America*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, p. 113

viewer reeling at this “blithely white-supremacist skit”,³⁴ (Hoberman 2012) evidently Dante’s satirical intent.

Everything is remix, culture included

Dante and Davison did not invent the found footage movie mash-up; indeed Bruce Conner’s *A Movie* predates the *Orgy* by a decade. Dante is both aware of and respectful of the fact that this is not new ground – indeed as the *Orgy* enters its chaotic final reel, Dante uses a sequence from the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933) in which Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx) calls for reinforcements in battle. Cue a montage of found footage in which allies rush to his aid, allies of a progressively more ridiculous makeup. There is no sense, clearly, that Dante is purporting to be a pioneer.

What is pivotal however is the scale of the work. More than 35 years before *Star-Spangled to Death* (Ken Jacobs, 2004) and 40 years before *The Clock* (Christian Marclay, 2010), Dante and Davison had already spliced together a behemothian piece. *The Movie Orgy* is not just colossal, it was also undertaken by amateurs; student filmmakers more interested in getting a laugh than making serious art.³⁵ Sometimes this shows in the editing, with the occasional gag spoiled by a “hasty splice, as the sound drops out between edits”,³⁶ but this hardly serves to undermine what an achievement of filmmaking the *Orgy* is. And it is *film*-making – a work made with films. Still visible are the tears and splices of dozens of screenings, emulsion

³⁴ Hoberman, ‘Across the Movi-verse’, p. 36

³⁵ Gabe Klinger and Joe Dante, ‘A Conversation’, in *Joe Dante*, p. 28

³⁶ Jeff Kuykendall, ‘The Movie Orgy (1968-197?)’, on *Midnight Only* (blog), November 6, 2011, www.midnightonly.com/2011/11/06/the-movie-orgy-1968/

damage, colour-fading, even holes punched into frames – assumedly to mark the films for junking, where they were rescued by Dante or Davison. There is kinescope footage and other muddled clips clearly derived several generations from the original negatives, while footage of British band The Animals performing their most famous song, ‘The House of the Rising Sun’ (1964), shot for anamorphic widescreen, is seen here without its correcting lens, the image squeezed. In the digital age, *The Movie Orgy* stands as a reminder of what film, specifically 16mm, looked like, and the various scratches and scrapes that were the staple of so many screenings for audiences of the time. “I think the funky condition actually contributes to the fun,” Dante has said.³⁷



Figure 2: Repaired tear damage in a scene from *Speed Crazy*, in *The Movie Orgy*

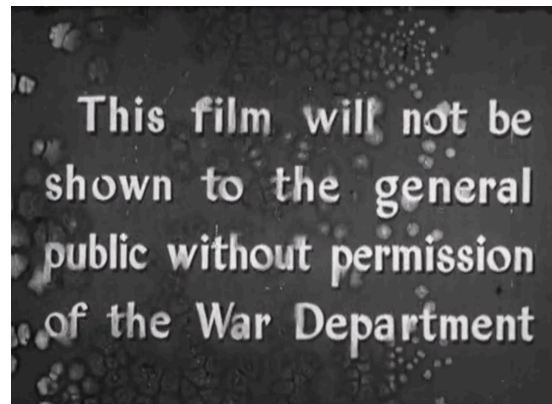


Figure 3: Emulsion damage in an informational film seen in *The Movie Orgy*

That the digital generation can now view *The Movie Orgy* as a window to the heyday of 16mm acetate film shows that the importance of the *Orgy* extends far beyond its original audience. Just as it entertained college students circa 1970 (who

³⁷ Dave Kehr, ‘Saved from Extinction: Classics and Curiosities’, in *The New York Times*, October 13, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/14/arts/design/to-save-and-project-momas-film-preservation-festival.html?_r=1

had grown up with television as a family member³⁸) with the cultural detritus of a previous generation, it can now entertain 21st Century viewers in much the same way. Except from this further-removed point in time the clips within *The Movie Orgy* seem all the more alien, bewildering, terrifying, and hilarious, creating further temporal disparity. As an added tier to this mixed-up cake of camp culture, the new audience of *The Movie Orgy* has the added viewpoint of studying the film as a sampling of the sensibilities of young Americans of the late '60s and early '70s; what made them laugh and what outraged them politically. David Bordwell calls *The Movie Orgy* "a baby-boomer time capsule"³⁹, and truly it paints a remarkable picture of where America was at in 1968, while also demonstrating, with both nostalgia and embarrassment, how far the country had come.

Dante's divine comedies

There is yet another reading of *The Movie Orgy* that is unique to audiences today, a reading of it as the first Joe Dante film. This "Rosetta Stone of Dante's career",⁴⁰ the "secret skeleton key to his filmography",⁴¹ reveals to us where so much of his humour, inspiration, and filmmaking techniques derived from, while also laying out Dante's principal genre interests – light-hearted science fiction, B-movie homage, and brazen political satire. Like *The Movie Orgy* itself, Dante has proven himself

³⁸ Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerilla Television Revisited*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 3

³⁹ Bordwell, 'Dante's cheerful purgatorio'

⁴⁰ Peter Debruge, 'Joe Dante Whips Out 1968 Movie Orgy', on Thompson on Hollywood, April 23, 2008

⁴¹ Tim Lucas, '192. The Movie Orgy (1968)', on *Pause. Rewind. Obsess.* (blog), 2012, vwpro.blogspot.com/2012/12/192-movie-orgy-1968.html

flexible thematically, and fluent in fluidly merging diverse ideas and images. “His work has knowingly straddled the cheap thrills and laughs of “B” cinema,” write Baskar and Klinger, “and, often within the space of the same film, affectionately rendered the bygone eras and milieus in which cinema offered a mirror to the scary world of global politics.”⁴²

“Oh you’ll find a lot of references to *The Movie Orgy* [in my films],”⁴³ Dante told me, particularly addressing *Matinee* as his ode to the *Orgy*, or at least to its content. But there’s far more in there than just this. Dante’s film debut, as a director rather than collagist and curator, was *Hollywood Boulevard* (1976), co-directed with Allan Arkush and produced by Davison for Roger Corman’s New World Pictures, where Dante had been working as an editor (mostly of trailers) while living off the continued popularity of the still-touring *Orgy*. Davison has said the film was made as a bet with Corman that they could turn in the studio’s cheapest film yet, on a budget of just \$60,000. Their plan was to use stock footage from previous New World features, which since their films traversed all genres, Davison explains, “dictated a story about making low-budget movies”.⁴⁴ Thus Dante’s first feature film involved his finding the most suitable film material to repurpose to best tell the story, a technique in which *The Movie Orgy* had given him a unique training. Indeed, Dante even draws footage from *The Movie Orgy* itself, repurposing a Carter’s Liver Pills

⁴² Baskar and Klinger, *Joe Dante*, p. 5

⁴³ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

⁴⁴ Jon Davison, ‘Jon Davison on *Hollywood Boulevard*’, on Trailers From Hell, 2013, trailersfromhell.com/hollywood-blvd/, (accessed April 19, 2015)

commercial in a scene where the protagonists of the film screen a film reel from the 1950s.⁴⁵

B-movie thrills and shocks are at the centre of several of Dante's films, such as *Explorers* (1985), *Piranha* (1978), *Looney Tunes: Back in Action* (2003), and his segment from *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (Dante, John Landis, George Miller, Steven Spielberg, 1983). His Showtime film *Runaway Daughters* (1994), inspired by the 1956 American International Pictures B-movie of the same title, features all the semi-prudish sexual chatter of *College Confidential* alongside discussion of '50s sci-fi movies and their heralding of an atomic apocalypse. In the most Joe Dante of throwbacks, the film's gruff biker boy Jimmy (Paul Rudd) uses "Don't crowd me" as his catchphrase, and repeats it all too regularly.

The frantic editing, anarchic sensibilities and pop culture deconstruction of *The Movie Orgy* is written all over Dante's two most famous films, *Gremlins* (1984) and its sequel, *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (1990). With their B-movie plots in which traditional portraits of American life (Small Town USA and corporate New York, respectively) are assailed by chaotic demons more interested in the fun of havoc than in the committing of evil acts, Dante brings to mind films such as *Speed Crazy* being intruded upon by the likes of Abbott and Costello before a sudden cut to the giant gilla monster, within *The Movie Orgy*. In perhaps *Gremlins 2*'s most surprising scene, the film pauses mid-scene, and appears to burn up in the projector – the audience is then given the impression that the gremlins have meta-textually taken over the projection booth. One gremlin, shown in projected silhouette and wrapped

⁴⁵ Bill Krohn, 'Dante's Slashers', in *Joe Dante*, p. 85

in shreds of 35mm film, lifts the reel of the film and cackles triumphantly, before putting on a black-and-white nudist film. Professional wrestler Hulk Hogan, sitting in the audience of the cinema within the film, threatens the gremlins until they return to *Gremlins 2*. Between this unexpected celebrity interruption, use of camp archival film, and the playful yet forceful reminder that the story being viewed is projected film, this sequence is surely the most *Movie Orgy*-inspired sequence in Dante's entire oeuvre.

Small Soldiers (1998) revisits most of the themes of *Gremlins* – toys come to life and run amok in an American town – but the film adds to this subversive anti-consumerist message with Dante's trademark anti-militarism. In *Small Soldiers*, it is the military toys who are evil sociopaths, the B-movie monster toys are the gentle heroes. For a mainstream filmmaker, albeit one teetering on the avant-garde,⁴⁶ Dante has never hidden his political leanings. His 1997 HBO film *The Second Civil War* addresses America's complex divisions over immigration. Set in the near future, it features a stand-off that emerges when the state of Idaho closes its borders to an influx of immigrant refugees, against the orders of the White House. In the finale, a semantic misunderstanding leads to all-out civil war erupting, with soldiers gunning one another down as needlessly as the lives wasted fighting the locusts in *The Movie Orgy's Beginning of the End*/War Baby sequence. But Dante really took the gloves off for 'Homecoming', an episode of the anthology series *Masters of Horror*, which he directed for Showtime in 2005. A satirical zombie movie, it featured the corpses of American soldiers killed in an ongoing but unnamed controversial war (assumedly

⁴⁶ Krohn, 'Dante's Slashers', p. 76

Iraq), rising from their graves so that they can vote out the current administration. A “horrific vision of patriotism turned upside down,”⁴⁷ Dante’s no-holds-barred slam of the Bush administration revealed anew the student parodist who recut the Checkers speech as pornographic horror.

The Movie Orgy echoes throughout Dante’s career, as his films “sustain the baby-boomer hope that you can squeeze cultural critique into a genre project”.⁴⁸ Even his miniseries for Netflix *Splatter* (2009), an interactive horror story in which subscribers could vote which character got killed off in the next episode, brings to mind how *The Movie Orgy*’s reels would be switched between and re-edited depending on audience reaction. The opening titles of *The Movie Orgy*, featuring a barrage of stills from famous films drawn from Dante’s own collection, is actually his own student film incorporated into his early opus.⁴⁹ Thus *The Movie Orgy* even represents Joe Dante’s filmmaking career from before there was a *Movie Orgy*.

In addition, it is worth mentioning the importance of *The Movie Orgy* for Jon Davison. Dave Kehr suggests the “wild juxtapositions” in the *Orgy* outline Davison’s career as a producer, noting slapstick classic *Airplane!* (Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, Jerry Zucker, 1980) as an obvious example.⁵⁰ In addition, watching *The Movie Orgy* with Davison in mind makes it clear what attracted him to a film such as *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), a sci-fi action movie loaded with anti-right wing, anti-capitalist satire – like *The Movie Orgy*, *RoboCop*’s narrative is repeatedly interrupted by audacious advertisements.

⁴⁷ Violeta Kovacsics, ‘Season 1: Joe Dante and Serial Repeition’, in *Joe Dante*, p. 153

⁴⁸ Bordwell, ‘Dante’s cheerful purgatorio’

⁴⁹ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

⁵⁰ Kehr, ‘Saved from Extinction: Classics and Curiosities’

The accidental archive

If the importance of *The Movie Orgy* to film studies, and indeed to American cultural history, remains obscured, consider the content within it further. For many viewers today it is their first exposure to these works, particularly long-forgotten television shows. As Bordwell notes, *The Movie Orgy* “is somewhat misnamed. It’s a Movies And TV Orgy. More specifically, it’s a Movies *On* TV orgy.”⁵¹ Shows as banal as *The Adventures of Wild Bill Hickok*, baffling as *You Bet Your Life*, or horrifying as *Andy’s Gang*, can receive revived cultural and archival interest through Dante’s stamp of approval in a way no YouTube clip can possibly promote. Together, these works create a remarkable film experience. In ‘Comments on Collage Film’, Standish Lawder writes:

“Stripped of its original context, [found footage] becomes veiled with layers of speculation, subjective evocation and poetic ambiguity. Questions of intentionality and meaning become slippery. The true significance of the a priori original image hovers just off-screen; we cannot be certain exactly why it was filmed. Yet what was filmed remains firmly fixed, only now surrounded by a thousand possible new whys.”⁵²

As I will discuss in Chapter 4, some of the works in *The Movie Orgy* may no longer be accessible, or even *exist*, outside of *The Movie Orgy*. Thus to preserve *The Movie Orgy* is to engage in the “meta preservation” of these amateurly preserved works, that by some accident of timing were fortunate enough to get caught up in this crazy colossal collage. Or, as critic Ann Linden hailed it, “a (mere) 4.5 hours of

⁵¹ Bordwell, ‘Dante’s cheerful purgatorio’

⁵² Standish Lawder, ‘Comments on Collage Film’, in *Found Footage Film*, ed. Cecilia Hausheer and Christoph Settele, Luzern: VIPER/Zyklop, 1992, p. 115

unmitigated, enthusiastic cognitive dissonance spun together in an inexplicably seamless narrative whorl”.⁵³

⁵³ Ann Linden, ‘The Movie Orgy Is Weird, Wonderful Fun’, on *Take One*, April 4, 2012, www.takeonecff.com/2012/the-movie-orgy-is-weird-wonderful-fun

Chapter 2

‘A 2001-splice odyssey’ – The first life of *The Movie Orgy*

“7 Incredible hours of Thrills, Violence, Nostalgia, & Eyestrain.”

- ad for *The Movie Orgy* in *The Village Voice*, March 5, 1970

“It is no longer possible to show all the important productions of film history in a complete form on the screen. In many cases a title and a memory are all that exist.”

- Herbert Volkmann, *Film Preservation*⁵⁴

Joe Dante met Jon Davison in 1965. The pair had plenty in common; both were born and grew up in New Jersey, raised on a diet of science fiction movies. Dante had, aged 16, blagged his way into the pages of *Castle of Frankenstein*,⁵⁵ a nationally distributed monster movie publication with a focus on B-movies. By age 19 he was a respectable film critic and named as a Contributing Editor on *Castle of Frankenstein*, all while studying photography and film at the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts). It was in the pages of *CoF* that Davison first heard of Dante, and chose to introduce himself by inviting Dante to a science fiction convention that was underway in Philadelphia.

They became fast friends, attending sci-fi gatherings or just going to the movies.⁵⁶ Davison was still in high school and Dante was eventually invited to the family home to meet his parents, and was shocked to learn that Davison had his own

⁵⁴ Herbert Volkmann, *Film Preservation*, London: British Film Institute, 1965, p. 3

⁵⁵ Davison would also briefly write for *Castle of Frankenstein*, contributing a review of *Frankenstein Conquers the World* (Ishirō Honda, 1965) in 1966

⁵⁶ Cozzalio, ‘Joe Dante, Your Movie Orgy M.C.’

collection of 16mm films.⁵⁷ Dante was convinced to begin investing in a collection of his own, and soon found himself hooked. Between them, the friends would amass a vast collection of complete films and assorted clips, some purchased, some harvested in a method “perilously close to dumpster diving”.⁵⁸

Dante recalls: “We knew a lot of people at various rental exchanges. When they would get a new print of a film, or a new reel 5, ‘cause their old reel 5 was beat-up, they would throw out their reel 5, and we would get that and add that to our library. So we had lots of bits and pieces of films that were out of service.”⁵⁹ By the time the idea hit them to create what would become *The Movie Orgy*, their combined film knowledge and collected cultural detritus would put them on a path that would lead all across America, ending in Hollywood.

The Camp Knight Returns

It all began with Batman. The first onscreen appearance of the comic book hero⁶⁰ was in the 1943 Columbia Pictures serial *Batman* (Lambert Hillyer). Low-budget and with only a passing faithfulness to its source material, the series of 15 episodic adventures would play one per week, preceding a major release, with each entry in the story ending on an inescapable cliffhanger, miraculously avoided in the next entry. Filmed at the height of World War II, the serial featured as its villain the evil Japanese spymaster Dr. Daka, whose scenes now come off as “bigoted and

⁵⁷ Klinger and Dante, ‘A Conversation’, p. 24

⁵⁸ Kehr, ‘Saved from Extinction: Classics and Curiosities’

⁵⁹ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

⁶⁰ First print appearance in *Detective Comics* #27, May 1939

hysterical”.⁶¹ It was largely forgotten after its initial run until the 1960s, when Columbia reissued it in an attempt to join the cavalcade of camp that followed Susan Sontag’s mass popularisation of the term. Released in a single four-and-a-half-hour format, and retitled *An Evening with Batman and Robin*, it began touring America, mostly college towns, where it drew a huge audience and great appreciation.⁶²

Joe Dante remembers the arrival of *An Evening with Batman and Robin* to Philadelphia in 1966:

“It happened to be at the World Theater in Philadelphia which usually showed art films; it was a big theatre though. And they showed all the 15 chapters of this thing one after the other. And seeing them end-to-end you saw all the cheats, all the things that kids didn’t notice a week later in 1943. But also the rampant racism of it. This WWII, anti-ethnic stuff. It was *shocking* for us. And it was kind of illuminating. Because attitudes that a lot of our parents held were now explicable, because this is where they got that stuff. ‘Cause the people were being fed a pretty diet of this during WWII. At least on that comic book level.”⁶³

Dante adds that it was not the film he was enamoured with, but “the experience... the camaraderie of the crowd”. The audience “came out into the lobby as if they’d just gotten off a sinking ship”. Feeling thoroughly inspired, and wishing to instill that kind of a response in an audience himself, Dante elected to host his own “Camp Movie Night”.

This beta phase *Movie Orgy* saw Dante renting a serial, *The Phantom Creeps* (Forde Beebe and Saul A. Goodkind, 1939), starring horror legend Bela Lugosi,

⁶¹ Mark S. Reinhart, *The Batman Filmography: Live-Action Features, 1943-1997*, Jefferson: McFarland, 2005, p. 14

⁶² Reinhart, *The Batman Filmography*, p. 24-25, 89

⁶³ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

because it was the only complete serial available in Philadelphia.⁶⁴ Feeling it needed an extra kick of camp, Dante extended its running time from five to seven hours by adding in miscellaneous amusing clips from his own collection: cartoons, industrial films, commercials, and pieces of other films. And he wouldn't just play these reels in between the reels of the serial; sometimes he would cross to a clip reel mid-scene. So near the end of *The Phantom Creeps* when the mad scientist drops a bomb, Dante had lined up a reel of copious explosions, bombs, and volcanoes erupting, to add an extra layer of silliness. "In this nascent form, *The Movie Orgy* was a smashing success."⁶⁵

Dante's first curated movie night was a success, and would inspire many more like it. That same year saw the release of Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (Warhol and Paul Morrissey, 1966), which played an unlikely bedfellow with *Batman* in siring *The Movie Orgy*. *Chelsea Girls* is an experimental work projected in split-screen, but with the orders and timing of the reels changed each time it is shown, so that, ostensibly, no two screenings are ever the same. The reels were "assembled in various ways for public exhibition. They were changed from showing to showing of a film, or incorporated into other films... *Chelsea Girls* is paradigmatic of this interplay between the regular production of reels and the changing order of their exhibition."⁶⁶ Dante found the idea of this interplay of imagery intriguing; "sometimes the two sides commented on each other and other times they just had nothing to do with each other," he said, noting that when the scenes did seem to

⁶⁴ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

⁶⁵ Howard Prouty, 'The Movie Orgy', in *Joe Dante*, p. 196

⁶⁶ Joe Gartenberg, 'Notes on the Restoration of The Chelsea Girls', Museum of Modern Art, 1988, p. 1

comment on one another, it was far more interesting than either of the images being projected individually.⁶⁷ The infinite capacity for well-placed imagery to create commentary through juxtaposition would become as central a theme to *The Movie Orgy* as the hunt for camp giggles. What R. Emmet Sweeney of Turner Classic Movies calls “the Kuleshov effect used for juvenile laughs”.⁶⁸

Trip the light orgiastic

There is no date on record for the very first *Movie Orgy*. Even the year the term was first used is suspect, 1966 or 1967,⁶⁹ or more commonly 1968.⁷⁰ But really the night Dante screened *The Phantom Creeps* is the genesis point, the ground zero of a 16mm A-bomb. The success of that screening led Dante to plan another, but he wanted to show a different movie. Since there were no other serials available, and since most films didn’t run the necessary 3+hrs, Dante and Davison began renting multiple complete features, B-movies of course, and only showing “the parts that were good”.⁷¹ When the film being screened got boring, they would switch to the other projector, loaded with a reel of their “stuff” (Davison would man the features’ projector, Dante the projector loaded with fragmented chaos). They would run that for a while until they could wind the main feature forward to a good point to start it back up again. When it came time to switch the feature reel, they would put on a reel

⁶⁷ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

⁶⁸ R. Emmet Sweeney, ‘To Save and Project: *The Movie Orgy* (1968) and *Afraid to Talk* (1932), on *Movie Morlocks* (blog), October 25, 2011, moviemorlocks.com/2011/10/25/to-save-and-project-the-movie-orgy-1968-and-afraid-to-talk-1932/

⁶⁹ Howard Prouty and Gabe Klinger, ‘A Dante, Esq. Chronology’, in *Joe Dante*, p. 182

⁷⁰ *The Movie Orgy*, IMDb, www.imdb.com/title/tt0270523/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

⁷¹ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

from a different film, and so forth, only picking up the main features perhaps hours later. “So we would ultimately be telling maybe five stories simultaneously,” said Dante. “But always with the proviso that we have to keep changing up the reels on the projector while we’re showing this thing.”⁷² Because of this *The Movie Orgy* became a pure example of Paolo Cherchi Usai’s argument that there is “no such thing as two identical viewings”.⁷³

And so *The Movie Orgy* became a performative work out of necessity, to maintain the condition of the films being rented, while still allowing for interruption by Dante’s clip reels – the films were intercut without cutting them up. Each Movie Orgy became a trial for the next one, testing what footage would earn the right reactions from the crowds, so the weaker sequences could be retired. “Every show was like a preview,”⁷⁴ Dante said, comparing *Movie Orgy* screenings to the Marx Brothers taking their materials on the road to hone it for their next feature. Dante said: “We would find a new piece of film and try it out at a screening and if it got laughs, we’d leave it in. If it didn’t, we’d take it out. Sometimes things got so old we just couldn’t stand watching them anymore.”⁷⁵

There was method to the madness, and madness to the method. Dante and Davison kept finding new, funny, strange material, filling walls with strands of film waiting to be spliced in when a suitable location opened up. “I had these big lists of what was in every reel,” Dante confessed, “maybe I could put [a clip] here, and then

⁷² Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

⁷³ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, London: British Film Institute, 2001, p. 47

⁷⁴ Interview with David Neary, via phone, April 22, 2015

⁷⁵ Stockman, ‘WAMG Interview – Director Joe Dante On THE HOLE And THE MOVIE ORGY’

it would comment on this. I got into pulling out just phrases from movies and keeping them in a trim bin, so if there was ever a joke that could be made by sticking a phrase into a scene I could do that.”⁷⁶ It was an obsession, evidently, but a brilliant one.

After a while, renting the features became prohibitively expensive, so Dante began charging entry to his shows. Dante decided he “like[d] money OK, if only to buy more films with”.⁷⁷ Eventually it became more cost-effective to just buy entire features and cut them up, using the highlights of these half dozen or so features (see Chapter 1) and intercutting them with the assorted clips. This new and improved *Movie Orgy* gave Dante far more room to play around with the editing, while also making the projection of it a far less complicated affair. Not only did cutting up these features bring to an end *The Movie Orgy’s* accidental performance art period, but, claims Dante, it was also “where we crossed the line from a legal screening to an illegal screening”.⁷⁸

In 1969 *The Movie Orgy* had its first field trip; its New York premiere was held at NYU, where Davison had come for film school, on January 10 at the Eisner-Lubin Auditorium. An article in the *Washington Square Journal* on December 16, 1968, no doubt liberally sampling a hastily scribbled press release by Dante and Davison, reads:

⁷⁶ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

⁷⁷ Prouty and Klinger, ‘A Dante, Esq. Chronology’, p. 182

⁷⁸ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

“The Loeb Program Board, in keeping with its tradition of presenting stimulating entertainment, has announced a seven-hour movie orgy to begin at 7pm on January 10th... Described by program officials as “An experience of mindrotting celluloid hysteria,” and rated “Grade Z” (not suitable for anyone), the evening will feature thousands of actors in the roles that earned them obscurity... Admission is 75c – more if one brings his own popcorn and allows the butter to drop on the floor.”⁷⁹

The article references clips that are still present in *The Movie Orgy* today, including Ann-Margret’s speech in support of the Vietnam War, and Conway Twitty’s performance of ‘That’s Why We Go to College’ in *College Confidential*. Thus the earliest contemporary writing I could locate on the original *Movie Orgy* is clearly referring to a version of the same creature that still survives today.

Movie Orgy begat Movie Orgy, and Dante and Davison found themselves in demand. Temporarily retitled *The Movie Orgy Strikes Back* (one of several aliases the show would be supplied with⁸⁰), Dante and Davison’s event would return to NYU on May 2 of ’69, and play at Columbia University the following November. A basic notice for that show in the *Columbia Spectator* advertised a five-hour experience for just 1 dollar. “The best from the worst movies,” it read. “Come early, come late, come.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ ‘Movie Orgy – Celluloid Hysteria’, *Washington Square Journal*, December 16, 1968, New York University, p. 12

⁸⁰ These include ‘Son of the Movie Orgy’, ‘The Movie Orgy 2’, ‘Escape to Movie Orgy’, ‘The Movie Orgy (Part II)’, and the unforgettable and only half-true ‘All Night Once in a Lifetime Atomic Movie Orgy’

⁸¹ *Columbia Spectator*, November 3, 1969, Columbia University

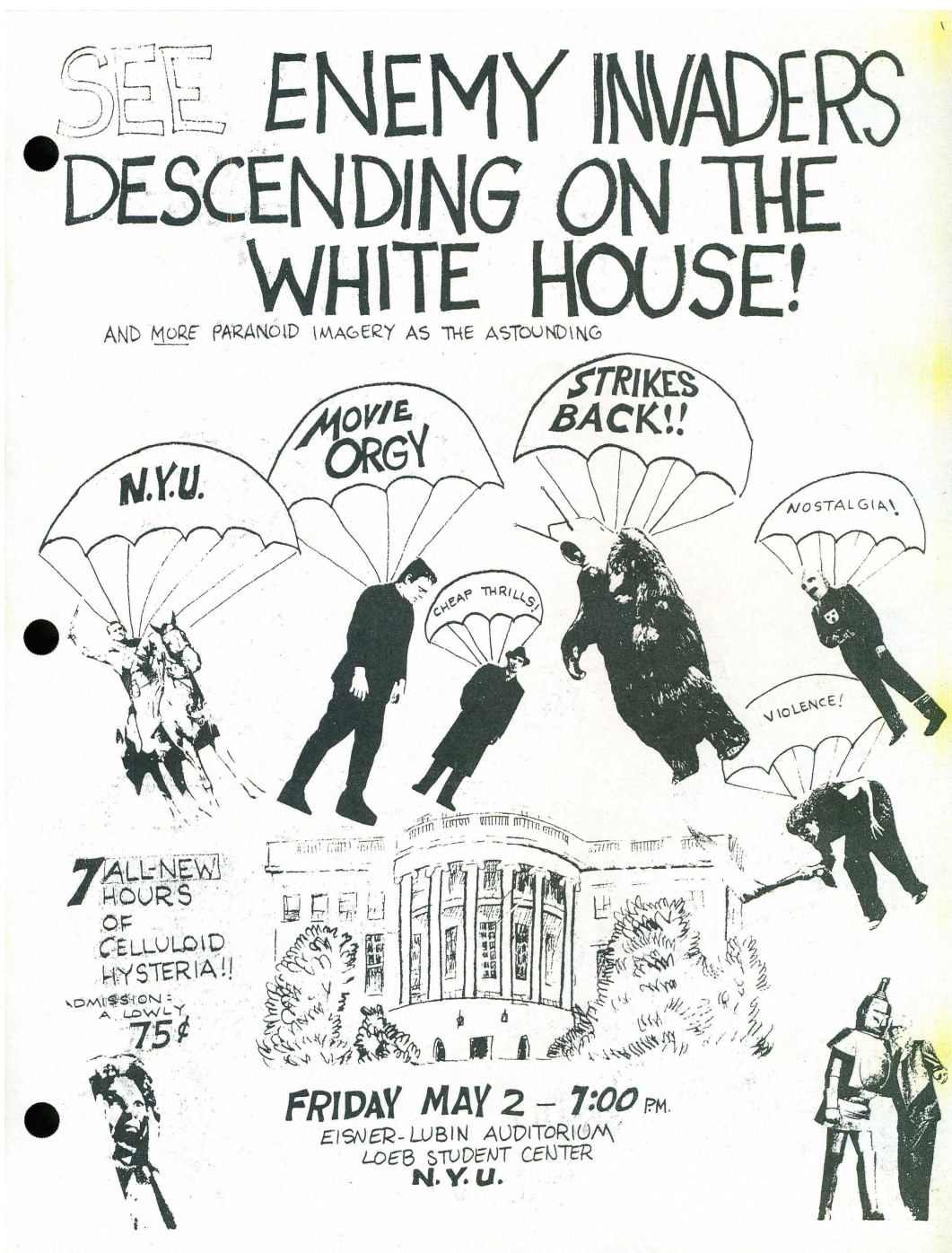


Figure 4: Flier for a presentation of *The Movie Orgy* at NYU, on May 2, 1969, from the files of Joe Dante

While attending NYU, Jon Davison was programming film at the Fillmore East in New York's East Village, a venue owned by famed music promoter Bill Graham.⁸² A Movie Orgy the dynamic duo of disarray performed there in March of 1970, perhaps the very same billed in *The Village Voice* ad quoted at the open of this chapter (see Figure 5, right), is the most important Movie Orgy of all in terms of both Dante and Davison's careers, and the continued fame of *The Movie Orgy*. A brief article in *The New Yorker's* 'The Talk of the Town' section on March 21, 1970, casually mislabeled 'Film Orgy',⁸³ would be the largest press the *Orgy* would get for

another three decades, and would attract some game-changing attention. The anonymous writer of the piece described in some detail his or her experience of attending a *Movie Orgy*.

"From nine [pm] right through the end (at 2am) we viewed the proceedings from the front of the balcony, where Jon Davison and Joe Dante, the organizers of the orgy, had set up two sixteen-millimetre movie projectors... Davison showed whole reels of bad movies from the forties and fifties. Dante interrupted him with short takes from *his* reels, which were a potpourri of incredible things: Second World War W.A.C. training films, forties serials, newsreels, commercials, and a complete set of Frankenstein trailers. Dante and Davison really know how to put on a film orgy."

⁸² Bill Graham and Robert Greenfield, 'Woodstock Nation', in *Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay: An Anthology*, ed. William McKeen, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000, p. 404

⁸³ 'Film Orgy', *The New Yorker*, March 21, 1970, New York, p. 37



Figure 5: Ad for *The Movie Orgy* in *Village Voice*, March 5, 1970

The article also features the only record of dialogue between Dante and Davison *during* the running of a Movie Orgy. “Hey!” *The New Yorker* quotes Dante as saying to Davison, “We cut from ‘Hercules’ to ‘Ulysses’ and nobody noticed.” Clearly right from the beginning Dante and Davison were aware of just how clever their project was, and how great an effect it could have on their audience. Humility was perhaps not their strong suit. “They told us they considered their material very funny,” *The New Yorker* article continued. ““At least,” Davison said, “it’s very funny to people who grew up in the fifties in front of a television set, and fortunately there are a lot of us.””

Deirdre Boyle writes: “The Baby Boomers grew up with television, developing a love-hate relationship with it and a sense of possessiveness about it that, some might argue, was Oedipal in its complexity.”⁸⁴ Thus *The Movie Orgy’s* nostalgic revisiting of this lost culture of their childhood added to its appeal, as did the sensation of tireless channel surfing that the *Orgy’s* presentation evokes.

The Schlitz hits the fan

The baby boomer peak was now college age in 1970, and remained disenfranchised and betrayed by the unsuccessful youth revolt of the previous decade, the conformity of their parents, and the ongoing conflict in Vietnam.⁸⁵ In his book *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, Thomas Frank discusses how American marketers were able to latch onto the

⁸⁴ Boyle, *Subject to Change*, p. 3

⁸⁵ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 14

counterculture of the late 1960s and directly advertise to it, despite being such a fundamental part of the system these youths were rebelling against. Schlitz beer would be one of the companies to target the youth market during this period, and their methods were surprising. “The beer that made Milwaukee famous” had become one of America’s best-selling by the 1950s and ’60s, due to its large presence in the market, reasonable price, and strong marketing.⁸⁶ A quick glance at the *Washington Square Journal* in 1968 shows a whole series of frat-humour ads targeting adolescent drinkers (the legal age was still 18 in the USA then), with saucy or sometimes racially offensive jokes – the entire campaign was told in that bawdiest of literary forms, the limerick. The copy in one example, in which college boys in a bar are pictured ignoring the made-up ladies at one table to fawn lasciviously over the bartender pouring beer, reads: “The Beauty embraced in a rose; Is oft rhapsodized in quaint prose; But the beauty in beer; Is only made clear; In Schlitz, as everyone knows.”⁸⁷ Schlitz was determined to win as much of the rebellious student market as possible, and this meant offering them an experience that no one else could.

As Joe Dante tells it, Schlitz approached him in 1970 with the proposal to tour *The Movie Orgy* around campuses across the United States, to be shown at venues with free or cheap entry fees and a particular brand of beer on sale inside. It seems likely the *New Yorker* article tipped them off, and a Schlitz representative

⁸⁶ Christopher B. O’Hara, *Great American Beer*, New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 2006, p.52

⁸⁷ ‘Schlitz’, *Washington Square Journal*, April 11, 1968, New York University, p. 9

attended a later show and made the offer. On top of a travel allowance,⁸⁸ Dante would be paid \$100 per show and a cut of the take at the door;⁸⁹ Schlitz took home the rest of the take, the beer money, and the kudos from the student body for running such a wild event. There is certainly an irony in Dante's agreeing to work with Schlitz, given how anti-corporate *The Movie Orgy* is. Indeed, there is still a kitsch Schlitz commercial embedded in the *Orgy* today. But it gave him a chance to properly "share our culture"⁹⁰ and make a living wage off it at the same time.

Schlitz's promotion can be easily judged with a cynical eye now, but the few records available show they knew how to market the *Orgy* as well as Dante and Davison knew how to run it. A full-colour poster from 1974 advertising *The Movie Orgy* displays the words "Free from: Schlitz" in bigger letters than the title! Catch-phrases dotted around the image call it "mind-boggling", "never-to-be-forgotten-or-believed", "a colossal collage of nostalgia", and "a fractured filmic frenzy". A woman emits a speech bubble reading: "I can't believe I saw the whole thing," while the whole event is jokingly said to be presented "in Gusto Scope", mimicking various over-the-top presentation formats from the heyday of B-movie cinema.⁹¹ A flier distributed by Schlitz to venues with the poster sums up their involvement, and fits snugly into Frank's thesis in *The Conquest of Cool*:

⁸⁸ Prouty and Klinger, 'A Dante, Esq. Chronology', p. 182

⁸⁹ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

⁹⁰ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, April 22, 2015

⁹¹ Poster found at auction on Etsy.com, www.etsy.com/listing/203913980/rare-vintage-1974-promotional-package?ref=market, accessed April 24, 2015

“In our fast-paced society of instant communications, yesterday’s fad is today’s nostalgia. Nothing personifies this notion better than the Schlitz Movie Orgy. Over a quarter of a million college students are witness to this fact, as are many JSBCo. (Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company) wholesalers, district managers, and college officials.”

This obvious marketing lingo (“fast-paced”, “personifies”) coupled with its impossible to verify claims (250,000 people have not, all research suggests, seen *The Movie Orgy*) shows just how hard Schlitz were pushing this as an event created just for the college students of 1970s America. The text is followed by quotes attributed to students and college officials, including:

- “...turned out more people than any other campus event.”
- “...students have been begging for it to come back since last year’s showing.”
- “...the best, most effective thing Schlitz does in the college market.”
- “...the audience cheered and hollered with the action of the movie.”
- “...the fact that Schlitz offered something more than straight advertising was very impressive to the students.”
-
- “...Movie Orgy gave Schlitz a real sales boost.”

Schlitz was clearly in this for the long run. But Dante was not, and to make matters far worse for the brewing company, an experiment with a new form of fermentation around this time resulted in a weak beer hitting the shelves that “eroded the brand’s image” and resulted in “crippling sales”.⁹² It would soon be time to retire *The Movie Orgy*.

⁹² O’Hara, *Great American Beer*, p. 53

The final reel

Jon Davison parted ways with *The Movie Orgy* first. Though younger than Dante he was the first to get a real break – a recommendation from Martin Scorsese, an instructor of his at NYU, to work with Roger Corman at New World Pictures in Los Angeles.⁹³ Dante could keep the *Orgy* running, and due to the purchase of prints to create a fully edited *Movie Orgy*, the need for a second projectionist to help run it was lessened. But it was still difficult to manage. It would constantly “fall apart in the projector”,⁹⁴ meaning a keen projectionist had to be ready and able to repair it. Also, with the vast variety of different film stocks contained within it, it took a skilled projectionist to “ride focus and sound levels”⁹⁵ so that it was a successful viewing experience. Dante would hire friends to run Orgies when he was unavailable, and demand was high enough that a dupe was even made.⁹⁶ By the end of its run, any of the footage in the original film reels damaged beyond repair was replaced with film harvested from the dupe. There were other setbacks – Dante’s LP of ‘War Baby’, which he would play over a silenced sequence from *Beginning of the End*, shattered on the ground outside Port Authority bus terminal in New York, and the record proved irreplaceable until the digital age.⁹⁷ Even cleaning the film was an enormous hassle – due to its length, of course, and their non-professional equipment, but also the hazardous splices and sprocket tears. There were even sequences with marker on them where a former owner of the clips had drawn in

⁹³ Cozzalio, ‘Joe Dante, Your Movie Orgy M.C.’

⁹⁴ Stockman, ‘WAMG Interview – Director Joe Dante On THE HOLE And THE MOVIE ORGY’

⁹⁵ Kehr, ‘Saved from Extinction: Classics and Curiosities’

⁹⁶ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

⁹⁷ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, April 22, 2015

gags of his own; those scenes had to be cleaned carefully so that the colours wouldn't run.⁹⁸

In the end, Dante sighed, "it just got away from us. It was really just too time-consuming."⁹⁹ *The Movie Orgy* paved Dante's way to Hollywood, and while he was earning a pittance there at his first job there, *The Movie Orgy* paid his way through it.¹⁰⁰ In 1974 Dante started out editing trailers for Roger Corman, a gig he does not believe he could ever have got without having done *The Movie Orgy* first¹⁰¹ – after all, story compression and montage were skills he now excelled in. With Davison's support (coercing Corman with a seemingly impossible wager), Dante would direct his first feature in 1975, *Hollywood Boulevard* (Dante and Allan Arkush, 1976). His second, 1978's Jawsploitation movie *Piranha*, would go on to be New World Pictures' most successful film.¹⁰² The rest, as they say, is filmography.

Back East, however, and indeed all across America, things were changing. Vietnam was over. Watergate had passed. In 1975, *Castle of Frankenstein* folded. It was the end of an era. Feeling audiences were not reacting to *The Movie Orgy* as they once had, Schlitz began to make demands about the picture's content. They would ask to make it shorter, or suggest new additions that younger college kids could get the nostalgic vibes from, such as *The Flintstones* or *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* But Dante resisted. "They didn't seem to understand that what was most funny was the

⁹⁸ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, April 22, 2015

⁹⁹ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

¹⁰⁰ Jeremy Smith, 'Joe Dante And Mr. Beaks Tumble Down THE HOLE (In 3-D)! Also Discussed: "Dante's Inferno" At The New Beverly!', on *Ain't It Cool News*, August 7, 2009, www.aintitcool.com/node/41944

¹⁰¹ Fitch, 'A Lifetime of Cult Films by Joe Dante'

¹⁰² Prouty and Klinger, , 'A Dante, Esq. Chronology', p. 184

more sincere, Ed Wood-level kind of material that took itself very seriously, and then became funny,” he told me. “And as soon as you got into self-aware material, it was kidding itself, it didn’t have the same impact.”¹⁰³ Ironic, self-aware, and intentionally camp material had no place in *The Movie Orgy*, and the shift into the late '70s showed that interest was waning. The last recorded article on the *Orgy*'s original run, from SUNY Potsdam's student newspaper *The Racquette* in April 1977, bears the uninspired headline ‘Movie Orgy – offered a little something for everyone’.¹⁰⁴ Dante summed it up best: “When the Richard Nixon footage wasn’t getting laughs any more, we knew it was time to pack it in.”¹⁰⁵ The film was packed into seven 2,000ft reels, where it would sit unceremoniously in Dante’s garage for two decades.¹⁰⁶

It’s very difficult to gauge the success of *The Movie Orgy* now. Certainly there were enough Orgies held to show that word of mouth was strong, and the fact it ran for nearly 10 years in some form or other backs the case. The list on Page 49 has assembled as many of *The Movie Orgy* screenings from the 1960s and '70s as I could confirm dates for, but even from anecdotal evidence and references to previous Orgies in newspaper articles I know I have missed several. There is even one report of it being shown at a drive-in.¹⁰⁷ Recollections of Movie Orgies are difficult to come by. There were very few accounts published back in the day, and all that can be

¹⁰³ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

¹⁰⁴ Sherman, Robin, ‘Movie Orgy – offered a little something for everyone’, in *The Racquette*, April 21, 1977, SUNY Potsdam, p. 13

¹⁰⁵ Prouty, ‘The Movie Orgy’, p. 197

¹⁰⁶ Joe Dante, interviewed by David Neary via email, February 25, 2015

¹⁰⁷ Yoram Allon, Del Cullen, and Hannah Patterson, *Contemporary North American Film Directors*, New York: Wallflower Press, 2002, p. 122

traced now (without dispersing a huge survey to college graduates aged 60-70) are reminiscing blog posts and forum comments online. Perhaps the amount of alcohol sold, or, as Dante admits, the fact so many Orgy-goers were stoned,¹⁰⁸ has contributed, with time, to a lack of recall. Not all memories are positive, with one anonymous poster on website *mental_floss* recalling having to clean up the morning after an Orgy, where vomit had ruined the floors and a urinal had been knocked off the wall. “To their credit,” the poster concludes, “Schlitz paid for all the repairs without argument.”¹⁰⁹

But supporters are not too difficult to find. Jeff Duntemann recalls a screening of *The Movie Orgy* at DePaul University in Chicago, in 1972 or '73.¹¹⁰ “Envision a seven-hour, nonstop sequence of early 1950s soap, cereal, toothpaste, and deodorant commercials, chunks of WW2-era newsreels, loose seconds from old Army training films, coming attractions of bad movies, intros to old TV series like ‘The Texas Rangers’ (brought to you by Kix Cereal) and an entire SF B-movie spliced into the thick of it all,”¹¹¹ he wrote. After attempting to describe its “boom-boom-boom” style of editing, Duntemann wrote: “I would love to see it again (or at least part of it; I’m not sure I could stand seven hours’ worth) but I suspect that rights issues will keep it out of circulation forever.”

¹⁰⁸ Joshua Klein, ‘Joe Dante’, on *The A.V. Club*, November 29, 2000, www.avclub.com/content/node/22808, accessed via the Wayback Machine, April 25, 2015

¹⁰⁹ Comment in response to the article ‘On This Date in 1974, Cleveland’s “Ten Cent Beer Night” Went Horribly Wrong’ by Jason Plautz, on *mental_floss*, June 4, 2014, stone.mentalfloss.com/article/30826/date-1974-clevelands-ten-cent-beer-night-went-horribly-wrong#comment-918801686

¹¹⁰ Records confirm a Movie Orgy was held at DePaul in April 1972

¹¹¹ Jeff Duntemann, ‘Movie Orgy’, on *Jeff Duntemann’s ContraPositive Diary* (blog), January 24, 2006, www.duntemann.com/january2006.htm

How wrong he was. A little over two years after he wrote these words, *The Movie Orgy* would receive its first public screening in America for 30 years.

Addendum: The Video Orgy?

In the last weeks of putting together this thesis, I came across a news article in a 1973 issue of the *Kentucky New Era*, a daily from Hopkinsville, KY, which seemed to discuss a video presentation of *The Movie Orgy*. I was incredulous that it could be a related programme, since no conversation or account of the *Orgy* had ever mentioned video; still I contacted Dante just to make certain. I was surprised when he confirmed that indeed it was “the same *Movie Orgy*”.¹¹²

Information is in short supply and Dante’s recollection of what was for him a brief transaction is slim, but it seems that in 1972 or 1973 Dante allowed a New York company called Video Tape Network (VTN) the rights to syndicate a telecine of *The Movie Orgy* to campuses, where it would be shown on their closed-circuit TV networks. He could not remember whether VTN paid him up front for the telecine or if he received a fee every time it was shown.¹¹³

According to the *New Era* article, taken from the Associated Press, VTN had “234 schools as ‘affiliates’”¹¹⁴, to whom it would distribute works such as the *Orgy*, as well as cartoons and other youth programming. John Lollos, then VTN vice-president, is said to have conjured the idea when he “looked around campuses [and]

¹¹² Joe Dante, interviewed by David Neary via email, March 29, 2015

¹¹³ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, April 22, 2015

¹¹⁴ Jay Sharbutt, ‘Video Tape Network Sells on Campus’, in *Kentucky New Era*, March 21, 1973, Hopkinsville, p. 25

saw nothing but dark sets”.¹¹⁵ VTN would lease packages of shows for periods of five to 30 weeks, with a \$250 affiliation fee and a commitment to spend at least \$750 on programmes.¹¹⁶ “When we go onto a campus,” said Lollos, “we try to get the monitors located in high-traffic locations such as TV lounges of student union buildings, dorm lounges and fraternity lounges.” A week-long run of ‘*Movie Orgy #1*’ in February 1973 at Longwood College, Virginia, was one of a number of “video-tape programs... presented in the residence halls by the Student Union Residence Hall Programming,”¹¹⁷ showing how wide a dispersal this ‘Video Orgy’ was getting. Accompanied by a photo of students huddling en masse in front of a television set, an article from Monroe Community College said a premiere screening of the “VTN show” *The Son of Movie Orgy* was a “total success”.¹¹⁸ Articles suggest the ‘Video Orgy’ was a five-hour cut of the film version,¹¹⁹ and the number of universities with which VTN was supposedly affiliated suggests that several more people may have seen *The Movie Orgy* in some form during the 1970s than was first evident. What video format it was distributed on, most likely 1-inch open-reel, remains an unknown.

¹¹⁵ Sharbutt, ‘Video Tape Network Sells on Campus’, p. 25

¹¹⁶ VTN advertisement, undated,

www.radicalsoftware.org/volume2nr4/pdf/VOLUME2NR4_art22.pdf

¹¹⁷ ‘Movie Schedule’, in *The Rotunda*, February 7, 1973, Longwood College, Farmville, p. 7

¹¹⁸ ‘Video Committee Offerings Premier’, *The Monroe Doctrine*, October 3, 1974, Vol. 13, No. 5, Monroe Community College, Brighton, p. 1

¹¹⁹ ‘Campus Calendar’, *Oakland University News*, October 2, 1973, Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, p. 2

Dante suspects the video copy of *The Movie Orgy* continued in circulation for some years after the film version was retired,¹²⁰ with anecdotal evidence suggesting the company shut down in 1983/84 following legal issues over use of copyrighted materials.¹²¹ The trademark for 'Video Tape Network' expired in 1995.¹²² Further research into VTN and its relationship to *The Movie Orgy* should be conducted in future. It is possible a copy of the *Orgy* on videotape is resting in an archive somewhere, but with no former VTN employees currently contactable, that remains an avenue for exploration another time.

¹²⁰ Joe Dante, interviewed by David Neary, March 29, 2015

¹²¹ Comment in response to the post 'The Video Tape Network [VTN]' by Wally Swift, on Steve Hoffman Music Forums, December 12, 2013, forums.stevemoffman.tv/threads/the-video-tape-network-vtn.337142/

¹²² 'Video Tape Network', on Trademarkia, www.trademarkia.com/video-tape-network-72441718.html

A partial list of Movie Orgies from the 1960s and 1970s

Location	Date
New York University	January 10, 1969
New York University	May 2, 1969
Columbia University	November 7, 1969
Fillmore East	March 8, 1970
SUNY Geneseo	October, 1970
University of Illinois	May, 1971
University of Illinois	October 29/30, 1971
Wisconsin State University	November 30, 1971
University of Southern California	February 23, 1972
DePaul University, Chicago	April 28, 1972
Cornell University, NY	May 14, 1972
Kent State University, OH	October 20, 1972
Longwood College, VA	May 7-13, 1973*
Kent State University, OH	May 19, 1973
Oakland University MI	October 2-5, 1973*
Wisconsin State University	October 12, 1973
Boston College	December 18/19, 1973
University of Cincinnati, OH	April 19, 1974
Monroe College, NY	September, 1974
University of North Carolina at Asheville	February 21, 1975
University at Albany SUNY	April 12, 1975
Cornell University, NY	August 28, 1975
Boise State University, ID	September 18, 1975
Providence College, RI	April 3, 1976
SUNY Potsdam	April 13, 1977

*** Denotes a confirmed 'Video Orgy'**

Chapter 3

‘The Digital Orgy’: A new experience for a new millennium

“Digital projection promises to carry the essence of cinema to us: the movie freed from its material confines.”

- David Bordwell, *Pandora’s Digital Box*¹²³

“There are no archival formats worth anything in the digital realm that you would put any stock in.”

- Christopher Nolan, *Side By Side* (Christopher Kenneally, 2012)

In 1999 the Locarno International Film Festival ran a retrospective of Joe Dante’s work, and that of the second generation of the Roger Corman school. Aiming to be as completionist as possible, they asked if Dante would be willing to perform a Movie Orgy, which would be the first official screening in more than 20 years. Dante was understandably reticent. “I just knew that nobody could make it run but me,” he said, “and I didn’t wanna have to do it.”¹²⁴ While his politics and passions were hardly dulled, it was 30 years then since the heyday of *The Movie Orgy*, and seven hours of loading projectors with film that was largely falling apart can hardly have sounded as fun as it once was. In addition, the question had to be posed: Who was the audience for *The Movie Orgy* in the 21st Century?

An audience would become clear in time. In the meantime Dante had the idea to make a digital scan of the remaining *Movie Orgy* footage and put it on a D-1, an early digital video format, for easy screening at Locarno. Dante added other snippets

¹²³ David Bordwell, *Pandora’s Digital Box: Films, Files, and the Future of Movies*, Madison, 2012, p. 194

¹²⁴ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

of footage to the D-1, outtakes from films of his for example, and off to Locarno it went.

This screening of *The Movie Orgy* was the first screening of a new kind of Movie Orgy, a 'Digital Orgy'. The content was much the same, although some had been excised and lost during the later years of the original Orgies, and certainly much if not all of the most rare and exciting footage, and of Dante's most astute cuts, were still to be seen and appreciated. Since the mid-1970s the edited print of *The Movie Orgy* had no longer been a performance piece in the way it had been in the early days of its inception, but without need for constant repairs, this version was, by traditional standards, a cinematic work; playable, repeatable and every time (more or less) identical. Paolo Cherchi Usai writes that the primary goal of film history is "to recapture the experience of its first viewers, an empirical impossibility",¹²⁵ a statement which bears greater significance in *The Movie Orgy's* case. That original experience cannot be recaptured because this fixed digital copy does not permit a projectionist to react to the audience and shift reels or scenes. As Ross Lipman says: "The paradox is that "preservation" of a temporal experience, even a mechanized one, is impossible. Only once one has accepted this, and embraced the paradox of preservation, can one begin to approach the individual work."¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, p. 25

¹²⁶ Ross Lipman, 'The Gray Zone: A Restorationist's Travel Guide', in *The Moving Image*, Vol. 9, Number 2, Fall 2009, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, p. 8

From film to tape

After Locarno, Dante deposited the D-1 of *The Movie Orgy* with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Archive in Hollywood, California. Its fate there is unclear; Dante says his attempts to later withdraw it were unsuccessful,¹²⁷ and AMPAS archivists tell me there is no entry for the work in their database. Regardless of what happened, it appears to be gone – like every version of *The Movie Orgy* before it, the D-1 copy can never be shown to audiences again exactly as it was.

Flash forward to 2007. The historic New Beverly Cinema in Los Angeles was facing redevelopment when it was purchased by filmmaker Quentin Tarantino in December of that year, a feat of cinephilia now passed into legend. Amongst the earliest events programmed at the new theatre was a revival of *The Movie Orgy*, held on April 22, 2008. This event required Dante to make a new digital copy of the *Orgy*, but pivotally gave him a chance to tinker once more with his oldest creation. Dante had the remaining film transferred, adding up to around five hours of material, and re-edited that into an extended feature. He even did some “due diligence”¹²⁸ and put back some works that had been taken out of *The Movie Orgy*, or had become too damaged to still be used, while removing elements that no longer seemed to gel with the rest of the production. So the B-movie *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Gene Fowler Jr., 1957), of which Dante still had 20 minutes’ worth of segments, was left out of this new cut, and all of the material that tied into it had to be moved around or removed also. To make up for this, Dante replaced long-since discarded footage from *College Confidential* with the same material but from another print, literally

¹²⁷ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

¹²⁸ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

“restoring” a sequence to the movie. “I tried to give a taste of what it was like when we first put it together,” he explained.¹²⁹ Penelope Houston defines film restoration as having the objective of “return[ing] a film as nearly as possible to its definitive form, if there ever was a definitive form which can be clearly established”.¹³⁰

The version created for the New Beverly, running a total of 259 minutes, is the only version that has been played since, at venues from California to New York, Chicago, Melbourne, and London. It is the official ‘*Movie Orgy*’, a digital record of the content of those initial performances from the late 1960s and the 1970s, distilled, recaptured and re-curated. Now housed on a DVCam and a DigiBeta, with DVD copies available for quick viewing purposes, *The Movie Orgy* is technically and physically a far cry from the seven reels of the original film in Dante’s vault.

What a difference a bit makes

The process of digitising any film work incites questions of artistic fidelity and archival ethics that have plagued some of the most experienced and knowledgeable names in the business of filmmaking, archiving and curating. D. N. Rodowick writes:

“[A]lthough the mathematical measures for resolution in analogical photography and digital capture or synthesis may be comparable... they cannot be said to be equivalent... To insist that analogical images contain “information,” and that these presentations can be quantified in mathematically discrete units, is already to succumb to the contradictions of perceptual realism by retroactively applying concepts of digital processing to a domain in which such measures are inappropriate.”¹³¹

¹²⁹ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

¹³⁰ Penelope Houston, *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives*, London: British Film Institute, 1994, p. 126

¹³¹ D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 119

What Rodowick is saying here is that the rendering of an image into bits and bytes, a code of 1s and 0s, can never truly recreate, but only passably mimic, photographic film. While this may be seen as a concern for the 'Film Orgy', as *The New Yorker* once erroneously called it, fidelity has never been at the centre of *The Movie Orgy's* representational ethos. Manipulation and intercutting, dupes of dupes, kinescopes of television broadcasts – *The Movie Orgy* was never about representing the photographic image in its purest form. Indeed Dante has said the whole experience is akin to changing channels on a TV late at night in the 1960s¹³² a form of viewing in which image quality is of little concern.

Where format fidelity is an issue, then, is to the work that Dante and Jon Davison did in assembling this behemoth, not just in curating it, but in splicing it all together. Any digital scan of *The Movie Orgy* needs to capture the wear to the film, the fades of duplication, the dust, dirt, tears, and amateur splices, that make it the work it is. If there is an argument then for capturing *The Movie Orgy* at the highest quality affordable and logical (a 2K or 4K scan, for example), it is not to salvage the already tattered imagery, but to preserve the tatters that reveal its unique origins on countless 16mm film strips; the wear and corruption that define *The Movie Orgy* as the astonishing found footage work it is. In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Walter Benjamin states: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was". It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes

¹³² Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

up at a moment of danger.”¹³³ Thus, rather than perfectly capturing the grain, and against most contemporary practices of digital restoration, it is capturing the wear to *The Movie Orgy* that best represents the film, revealing its age and its provenance, and its former life between the film supply and take-up reels of dozens of university projectors. Bolter and Grusin describe the difference between “hypermediacy” and “immediacy (or transparent immediacy)” in the arts; the former works to remind the viewer of the medium being watched, the latter seeks to absorb the viewer into the work and make them forget the “presence of the medium”.¹³⁴ While they describe cinema as being a medium of immediacy, *The Movie Orgy* could be seen as an example of hypermediacy, constantly reminding us of its 16mm origins. Writing on Bill Morrison’s *Decasia* (2002), a digital work made up of found footage scanned from disintegrating nitrate film, Byron says: “The experience of watching *Decasia* is one of a constantly evoked desire for something that has been lost... were these images not decayed, they would lose much of their affective power. Their magic lies in their partiality, which emphasizes their metonymic relationship to a whole that is gone forever and whose traces are also flickering their last.”¹³⁵ This can easily be reworked to describe the sensation of watching *The Movie Orgy*, comprehending its role as relic through the splices and tears. Despite it being projected digitally, there

¹³³ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, 1940, translated by Harry Zohn for *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968, p. 255

¹³⁴ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999, p. 272

¹³⁵ Byron, *Archive Effect*, p. 129

remains a feeling “we might reach out and touch that disintegrating filmstrip, if only to watch it fall apart”.¹³⁶

To project and serve

The act of digitisation can preserve *The Movie Orgy* as a work, but what about experience of a Movie Orgy? Where digitization throws up preservation roadblocks is in the realm of projection; not so much what the movie is, but how it is shown. As has been discussed in previous chapters, *The Movie Orgy* in its earliest instances was as much a performative work as it was a filmic one. Dante, Davison, and the friends they trained to run it were not just curating and MC'ing a night's entertainment, they were mixing a new film experience every night. Giovanna Fossati writes that “because of [film's] performative dimension as a projection, it is more similar to performative arts”,¹³⁷ and this was rarely more true for a film than for *The Movie Orgy*. Noël Carroll differs, saying that “the performance of a film – a film showing – warrants no artistic appreciation, since it is simply a function of the physical mechanisms engaging the template in the right way.”¹³⁸ However, this disregards the key role of the projectionist. But while the hand-cranking of early projectors certainly produced “nonrepeatable” film experiences with shifting running speeds,¹³⁹ and traditional dual-projector film screenings required a skilled and alert projectionist whose work may be deemed performative, it is difficult to disagree

¹³⁶ Byron, *Archive Effect*, p. 130

¹³⁷ Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009, p. 105

¹³⁸ Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, p. 70

¹³⁹ Lipman, ‘The Gray Zone’, p. 5

with Carroll that the digital projectionist shouldn't be considered a performer. Indeed, once the lights have gone down and the file has been selected to run, the digital projectionist may no longer need to be in the projection booth, let alone the building.

So the 'Digital Orgy' is then no longer a performance, but a presentation, a stream of edits simulating the switching between reels of B features and ephemeral snippets. It is a representation of the concept and construct of a Movie Orgy performance, a record. In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, feminist scholar Peggy Phelan writes: "Defined by its ephemeral nature, performance art cannot be documented (when it is, it turns into that document — a photograph, a stage design, a video tape — and ceases to be performance art)."¹⁴⁰ She adds that it is the very act of attempting to record a performance (or "preserve" it) that fundamentally alters that event;¹⁴¹ we can extend this thinking to *The Movie Orgy*, in that removing the elements that require an active (and reactive) projectionist and setting a single repeatable version of *The Movie Orgy* in stone (so to speak) definitively exclude this Digital Orgy from the realm of performance art. Performance is, Phelan argues, "in a strict ontological sense nonreproductive".¹⁴² While one can view the digitally projected film with a different audience each night, seated on chairs of varying comfort in theatres of varying darkness, temperature, and atmosphere, it is still the same cut of *The Movie Orgy* shown each night, from countdown leader to countless

¹⁴⁰ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 31

¹⁴¹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 148

¹⁴² Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 148

‘The End’ title cards. The act of preserving *The Movie Orgy* has made *The Movie Orgy* a very different monster altogether.

However, while *The Movie Orgy* has been fundamentally altered, it was never a truly defined work, with new edits creating a new film at almost every screening. And while the version shown at festivals and special events since 2008 is a single, repeatedly screened work, it is in theory no more a definitive *Movie Orgy* than any version shown since 1968. However, Dante stresses that the current Digital Orgy is “the best version of it there has ever been,”¹⁴³ in terms of its flow as a work and the content that is in it. This may not be its final form, but since the performative aspect of the *Orgy* was designed to craft it based on audience reaction, it stands to reason that the completed Digital Orgy should be the most audience-pleasing version of all.

The new audience

“When they trotted it out about eight years ago at the New Beverly here [in Los Angeles], just to see what the reaction would be, to see if anybody would even show up – it turned into this sort of social phenomenon,” Dante said.¹⁴⁴

He was left surprised by the reception *The Movie Orgy* received following its screening at the New Beverly in 2008, and its easy to see why. The length of the work for starters – 280 minutes, in an age when audiences complain about blockbusters exceeding two hours. The relevance of the content to a 21st century audience seemed debatable, while the *Orgy*’s often scratchy, soundtrack-popping condition, seemed far removed from the heavily digitally graded output of

¹⁴³ Interview with David Neary, April 22, 2015

¹⁴⁴ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

contemporary Hollywood and its HD restorations of the classics. And also the *Orgy's* role as media mash-up might have seemed simultaneously old-hat and overly familiar to audiences now exposed to similar works of considerably shorter running times on YouTube and other websites daily. Indeed this is true, but as film critic Peter Debruge wrote following the New Beverly screening, "this sort of ironic postmodern commentary is more popular now than ever".¹⁴⁵ Stephen Saito would later add: "Even though the novelty of seeing oddities from the Atomic Age and earlier is slightly less elusive since the advent of YouTube, nowhere could one find a collection as expertly curated as [*The Movie Orgy*]." ¹⁴⁶

Thus Dante's doubts were misplaced. Just as *The Movie Orgy* had given college kids of the late '60s and '70s insight into the cultural exposures of their parents, so too could the new audience sample the bizarre delights of a previous generation's pop culture. An added layer can be gleaned from the idea that *The Movie Orgy* also represents not just the camp of the '50s and early '60s, but also what was amusing and startling to the first generation of *Movie Orgy* viewers. Dante noted that some sequences no longer had the same impact, quoting by way of example a sequence from *The Lone Ranger* in which the hero's Native American sidekick Tonto refers to a plain on which "good grass" grows; a line the director says drew bales of laughter back when the word "grass" was a more popular synonym for marijuana.¹⁴⁷ But by and large its sequences, and its overall effect, landed with

¹⁴⁵ Debruge, 'Joe Dante Whips Out 1968 Movie Orgy'

¹⁴⁶ Stephen Saito, 'Joining in Joe Dante's Movie Orgy', on IFC, August 10, 2009, <http://www.ifc.com/fix/2009/08/joining-in-joe-dantes-movie-or>

¹⁴⁷ Joe Dante, Q&A following a screening of *The Movie Orgy* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 14, 2011

enormous success, easily summed up in the enraptured words of critic Drew McWeeney following the April 2008 screening, when he wrote: “*The Movie Orgy* is not some meta-textual commentary on pop culture... it is a syringe full of pop culture, a spike directly into the heart that adrenalizes my love of movies all over again.”¹⁴⁸

The key error in Dante’s calculations was Dante himself. Underestimating his own popularity as a filmmaker with a generation of moviegoers raised on *Gremlins*, the cult interest surrounding *The Movie Orgy* was so large as much because of its length and unique history as because of it being his first work. Fans were eager to see “that weird thing Joe Dante did before *Hollywood Boulevard*”,¹⁴⁹ which had for so long existed only in whispers, listed on the Internet Movie Database with a question mark after its title.¹⁵⁰ Following a second high-profile screening at the New Beverly, *The Movie Orgy* would go on to be one of the star attractions at a series of Dante retrospectives that followed, in Chicago, London, Australia, Austria, and even northern Finland. Presented as the ‘Ultimate Version’ at several locations, every screening was a free one, so as not to test the wrath of litigators. A full list of screenings of this new *Movie Orgy* is as follows:

¹⁴⁸ McWeeney, ‘Moriarty’s One Thing I Love Today! Joe Dante And The Movie Orgy!’

¹⁴⁹ Kuykendall, ‘The Movie Orgy (1968-197?)’

¹⁵⁰ Fitch, ‘A Lifetime of Cult Films by Joe Dante’

- New Beverly, Los Angeles, 22 April 2008
- New Beverly, Los Angeles, 8 August 2009
- Venice Film Festival, Italy, 12 September 2009
- Cine-Excess, London, 29 April 2010 (90min cut)
- Melbourne International Film Festival, Australia, 31 July 2010
- Cinefamily, Los Angeles, 4 July 2011
- MoMA, To Save and Project, New York, 14 October 2011
- Madison, Wisconsin, 5 November 2011
- Amiens International Film Festival, France, 17 November 2011
- Mar Del Plata International Film Festival, Argentina, 20 November 2011
- Grand Illusion Cinema, Seattle, 31 March 2012
- Midnight Sun Film Festival, Sodankylä, Finland, 14 June 2012
- Nightingale Cinema, Chicago, 11 August 2012
- Slovenska Kinoteka Ljubljana, Slovenia, 30 September 2012
- St Louis International Film Festival, Missouri, 11 November 2012
- /Slash Filmfestival, Austrian Film Museum, Vienna, 13 October 2013

The reaction to *The Movie Orgy* from audiences exposed to it for the first time in 35-40 years has been largely rapturous. Film historian David Bordwell, a contemporary of Dante, waxed lyrical, writing: “*The Movie Orgy* in its current form seems to me a zestful celebration of the world our generation saw when we flopped on our bellies, propped our chins in our hands, and stared at the tumultuous world inside a black-and-white (not color) TV (not video) set (not monitor).”¹⁵¹ A sensitively phrased search for *The Movie Orgy*¹⁵² on Google, social media, or in comment threads turns up dozens of cinephiles praising the work, or lamenting that they have yet to, and may never, see it. Not all the comments have been from devout converts, with one Austrian cinemagoer writing in his blog that the *Orgy* was “tiresome” and that he had seen similar kinds of satirical works before, “but done in more accessible, more entertaining ways”. He added that he and his friends left the

¹⁵¹ Bordwell, ‘Dante’s cheerful purgatorio’

¹⁵² Quotation marks and keywords such as ‘Dante’ are recommended, since searching for “orgy” on the internet can turn up all sorts of unfortunate unwanted.

cinema after only two hours of the show.¹⁵³ No one ever said *The Movie Orgy* was for everybody.

A 'Beta way to store your movie

The longevity of *The Movie Orgy* has been tested, and new fans have proven that there is an audience for both Dante's earlier works, and for the fascinating cultural detritus of the 1940s, '50s and '60s. It may not have the same effect on viewers another 40 years from now, but it's safe to say that there will be an audience well into the future, even it is to become and increasingly academic one. Fossati writes: "The problems of instability of cinematographic film, from cellulose nitrate to polyester, are well known, studied and documented... The question of the stability of the carriers is a crucial one from the film archive's point of view. Furthermore, any damage to digital data is not directly visible, unlike the decay of a traditional cinematographic film."¹⁵⁴ As the remains of the original film of *The Movie Orgy* are now safely stored, preserving the Digital Orgy has become a far clearer priority than it was when Dante deposited his Sony D-1 copy with the Academy Film Archive in the early 2000s. In the concluding chapter of this thesis I will put forth recommendations from the preservation of *The Movie Orgy*, both in analogue and in digital forms, but at this stage it is important to make clear how the Digital Orgy is currently preserved.

¹⁵³ Maynard Morrissey, 'Filmfestival Bits and Pieces: HELLFJORD / DANGER 5 / TALL MAN / HAIL / MOVIE ORGY / TWILIGHT ZONE / EXPLORERS', on *Horror Movie Diary* (blog), December 12, 2013, www.horormoviediary.net/2013/12/filmfestival-bits-and-pieces-hellfjord.html?zx=1c0e5c55128a2849

¹⁵⁴ Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel*, p. 64

Originally transferred to D-1 for preservation purposes and for presentation at the Locarno Film Festival in 1999, it was subsequently transferred to DigiBeta in 2007/8 by the Post Group, a video duplication service in Hollywood. Dante told *The New York Times*, “Digitization seemed the way to go. It took lots and lots of resplicing and perforation repair to get it through their system.”¹⁵⁵ As well as DigiBeta there are copies on DVCam and DVD¹⁵⁶ which Dante stores at his office at Renfield Productions in Hollywood. Of these formats, only Digital Betacam is considered an acceptable archival format, due to its “high quality, durability, and the widespread availability of playback equipment”,¹⁵⁷ as well as because it offers lossless transfer of information. Electronic Arts Intermix recommends archival masters be transferred to a new master every five to seven years.¹⁵⁸ The limitations of DigiBeta will be addressed in the conclusion of this thesis, as while it is a suitable preservation format for the currently digitised form *The Movie Orgy* exists in, any greater preservation work performed on *The Movie Orgy* would likely be at a scan rate that DigiBeta simply could not carry without severe, unacceptable compression.

¹⁵⁵ Kehr, ‘Saved from Extinction: Classics and Curiosities’

¹⁵⁶ Joe Dante, interviewed by David Neary, via email, February 25, 2015

¹⁵⁷ Electronic Arts Intermix, ‘Formats – Digital Betacam’, 2006, <http://www.eai.org/resourceguide/formats.html?digitalbetacam>, accessed May 3, 2015

¹⁵⁸ Electronic Arts Intermix, ‘Glossary – Archival Format’, <http://www.eai.org/resourceguide/glossary.html?archivalformat>, accessed May 3, 2014

Chapter 4

Who owns *The Movie Orgy*?

Reclaiming culture through fair use

“Fair use is a way to ensure that the goal of furthering creativity is not impeded by an overly restrictive view of exclusive rights.”

- William Patry, *How to Fix Copyright*¹⁵⁹

“We couldn’t charge admission because I don’t own the rights to any of the stuff that’s in here, and some of it I don’t even know what it is...”

- Joe Dante, radio interview on April 30, 2010¹⁶⁰

In Chapter 2 Joe Dante suggested that it was when he and Davison began cutting up films that they had purchased that *The Movie Orgy* became “an illegal screening”.¹⁶¹ This is a half-truth; assuming that the features Dante rented also came with an exhibition license, he was indeed breaking the law by charging entry to events where he would screen the works he had cut up but no longer had licenses to exhibit. But the act of cutting up the features themselves, and intercutting them with other films and assorted clips, is protected under the first-sale doctrine, which allows for secondary uses for purchased copies of copyrighted works.¹⁶² Since Dante and Davison only ever toyed with clips or reels that had come into their possession, the very act of creating *The Movie Orgy* was in and of itself not a violation of any then- or now-standing law. Dante owned the film, he owns the concept; it’s the content that’s up for debate.

¹⁵⁹ William Patry, *How to Fix Copyright*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 212

¹⁶⁰ Fitch, ‘A Lifetime of Cult Films by Joe Dante’

¹⁶¹ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

¹⁶² David Bollier, *Viral Spiral: How the Commoners Built a Digital Republic of Their Own*, New York, 2008, p. 44

Copyright law is a complex arena that contenders are often best advised to stay out of. It's a bipolar world, where two near-identical cases can be concluded with opposite rulings. What works for one artist wishing to gamble on a copyright ruling going in his or her favour, will see another artist's work sealed under lock and key by the rights holder of an appropriated work. In order to size up the copyright issues surrounding *The Movie Orgy*, we must look at three key issues: Who owns the content in *The Movie Orgy*? What happens when rightsholders cannot be identified? And how can we apply the tenets of fair use to *The Movie Orgy*? This chapter will address these questions, looking at what they mean for the past, present, and future of *The Movie Orgy*.

The public domain course

Many of the copyright problems surrounding *The Movie Orgy* stem from the fact that there is still no full catalogue of what is actually in it. It was beyond the scope of this project to break the *Orgy* down clip-by-clip and trace the provenance of every image. Dante has admitted he hardly knows what half the stuff in it is – “Some of them are clips from movies I’ve never seen.”¹⁶³ Without knowing the creator, or the date of creation, of each and every individual work, it is difficult to clear *The Movie Orgy* rights-wise. While there are several title cards used throughout the *Orgy*, these can only offer up so much information, and other works must be recognised by their content. Using web searches to track down titles using notable dialogue or key descriptor words is useful in deducing some of the appropriated works, but many

¹⁶³ Smith, ‘Joe Dante And Mr. Beaks Tumble Down THE HOLE (In 3-D)! Also Discussed: “Dante’s Inferno” At The New Beverly!’

are so brief and so extremely obscure that their origins remain at present untraceable.

What is clear however is that many works in *The Movie Orgy* were already in the public domain when *The Movie Orgy* was made, while others have drifted into it in the years since Dante and Davison first spliced them in. Under U.S. copyright law, works published before the Copyright Act of 1976 had to have their copyright registered in order for them to be copyright protected works. They also had to have their copyright renewed after 28 years (only allowed once, meaning copyright terms were a maximum 56 years instead of 95 today) or it would expire. This renewal became automatically recognised through the Copyright Renewal Act of 1992. Therefore, films or television shows created before 1964 that were not renewed are in the public domain. The only reason not to renew a copyright was disinterest or forgetfulness, usually a sign that the rightsholder felt the work no longer had value in the market. Indeed, a 1961 study found fewer than 15% of all copyrighted works had been renewed.¹⁶⁴ So it should not surprise us that many of the B-movies in *The Movie Orgy* did not have their copyrights renewed, given the “generational effect”¹⁶⁵ of their popularity that left them without an audience barely a decade later. Thus works such as *The Giant Gila Monster* (Ray Kellogg, 1959) and *Beginning of the End* (Bert I. Gordon, 1957) are now definitively free of the shackles of copyright control.

Some public domain films featured in *The Movie Orgy* might surprise. That a picture such as 1938’s *Wives Under Suspicion* (see Chapter 1), produced by a major

¹⁶⁴ Stephen Fishman, *The Public Domain: How to Find & Use Copyright-Free Writings, Music, Art & More*, Berkeley: NOL0, 2010, p. 389

¹⁶⁵ Davis, *The Battle for the Bs*, p. 108

studio like Universal, and directed by a well-respected auteur, James Whale (*Frankenstein* (1931), *Show Boat* (1936)), could have been allowed to lapse into the public domain seems improbable. However, it was made during a period of austerity at the studio in the prewar years,¹⁶⁶ and had not been a financial success, so failing to renew its copyright status was likely not considered a major loss. Coincidentally, its copyright lapsed in 1966, the year Dante was beginning to develop *The Movie Orgy*. Other films featured in *The Movie Orgy* now in the public domain include *Teenagers from Outer Space* (Tom Graeff, 1959), *One Million B.C.* (Hal Roach, Hal Roach, Jr., 1940), *Tarantula* (Jack Arnold, 1955), and *Renegade Girl* (William Berke, 1946).

As has been discussed previously, much of the material in *The Movie Orgy* was originally made for television. Early TV was often seen to have limited potential for extended syndication, so copyright was often allowed to slip, if it was ever registered at all. The Library of Congress states: "Because network television programs were not sold or leased in copies, there was considerable uncertainty as to when TV programs were "published" within the meaning of the existing copyright statute."¹⁶⁷ Thus before the 1976 Copyright Act became active in 1978, large swathes of American television had never had its copyright registered or renewed (although, admittedly, copying television programmes in the days before VCRs was beyond most Americans' capabilities). For *The Movie Orgy*, this places a question mark over a large amount of its content. Whole episodes of shows featured in the *Orgy*, including *Sky King*, *Adventures of Wild Bill Hickok*, *You Bet Your Life* starring

¹⁶⁶ David Pierce, 'Forgotten Faces: Why Some of Our Cinema Heritage Is Part of the Public Domain', in *Film History*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Indiana University Press, 2007 p. 138

¹⁶⁷ 'Television in the Library of Congress', www.loc.gov/rr/mopic/tvcoll.html

Groucho Marx, and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, are public domain, but not the entire series, so it difficult to clear the clips used. A total of 17 episodes of *The Lone Ranger* (of 221) are public domain,¹⁶⁸ meaning the clips from that show in *The Movie Orgy* could be out of copyright if they were taken from these episodes, but without an episode title it might takes a considerable amount of time to ascertain which clips are violating copyright. When asked about clearing the rights for release, Joe Dante once replied that “the amount of time it would take a lawyer to clear all of the clips in this thing... it wouldn’t be worth it.”¹⁶⁹ (Smith 2009)

The most recent work to be featured in *The Movie Orgy*, as best as can be known, is *The Projectionist* (Harry Hurwitz, 1971), by no likely coincidence also a film that makes great use of appropriated footage from Hollywood’s B-movie past. If we assume that no further extensions are made to United States copyright law (an unlikely assumption at that), this would mean the last footage from *The Movie Orgy* would fall into the public domain around the year 2069, more than a century after the film was first constructed. “The only way we get away with running it is by running it for free,” says Dante. “It’s never going to get released commercially.” But the public domain is not the only aspect of copyright law at play here.

The Movie Orphanage

The inability of researchers, film fans, and Joe Dante himself to put titles to every work in *The Movie Orgy* raises a pivotal question: are there any works in *The Movie*

¹⁶⁸ IMDb, [hwww.imdb.com/title/tt0041038/trivia?item=tr0697003](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041038/trivia?item=tr0697003)

¹⁶⁹ Smith, ‘Joe Dante And Mr. Beaks Tumble Down THE HOLE (In 3-D)! Also Discussed: “Dante’s Inferno” At The New Beverly!’

Orgy that no longer exist anywhere else? I posed this question to Dante, and he estimated that as much as 5% of the footage in *The Movie Orgy* could be unique, the only remaining copies in the world.¹⁷⁰ Some of it “came to me as footage but it wasn’t labeled so I don’t know what movie it is,” he says. Many of these works are commercials for products or companies that no longer exist, bloopers from movie shoots, or filmic curios that defy simple definition. For example, there is an outtake from a commercial for Johnson’s Baby Powder in which two young women prepare for their day in front of the bathroom mirror – when one of the actresses gets a line wrong, the pair decide to make full use of the ruined take by disrobing, coating each other’s breasts with Johnson’s Baby Powder and then embracing passionately. Dante has said the clip had been well known in film collector circles for many years.¹⁷¹ The clip can be found on the Internet Archive,¹⁷² but in an artifact-riddled copy digitised from video, several generations removed from the film version in the *Orgy*. Dante’s copy of the Johnson’s clip may be the closest thing to the original that still exists, and might therefore be considered an archival master of sorts.

What we have here therefore are examples of orphan films. Dan Streible defines orphan films as films whose owners or rightholders cannot be “identified or located, or who have abandoned care” for the works.¹⁷³ The inclusion of orphans in *The Movie Orgy* further highlights the importance of the film as both an artistic work

¹⁷⁰ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

¹⁷¹ Joe Dante, responding to a question from David Neary at a screening of *The Movie Orgy* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 14, 2011

¹⁷² ‘Johnson’s Baby Powder Commercial – Outtake’, archive.org/details/JohnsonsBabyPowderCommercial-Outtake

¹⁷³ Dan Streible, ‘Saving, Studying, and Screening: A History of the Orphan Film Symposium’, in *Film Festival Yearbook 5: Archival Film Festivals*, ed. Alex Marlow-Mann, St. Andrews Film Studies, 2013, p. 163

and an archive of sorts, in which these orphans have been collected. Another prime example is a film clip written by and starring British satirist Peter Cook. Supposedly shot to be screened at Cook's nightclub *The Establishment*,¹⁷⁴ the clip parodies romantic melodrama and features Cook pausing in the midst of a sweeping love story to reflect on how it is time for a Labour government in Britain. TV historian Jonathan Sloman has posited it may be the only remaining copy of this film¹⁷⁵ – bizarre to think of a famous British comedian's work being rediscovered buried in the film experiment of a pair of American college kids.

The social importance of these works cannot be underestimated. Buried in *The Movie Orgy* for example is a clip from a 1960s police training film demonstrating the use of, and effects of, chemical mace. A man willfully subjects himself to being sprayed in the eyes with mace, and is brought to his knees, covering his face and moaning in great distress. After his recovery, a spokesperson for Mace is asked: "Could this be a weapon in helping police departments to fight some of the legal restrictions that have recently been put against them by the court?" The spokesperson replies: "Very definitely."

Perhaps the most shocking clips in *The Movie Orgy* are amongst the most mysterious, and the collector's items Dante is most proud of. A quartet of commercials from the 1960s for Bufferin headache medicine is placed throughout *The Movie Orgy*, emerging at surprising and always hilarious opportunities. The

¹⁷⁴ According to Jonathan Sloman,
twitter.com/squidyuk/status/182571978786476032

¹⁷⁵ Sloman, twitter.com/squidyuk/status/182571978786476032

misjudged campaign, which Dante believes was shown only once, or not at all,¹⁷⁶ attempts to sell Bufferin as “strong medicine for sensitive people”. The choices of subjects however, are preposterous to the point of parody, and yet they appear to be utterly sincere. One features a son whose father buys him a rifle, but he is sensitive and doesn’t want to shoot. Another shows a man on the draft board suffering a headache after sending a young man off to war. A third has a man evict an elderly couple from the house they’ve lived in for decades. “Our kids were born right here,” the old man pleads, giving the sensitive estate agent a headache. As he takes a “gentle” Bufferin to relieve his pain, a wrecking ball demolishes the building in the background. “I just happened to have the 16mm,” said Dante, “I’ve never seen them anywhere else.”¹⁷⁷ The quality of the image strongly suggests the film is not far removed from the original negative, and it seems quite possible that Dante does hold the only copy.

One of the last works featured in *The Movie Orgy* is a short film in which a priest is seen secretly reading a *Playboy* magazine while giving a sermon. Behind him, a statue of the crucified Christ begins to wiggle frantically in protest, leading to the priest pausing his sermon to take a staple-gun and secure Jesus to the cross. The clip, Dante says, comes from the student film of a contemporary of his at Philadelphia College of Art, but he confesses he can’t remember who made it.¹⁷⁸ This only shows the uniqueness of many of the works within *The Movie Orgy*, and highlights the uniqueness of *The Movie Orgy* itself. In addition, while other copies of

¹⁷⁶ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

¹⁷⁷ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

¹⁷⁸ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

many of the films in the *Orgy* may be available elsewhere, like the Johnson's Baby Powder commercial Dante's collection may in some cases include the most complete and highest quality copies that still survive.

The apparent existence of orphan works within *The Movie Orgy* makes it a far greater preservation concern for the *Orgy* than just "Joe Dante's first film". For film, preservation means copying, and copying orphan works may mean breaching someone's copyright. Let alone the issue of screening it. Paolo Cherchi Usai bitterly chastises the system that allows for this, stating: "An archive may own a copy of a film without enjoying the right to exhibit it. As if the intervention that prevented its disappearance were a theft to be forgiven!"¹⁷⁹ There are currently discussions within the U.S. legal system about loosening restrictions around the use of orphan works,¹⁸⁰ but in the meantime, the best defence *The Movie Orgy* has is a fair use offence.

Fair use is fair game

If copyright is a complicated game, then fair use is that chapter of the rulebook that was accidentally published in the wrong language. Not that the concept of fair use is especially complex, but that its applications to real world copyright cases are so ill-defined and scattershot that some would argue it cannot and should not be relied upon. Leading legal scholar and copyright reform activist Lawrence Lessig has

¹⁷⁹ Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, p. 125

¹⁸⁰ 'Orphan Works', copyright.gov/orphan/

dismissed fair use as a “thin sliver”¹⁸¹ of exceptions to copyright law, while Siva Vaidhyanathan calls it “a gray and sloppy concept”.¹⁸² It is not so much that fair use is ill-defined, but that its wording is sufficiently vague, and its failure rate sufficiently high, that it is a difficult doctrine for artists who sample copyrighted materials to fall back on. Fair use offers creators of media a potential pass to use limited amounts of a copyrighted piece in order to “build upon or critique [the] earlier work”,¹⁸³ but this is only if it could satisfy a court.

Traditionally fair use has been used for simple copying arguments, in fields such as education or journalism. If a teacher needs to teach from a book that remains relevant and out-of-print but still under copyright, he or she would be making a “fair” infringement by making photocopies of a chapter to share with the class. Similarly, a film critic can hardly be expected to perform their job without quoting from, or showing clips from, a film which they are reviewing. Of course, a teacher might risk breaching the definition of fair (so unfairly undefined) by photocopying the entire book – a copy for each student! Or the critic might use too long a segment from a film in his or her review, no longer using an amount of the original a court would deem “fair”. Of course, this is judged on a case-by-case basis, making a fair use defence in copyright an often risky venture. Lessig writes: “The fuzzy lines of the law, tied to the extraordinary liability if lines are crossed, means

¹⁸¹ Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2004, p. 160

¹⁸² Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and how it Threatens Creativity*, New York: NYU Press, 2001, p. 27

¹⁸³ Lawrence Lessig, ‘Remix: How Creativity Is Being Strangled by the Law’, in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg, New York: NYU Press, 2012, p. 161

that the effective fair use for many types of creators is slight. The law has the right aim; practice has defeated the aim.”¹⁸⁴

Since fair use was not enshrined in U.S. law until the Copyright Act of 1976, there are few cases of fair use defences in copyright hearings from before this time worth addressing. Of course, *The Movie Orgy* was created before fair use became more than just common law, but as Dante has said: “no one ever said anything about it. We never got in trouble with anybody.”¹⁸⁵ Dante and Davison never had to defend their use of clips in *The Movie Orgy* back in the day, but it is worth examining how Dante might mount a fair use defence today should he ever consider a wider distribution for the opus of his youth.

Title 17 of the United States Code, § 107, states, “The fair use of a copyrighted work... for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship, or research, is not an infringement of copyright.”¹⁸⁶ It then lists four tenets that should be considered in all fair use cases, but not all of which must be met for a use to be deemed fair. The tenets are:

1. The purpose of the use; is it commercial in nature? Is it educational?
2. The nature of the copyrighted work that is being appropriated.
3. The amount of the copyrighted work that is being appropriated.
4. The effect the use has on the potential market of the copyrighted work.¹⁸⁷

Peter Decherney calls the inclusion of fair use in U.S. copyright law “an important milestone”, adding: “Not only did it lend legislative authority to the court-

¹⁸⁴ Lessig, *Free Culture*, p. 99

¹⁸⁵ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

¹⁸⁶ ‘17 U.S. Code § 107 - Limitations on exclusive rights: Fair use’, Cornell University Law School, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/17/107>

¹⁸⁷ ‘17 U.S. Code § 107 - Limitations on exclusive rights: Fair use’

made principle, but the brevity and openness of the statute's language signaled Congress's intention to keep fair use flexible, so that it could grow with society's needs."¹⁸⁸ While the looseness of the definition has no doubt ensnared its fair share of content creators over the past 40 years, there is clear evidence that fair use has indeed evolved since '76,¹⁸⁹ and has had a resurgence since the year 2000.¹⁹⁰

So what does this mean for *The Movie Orgy*? Fair use activists Patricia Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi have argued that the broadest interpretation of fair use draws from tenets 1 and 4, when the "social benefit is larger than individual owners' loss".¹⁹¹ In Chapter 1 I discussed at length the merits of *The Movie Orgy*, concluding by drawing attention to how it offers viewers today a window into two bygone cultures; the unknowingly camp culture of the 1950s, and the rebellious youth culture of the late '60s and early '70s. The filmmaker John Sayles, an old friend and collaborator of Joe Dante, has said *The Movie Orgy* is "too meaningful to be campy and too much fun to be taught in school".¹⁹² And yet, as I have suggested, there is a wealth of cultural, historical, and sociological information that can be reaped from *The Movie Orgy*. While the intent of *The Movie Orgy* was never to educate, a wily academic could easily use it as the framework for an entire semester's worth of teaching.

¹⁸⁸ Peter Decherney, *Hollywood's Copyright Wars: From Edison to the Internet*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 155

¹⁸⁹ Patricia Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi, *Reclaiming Fair Use: How to put balance back in copyright*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 14

¹⁹⁰ Aufderheide and Jaszi, *Reclaiming Fair Use*, p. 79

¹⁹¹ Aufderheide and Jaszi, *Reclaiming Fair Use*, p. 3

¹⁹² Sayles, 'A Soldier in the Field', p. 9

Legal scholar Pamela Samuelson has suggested that rather than simply judging if every work observes the four tenets of fair use, it is easier to see if the work in question falls into one of three distinct categories of fair use works.¹⁹³ These three categories are:

- Transformative: parody or satire
- Productive: quotation or sampling to illustrate or critique
- Orthogonal: creating new uses or purposes for the original material

The Movie Orgy could easily fall under any of Samuelson's headings, which makes it a realistic subject for a fair use hearing. "Parody is an important part of our culture," writes Vaidhyanathan. "Without criticism and comment, even ridicule, democracy cannot operate optimally."¹⁹⁴ As has already been highlighted, *The Movie Orgy* is a deeply satirical work, wittily undermining the Nixon administration and deflating American jingoism. Critic Dennis Cozzalio says that in *The Movie Orgy*, "Dante fuses pop, politics, satire and a bracing yet benign cynicism and enriches movies that in other hands might be rote projects-for-hire with a distinct point of view on the world."¹⁹⁵ There is also plenty of parody on display, for example the frantic intercutting of sci-fi B-movies to create the impression of a single city under siege from giant locusts, spiders, birds, and women, all at the same time. *The Movie Orgy* is transformative through the simple power of editing.

¹⁹³ Pamela Samuelson, 'Unbundling Fair Uses', in *Fordham Law Review*, Vol. 77, Issue 5, 2009, p. 2548-2557

¹⁹⁴ Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs*, p. 26

¹⁹⁵ Cozzalio, 'Joe Dante, Your Movie Orgy M.C.'

For fair use to be applicable, Samuelson points out that the new work should “criticize, comment upon, or offer new insights about those works and the social significance of others’ expressions”.¹⁹⁶ This is *The Movie Orgy* in a nutshell, recontextualising works through mass-appropriation and juxtaposition. Thus the *Orgy* is productive, critiquing the works and highlighting their wonderful failures, often through repetition – such as the oft returned-to Bufferin ads, or the endless parade of “Don’t crowd me, Joe”s from *Speed Crazy*. B-movie actor Morris Ankrum stars in three of *The Movie Orgy*’s most oft-quoted films, *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, *Beginning of the End*, and *The Giant Claw*, playing characters named, respectively, Brigadier General John Hanley, General John Hanson, and Lieutenant General Edward Considine. Dante points out that when Ankrum plays a general, he “always dresses the same way. So you can cut him in and it looks like he’s fighting six different monsters!”¹⁹⁷ The intercutting of those three films (where Ankrum commands forces against giant locusts, aliens and a colossal bird) therefore produces something new, a meta-narrative that comments on the very concept of the monster movie.

As for being orthogonal, *The Movie Orgy* is that by its very nature. It is not just a string of clips, but a greater work that uses those strands of film to make a larger point about the America of yesteryear and the film industry itself. So that even when works are lifted wholesale, such as the Bufferin ads, the commercial acts as a new work in the context of *The Movie Orgy* by relation to what has come before it. Made for a sales purpose, in the context of the *Orgy* a Bufferin ad about drafting soldiers

¹⁹⁶ Samuelson ‘Unbundling Fair Uses’, p. 2549

¹⁹⁷ Cozzalio, ‘Joe Dante, Your Movie Orgy M.C.’

for Vietnam is now a comment about the insensitivity of marketing, and capitalism as a whole, as well as the self-importance of some vision of America in which an individual's headache is a greater concern than the life of a U.S. soldier.

So while *The Movie Orgy* can easily stand up to Samuelson's scrutiny, how does it measure up against those four factors of fair use? The factors only offer a loose guideline for how to mount a fair use defence, but since they are written into U.S. law, appeasing at least some of their requirements seems necessary for any work appropriating copyrighted materials. This is how *The Movie Orgy* stands up against their demands:

1. **Purpose and character of the use** – *The Movie Orgy* may have been a commercial venture in its first incarnation, but that was always secondary to Dante's desire to just create and share.¹⁹⁸ That all screenings of *The Movie Orgy* since 2008 have been free of charge¹⁹⁹ shows Dante has no interest in profiting off of others' hard work. Even if he wished to give *The Movie Orgy* a wider release, which would likely require ticket sales, its role as an educational work, discussed above, might still see it pass this test.
2. **The nature of the copyrighted work** – A complete audit of *The Movie Orgy* is at present an impractical exercise, but it cannot be denied that many of the major works sampled within it are commercial works (although most without commercial futures). This test is hard for *The Movie Orgy* to pass.

¹⁹⁸ Joe Dante, interview with David Neary, April 22, 2015

¹⁹⁹ Smith, 'Joe Dante And Mr. Beaks Tumble Down THE HOLE (In 3-D)! Also Discussed: "Dante's Inferno" At The New Beverly!'

- 3. The amount and substantiality of the portion used** – In many cases the clips used are so brief that there is little question of them being “too long” to be fair use. However, some of the clips from television shows are a few minutes long, but never more than is needed to make the point of the clip’s inclusion clear. But what about the B-movie features that make up the main structure of the *Orgy*? Did Dante “pig out” and “take as much as he wanted out of laziness” as William Patry asks?²⁰⁰ This is arguable, but as was shown in Chapter 2, Dante was always trimming what was not needed to make his point and earn a laugh from the newly recontextualised material. It is only in taking so much of these films that Dante is able to draw the conclusions that he does. In July 2010 the Librarian of Congress stipulated that excerpts used under fair use must be “relatively short”, but in this he opted not to define that term specifically.²⁰¹ When your film is nearly five hours long, everything is relatively short!
- 4. The effect on the market of the copyrighted work** – The audience for *The Movie Orgy* has yet to be defined, without wide release or much public knowledge of its existence, but there is evidence online of many cinephiles and Dante fans desirous to see it. However, these are certainly not the same people to whom *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* was originally targeted. In the case *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc.*, better known as the 2 Live Crew case, Justice David Souter said that a parody is unlikely to ever compete in the

²⁰⁰ Patry, *How to Fix Copyright*, p. 216

²⁰¹ Aufderheide and Jaszi, *Reclaiming Fair Use*, p. 77

same market as the original because it acts as a form of criticism.²⁰² “Parody has an obvious claim to transformative value,” he wrote, adding, “it can provide social benefit, by shedding light on an earlier work, and, in the process, creating a new one.” Indeed, most of the films featured in *The Movie Orgy* have no market value at present. If anything, they would only serve to benefit from inclusion in it. Films such as *College Confidential* or *Speed Crazy* have been written about at length in the context of *The Movie Orgy*, but are hardly available outside of it. Wider knowledge of *The Movie Orgy* can actually reinvigorate interest in such films in the eyes of audiences, for whom a 15-minute highlight reel simply is not enough. Film fan Cathie Horlick-Wilson, who was present at both of *The Movie Orgy*’s screenings at the New Beverly Cinema, wrote me that she had tried in vain to source a copy of *Speed Crazy* since discovering it through *The Movie Orgy*, and was more than willing to spend money to own a copy.²⁰³

You’ve got to a-pro-priate the positive

“Now today, the doctrine of fair use might cover us, but who knows,” Dante said in 2013.²⁰⁴ Bearing always in mind that it is a flexible and unreliable concept, it does still seem that fair use would find a way to clear *The Movie Orgy*. Given its educational and discursive merits, and the depth of Dante and Davison’s hunt for archival footage, the question emerges as to whether *The Movie Orgy* can be

²⁰² Vaidhyathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs*, p. 148

²⁰³ Email from Cathie Horlick-Wilson, April 28, 2015

²⁰⁴ Klinger and Dante, ‘A Conversation’, p. 25

classified as a documentary. The Internet Movie Database certainly considers it one!²⁰⁵ Fair use has in recent years been far leaner on documentary than on narrative cinema, with Aufderheide and Jaszi campaigning for looser restrictions and creating a guide for appropriation of footage for documentary filmmakers.²⁰⁶ Recently a film very much akin to *The Movie Orgy, Los Angeles Plays Itself* (Thom Andersen, 2003), made up entirely of clips from feature films shot in LA in order to discuss the city's representation in cinema, was granted a commercial release a decade after its completion. Entertainment lawyer Michael Donaldson went through the film frame by frame and came to the conclusion that the use of every clip in it sampled without permission was covered under fair use. "I looked at every single clip, and it was rock-solid fair use then, and it's rock-solid fair use now," Donaldson told the *Los Angeles Times*. "Every clip [Andersen] used was to illustrate a point he was making about Los Angeles, whether it be Los Angeles as the setting for a film or Los Angeles as a character in the film or a Los Angeles story being told cinematically."²⁰⁷ It is not hard to imagine a similar defence of *The Movie Orgy*. Thom Andersen, defending his film, added: "There have always been movies about movies, but it's only recently that a critical discourse has been possible. And that's good for everyone."²⁰⁸ Even if Dante and Davison weren't aware of it back in the 1960s, this is a dialogue in cinema that *The Movie Orgy* is a part of.

²⁰⁵ IMDb, www.imdb.com/title/tt0270523/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

²⁰⁶ Pat Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi, 'Documentary Filmmakers' Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use', Center for Social Media, Washington D.C., November 18, 2005

²⁰⁷ Glenn Whipp, "L.A. Plays Itself' is finally coming to home video. Here's how.", in *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 2014, www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-on-film-copyright-protection-movies-20140727-story.html

²⁰⁸ Whipp, "L.A. Plays Itself' is finally coming to home video. Here's how.'

Of course, even a lawyer of Donaldson's standing might have difficulty clearing every clip, given the sheer number of them, and their obscurity. And attempting to clear *The Movie Orgy* for some form of release might draw unwanted attention from rightsholders, even where other films did not. Decherney notes that "ignoring a controversial example of fair use (such as *Los Angeles Plays Itself*) may allow one work to survive, but it does not necessarily help the next work that relies on the same principle".²⁰⁹ (Decherney 2012 p. 157) He cites as an example *A Fair(y) Use Tale* (Eric Faden, 2007), a short educational documentary about fair use, that only uses appropriated works, like *The Movie Orgy*, though quite riskily it is entirely made up of clips owned by the litigious Walt Disney Company. While its existence is seen by many as a victory for fair use, Decherney suggests that since Disney never actually attempted a suit, we can never be certain that it would have emerged unscathed, so a similar work, such as *The Movie Orgy*, might not get a pass quite so easily. "There is no clear precedent for the next filmmaker who wants to take on a similar project."²¹⁰

"Fair use's DNA is mapped from the heart of copyright," says Patry. "Fair use consists of principles, not rules, and its goal is to ensure that creativity flourishes in the face of overly exuberant exclusive rights."²¹¹ Creativity flourished in *The Movie Orgy*, and that same creativity can be seen throughout Joe Dante's career. While a risk, perhaps, it may be time to consider a fair use challenge on behalf of *The Movie Orgy*, to share it with a greater audience whom it might educate and enthrall.

²⁰⁹ Decherney, *Hollywood's Copyright Wars*, p. 157

²¹⁰ Decherney, *Hollywood's Copyright Wars*, p. 157

²¹¹ Patry, *How to Fix Copyright*, p. 215

In the meantime, copyright limitations surrounding *The Movie Orgy* shall remain tied to its archival survival. Preservation should not be hindered by copyright concerns. U.S. Code 17 § 108, section (c) stipulates: “The right of reproduction under this section applies to three copies or phonorecords of a published work duplicated solely for the purpose of replacement of a copy or phonorecord that is *damaged, deteriorating, lost, or stolen...*”²¹² (emphasis mine). Thus, while the creation of *The Movie Orgy* may have been a breach of copyright, Dante’s actions in preserving it thus far, in creating DigiBeta, DVCam and DVD copies, have been within the boundaries of the law, despite being further examples of copying. Indeed, by preserving *The Movie Orgy*, the many orphan works within it are similarly saved through copying.

So *The Movie Orgy* and its content can be saved for future generations, and perhaps future generations, or even the present generation at a later date, will get a new chance to see it. That, however, is for Dante – as its creator, curator, and caretaker – to decide.

²¹² ‘17 U.S. Code § 108 - Limitations on exclusive rights: Reproduction by libraries and archives’, www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/17/108

Conclusion

What do we do with *The Movie Orgy*?

“Such images seem to bring us into “contact” with the past, to offer us a glimpse of a world that existed but has been erased and overlaid with different faces, current fashions, and new technologies. Indeed, the past seems to become not only knowable but also *perceptible* in these images. They offer us an *experience* of pastness, an experience that no written word can quite match.”

- Jamie Byron, *Archive Effect*²¹³

“This is crude in every sense of the word.”

- Joe Dante, introducing *The Movie Orgy* in Madison, Wisconsin, November 5, 2011²¹⁴

Crude it may be. But there is value in crude. In addition, I believe that I have argued in these pages that *The Movie Orgy* is considerably more than crude entertainment. It is a comedy and a documentary, a social study and a time machine, an ambitious if haphazard 16mm experiment and a triumphant argument for the importance of footage appropriation and mash-up. It represents a unique case in live performative film presentation, where audience reaction not only shaped the night’s viewing as it progressed but also affected the edits of future presentations. “It’s a relic of a bygone age,”²¹⁵ says Joe Dante, with a note of sadness in his voice. And he’s not wrong, it is a relic. And like all relics it speaks to us about the age when it was created. And it must be preserved, both for its own unique brilliance, and for the treasures and curiosities held within it, and for generations now and to come to study that bygone era through this one-of-a-kind, shattered lens, spliced back

²¹³ Byron, *Archive Effect*, p. 1

²¹⁴ Kuykendall, ‘The Movie Orgy (1968-197?)’

²¹⁵ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

together 2,000 times over. Dante has already rescued *The Movie Orgy* from obscurity, myth, and decay, and its renewed success has been demonstrated. In these concluding pages I will lay out a series of recommendations for the continued preservation of *The Movie Orgy*, in a manner that will allow for the highest level of security for the work while also allowing those who need to see it to have better access.

There are three major elements to this gesamtkunstwerk:²¹⁶ the performed *Movie Orgy*, the reels of 16mm film themselves, and the content contained within them. Of these, the former can only be documented, never reproduced; its role was in editing and molding *The Movie Orgy* into what it is today. The 16mm film reels, all seven of them, are the artefactual *Movie Orgy*, the document which still bears the splices Dante inserted to create the beast, as well as the scrapes and scratches of some hundred projectors found at college campuses all across America. Boris Groys borrows from Walter Benjamin when he writes: “The original has a specific location and it is due to this particular location that the original finds its place as a unique object in history. Benjamin’s formulation in this context is well known: “There is one thing missing even in the most perfect reproduction: the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of the piece of art – its unique presence in its location”.²¹⁷ Finally, there is the content, some of it still in the 16mm, with more reinserted from digital sources found in the Digital Orgy, currently housed on DigiBeta. While *The Movie Orgy* is thus in no immediate danger, decisions must be taken for the sake of its longevity in the

²¹⁶ ‘universal artwork’, ‘total artwork’ – ArtLex Art Dictionary, www.artlex.com/ArtLex/U.html#anchor1538384

²¹⁷ Boris Groys, ‘The Aura of Profane Enlightenment’, in *The World (maybe) fantastic*, exhibition catalogue, Sidney Biennale, 2002, p. 1

coming years. Penelope Houston argues: “In archive terminology, a film which is merely held in safe keeping has not been preserved.”²¹⁸ Thus, my recommendations are as follows:

1. **Complete *The Movie Orgy*** – On some level it’s hard to believe Joe Dante will ever be finished with *The Movie Orgy*. To borrow from Barry White, it’s his first, his last, his everything; the film that gave him the skills to be the filmmaker he became, and which has in some way or other defined his entire career. When I asked him if he was done tinkering with it, he admitted that if someone were to propose a new transfer of the film that he “could probably pull together some stuff”.²¹⁹ Some of the most damaged film material, for example, could be replaced with footage sampled from other sources, such as DVDs. The current edition of *The Movie Orgy* has been called the “Ultimate Version”,²²⁰ so perhaps this is it. And there’s no problem with that. The only concern is that a major preservation project undertaken on *The Movie Orgy* should not be begun until Dante feels he has given the project back everything he can. “Don’t crowd me, Joe,” bad boy Nick Barrow would repeat in *Speed Crazy*, and somehow now the dialogue seems aimed at Joe Dante. He can’t keep crowding *The Movie Orgy* forever.
2. **Preserving the film** – The film of *The Movie Orgy* is so much more than an archival master. It’s a labour of love, made with human hands.²²¹ Spliced into its reels are the wealth of a generation’s culture, and Joe Dante’s DNA is

²¹⁸ Houston, *Keepers of the Frame*, p. 126

²¹⁹ Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

²²⁰ Prouty, ‘The Movie Orgy’, p. 196

²²¹ Cozzalio, , ‘Joe Dante, Your Movie Orgy M.C.’

found throughout it (perhaps literally in some cases, embedded in the emulsion). The film reels are currently stored in two shipping cases in Dante's HVAC-controlled vault, at 40°F,²²² an excellent preservation condition for them, especially when compared to Dante's garage where they had spent the entirety of the 1980s and 1990s. It's a wonder the reels could make it through the film scanner at all. Speaking with film preservationist Bill Brand of BB Optics in New York, he told me that when preserving a film work without a negative, it is usually best to make an optical transfer first, then scan the new internegative.²²³ However, Brand admitted that in the case of a "wonderful nightmare" like preserving *The Movie Orgy*, this would depend on what Dante wished to further preserve. Would he just want to preserve a secure internegative of the *Movie Orgy* reels as they are now, or should any additional material included in the Digital Orgy's "Ultimate Version" be restored to it first? Either way, Brand suggested that first creating a digital intermediate by a 2K or even a 4K scan would allow far more flexibility. With this scan logged in the system, Dante could then recreate the *Orgy* in any way he needed to, before printing out to a preservation master, a new internegative (the first negative of *The Movie Orgy*), on 35mm polyester film. If there was ever a desire to screen *The Movie Orgy* on film again, 35mm or 16mm release prints could be readily struck from this. *The Movie Orgy* is a fitting candidate for edge-to-edge scanning, given the enormous information that can be gathered from

²²² Joe Dante to David Neary, via email, February 25, 2015

²²³ Bill Brand, in conversation with David Neary via phone, March 25, 2015

sprockets and rails, which could help future researchers learn a great deal about each individual strip of film used to create it, from stock type and date to generation, as well as revealing all the damage that has been amassed on the original film during its decade of innumerable splicings and projections.

3. Digital preservation – While film is still regarded as the best archival medium for moving images,²²⁴ the digital domain is where *The Movie Orgy* is most likely to receive the most ongoing exposure. After the new scan of the film has been completed and all corrected and restored in post, the question becomes how that file, from which digital derivatives can be made, should best be stored. While DigiBeta, on which *The Movie Orgy* is currently most completely preserved, is accepted as a reliable and lossless storage medium,²²⁵ it will not be able to properly display a file resulting from a 2K scan at full resolution. DigiBeta's maximum resolution for NTSC is 720x576,²²⁶ while the resolution of a 2K scan is 2048x1556;²²⁷ that's nearly three times the difference. Not to mention the difference if Dante were to take Bill Brand's advice and make a 4K scan of the *Orgy*. Leo Enticknapp warns that "a 4K restoration of a full-length feature working on uncompressed images... can easily amount to dozens of terabytes,"²²⁸ but

²²⁴ NFPP, *The Film Preservation Guide*, San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2004, p. 44

²²⁵ Philip de Nier, 'Archive Preservation File Format: DigiBeta System', R&D white paper for the BBC, September 2012, p. 1

²²⁶ 'Digital Betacam', on MediaCollege.com, www.mediacollege.com/video/format/beta/digital-betacam.html

²²⁷ Image-It, '16mm 2K Scan', www.imagine-it-entertainment.com/16mm-2k-scan.html

²²⁸ Enticknapp, *Film Restoration*, p. 226

the results would speak for themselves. Bordwell says: "Today carefully done digital transfers can preserve some of the film look. 2K projection can at times look "videoish," with aliasing, jagged edges, and the like, but it can also preserve a certain graininess/ Some qualities of the film look can be retained in digital transfers."²²⁹ Looking at the work, one should be seeing as much of the picture, film grain and damage and all, without any digital artifacts such as the one shown in Figure 6, below. Storing files of this size would require an enormous amount of memory – at present LTO-6 is considered to be the highest standard of magnetic tape data storage, with each tape able to hold 8TB of data.²³⁰ Its archival shelf life is 30 years, and it is designed so that each new model is backwards compatible to two generations of LTO, so the Digital Orgy could be secure for some years, and beyond that with relatively inexpensive upgrades.

²²⁹ Bordwell, *Pandora's Digital Box*, p. 201

²³⁰ Sofie Laier Henriksen, Wiel Seuskens, and Gaby Wijers, 'Best practices for a digital storage infrastructure for the long-term preservation of digital files', DCA, December 2012, p. 9-10



Figure 6: Notable compression in a single frame from *The Lone Ranger*, from a digital copy of *The Movie Orgy*

4. **Who can view *The Movie Orgy*?** – “The sheer length of it,” Joe Dante has said of the film, “and the fact that the audience is having this communal experience, having to digest all this crazy material – actually does make people giddy.”²³¹ This communal element to *The Movie Orgy*, its cinema-centric role, is one of the most unique aspects of the film, and one about which Dante feels very strongly. So much so that when I asked him if a fair use-cleared DVD/Blu-ray release were ever allowed, how he would feel, he responded: “I really don’t think that the fate of this movie should be that everybody gets their own copy to take home... It’s more like a concert in a

²³¹ Sachs, ‘The orgiast: an interview with Joe Dante (part two)’

way. It's something that you really have to be there for."²³² But there remains an audience out there for the film, so more Orgies don't seem to be too far over the horizon, and there must be hope that they can continue even after Dante is no longer able or willing to MC. Paolo Cherchi Usai says: "All our talk about budgets and legal rights, about the digital age and vinegar syndrome is meaningless if it does not preserve a thing that is no less precious than moving images themselves, the right to see them. Seeing is an art unto itself."²³³ In the meantime, the one audience who may require access to *The Movie Orgy* sooner rather than later are researchers. Beyond this thesis there remains a colossal amount of work for future academics to delve into this bottomless trough of cinematic madness. From cataloguing a complete list of titles, to deducing the origins of clips from their content and edge code information, or simply deconstructing Dante's politics and editing techniques. Perhaps donating a digital copy of *The Movie Orgy* to one of America's leading film studies departments would allow researchers an opportunity to crack further into this complex film problem. A metadata format such as Web Video Text Tracks (WebVTT)²³⁴ could be used to label the film clips within *The Movie Orgy*, providing live in-viewing descriptions of the content.

²³² Interview with David Neary, November 24, 2014

²³³ Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, p. 127

²³⁴ WebVTT, dev.w3.org/html5/webvtt/#introduction

It is clear that any of the projects recommended above would come with considerable price tags attached. And without allowance for wider distribution or a home video/on-demand release the project cannot hope to pay for itself. Grants might be made available, however, and putting *The Movie Orgy* forward for consideration for the National Film Registry, where it would join similar found footage works *A Movie* and *Decasia*, is recommended. Supporters of this work, once its existence is made better known, will not be hard to come by.

The Ends

“The form of *The Orgy* — and it does have a form, of sorts — is to open with openings and end with endings.”²³⁵ In the final reel of the movie the audience sees more than a dozen “The End” titles, as all of the B-movie films that gave it structure, draw to a close, and a few others thrown in for good measure. When Porky Pig stutters “That’s all folks!” there’s still three minutes left to go.

The Movie Orgy has many ends, and indeed has had many lives. For a film buried for so long in obscurity – that rare sort of film that could still reasonably be deemed a “cult movie” – *The Movie Orgy* refuses to die like the monsters it features, or decay like the film fragments it was printed on. Nearly 50 years ago Dante stitched a Frankenstein’s monster together out of celluloid and film cement, and nothing can contain it forever. Slowly, very slowly, the beast rampages on.

²³⁵ Bordwell, ‘Dante’s cheerful purgatorio’

Appendix A

Interview with Joe Dante

The following is the transcript of a phone interview with Joe Dante, recorded by David Neary on November 24, 2014.

[as the recording began, Dante and I had just been discussing the possibility of giving me access to a viewing copy of The Movie Orgy]

JOE DANTE: “It’s such an overwhelming experience. You can’t really qualify it much if you don’t have it in front of you. But I am glad that you actually saw it in a theatrical environment first. Because one of the reasons aside from copyright that we’ve never disseminated this thing is that it’s the communal experience of watching it that’s part of the adventure. And simply watching it by itself on a screen – that’s interesting too but it lacks the social aspect that I think is so appealing about seeing it with an audience. You gotta remember that in one form or another I’ve been talking about this thing for 40 years. There’s only been a recent spate of anything other than archival interest in it. It was sort of a legend for a while; people who saw it told other people about it and since obviously the base of people who saw it was very small because we could only fill up one hall at a time over a period of years that it became this sort of urban legend. And then when they trotted it out about eight years ago at the New Beverly here just to see what the reaction would be, to see if anybody would even show up, and it turned into this sort of social phenomenon. That led to lots of other screenings in lots of other places.

DAVID NEARY: “There’s never been a “definitive” version of *The Movie Orgy*. It began out as a form of projector based performance art?”

JD: “Yes it was. It was sort of similar at the time to *Chelsea Girls*, the Warhol picture, where he would screen the picture on two different screens, always in a different sync, so the images on one side of the screen would have something to do, or not, with what was on the other side of the screen. And so as a result no two public performances were ever quite the same. And sometimes the two sides commented on each other and other times they just had nothing to do with each other. But I remember finding that intriguing when I saw it. Certainly more so than it would have been if I had had to watch any one of the screens by itself. Because it was generally pretty inactive film. But for *The Movie Orgy* it really started with a serial that we rented. In the wake of the theatrical reissue of the 1943 *Batman* serial, where hordes of college students with pizza in hand would descend on this theatre. It happened to be at the World Theater in Philadelphia which usually showed art films, it was a big theatre though. And they showed all the 15 chapters of this thing one after the other. And seeing them end-to-end you saw all the cheats, all the things that kids didn’t notice a week later in 1943. But also the rampant racism of it. This WWII, anti-ethnic stuff. It was *shocking* for us. And it was kind of illuminating. Because attitudes that a lot of our parents held were now explicable, because this is where they got that stuff. ‘Cause the people were being fed a pretty diet of this during WWII. At least on that comic book level. And so it was not that I was so

enamoured of the serial itself but I was enamoured of the experience, and the camaraderie of the crowd, which I had seldom witnessed in a movie theatre except once during a screening of *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven, 1995), where the audience, it was like they were watching *The Movie Orgy*, and they were talking and yelling at the screen, and when the movie was over they came out into the lobby as if they just gotten off a sinking ship. And there's something about that kind of – being able to instill that kind of reaction in an audience, that I found intriguing. And so we rented this Bela Lugosi serial called *The Phantom Creeps*, which happened to be the only serial in Philadelphia which was available with all the chapters, and interspersed it with... just a bunch of stuff that we had. You know, commercials, and pieces of other films, and uh, detritus that was just put on reels because they had to put them on somewhere. And on occasion we would actually cut into the serial, and... for instance they had a lot of... at the end of the picture the mad doctor drops a lot of bombs and there's a lot of stock footage of Dresden and things, and we just added to that, more explosions and volcanoes erupting and you know, much like what is now the last reel or so of *The Movie Orgy*. And it was fun and everybody liked it, and so we thought we'd repeat it, but we didn't wanna run the same film. So we started the idea of running – since most films don't run 3hrs like a serial, we would rent different movies and show just the parts that were good, and then when they got boring we would switch to the other projector that had our stuff on it and we'd run that for a while until we could roll down to the next spot in the movie and then we'd turn it back on again. And then we would cut to another movie, and we'd put another movie on! And so we would ultimately be telling maybe five stories

simultaneously. But always with the proviso that we have to keep changing up the reels on the projector while we're showing this thing. And so it didn't give us a lot of control, plus it was expensive to rent the movies. Finally we just started buying the movies, buying prints of the movies, and cutting them up. And that was where we crossed the line from a legal screening to an illegal screening. But no one ever said anything about it. We never got in trouble with anybody. But we were very low profile. I mean the only fame that we ever had was when the Schlitz beer company came to see one of our performances and was interested in distributing this thing on college campuses and giving out free beer. Giving us like a hundred bucks every time we would do it. We would take the reels and we would get on an airplane and we would go to Buffalo, New York, in a snowstorm and get out and run this thing for kids. And then I guess they would charge admission, and Schlitz would give us a hundred bucks, and I guess we'd probably get a cut of the take or whatever. And it was... remunerative. It was a lot of work, but we were actually seeing some results. Plus the legend was growing; people were talking about this movie, this *Movie Orgy* thing – what is it? And people who hadn't seen it wanted to see it, and people who had seen it would tell people about it and they wouldn't believe it. This is back when it was seven hours long! So... that's a lot of film. And of course it was designed so that if you got up and left and came back, you wouldn't have missed anything. Because... of course you did miss something, but it wouldn't matter! You know, it shouldn't make any difference. And it became quite popular in its tiny sphere, for us, until finally I came out to California and got a job working for Roger Corman; Jon Davison had already preceded me out here. We would hire friends of ours to take

the film and run it somewhere because we couldn't do it, we didn't have the time to get away from our jobs to do it. So for about – I dunno – two or three years in the late-mid-70s when we first came out here, we would hire people to run these things, and we made a dupe of the film, and since there were always pieces coming in and out of the film, we would take some of the pieces that we'd cut from one version and we'd put them in the other version. This of course necessitated a great deal of focus changing, and sound riding, because the dupe footage would come on and it'd be out of focus, and you'd have to focus it. And also the sound would be lower so you'd have to boost it. After a while it just got to be too much trouble, to keep track of all this stuff, and the fact that we only had this stuff on film meant that every time it came back from running some place it was either scratched or it was torn, and it had to be repaired. Plus every time we would find some new piece of funny footage or something we would – I would try to find a way to splice it in. I had these big lists of what was in every reel, and then what caused this, and maybe I could put it here, and then it could comment on this. I got into pulling out just phrases from movies and keeping them in a trim bin, so if there was ever a joke that could be made by sticking a phrase into a scene I could do that. But it just got away from us, it was really just too time-consuming. And so we just let it go away for a while, for like 20 years or something, until one of the later versions that we had put together – because Schlitz kept coming back to us and saying 'jeez it's too long, can't you make it shorter?', and then they would also say things like 'can't you put *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* in it? Can't you put *The Flintstones* in it? Can't you put something that was new in it?' They didn't seem to understand that what was most funny was the more

sincere, Ed Wood level kind of material that took itself very seriously, and then became funny. And as soon as you got into self-aware material, it was kidding itself, it didn't have the same impact, and also it didn't have the nostalgia value. And one of the main appeals of it was that there were so many kids' shows from the '50s that we had scenes from that the audience hadn't seen or thought of in years, and they would see this stuff and it was this instant rush of memory, of what they had seen and forgotten over the years. And it created this big audience bond where they just would be having this wonderful time. And then also politically it was very anti-war and anti-establishment because those were the times and those were our politics – and still are. So, there was a lot of anti-government stuff and anti-war stuff, which suited the tone of the time.

DN: The material, was it a mixture of 35 and 16mm?

JD: No, never 35.

DN: The films you originally mixed in with the serial, this was just 16mm film you picked up?

JD: Both Jon and I were film collectors, so we had prints. But also we knew a lot of people at various rental exchanges. When they would get a new print of a film, or a new reel 5, 'cause their old reel 5 was beat-up, they would throw out their reel 5, and we would get that and add that to our library. So we had lots of bits and pieces

of films that were out of service, essentially, and we would just hold onto them and see if there was a place to use them. There was a Wild Bill Hickok serial, a Western serial, with lots of intertitles, which would be very funny if you followed something and then it said 'And MEANWHILE, the gang loots Abeleine' or whatever, and it was a way of trying to tell a story, even though it wasn't really the same story. But by putting the things together in chronological order it would look like we were actually following the story, and it was one of the reasons that I think people were willing to sit through the whole thing, because it wasn't just a pile of random stuff. It all seemed to be going somewhere.

DN: Fastforwarding to more recently – you had it digitized because the reel was falling apart?

JD: Well we actually... the first time I transferred it was in 2000. The Locarno Film Festival did a retrospective of all my stuff and they wanted to run *The Movie Orgy*. And I just knew that nobody could make it run but me, and I didn't wanna have to do it. So I said well why don't we put it on a D-1 and so I transferred it to a D-1 and they ran it, and also a lot of outtakes from movies I'd done, that it was much easier to just transfer to video. So they ran it on video there; when it came time to do the New Beverly thing, I was trying to find the video, I had put it in the Academy but it got lost. So I made a new transfer, of what I happened to have at the time which was the five-hour version. And I actually did some due diligence and put back some things that had been taken out. As much stuff as I could find. But I couldn't replicate all of –

I mean one of the movies that we used to run was *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, so we have all of the 20 minutes of pieces of that, but I didn't really have a place to put them, because all the linking material had been moved. So, I put in some of *College Confidential* which there used to be more of, but now only the beginning, and I tried to give a taste of what it was like when we first put it together.

DN: The copy you have now, that's also in the Academy?

JD: No, there's nothing in the Academy, except the video. Because the print is here in my screening room, I didn't even give it to the Academy. I thought that I needed to hold onto it.

DN: So you still actually have the film?

JD: I have the film. It can be run, however it's not as complete as what I've been doing on video, because some of the pieces I have put back on video.

DN: So there is no definitive version, but the digitized version then is the version that audiences will see from now on?

JD: It's the version that most people have seen since 2000, yeah. Some of the later screenings have been a little bit more complete than the earlier screenings, but it's essentially the same film.

DN: What you are saying to me then is that if the mood took you could tinker with it just that little bit more?

JD: Well no if somebody said “well we wanna do a blu-ray and we wanna re-transfer it” then I think I could probably pull together some stuff, and maybe some of the stuff would actually be taken off DVDs of some of the actual films instead of print stuff we have, because the prints are really beat up now. And some of them are scratchy and splicey and all that and I could probably get much better quality off of other videos.

DN: What do you think the *Orgy* is now?

JD: The word ‘relic’ comes to mind. You know, it’s a relic of a bygone age. Some of what it was satirizing, which is late night television changing channels, it’s not even really part of the culture any more. I mean you can’t turn on the TV at night and click and have all these old movies on channels, and all of this strange material. It’s all infomercials. And so that experience of changing channels and watching pieces of movies is pretty much gone. And I think the fact that the internet has taken up the idea of intercutting all this stuff together and making all these found footage things is where that idea has gravitated to. And I don’t think a lot of people will remember where it actually came from.

DN: Does the idea of a home movie release bother, or horrify you?

JD: No it doesn't horrify me. If I did a blu-ray it would be to project with an audience, I really don't think that the fate of this movie should be that everybody gets their own copy to take home. I just don't think it's – it's more like a concert in a way. It's something that you really have to be there for.

DN: It would be great to do a wider showcase, though, perhaps.

JD: Well, there are certain problems with that. (laughs)

DN: In 50 years or so there's nothing in the *Orgy* that will still be under copyright.

JD: Actually a remarkable amount of the *Orgy* has fallen into the public domain since we did it.

DN: Ken Jacobs removed a lot of material from *Star Spangled to Death* in order to get it released.

JD: But they didn't have to do that for instance on *LA Plays Itself*, which now is out in a very nice version, with good quality, and I think has been vetted properly, and is considered a work of fair use.

DN: Do you know of any material in *The Movie Orgy* that now only exists in *The Movie Orgy*?

JD: Uh, yes. For instance, I would suggest that the Bufferin commercials, where the guy's on the draft board and he's gonna send this kid to the war, and there's another guy evicting some old people, and there's another guy who's shooting a gun, and the kid doesn't wanna take it from him. It was a campaign about sensitive people, which apparently was never run, or run once, and then. But I just happened to have the 16mm; I've never seen them anywhere else. There's probably... there's a number of things I don't actually know what they are. Because you know there's some things I just don't – it came to me as footage but it wasn't labeled so I don't know what movie it is. I'm sure due diligence could find that out. You can sort of recognize the actors some times. I would say that there's probably 5% of it that might be unique to *The Movie Orgy*.

DN: Have you ever sat down and done a catalog of what's in *The Movie Orgy*?

JD: I have my old notes of what was in each reel, so that exists. But it's very general – it's *Rin Tin Tin*, or Bufferin, or whatever. Whatever the material is it just says that, it doesn't say where it's from, or what year it is or anything like that.

DN: I've been watching a lot of your movies lately...

JD: Oh you'll find a lot of references to *The Movie Orgy*. I mean there's a lot of stuff in *Matinee* that's directly from *The Movie Orgy*. That whole Harvey Starkweather thing is right out of *The Movie Orgy*.

DN: There is always a scene in your movies where one of the characters is watching a B-movie on the television.

JD: That's a little harder to do these days believably, because there's so few channels that actually run that kind of stuff any more.

DN: One last quick question, is there anything in *The Movie Orgy* that has been manipulated, or produced by you, beyond the editing?

JD: There's a card at the beginning that says 'The Movie Orgy' and some stills and things. That's part of my student film that opening. But there's nothing 'original' in there, quote unquote. We didn't do anything for it. There's another student film at the end of it by some guy whose name I can't remember, which is the priest who's reading *Playboy* while he's preaching and there's a little Christ figure on the cross that starts moving and he staple-guns it. That's somebody's student film from that period, but I don't remember who the guy was!