“Hard to Handle”: Camp Criticism, Trash-Film Reception, and the Transgressive Pleasures of Myra Breckinridge

by DAVID SCOTT DIFFRIENT

Abstract: Twentieth Century Fox’s Myra Breckinridge (Michael Sarne, 1970) is perhaps the most notorious studio-backed motion picture of its generation. This article adduces the reasons behind the film’s initial failings, discusses its subsequent reevaluations by various cult fan communities, analyzes key scenes, and examines the “campy” critical rhetoric that has contributed to its shifting cultural status over the years. Despite its initial failure to connect with mainstream viewers, Myra Breckinridge has done much to destabilize taste-based assumptions of “trash” and “art” while collapsing distinctions between Old Hollywood and New Hollywood through a radical, transgressive textuality.

It was really the last movie of its kind—a big Hollywood studio movie.
—David Giler, co-screenwriter of Myra Breckinridge (1970)

At the end of the 1960s, Twentieth Century Fox produced two audacious, stylistically unrestrained films that marked a dramatic shift in cinematic depictions of sexual themes. At once bawdy and breast obsessed, these X-rated exercises in brilliantly bad taste—Myra Breckinridge (Michael Sarne, 1970) and Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (Russ Meyer, 1970)—did not merely drive the final nails into the coffin of Old Hollywood. They poured dirt atop that studio-era casket and danced a malicious jitterbug on its grave. Despite an initially negative reception among reviewers, these two films have risen to the top of the trash heap in recent years to become cult classics. At the time of their original release, however, critic

2 At various times throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Myra Breckinridge and Beyond the Valley of the Dolls were showcased as a double bill at the New Beverly, a Los Angeles revival theater that continues to program esoteric and unusual fare, thanks to monthly financial support provided by Quentin Tarantino.

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John Simon referred to these and a few other “scandalous” productions (including *Boom!* [Joseph Losey, 1968], *End of the Road* [Aram Avakian, 1970], and *Performance* [Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg, 1970]) as “loathsome films.” According to Harry M. Benshoff, the so-called loathsome film was a visible sign of the many changes occurring within the industry at a time when “foreign, countercultural, and/or queer influences” were contributing to an expansion of “the syntax and meaning of Hollywood filmmaking.” Simon and other reviewers, including Charles Champlin and Pauline Kael, considered such works “sleazy,” “self-indulgent,” “meretricious,” “promiscuous,” “amoral,” “vulgar,” and “degenerate.” As Benshoff argues, the backlash against films like *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and *Myra Breckinridge* “was an attempt by critics, filmmakers, and moviegoers to renegotiate the form, content, and meaning of Hollywood film—to rewrite the ‘laws of the market’ in order to stifle a specific ‘mode of expression.’” Of these two, *Myra Breckinridge*, an adaptation of Gore Vidal’s 1968 novel of the same name and the first Fox film branded with an X rating by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), was perhaps the most notorious studio-backed motion picture of its generation. To quote J. Hoberman, it was (and remains) “Hollywood’s most remarkable assault on popular taste.”

Like Vidal’s controversial novel, the film’s story line concerns a gay movie buff named Myron (played by film critic Rex Reed) who undergoes a sex-change operation in Copenhagen so as to reinvent himself as a silicone-implanted diva. He then returns to America as Myra (played by Raquel Welch), a woman bent on seeking revenge against the men in Hollywood responsible for so many of its misogynistic images. Indeed, she is quite literally bent on bending men, on bending them over. Like an undercover agent, she pretends to be the widow of Myron and takes a job as an instructor at an acting school in Los Angeles: the Buck Loner Academy, run by her “dead husband’s” uncle (played by John Huston). There she meets an aspiring cowboy actor named Rusty Godowsky (Roger Herren), one of the many wide-eyed, would-be stars enrolled at the drama school, which Myra plans to take over in much the same way she will overtake him.

In the film’s most “shocking” scene, after having invited Rusty into her office for a medical checkup, Myra attempts to expand the young man’s sexual horizons by brandishing a strap-on dildo (“tastefully” hidden off-screen) behind the macho homophobe in an act of forced anal intercourse—described by an offended critic as one of the

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5 Benshoff, “Beyond the Valley of the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” 94.

6 Besides receiving an X rating from the Code and Rating Administration of the MPAA, *Myra Breckinridge*, along with other films from that period (including Metro’s *The Strawberry Statement* [Stuart Hagmann, 1970] and National General’s *The Cheyenne Social Club* [Gene Kelly, 1970], drew a “Condemned” (“C”) tag from the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures because of their “morally objectionable” material. “Catholics and MPAA United in Faulting of ‘Breckinridge,’” *Variety*, July 8, 1970.

“most distasteful moments in film history.”

Throughout this admittedly disturbing yet hilarious scene—indeed, throughout the entire film—are several clips from such black-and-white classics as Dante’s Inferno (Harry Lachman, 1935), The Mark of Zorro (Rouben Mamoulian, 1940), The Little Foxes (William Wyler, 1941), Kiss of Death (Henry Hathaway, 1947), and The Pride of St. Louis (Harmon Jones, 1952), each providing a comical commentary on the action and suggesting that Myra worships at the altar of the images she criticizes for perpetuating less-than-progressive attitudes toward race, gender, and sexuality.

Produced by Robert Fryer on a budget of roughly $5 million (inclusive of $350,000 paid to Vidal for the rights to his novel) and helmed by the relatively inexperienced British director Michael Sarne, who also cowrote the film with David Giler after Vidal had made his own unsuccessful attempts at writing the screenplay, Myra Breckinridge failed to connect with a large mainstream audience upon its original release and was among the biggest box-office washouts of the early 1970s, grossing a mere $3 million in the United States. Today, it is still often referred to as “the most reviled movie in Hollywood history,” although many contemporary critics appear to be more willing to adopt a sympathetic attitude and point out its strengths (or charms) rather than its weaknesses. This article assesses the film’s initial failings as well as its subsequent reevaluations by various cult fan communities, looking carefully at the “campy” critical rhetoric that has contributed to its shifting cultural status over the years. Just as cult movies often elicit a discursive range of spectatorial responses due to their aesthetic transgressions, formal innovations, and rhetorical invitations to take up ironically detached yet receptive positions vis-à-vis the “imperfections” of a text, so, too, can movie critics—especially those who employ flamboyant prose—be seen as purveyors of “perversity.” That is, as camp producers (rather than just receivers), critics have the capacity to undermine conventional notions of good taste and propriety by ushering in hyperbolic wordplay, grotesquely corporeal adjectives, and questionable metaphors or rhetorical flourishes (see, for instance, my own funereal imagery above).

Such potential, embedded in purposefully delirious approaches to cinema’s aesthetic values, has not been lost on historian Greg Taylor, author of Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism. Taylor points toward a pivotal shift that occurred in postwar vanguard criticism, which began privileging “vulgar” movies as legitimate and vital cultural expressions capable of challenging middlebrow, “mainstream, consumer-friendly modernism.” In some ways, this development harkens

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9 Howard Thompson, “Gore Vidal to Guide ‘Myra’ Film Career as Writer-Producer,” New York Times, March 8, 1968. As outlined in the studio’s March 28, 1968, contract for purchase of literary material, the $350,000 that Twentieth Century Fox paid to acquire the rights to Vidal’s book included remake rights, providing that such an undertaking were to commence prior to March 28, 1983. “Stan Hough’s Black Book,” Myra Breckinridge Production Files, Special Collections, UCLA Arts Library, Los Angeles, CA.


back to the kind of “erotic spectatorship” practiced by film critic Parker Tyler in the 1940s and filmmaker Kenneth Anger in the 1950s and early 1960s, a heyday for what Taylor has referred to as “creative camp reception.” That was a period in American film history when a few exhibition spaces in Manhattan (primarily in the East Village), including the Charles Theater, the Thalia, and the Bleecker Street Cinema, began programming “underground” works—challenging avant-garde and experimental films, as well as gay “physique” films and same-sex erotica—that were often paired with examples of classical Hollywood cinema. That “perverse” combination, detailed by Janet Staiger in her study of early-1960s underground cinema, not only encouraged a combined campy-cultish mode of spectatorship (or what she refers to as a “communal participation” with cinematic texts) but also anticipated the dialectical mishmashing of aesthetic sensibilities in *Myra Breckinridge* a few years later.

By engaging in what Taylor calls “resistant camp refashioning,” some critics and audiences were thus becoming more attuned to the inner workings of exploitation cinema and the politics of taste in the years leading up to the film’s 1970 release. Such refashioning, however, required viewers to adopt a more sensitive perspective on the ways in which trash films in general were capable of stimulating a sense of both emotional and physical involvement among a select few audience members while alienating a majority of others. At the very least, cinema’s subjectively pleasing (and displeasing) experiences could now be brought to the fore in those texts that embraced camp’s unique performative protocols—its flamboyant modes of metapresentation and mockery. In the following pages, after providing a tour through the *Myra Breckinridge* backstory, I consider its transgressive pleasures via an analysis of several key scenes, before concluding with an exploration of its camp reception. These intertextually rich and excess-filled moments, along with the equally excessive critical language attending the film’s original release and subsequent reemergence as a cult classic, provide instructive guidelines for how we might begin modifying our spectatorial relationship to cinema, inviting us to consider the reciprocal interplay between industry, text, audience, and criticism.

**Behind the Scenes, Beneath the Jeans: Much Ado about Myra**

What was anal in the book is banal in the movie.

—Joe Rosen, 1970 review of *Myra Breckinridge*

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12 In the preface to *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), Parker Tyler states, “I think that straight (no less than kinky) camp is a perfectly valid instrument of criticism, particularly in terms of an art offering the public so many crass charades as the movies did and still do” (12). See also Taylor, *Artists in the Audience*, 98.

