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Cult and Camp

Dr. M

Paper 1

Full-Cage: A Case for the Cult Status of *Mandy*

Dangerous drugs, endless supplies of fake blood, murderous cults led by blonde folk musicians, too many moons, massive chainsaws, and Nicolas Cage. *Mandy* (Cosmatos, 2018) takes all of these wonderful tropes, shoves them into an 80s themed box, and slaps a ribbon made of heavy metal on top. *Mandy* is a wholly unique take on the classic revenge thriller that shoves the viewer through a door, slams it shut, and swallows the key. This psychedelic film is incredibly immersive and has massive production value for the kind of story that it tells. *Mandy* has the genetic makeup of any classic cult film and has already, in its brief lifespan, developed a cultish following. *Mandy* epitomizes what it means to be a contemporary cult film due to its elusiveness upon release, its association with Legion M, the extreme excess of the film, the transgressive themes and content, and the participation of its fans in the development of meaning.

If one were to pitch *Mandy* to a potential audience, the easiest classification that one could give would be a revenge film, hence the use of the term in the previous paragraph but pigeonholing this film into any genre would not do it justice. In the Shadow Mountains, Red Miller, played by the fan-favorite Nicolas Cage, lives in a blissful solitude with his girlfriend, Mandy. Upon catching a glimpse of Mandy on a drive around the forest, the megalomaniacal leader of the Children of the New Dawn, Jeremiah Sand, decides that he must have her. Jeremiah’s fiendish cult and the Black Skulls, a gang of permanently tripped out Hell’s Angel types, break into Red and Mandy’s serene haven, gags Red with barbed wire, forces Mandy to consume LSD and wasp venom, and then Jeremiah tries to get Mandy to sleep with him. Upon seeing the shape and size of Jeremiah’s penis, Mandy cackles at him. Obviously, Jeremiah’s ego is far too fragile to handle something of this nature, so he burns Mandy alive in front of a tormented Red and takes off. After they leave, Red frees himself from his shackles and gag, and embarks on a murderous rampage to get revenge on his partner’s assailants with a crossbow and a freshly forged battle axe.

The casual film audience may have missed the release of Panos Cosmatos’ second feature film due to its severely limited theatrical release, but this factor only serves to enhance *Mandy*’s eligibility for cult film status. *Mandy* premiered at the 2018 installment of the Sundance Film Festival and had a moderately successful film festival run. Following the festival loop, *Mandy’s* theatrical release was limited to a mere 250 theaters. Today, *Mandy* is available on Amazon Prime, YouTube Movies, and on the horror streaming service, Shudder. While the film is accessible now, at the time of its original release it was quite elusive. Further, *Mandy* had a very limited marketing strategy and has been something of a secret to mainstream audiences. Hence, *Mandy* is a film that audiences must discover in order to enjoy. In this way, *Mandy* satisfies a requirement that Adrian Martin suggests for a film to really be considered cult. Martin writes in “What’s Cult Got To Do With It?: In Defense of Cinephile Elitism” that “a cult film is an ‘orphan,’ discarded, forgotten, or never-recognized by the industrial circuit of cinema. We need to be able to find it in a state of oblivion in order to reclaim it as an object of cult veneration.” (40) While *Mandy* may not have been specifically “discarded,” it certainly was forgotten by the mainstream circuit and thus fits with Martin’s dangerously essentialist definition of Cult.

*Mandy* is a film for the fans. As a film starring Nicolas Cage that gives the heavy metal comic book audiences exactly what they want for two hours, it seems like a fantastic example of fan service. *Mandy* was produced in part by Legion M, the first production company that allows fans to not only invest but also have a creative hand in projects. Legion M has also had a hand in creating fan favorite films like the *Jay and Silent Bob Reboot* (Smith, 2019) and *The Field Guide to Evil* (League and Timpson, 2018), which was a follow up to the cult classic horror anthology film *The ABCs of Death* (League and Timpson, 2012). Legion M clearly has a sensitivity and passion for cult cinema and knows the formula. Thus, the relationship between Legion M and Panos Cosmatos’ psychedelic horror film should come as no surprise. While the involvement of Legion M by no means establishes any film as a cult film, it does provide a piece of intentionality that must be considered in the context of *Mandy*.

Any film must maintain an aesthetic of excess in order to qualify for cult status and *Mandy* checks this box with a quickness. The first hint at the excessive tone of *Mandy* that Cosmatos gives to the viewer is a quote in red against a black background set to a shredding electric guitar riff which serves as the first visual of the film. “When I die // bury me deep // lay two speakers at my feet // wrap some headphones // around my head // and rock and roll me // when I’m dead.” This quote, written by Cosmatos just to set the tone of the film, was suggested by Reddit user alex\_deitsch to “probably just [be] a dope quote to set the tone for the film. The whole film embodies this dark doom metal vibe so I’m guessing it’s just to get the mood going.” In Jeffrey Sconce’s masterful article “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” he quotes Kristin Thompson to describe “excess as a value that exists beyond a cinematic signifiers ‘motivated’ use… At the point where motivation ends, excess begins.” (547) Essentially, excess could be considered to be anything that is not motivated the film.

*Mandy* is filled to the blood-soaked brim with all varieties of excess. The film makes use of massive chainsaws, gallons of fake blood, anime-styled sequences, and large quantities of LSD. In one representatively excessive sequence, Panos Cosmatos goes so far as to play with the medium of the film in a completely unmotivated way. After attempting to hunt them down, Red is captured by the monstrous Black Skulls and locked up in the basement of their home base. He kills one of them by cracking their skull with a pipe and launching them into a dark pit that appears to have no bottom. The excess in this moment is important to note, as this hole to the center of the earth is just located in a random house in California. The hole is completely unmotivated, nonsensical, and serves no real purpose to the story.

After escaping the first Black Skull, Red goes on a rampage through the house. He discovers another Black Skull in the middle of masturbating to a homemade pornographic film of Jeremiah Sand. This Black Skull, grotesquely named “Fuck Pig,” serves to essentialize the excess of *Mandy* through the representation of his penis as a massive knife. After Red slaughters Fuck Pig and the other surviving Black Skulls in the house, he finds a jar of the bad LSD and takes a small taste. As soon as the LSD touches Red’s tongue, he launches into a violent hallucinatory moment that is shown through an experimental clay-based stop motion animation that reveals Red’s next destination, the radio tower that serves as the laboratory of The Chemist.

Cult films tend to deal with sensitive subjects, sometimes sensitively but other times not so much. Without considering the moral value of the representation of these themes at the current juncture, cult films tend to be transgressive. As J.P. Telotte explains in “Beyond All Reason: The Nature of the Cult” that “the cult film experience… represent[s] a ‘supertext’ that can be described only in terms of a boundary crossing.” (16) and then later posits that through this experience “we celebrate a most pleasurable transgression, as we vicariously cross over into taboo territory and then emerge to tell of it.” (16) After one finishes the viewing experience that constitutes a watching of *Mandy*, it certainly feels like one has traveled through the gauntlet and survived. Panos Cosmatos certainly jumped headfirst into a world of transgressive material with this film. Wrapped inside the colorful exterior of the revenge film, one will find various taboo subjects.

The film deals thematically and textually with cults. In a post-Manson world, specifically in the 80s when the film is set, the word cult evokes a tangible fear in the minds of people. Cults are definitely a taboo subject. The Children of the New Dawn are the antagonistic hydra of Red Miller’s blood-soaked journey, therefore the transgressive presence of the cult is highly prevalent. Further, the psychedelic drug LSD is an extremely important theme in the film. A bad batch of LSD is the source of the masochistic brutality and superhuman qualities found in the Black Skulls. During the San Francisco Acid Wave of the late 60s and early 70s, LSD became an incredibly taboo cultural and political issue. Generally, LSD is regarded with intense negativity and considered a dangerous and illegal substance. Considering the experience that *Mandy* gives the audience, which Panos Cosmatos has explained is intended to visually and aurally represent an Acid trip, the transgression of the film is clear. The territory that *Mandy* trudges through is incredibly taboo, thus the film is undeniably transgressive.

Despite the short lifespan of *Mandy*, the film has already developed a quite vocal fanbase. As already stated, Panos Cosmatos premiered the film at Sundance in 2018 so *Mandy* has only been in circulation for about two years. Also considering the inaccessibility of the film for a sizable period of its run, it may come as a surprise that *Mandy* has such a prolific internet presence. The successful film review YouTube channel, FoundFlix, released a video in September of 2018 entitled “MANDY (2018) Ending Explained.” This channel, as the name may suggest, explores cult and horror films that fall by the wayside. Many Redditors have taken to forums to discuss theories about the film and its merits. One Redditor with the username Dark\_Vengeance, posted a thread in /r/movies titled “Mandy is a weird ass movie.” This thread received 70 upvotes and created a dialogue consisting of 57 comments. *Mandy* is clearly a film that people want to talk about, and in order to talk about it they are forced to hunt down likeminded people on forums like Reddit. The film is also the subject of many podcast episodes, people seem to think that there is much to unpack inside the 80s-stylized revenge film. *The Only Podcast About Movies* released an episode called “Ep 181: Mandy” that attempted to both read and critique the film. In this way, Henry Jenkins’ discussion of fans is relatable to *Mandy*. Jenkins writes in “‘Get a life!’: Fans, poachers, nomads” that “Fans recognize that their relationship to the text remains a tentative one, that their pleasures often exist on the margins of the original text and in the face of the producer’s own efforts to regulate its meanings. While fans display a particularly strong attachment to popular narratives, act upon them in ways which make them their own property in some senses.” (434) To offer a simpler account of this position, fans of cult films tend to pull meaning from the object of their affection. If fans of *Mandy* are prolifically creating and sharing theories about the film, then according to Jenkins’ account of cult fandom, *Mandy* must be a cult film.

An unfortunate factor that works against the case for the cult status of *Mandy* is its budget. The film had a budget of $6 million, which is a pretty serious number for a film with the niche appeal of this one. Cult films importantly have low budgets and “trash” aesthetics, but this film has neither. *Mandy* has incredible production value due to its sizable budget. One may argue that this point detracts from the status of *Mandy* as a cult film, but one would argue too hastily. As mentioned earlier, *Mandy* was created by the production company Legion M and this association quickly dismisses the hasty objector’s point. The Legion M website explains that “Legion M is using disruptive new equity crowdfunding laws to build an entertainment company owned by fans.” Legion M’s cutting-edge fan-based fundraising techniques surely take precedence over the budgetary restrictions of *Mandy*. Legion M has been established as a positive in the case for the cult status of *Mandy* and thus should not simultaneously be used to negate the status. To further defend against this accusation, the hasty objector must also recognize that *Mandy* only collected $1.4 million in the box office. This statistic only serves to further prove that this film is undeniably cult.

Due to the circumstances surrounding the making of *Mandy*, the contents and style of the film, and the reception, Panos Cosmatos’ surreal synthesized revenge flick must not simply be considered a cult film, it must be considered as the epitome of contemporary cult. Not only is *Mandy* filled to the brim with excess and transgressive themes, not only is *Mandy* heavily associated with a production company that exists for the sole purpose of cult-fan service, not only was *Mandy* quite the elusive title upon release, but *Mandy* has also been the subject of much internet discourse and theorizing in the way of all cult films. This blood-soaked heavy metal caper deserves the cult status that has been given to only a select number of films. *Mandy* is a film like no other and should certainly be heralded as a groundbreaking example of paracinema.

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