

Movie riffing at B-Fest: An exploration of unscripted in-theater audience participation as embodied performance of film criticism

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Abstract:

An increasingly rich area of interest in audience and media studies is the cultural practice of *movie riffing*: the performance of verbally or physically responding to a film with conspicuously critical and/or humorous observations. Riffing, a model of media consumption innovated and popularized by the cult television program *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, is a prominent feature of participatory audiencing rituals by which filmgoers and fan communities publicly engage in struggle over the meaning and value of mediated texts. Drawing on scholarship from cult audience, cultural and performance studies, this essay explores the state of ritual movie riffing at B-Fest, Northwestern University's long-running annual twenty-four-hour celebration of 'bad movies' and the culture surrounding their public consumption. After riffing alongside B-Fest's enthusiastic attendees, the author presents rhetorical strategies and discursive themes from B-Fest and considers movie riffing as a participatory, communal model of media criticism.

Keywords: movie riffing, audiencing rituals, cult audiences, midnight movies

One need only gaze across the landscape of McCormick Auditorium on the final weekend of January to know the attendees of B-Fest take their bad movies seriously. By 6:00 p.m. Friday each of McCormick's 200-plus seats will be occupied with festival attendees and their belongings: winter coats, backpacks, blankets and pillows, knotted plastic grocery sacks of provisions, and hundreds of thin white paper plates. The space between the front row and the stage separating the audience from the screen is an unassembled Cabela's display of coolers, backpacks, and sleeping bags. Someone has transported and erected a six-tier shelf of plastic storage bins, the insides of which are stuffed with foodstuffs as colorful and organized as a professional angler's tackle box.

The sheer absurdity of lugging all this through wintery Chicagoland for a trip to the movies is not for purposes of camp in the Sontag-ian sense or the outdoor connotation. It is a material manifestation of a cult's devotion to B-Fest, Northwestern University's annual twenty-four-hour film festival celebrating so-called bad movies and the culture surrounding their conspicuous consumption. With due respect to the enduringly passionate legions of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *The Room*, no moviegoing experience longitudinally obliterates static conceptions of a night at the movies like twenty-four carnivalesque hours at B-Fest.

In the tradition of participatory cult audiencing rituals such as those associated with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (*Rocky Horror*, hereafter) and *The Room*, as well as uniquely immersive themed screenings hosted by the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema, B-Fest is a fully embodied, communal audiencing experience that 'counters the contemporary trend for film viewing to be more of an individual activity and less of a special social event' (De Ville 8). B-Fest also fits comfortably within the tradition of *midnight movies*, 'the most social form of cinemagoing' (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 301). For B-Fest's twenty-four-hour duration, audience members animate the theater space with jokes, chants, songs, props, and projectiles. Doing so is both sanctioned and culturally appropriate; per the official B-Fest website (www.b-fest.com): 'viewers are encouraged to voice their opinions of onscreen events, especially if such comments provide entertainment for the other festival attendees.' Like its fellow embodied audiencing rituals, B-Fest is characterized by 'heightened cultural togetherness' (Barker 57) and *thematic immersion* by which its participants 'remain aware of the synchronicity and harmony with which the community *jointly acts*' (Moulton 210).

What distinguishes audiencing at B-Fest from *Rocky Horror* and *The Room* is that the vast majority of B-Fest's ritual is unscripted and unchoreographed. With no precirculated audiencing script, B-Fest participants devise their roles in the ritual in real time. B-Fest's participatory ethic borrows heavily in embodied form and discursive function from the practice of *movie riffing*. Riffing, broadly defined, is the act of consuming a mediated text (e.g., film, television, speech, poem) and conspicuously responding to the text *in the process* of consuming it (as opposed to discussing or critiquing afterward). Movie rifiers devise and perform speech acts – jokes, chants, critical (counter)statements – and embodied gestures to assertively situate their interpretations of the text between their audience and the screen with the purpose of reframing the text in real time.

Through such conspicuous acts of productive meaning-making, a manifestation of what John Fiske calls *enunciative productivity* (37), rifiers attempt to poach (De Certeau) the text from its original authors, context, and purpose, creating a novel interpretation that may run counter to the meanings foregrounded by the text. As a cultural artifact, B-Fest represents one of the richest known sites in which the emergent practice of movie riffing is practiced in a predominately unscripted setting, offering insight into the productive tactics cult movie audiences employ over the course of twenty-four immersive hours together to interpret, and at times enter into struggle over, the meaning of beloved (and less than beloved) texts.

Today, movie riffing as ritual performance is primarily a vehicle for performing irreverent humor and is heavily influenced by *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (*MST3K*, hereafter). As modeled on *MST3K*, performers riff aesthetically and/or conventionally flawed films, poking fun at textual flaws while demonstrating their intertextual chops by referencing familiar faces and texts from all corners of the pop culture universe, the goal being to generate positive feedback from audience members in the form of laughter and/or applause.

Researchers in audiencing, reception, and cultural studies have established rich scholarly traditions dedicated to the exploration of cult films and audiences (e.g., Grant; Hills; Jancovich; Mathijs and Sexton; Telotte) and cult audiencing rituals (e.g., Austin; De Ville; Kinkade and Katovich; Locke; McCulloch; Wood). Scholars have documented the histories of and catalogued acts performed during embodied audiencing rituals such as *Rocky Horror* (Austin; Locke; Wood) and *The Room* (Foy, 'You're Doing It Wrong, Tommy'; McCulloch). *MST3K* and movie riffing have also garnered significant scholarly attention since entering the cultural lexicon in the late 1980s, including a dedicated anthology (Weiner and Barba) and articles ranging from feminist critique (Royer) to proposing riffing as a generational model of cultural critique (Carroll) to positioning the show's premise as postmodern audiencing allegory (King).

However, scholars have yet to adequately explore the discursive implications of movie riffing or embodied audiencing. Often obscured by the novelty of live singing, dancing, and heckling in a space often characterized by stillness and silence is the fact that riffing rituals are composed of purposeful speech acts that produce text- and context-specific discourses with rhetorical and political implications. As movie rifiers are joking, chanting, and wielding props, they produce messages that exist neither in isolation from the text being riffed or from other actions performed during the ritual. Furthermore, research on movie riffing has yet to adequately explore the performance of riffing in a live, unscripted setting, to date focusing primarily on pre-scripted, professionally produced products. This essay attempts to address both gaps by examining and reflecting on the creative activities of B-Fest participants as embodied representation of the current state of amateur riffing and in-theater embodied audiencing. B-Fest is a uniquely rich site for this inquiry because its audience riffs consistently, at times nearly constantly, for twenty-four hours.

To borrow Eric Schaefer's characterization of the heyday of exploitation filmgoing, B-Fest is 'attending the theater, the carnival, and the lecture hall' (122) for twenty-four hours and over a dozen unique audiencing exigencies. This essay explores the rhetorical techniques and in-theater actions rifiers employ to perform real-time film criticism, noting discursive trends and themes that rifiers employ to speak *toward* the screen but *to* their fellow audience members. There can be no doubt that people at B-Fest, as well as inhabitants of theaters and living rooms around the world, are talking back to the screen, but what are they saying?

B-Fest as Performance Site

As Jancovich, Faire and Stubbings suggest, theaters are cultural spaces with distinct spatial histories that influence modes of film consumption while attracting audiences to whom its culture and histories appeal. B-Fest was born on November 13, 1981 as the Twenty-(plus)-Hour B-Movie, Horror, and Science Fiction Festival ('B-Fest History'), which aptly sums its marquee aesthetic: a twenty-four-hour *paracinematic* (Sconce) endurance run of films from the horror, sci-fi, exploitation, and fantasy genres with such provocative titles as *Horror of Party Beach*, *They Saved Hitler's Brain*, *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*, and *Marijuana: Weed With Roots in Hell*. Over time, another B-Fest hallmark emerged: a fully embodied experience predicated on critiquing and interacting with films in real time, as performed through clusters of largely unscripted speech acts incorporating joking, shouting, chanting, and prop-play.

Though many attendees enjoy the B-Fest experience with limited overt participation in the in-theater mayhem, a vocal contingent employ their voices and bodies with exuberance and endurance to talk back to the screen and each other with humorous, sarcastic, or critical comments or physical gestures that symbolically work to usurp the film as the primary form of entertainment. Performers riff the film, but the discourses they produce are intended to appeal to the audience; these acts and the discourses they produce collectively form a multivocal web of response frequently but not uniformly antagonistic or contradictory to the dominant-hegemonic meanings (Hall) foregrounded by the filmmakers.

Though no official or unofficial B-Fest scripts exist in circulation, regular attendance and participation at B-Fest allows access to a shared heuristic vocabulary composed of intertextual callback references to previous films from B-Fests years or even decades past. Yet even first-time attendees can tap into the audience's shared history by referencing highlights (or lowlights) from earlier in the marathon. The pleasures of gaining access to this ongoing conversation, with some intertextual references chronologically older than many in the audience, 'binds them in their privileged knowledge to others – and even to another side of the self, a repressed self that longs to be known *otherwise* and to find expression' (Telotte 13). Popular or memorable riffs become organically incorporated into the B-Fest lexicon through peer approval and repeated utterance, thus contributing to an evolving heuristic communal vocabulary into which participants tap to address the text at hand.

Pelias argues that 'researchers must be willing to use their own voices and bodies as tools of exploration' (252) in order to gain an embodied understanding of cultural performance. In order to better understand the real-time dynamics of movie riffing and embodied audiencing, I collected data for this study over the course of six B-Fests – 2011-12, 2014-16, and 2018 – at which I was an active participant-observer. Having previously attended B-Fest for pleasure in 2002-04 and 2007, I began recording field data in 2011 with a high level of fluency in the vocabulary and ritual acts that characterize the site. I gathered field notes documenting conspicuous vocal and gestural riffing throughout the 24 hours of each B-Fest attended, relying on my acquired fluency of the B-Fest lexicon to draw symbolic connections between riffs and the textual elements (character, dialogue, *mise en scene*) of

the films at which they were directed. By engaging in ritual performance alongside others, I sought to access a rich spring of embodied knowledge while navigating the tension between celebrating the active productivity of the audience while remaining critical of the discourses produced by interpreting their speech with the critical compassion and empathy necessary to claim authority to speak on behalf of a community.

My interest in exploring the rhetorical techniques and discursive tactics of extant riffing techniques is an attempt to ‘apply a subversive worldview to the conventional logic of cultural inquiry’ (Thomas vii) within ‘the netherworld of mundane life’ (46). If one of the goals of research is to get past superficial levels of meaning and provide depth and nuance to complex, community-specific cultural phenomena, researchers who already possess intimate experience with and knowledge of those communities are ostensibly well-equipped to do so without the daunting material and temporal demands of integrating oneself to an unknown community – in this case, one that assembles corporeally only once per year. My familiarity with B-Fest’s characteristic vocabulary afforded me ‘greater opportunities for interpretation, translation, and transference’ (Alexander 108) while lending ‘an insider-looking-in-and-out’ (Toyosaki 65) perspective that allows this research to be useful to those who attend B-Fest and/or those who are interested in riffing as a discursive practice so that we may ‘become empowered by coming to understand [our] own culture from the inside and connecting it with its neighboring communities through critical interrogation of cultural and political issues at stake’ (Toyosaki 65).

Performing Movie Riffing at B-Fest

It is Friday, 6:00 p.m. The auditorium lights go dark. The house applauds and cheers as if stretching its collective vocal cords. My immediate company and most intimate co-performers in the theater will be a group of fifteen to twenty dedicated B-movie devotees who’ve made B-Fest a cherished annual rite. A group of mostly self-characterized ‘doughy men’ who converge on B-Fest from across the U.S., the crew typically has a three-to-one man-to-woman ratio, ages ranging from mid-twenties to forties; their demographics and ‘dense nerdity,’ to quote a group-pleasing observation by one prominent of the cult, are representative of the larger B-Fest audience.

Several of those seated near me are prolific voices in the online B-movie review scene – magazine, blog, YouTube, podcast – who also dedicate their time, energy, and passion to *textual productivity* (Fiske 39). At B-Fest they are bestowed significant *subcultural capital* (Thornton, as cited in Mathijs and Sexton 11). They are recognized among many at B-Fest for their talents for ‘articulating communal, cultural norms and value systems’ (Hills, ‘Fiske’s “Textual Productivity” 147) in their critiques and for their capacities for agenda-setting and taste-making via ‘identification and isolation of marginal artworks, or aspects and qualities of marginal artworks’ (Taylor 15). They will be among the more active in-theater performers over the next twenty-four hours. Their vast paracinematic fluency and the speed at which they summon intertextual references both popular and obscure is inspiring and intimidating. As if publicly attempting impromptu comedy isn’t anxiety-

inducing enough, attempting to match wits with B-Fest's schlock scholars *ne plus ultra* raises the stakes when attempting to contribute to the ritual with them.

A typical B-Fest features about fifteen films, blends texts both beloved and reviled, and unfolds in a predictable pattern. The first four films of the night, in particular the opening film, tend to be energetic and action-oriented, which starts B-Fest off with high communal energy. For example, campy Italian superhero flick *The Pumaman* receives both the loudest volume of audience response and the most utterances per minute. Riffing, chanting, and/or rhythmic clapping are nearly constant through the film's ninety-minute duration and are frequently loud enough to drown out the film soundtrack. Many rifiers call out their comments at ear-aching volume, pausing afterward to allow for crowd endorsement in the form of applause and cheer. Almost every conspicuous effort to contribute is rewarded with applause in the first hour or so, but as the film eclipses the one-hour mark, only the most audience-pleasing riffs receive demonstrative affirmation.

Like seeing a film at the local multiplex, in-theater silence functions as a disciplinary tool enforced to control the viewing experience and whose speech is privileged. I perceive a subtle shift in pressure as *The Pumaman* enters its second hour: it becomes increasingly vital to evoke *the right performance* if one wishes to contribute to the community dialogue. Those that fail to resonate fall to the floor after being symbolically rejected through the deployment of silence, the implication being that the overt response was not grounded in shared meaning and thus not an appropriate articulation of the cult's 'common *subjective response*' to the film (Wood 160). Overzealous commenters who fall back on the laziest impulses of shallow commentary – harping on the same textual flaw, repetitively complaining about the blanket *badness* or *painfulness* of the film, loudly declaring the film is *so bad, it's good* – unwittingly become nuisances, even pariahs, to those who favor more creative riffing or simply find their repetition grating.

B-Fest veterans often practice self-conscious restraint early on, saving their vocal cords for when the cacophony fades. Pacing myself and preserving my vocal cords, early on I am mostly content to riff back and forth privately in conversational tones with my longtime friend and creative partner Bryan and his partner as opposed to belting riffs to the back row. We crack each other up often with private shared in-jokes and intertextual references; others have remarked to us that we seem to be speaking in a distinct private language. When considering raising my voice to be heard by those other than my immediate neighbors, I make an internal calculation: Is the riff both entertaining and insightful? If referencing other cult texts, will the audience be familiar with the reference, or is it too obscure or outside of the collective tastes of the cult?

Energetic and occasionally precocious, demonstrative riffing early in the ritual usually marks the badness, ineptness, or stupidity of the unassuming film. Commenters condemn *The Pumaman's* aesthetic shortcomings (cheap projected backgrounds, dated disco soundtrack) and poke fun at the titular superhero's unimposing physique, cheap poncho-and-slacks costume, and laughable butt-sticking-out flying posture. Occasionally a riffer cracks me up with clever wordplay or a wry observation of a textual quirk or

inconsistency: one fellow observes that Pumaman's superpowers (flying, x-ray vision, teleportation, dimension-hopping) are decidedly un-catlike. Others draw out erotic undertones from the relationship between Pumaman and his Aztec spiritual advisor Vadinho – one riffer encourages Pumaman to 'lick his [Vadinho's] wounds' after the latter is brutalized by henchmen of evil antagonist Donald Pleasance, a crowd favorite palpably more popular among the audience than the Pumaman. The most boisterous recurring utterance is the crowd chanting 'U.S.A.! U.S.A.!' in response to the film's many acts of wanton violence or hypermasculine heroism. *Pumaman* is an Italian film, but for the B-Fest audience, violence and explosions are constitutionally American.

Following *The Pumaman* is *Top Dog*, a man-and-dog buddy cop movie starring kitsch icon Chuck Norris, who seemed to openly cringe on screen at the B-Fest crowd's derisive faux-worship. *Top Dog* introduces another hallmark of B-Fest riffing: sight gags and sound effects. One performer lurking in the wings responds to the film's hackneyed shot of a fiery car crash by rolling out a B-Fest classic: a lone wheel emerges from the wings and teeters across the stage. Other well-received sight gags include non-sequitur comments written onto poster board ('Expletive deleted!' ... 'Greetings gentlemen how goes the inquest?' ... 'This case will take all of my ample skills indeed') and held up at the screen's periphery to interject ludicrous dialogue in the mouth of a character. In the sound department, every year a participant entralls the crowd with an immaculately timed slide whistle whose upward and downward glissando signify sexual excitement and frustration, respectively.

The transition from fun, easily riffable fodder to more challenging fare begins with the third film of the night, *Mama Dracula*, an aggressively inane, meandering take on the Elizabeth Bathory legend. The bizarre, confounding film effectively stifles the loudest contingent of the crowd. In the lobby after the film ends at 11:09 p.m., I witness reeling attendees complaining of the 'pain' caused by the 'so bad' film. Some appreciate its stylistic adjacencies to 1970s-era Hammer films. Whether *Mama Dracula* is really *that* bad a movie is ultimately immaterial. The act of commiseration, or of defending a cult text under fire, is an invitation to reproduce shared experience and B-Fest culture at large through talk. Love *Mama Dracula* or hate it, we agree on one thing: 'It's still better than *Twilight*.'

Getting On (and Back Off) Script

Though B-Fest's participatory audiencing ethic draws easy comparisons to performatives made famous through the *Rocky Horror* audiencing ritual, there is limited resemblance beyond the fact that both rituals privilege an embodied ethic of performing cult cinema fandom. The cults of *Rocky Horror* and *The Room* are cults of a text. Membership is constituted by love for the film – or 'patronising affection or even downright contempt' (Jancovich et al. 2) – and competence in embodying its corresponding audiencing scripts. B-Fest is better understood as a cult of a space: B-Fest itself – *being there* to revel in and reproduce its associated practices and spatial histories – is the element that constitutes the cult, not any particular text.

Returning to an earlier distinction, another salient difference between B-Fest and *Rocky Horror* and other cult-of-a-text audiencing rituals is the degree to which its associated performances are pre-scripted. This is not to suggest that there is no element of pre-scripting at B-Fest. Those who survey the schedule prior to arrival may come with a small arsenal of pre-selected jokes for films they've seen. There is even an occasional pre-scripted (in the loosest sense of the term) mini-skit: I was once recruited to participate in a brief staged recreation of *Mad Max: Fury Road's* War Boys' silver-grilled cries of *witness me!* and was rewarded for going last by gagging on a faceful of silver spray food coloring.

There are two notable exceptions to the unscripted nature of B-Fest: annual screenings of *The Wizard of Speed and Time* and *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. From 11:45 p.m. Friday to 1:25 a.m. Saturday, B-Fest is tightly scripted, highly ritualized, and for some regulars, creatively exhausted. Despite being B-Fest's marquee attraction, *Plan 9* is either the poetically ideal distillation of the midnight movie experience or a cue to visit the lobby and catch a quick nap or check social media.

The Wizard of Speed and Time, a 1979 short special-effects reel in which a caped wizard runs across the country at super speed before crashing into a castle filled with stop-motion dancing film equipment, has played at B-Fest since 1986 ('B-Fest History'). Before *Wizard* rolls, anywhere from thirty to fifty eager participants storm the stage and lay on their backs, feet to the screen. During the running sequence, performers stamp their feet on the stage at top speed; during the castle sequence, they stomp rhythmically in tune with the soundtrack. Immediately after the film's conclusion, the film is re-screened upside down and backwards, and the ritual is repeated in reverse. This recursive ritual of 'nerd calisthenics' is a crowd favorite and a welcome kinesthetic respite after over five consecutive hours on one's butt. In 2017, word circulated that the *Wizard* film reel had finally crumbled beyond repair, forcing a shift from film to digital and triggering a sense of elegiac melancholy for the loss of a beloved artifact from B-Fest's pre-digital era.

Plan 9, a quintessential cult film infamous for being the worst film of all time,¹ rolls at midnight every year. It was screened at the first B-Fest and has been an institution since 1986. Like *Rocky Horror*, its associated audiencing script is choreographed to the line and intended to be performed in unison. In short-burst mass chants, performers mark the film's scenic inconsistencies (*Day! Night!*), bicker over minutiae such as what to call the protagonist's patio furniture (*Wicker! Rattan!*), and mark director Ed Wood's recasting of Bela Lugosi, who died before production finished, with his wife's chiropractor (*Bela! Not Bela!*). We call out *Tor!* at every appearance of hulking B-movie icon Tor Johnson, and in a more recent attempt to shake up the script, some began chanting *Hot!* at the sight of Vampira's mute ghoul. Unlike the other audiencing exigencies over the course of B-Fest, there is a strong interiority to the riffing of *Plan 9*: the ritual is mostly devoid of intertextual references, and it takes only minutes for participants unfamiliar with the beats of the ritual to learn its movements. The ritual's tone, heavy on mocking the technical incompetence of the text's construction and the idiosyncratic performances of the cast, predates but is similar to that of 21st-century midnight screenings of *The Room*, during which 'Viewers are

encouraged to spot and laugh at so many mistakes and idiosyncrasies that the “so bad it’s good” reading is not only privileged, but also rewarded’ (McCulloch 205).

The embodied highlight of the *Plan 9* experience is flinging paper plates in the air at each appearance of the film’s cheaply constructed UFOs. The act of catching a plate is as enticing as throwing one. Participants often hand-draw slogans or pictures on the plates before the film begins: beloved one-liners from the B-Fest canon or other cult texts, advertisements for personal review websites, or crude sketches of *kaiju* and other sci-fi monsters. At B-Fest 2011 one series of plates featured drawings of film icons who died since B-Fest 2010, including Dennis Hopper, Tony Curtis, and Blake Edwards. I happened to catch a plate with the drawn face of Heckubus, a beloved cult member who had recently died and whose absence his comrades frequently noted. Having only met Heckubus briefly, I handed the plate to Bryan, who tucked it away safely as a souvenir. Intricately decorated paper plates, along with the raffling of donated movies and movie-related tokens and the passing of CD-Rs of culturally appropriate songs compiled by one of B-Fest’s most prominent attendees, constitutes B-Fest’s gift culture and is a material invitation to bring a bit of its culture home.

Though *Plan 9* is the highlight for first-timers and casual B-Festers, B-Fest veterans often flee the theater on cue just as Criswell takes the screen for his opening monologue. Nobody gives up on the *communitas* of *Plan 9* altogether, but for some there is little left to say about it; years of repetition and the tightly ritualized riffing leaves little room for the creativity or intertextuality on which they thrive. Midway through *Plan 9*, I venture out into the lobby to survey the landscape. Navigating the theater space grows treacherous by nightfall: sleeping bodies can be anywhere, cloaked in darkness. The lobby is quiet and the common areas become increasingly packed with slumbering attendees wearing flannel pajamas with winter coats draped over their heads. The accomplishment of ‘surviving’ all twenty-four hours (i.e., watching all movies without succumbing to sleep or abandoning the theater beyond designated breaks and biological necessities) is a badge of honor. Few attempt it earnestly and fewer succeed. Tonight, as paper plates fly through the air back in the theater, my B-Fest companions and I lounge together in the lobby, talking movies and sharing stories until *Plan 9* ends at 1:24 a.m. It is now Saturday.

After venturing forth with relatively light and accessible fare (*Mama Dracula* or the despised *Message From Space* excluded) and cresting with the ritual paean to *Plan 9*, Saturday’s post-midnight slate delves into more challenging audiencing exigencies. After 1:30 a.m., on-screen content turns more risqué, as unaccompanied minors must leave the theater until the next morning. A Blaxploitation film traditionally follows the post-*Plan 9* youth exodus and can range from exuberant crowd-pleasers (*Avenging Disco Godfather*, *Coffy*, *The Human Tornado*) to more turgid fare (*Blackenstein*, *The Monkey Hustle*). The pre-breakfast blue period is characterized by black-and-white snoozers such as *Moon Zero Two*, *Test-Tube Babies*, and *The Mole People*; or grimier affairs such as legendary ‘worst movie ever’ contenders *Manos: The Hands of Fate*, *Street Trash*, and *Guru the Mad Monk*; or gory mind-benders like *The Manitou* or *Lifeforce*. Such films, unpalatable to the vast majority of

moviegoers, can produce a lewd and boisterous happy hour-esque riffing environment when combined with an increasingly sleep-deprived hardcore crowd very much in its element.

By the wee hours of pre-dawn, the demonstrative riffing that characterized *The Pumaman* and *Plan 9* has given way to something closer to an archetypical midnight movie experience: isolated interpersonal chatter and occasional bursts of riffing to the audience still awake. With less shouting and group chanting, this period is conducive to more conversational riffing; recalling an earlier quote from Schaefer, here B-Fest becomes less carnivalesque and more like a lecture, or rather a graduate school seminar. Often an insightful riff transitions into informative sidebars or earnest discussions of horror, sci-fi, or exploitation film history or criticism. For example, during a 6:05 a.m. screening of *The Wicker Man* (the widely mocked 2006 remake), an earnest discussion of the artistic merits of *Gymkata* begins, which translates into an earnest discussion and endorsement of *Streets of Fire*, which in turn segues into a discussion of the latter's influence on side-scrolling beat-em-up video games such as *Double Dragon*, *Final Fight*, and *Streets of Rage*.

Around 3:00 a.m., people file out of the theater in increased numbers, passing others whose naps have concluded on their way back into the theater. On a bathroom break, I survey the now-crowded commons areas and see one attendee blowing up an air mattress as others shuffle past me in slippers and flannel shorts. One fellow sits in a chair and stares into space, awake but eyes utterly glazed over, mouth hanging open. There comes a point at which the body simply overrides the heart's desire to riff *Rhinestone*.

By 8:00 a.m., the theater begins to fill up again; the energy level spikes accordingly. The remainder of B-Fest will be filled with fun and breezy cult classics such as *Night of the Lepus*, *Cool as Ice*, *Stunt Rock*, *Road House*, *Miami Connection*, and *The Barbarians*. B-Fest traditionally concludes with a *kaiju* film: *Godzilla* is the gold standard, but deeper cuts such as *Super Inframan* and Chinese *King Kong* clone *Mighty Peking Man* wrap things up on an exuberant note and a reprisal of mass participation. In recent years, the finale spot has tilted more toward non-*kaiju* action films such as *Yor: The Hunter From the Future*, *Viva Kneival!* or *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai*, a shift that offends some B-Fest purists who advocate for the restoration of *kaiju* as the ceremonial climax. Regardless of the film, exhaustion has set in and rhetorically precise riffing gives way to delirious laughter. As one riffer groans during *Mighty Peking Man*: 'Blah blah blah, bring us the goddamn giant monkey. I need some sleep.'

For those who attend the entirety of B-Fest, that sleep will be much needed and hard earned. With participants peppering over a dozen feature-length films with hundreds of distinct speech acts and gestures, each B-Fest offers a cornucopia of observable acts of enunciative productivity that coningle to form a useful snapshot of the current state of movie riffing as cultural performance of embodied audiencing. In the following section, I will catalog and demonstrate three prominent emergent riffing themes on display at B-Fest: (1) intertextual references to familiar films and pop culture texts, (2), wordplay that declusters,

defamiliarizes, and decenters the text, and (3) political riffing antagonistic toward conservative figureheads and ideologies.

Theme 1: *We Understood That Reference – Intertextuality as a Tool for Comparison and Identification*

The meaning of a cultural text exists not with the sovereign text and its author but in the interplay between text, reader, and countless other texts which are idiosyncratically assembled by readers through intertextual reading practices: ‘Both the text and the subject are constituted in the space of the interdiscursive; and both are traversed and intersected by contradictory discourses’ (Morley 171). Ott and Walter observe that scholars employ intertextuality in two primary ways: (1) as a poststructuralist gathering of text fragments, and (2) as strategic reference to other familiar texts to coax a desired response from an audience; citing Kenneth Burke, Ott and Walter suggest intertextual literacy can serve the reader as ‘symbolic equipment’ in a mediated world (431).

Perhaps not coincidentally, the same decades in which intertextuality gained currency as an academic concept also witnessed movie riffing emerge as a popular audiencing ethic. All media consumption may be intertextual, but no audiencing practice honors and foregrounds the skill of intertextual reading like movie riffing. This is evident when watching *MST3K*, each of whose episodes feature hundreds of intertextual references to cultural texts popular and obscure, highbrow and low, which ‘situate the program in the center of a web of texts, interrelating it to the entire history of popular culture’ (McWilliams and Richardson 114). Intertextual fluency and creativity are lauded skills at B-Fest. Riffers who deploy the most impressive intertextual arsenals, characterized by range of texts referenced and the resonance of the symbolic connections drawn, are bestowed subcultural capital and tend to receive the most affirmative feedback in the form of positive audience response.

The most frequent style of intertextual riffing at B-Fest features a performer connecting a situation on screen to a familiar but not directly related cultural text by reading an element of iconography or dialogue on the screen, then verbally referencing another familiar cultural text that contains some corresponding antecedent to what is on-screen. In doing so, the riffer appeals to the audience’s shared appreciation of the antecedent text while drawing an implicit comparison between texts that usually tactically diminishes the film on screen by comparing it to a film that it is either derivative of or inferior to in the eyes of the audience.

To partake of this shared intertextual vocabulary, one must be fluent in the antecedent references popular amongst the audience. Cult genres such as sci-fi, horror, superhero, and exploitation are privileged at B-Fest. For example, familiar texts referenced during B-Fest 2018 included *Star Wars* (‘Pray I don’t alter [the deal] any further’), *Predator* (‘Get to the chopper!’), *Three Amigos!* (‘You killed the invisible swordsman!’), *Silent Night Deadly Night 2* (‘Garbage day!’), *Firefly*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The*

Sandlot, *Robocop*, *Batman Forever*, *Spider-Man*, *Lethal Weapon 2*, *They Live*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Wayne's World*. B-Fest 2015 featured riffs on *Creature of the Black Lagoon*, *Godzilla vs. the Sea Monster*, *C.H.U.D.*, *Marathon Man*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *MegaForce*, *The Omega Man*, *Radar Secret Service*, *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine*, *Fraggle Rock*, and *Truth or Dare: A Critical Madness* – the latter having joined the B-Fest lexicon due to the inclusion of its repetitive 'Driving Theme' on B-Fest 2015's circulated CD-R. Each reference invites the audience not only to share in a moment of mutual joy of shared intertextual knowledge but to reframe or reject dialogue or symbolism presented on-screen as less-than the text to which it is implicitly compared.

References to cult comedies are also valuable for their capacity to reframe a serious on-screen moment, opening the text's attempts to drama or action to ridicule and minimization. For example, during B-Fest 2018's screening of *She* (the bonkers 1984 post-apocalyptic Sandahl Bergman film), as our protagonists struggle to escape from plastic bags suspended in a burning room death trap, one riffer signs lyrics to *This is Spinal Tap's* 'Rock and Roll Creation' scene in which Derek Smalls pathetically struggles to escape an inoperative plastic pod while playing bass. Rather than fearing for our protagonists' lives and experiencing catharsis when they escape, we are instead invited to read the scene through a lens of comic ineptitude, to emotionally disengage from the protagonist's imperilled hero's journey and instead to laugh at their plight. When a dust storm erupts during a fight scene during *Super Inframan*, one riffer calls out with impeccable comic timing, 'God damn you, Walter! Everything's a fucking travesty with you, man!'; this reference from *The Big Lebowski* to The Dude's hilariously irate reaction to having his dead friend's ashes blown into his face remains an enduring source of humor years later and diffused any possible sense of excitement or engagement with our *henshin* hero or his world-saving martial arts skills.

Intertextuality's capacity to engender identification is clear when rifiers reference texts from B-Fests past and current, which appeals to both shared awareness and esteem of an ancillary text and shared participation in B-Fest culture. During B-Fest 2018, the desert landscape of *Tremors* evokes a reference to a scene in *Cool as Ice* (B-Fests 2003, 2011) in which Vanilla Ice takes his love interest to a desert construction site. *The Wicker Man* evoked a brief reprise of the wicker-rattan debate of the *Plan 9* ritual. Later, when Kirk Douglas dons a wolfskin disguise in Hal Needham's farcical western *The Visitor*, one riffer manufacturers intra-Fest continuity by referencing an infamous scene in *The Wicker Man*, which debuted at B-Fest just hours earlier: 'So he's going to dress up as a bear and punch women?'

The opening credits of a film offer rifiers an opportunity to declare love for beloved performers. Screen credits receiving audience cheers included: Bill Mummy, James Doughan, David Carradine, and Roddy MacDowell in B-Fest 2018 opener *Double Trouble* (featuring B-Fest favorites the Barbarian Brothers); Victor Wong, Reba McEntire, and Michael Gross in *Tremors*; and Pleasance, Steve Martin and musicians Aerosmith, Alice Cooper, and Earth, Wind & Fire in *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Conversely, unpopular actors, or those

with celluloid black marks on their resumes, are treated with scorn and derision. Nicolas Cage (whose B-Fest credibility would shortly after be rehabilitated by *Mandy*) is ridiculed throughout *The Wicker Man* with references to *Ghost Rider*, *Snake Eyes*, and *National Treasure*. Riffers showcase over-the-top Cage impressions throughout the film: at one point, two riffers seated several rows apart break out dueling Cage impressions in a surprise duet of 'Once in a Lifetime' by The Talking Heads, substituting lyrics ridiculing Cage movies. The presence of Rob Schneider during *Surf Ninjas* is met with hatred and wishes of bodily harm. As the film went on, riffers hurl four-letter curses and angrily implore Schneider to 'shut up!' when he speaks a line of dialogue or breaks the fourth wall.

For B-Fest's riffers, demonstrating their intertextual chops works toward multiple ends. It allows them to deconstruct genre and trope by framing the on-screen text's iconography, dramatic beats, or shared actors with more familiar texts. Rarely is the comparison flattering for the film on screen, which opens avenues for ridicule or dismissal of the text and its potential merits. Community performance of respect or disrespect engenders audience identification by appealing to shared love or shared scorn for texts or actors. In such moments B-Fest itself becomes a supertext, contributing to a shared sense of continuity and affirmation that previous texts were interpreted according to collective tastes. In doing so, B-Fest attendees negotiate axiological assumptions of what ought to be understood as good and bad in cinematic storytelling and performance, and many carry those assumptions beyond the walls of McCormick Auditorium to reproduce them in face-to-face or online fan talk.

Theme 2: Rhetorical Tactics – Declustering, Reframing, and Punning (Boooo!)

Another valuable tool in the B-Fest riffer's kit is the ability to attack the text with clever wordplay in order to foreground an inconsistency or flaw in its construction. Similar to *MST3K*'s riffing strategies that isolate and magnify troublesome elements of the text, B-Fest riffers engage in clever wordplay to decluster on-screen symbolism by observing inconsistencies and contradictions, to introduce absurd or risqué elements or unsavory motives to the film's narrative and characters, and to introduce self-aware levity to the viewing experience through the language game of gratuitous punning.

One of the hallmarks of B-Fest's riffing ethos, and of paracinematic audiencing more broadly, is drawing attention to inconsistencies, plot holes, and continuity errors, the focus on which 'renders the bad into the sublime, the deviant into the defamiliarized, and in so doing, calls attention to the aesthetic aberrance and stylistic variety evident but routinely dismissed in the many subgenres of trash cinema' (Sconce 386). Within the practice of moving riffing, highlighting flaws in the text also opens it to deconstruction by making the seams of its construction visible, denying the text's capacity to appeal to the audience as a sovereign, immersive experience.

Among B-Fest 2018's favorite plot holes came in Fest opener *Double Trouble*. The film's antagonist, cat burglar Peter Jade (played by one half of the beloved Barbarian Brothers) gifts his twin brother David (the other Barbarian Brother), a police detective

unsuccessfully pursuing him, a cat. The scene in which the hypermasculine David meets the cat establishes his character's hard-boiled cynicism: he fills the kitchen sink with litter and feeds the cat baby food. But as several members of the B-Fest crowd note, the cat is never shown on screen again, leaving no other conclusion but that it starved from neglect. '*What about the cat!?!*' became a recurring trope during the film's second and third acts, called out to subvert moments of tension or heroism and implying that the film's characters and plot combined fail to muster the emotional resonance of a kitten abandoned by the film after one scene. Later during *Sgt. Pepper's*, riffers reprise the throwaway pet riff when, during a tearful montage in which Peter Frampton's character mourns his dead girlfriend, it is suddenly revealed that he owns a dog, an inconsistency on which we gleefully pounce: who was caring for his dog while Billy Shears was touring with his band? Here, a cheap symbolic ploy to humanize the film's protagonist results in riffers rejecting him as inauthentically human.

Riffers identify and ridicule several forms of shoddy filmcraft throughout B-Fest. In *Tremors*, one riffer notes that a station wagon sucked into the sandy earth by the giant wormlike graboids still has its headlights on the next day (he notes the battery must be a 'Sears DieHard ... die really hard'). We complained about excessive stock footage used in 1945's *The White Gorilla*, marking the text as cheaply assembled and artistically deficient. We ridiculed *Troll 2* for failing on levels both macro (Call: 'How many trolls are in this movie?' Response: 'None!') and micro: when the protagonist's father explains the town of Nilbog's apparent lack of residents by asserting that its hard-working farmers are asleep at this time of night, several riffers cry foul by observing that it is day in the scene. This warmly received observation leads to an abbreviated reprise of *Plan 9's* '*Day! Night!*' mini-ritual.

Riffers often insert lines of dialogue into a character's mouths, suggesting alternate motivations. During *The Wicker Man*, when Cage's character draws his gun and bellows, 'Back up or I swear to god I will shoot you,' one riffer replies, 'He must be talking to his agent.' During *Metalstorm: The Destruction of Jared-Syn*, one riffer inserts homoeroticism into the characters' interest in the red, 'veiny' dream crystal: 'will you touch my crystal?' During *Tremors*, which a character's wife is killed, one riffer says, 'I'm feeling *Nekromantic*,' implying necrophiliac impulses in the character through intertextual reference to the notorious German exploitation film. Questions posed by on-screen characters are often answered by the audience. During *Sgt. Pepper's*, when Frampton sings the iconic opening from 'With A Little Help From My Friends' – the audience responds *en masse* to 'Would you stand up and walk out on me?' with an emphatic 'YES!'

The greatest gratification is to have one's riff adopted into the B-Fest lexicon and used repeatedly by others. Bryan experienced this highest of highs in 2003 when he branded the effeminate hero of *Warlords of Atlantis* 'Feminor,' as the character was dubbed the rest of the night and whenever the film is mentioned subsequently. Fifteen years later and counting, *Feminor* still lingers as a short-form citation for any male hero type who does not project archetypal masculinity. Time will tell if any B-Fest 2018 riffs will join the lexicon, but during *She*, a potential star was born. Early in *She*, a roomful of subjugated

slaves chants *She! She! She!* furiously in tribute to She the warrior queen. The audience seized on chanting 'She! She! She!' immediately, and throughout the film riffers seized on every aurally adjacent symbol available: Steam ... sleep ... sheets ... Stihl (at the sight of a chainsaw) ... leaves ... fiend ... meat ... free (when escaping capture) ... tree ... priest (at a monk) ... green (at a character's glowing eyes) ... yeast (at bread). After *She* ended and *Tremors* began, chants of 'sleep! sleep! sleep!' and 'sheep! sheep! sheep!' kept the trend going.

In terms of rhetorical invention, the antithesis of clever wordplay is the dreaded pun, which when performed with gratuitous self-awareness elicits playfully performative groaning or good-natured jeering from the peanut gallery. When a bowl of cereal is shot to pieces in a firefight during *Double Trouble*, the shooter is deemed 'a cereal killer.' During *She*, scenes in a tent village and on a river ferry become 'an in-tents scene' and 'a ferry tale,' respectively. In honor of *The Wicker Man*'s infamous 'not the bees!' scene, riffers swarm the film with bee puns: 'making a beeline' ... the townspeople's reaction to (Cage) 'stings' ... 'I just read an article on Buzzfeed.' During a scene in *Troll 2* in which a character is buried in popcorn during an intimate moment with an evil witch, popcorn puns erupt: 'she's giving you an earful' ... 'she's trying to butter you up' ... 'Mrs. Redenbacher, are you trying to seduce me?' ... 'so this is what corn-holing means?' Later in *Troll 2*, when the protagonist's mother turns to green goo and melts away in the shower: 'algae you later.'

Most puns are received with good-natured groans of exasperation or faux-disgust. During *Frogs*, for example, after numerous frog puns – riffs that a dead character 'croaked,' that others were playing 'croak-et,' and that a car wouldn't start because 'cane toads put sugar in the tank' – one riffer finally crosses the line and is playfully ordered to 'go sit in the corner' after vocalizing that a lizard was 'here to monitor the situation.' But on occasion punning is met with earnest approval. Such was the case at the end of the revolting karate-rapist drama *Undefeatable*: at the infamous climax in which the film's antagonistic serial rapist is impaled through his eye with a hook, one riffer quips 'who's the hooker now?' After ninety execrable minutes enduring the film's scenes depicting rape and intimate partner violence, this crudest of puns broke the hostile tension imposed by the film, the frivolity of the lowest form of comedy washing over the audience in a welcome wave of relief.

Theme 3: Political Riffing: B-Fest versus Conservatives, Racists, and Rapists

As the *Frogs* example above illustrates, riffing subject matter at B-Fest tends to stay primarily within the symbolic content foregrounded within the film. Films that emphasize animals (e.g., *Frogs*, *Top Dog*, *Night of the Lepus*) draw riffs on those animals. Films with iconic actors (Chuck Norris in *Top Dog*, Louise Fletcher in *Mama Dracula*, Tony Curtis and Burgess Meredith in *The Manitou*, DeForest Kelley and Rory Calhoun in *Night of the Lepus*) draw references to the actor's other films. Low-budget rip-offs of better-known films draw references to the A-list film.

At times, though, B-Fest riffing ventures extrinsically outward from the cues foregrounded by the text into explicitly political discourse that reveals attitudes beyond

interest in cult cinema. At B-Fest, such overly political riffing generally foregrounds left-leaning ideologies and hostility toward conservative figureheads, racism, and misogyny and gender violence. At times, though, B-Fest riffing also reinforces hegemonic norms of hypermasculinity and anti-LGBTQ hostility, suggesting that while movie riffing is an intriguing vessel for performing purposeful criticism – one with which some in attendance at B-Fest choose to experiment – riffing at B-Fest does not produce a coherent critical statement on film or politics.

During *Top Dog*, a white nationalist rally (complete with neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan – decidedly dark fare for a man-dog buddy-cop movie) spurs rifiers to equate their hateful rhetoric to that of Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, and the Tea Party. In *Rambo: First Blood Part II* clone *American Ninja*, the film's military setting draws riffs on Don't Ask Don't Tell, the citation of which draws bitter jeers from the audience. Embracing anti-racism, B-Fest rifiers reacted with hostility to the overtly racist White characters in *Blackenstein* and *Mighty Peking Man*, communicating collective disgust by booing, jeering, and groaning. This is not to suggest that these collective symbolic rejections of racist White characters constitute oppositional reading (Hall). In the contexts of both films, rejecting White racism seems to be the desired response, and both films reinforce this message by giving their racist characters comeuppance (i.e., brutal death) from their respective monsters; the audience applauds as intended. At B-Fest 2018, rifiers performatively rejected on-screen colonial racism by booing the obscenely crude dialogue of *The White Gorilla's* native women ('Me understand') and *The Visitor's* red-faced, stilted-speaking Indians. At one point, one audience member stands up and declares 'No can do racist bullshit right now' and walks out of the theater in disgust; upon his exit, his peers take up his burden of indignation in kind and verbally denounce the film's crude racism.

B-Fest 2017 began on January 20, 2017: the day Donald Trump was inaugurated as president of the United States. There is no doubt that Trump and the prior year's simmering conflicts over race, class, and gender politics were on the rifiers' minds in 2018, as overtly political riffing sharply increased in both quantity and explicitness in comparison to previous years. Trump was referenced several times, all audible references carrying negative connotation and eliciting audience response that suggested hostility toward Trump and burgeoning Trumpism. One riffer ridiculed Trump's orange-ish skin hue during *Double Trouble* when a corrupt politician is burned badly in a tanning booth. When the protagonists of *Surf Ninjas* arrive at a destroyed island village, one riffer suggests the wreckage is 'what happens when Trump sends humanitarian aid,' an apparent reference to Trump's flippant response to Puerto Rico's then-recent devastation from Hurricane Maria. In *Troll 2*, when the young protagonist urinates on tainted food that will kill his family if consumed, a riffer mocks Trump with reference to the mythical 'pee tape' alleged to be part of the Steele Dossier.

During *She* when marauders donning (backward) swastikas raid a village, a riffer suggested Trump would use the occasion to start a football team that won't kneel during the National Anthem; another chimes in with an intertextual reference that Trump would

‘make Gor great again,’ alluding to John Norman’s erotic sword-and-sandal fictional series. Later in the film, as a telepathic demigod prophet forces himself on a captive woman, a riffer comments ‘If you’re a star they just let you do this,’ a reference to the Trump-Billy Bush tape. Saving surplus vitriol for locally unpopular political figures such as Stephen Miller, Richard Spencer, and Alex Jones, rifiers encouraged physical violence against the former two, and during *Tremors* one suggested the characters’ armed resistance to the murderous graboids was a false flag job and that they were ‘turning the worms gay,’ an allusion to Jones’ ‘gay frogs’ conspiracy theory. Rifiers later made derogatory allusions to Brock Turner, right-wing scapegoating of Hillary Clinton, and All Lives Matter.

Though B-Fest’s annual lineups are not assembled with any theme in mind, the cumulative mood and tone of the films screened a given B-Fest may present the audience with a particular exigency to which the audience attempts to respond together. B-Fest 2011’s film lineup was saturated with imagery of man-on-woman gender violence, a problematic presence that the crowd was eager to demonstratively denounce. Though misogynist violence is a dishonorable hallmark of the horror and exploitation genres and is present in some degree at every B-Fest, the 2011 lineup was riddled with obscene depictions of rape, abuse, and misogynistic violence, mostly exacerbated by the hated *Undefeatable*. Participants reacted with intensifying hostility toward masculine violence as B-Fest proceeded. One riffer dubbed it ‘The Fest That Hates Women’; another summarized, ‘The lesson of this year’s B-Fest: men are terrible and they will rape you.’

Yet, community venom toward gender violence does not prevent riffing that is misogynistic in tone or makes light of rape or gender violence. For example, during *Undefeatable*, one riffer evokes Martha Stewart and casually critiques the dinner set out by a woman on a table upon which she is anally raped by the film’s vile antagonist. The hyper-misogynistic tone of Neil LaBute’s *The Wicker Man*, a film that invites audiences to identify with Cage’s character as he shouts anti-woman slurs and kicks and punches the inhabitants of an all-woman private island, seemed to seep into the audience, as sexist riffing recurred throughout the film, including riffs on lesbianism, women’s body hair, and Enya. Whether audience members were attempting Burkean *perspective by incongruity* was unclear; perhaps the intensity of these films’ gender hostility and violent imagery grew so unnerving that riffing while passing the graveyard served a calming purpose. But as a participant I experienced phenomenological discomfort at being party to jokes about rape and intimate partner violence, and I learned through later discussion that others experienced a degree of discomfort, as well. As Joanne Hollows observes, ‘The “radicalism” of cult is only sustained by processes of “othering” and it is always important to remain aware of who, and what, is being “othered”’ (49). The B-Fest crowd’s hostility toward on-screen women, though presumably intended to transcend the film’s content through transgressive riffing, was evocative of the gleefully misogynistic taunting present in the audiencing rituals associated with *The Room* and, to a lesser extent, *Rocky Horror*, both of whose audiencing scripts involve hyper-sexualizing and slut-shaming women characters (Lisa and Janet, respectively) for comedic purposes.

Confirming Jancovich's assertion that cult audiences 'do not share a single, and certainly not a uniformly oppositional attitude' (309), riffing at B-Fest often draws on hegemonic heteronormativity and homo-hatred to ridicule or reject characters. Riffers make several gay-, lesbian- and transgender-hostile jokes over the course of most Fests, and male characters who do not conform to hypermasculine norms are often exposed to ridicule. *Mama Dracula's* androgynous male twins were repeatedly ridiculed for 'gayness' and 'fruitiness,' a palpable contradiction just one hour after the anti-discriminatory sentiment of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell riff noted in *Top Dog*. In *Can't Stop the Music*, when a character played by Caitlin (then Bruce) Jenner has their groin region scalded, one riffer jokes that this incident is the source of Jenner's transgenderism. At B-Fest 2018, one riffer took up the mantle of heteronormativity with positive audience response, admonishing Arnold Schwarzenegger's Handsome Stranger character in *The Visitor* as 'gayer than a three-dollar bill' for his hesitation to sleep with Ann-Margaret's character, and the audience jeered demonstratively during *Troll 2* when two teenage boys non-sexually share a bed.

Though it is not my intention to rationalize or apologize for such discourses, I will note that I have never witnessed overtly hateful speech from a B-Fest attendee toward a present or non-present member of the LGBTQ+ community, or toward women, outside the act of movie riffing. Yet because this essay is primarily concerned with the discourses produced in the act of movie riffing, it is significant that these sentiments are uttered predictably when the movies roll, a curious dynamic that warrants further exploration, perhaps through qualitative inquiry once B-Fest resumes after its COVID-19-forced hiatus.

Though today I am inclined to interpret B-Fest's incongruently anti-woman and anti-LGBTQ riffing as a failure of self-reflexivity rather than an indication of hate, to ignore or minimize an audience's dehumanizing rhetoric while celebrating its productive praxis would be an abdication. As Matt Hills (*Fan Cultures*, emphasis original) persuasively argues, fan talk (a category in which I include riffing by cult audiences) must '*be interpreted and analysed in order to focus upon its gaps and dislocations, its moments of failure within narratives of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity*' (66). My ongoing grappling with my warring discomfort with and desire to understand the meanings intended behind this riffing reminds me that critics should not unreflexively celebrate the transgressions of ritual audience participation without also carefully considering the discourses produced in the act.

Making, Not Faking: Movie Riffing as Embodying Cult Criticism

In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes observed that reading 'is a form of work' and 'is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority' (10). Movie riffing as cultural performance, as manifested in the myriad speech acts and gestures of B-Fest, is a fully embodied, deeply immersive, and multivocal testament to the work audiences endeavor to put into the act of reading and responding to cult cinema. Though recognition and celebration of active audiences are recurring features of audience, performance, and cultural studies, B-Fest is another stark reminder that participants in embodied audiencing rituals aren't mere vessels that assemble to reanimate

existing audiencing scripts. Embodied audiencing rituals that incorporate movie riffing reveal not only an ethic of active audiencing but of live sensemaking, collaboration and negotiation of shared meaning, and willingness to engage in struggle over the preferred meanings of text and culture.

Like any critic, rifiers tap into the interpretive resources available to them to make sense of and draw attention to the ways films encode messages through dialogue, symbols, tropes, and iconography. To read the rhetorical techniques produced through movie riffing invites the critic insight into the often-opaque machinations audiences use to interpret mass media: selecting textual cues, making extratextual inferences, assigning value and meaning to symbols, communicating assessments for the needs and to the tastes of particular audience (Bordwell; Staiger) – all while text and riff collide in real time and shared space. Even when performed solely for purposes of humor or self-gratification, the discourses produced through riffing hail fellow audience members to frame or reframe textual cues in particular ways, potentially denaturalizing the meanings foregrounded in the text with real-time deconstruction rather than *ex post facto* judgment.

Terry Eagleton writes, ‘The very act of utterance discloses a quasi-transcendental community of subjects, a universal model of rational exchange, which threatens to contradict the hierarchies and exclusions of which it speaks’ (15). As is evidenced by B-Fest’s ever-evolving communal heuristic vocabulary, critical statements that tap into shared community subjectivities provide symbolic tools – equipment for riffing, to paraphrase Kenneth Burke – for those who participate in the ritual. It is in this fecund space of critical insight contributing to a shared vocabulary that riffing as an audiencing ethic helps us understand how audiences may collaborate, resist, or struggle over the meanings of texts loved and/or despised.

As evidenced by those whose talents for riffing regularly gain audience approval, the act of riffing is done with varying degrees of precision and persuasion; conversely, as is evidenced by riffs that are palpably ignored or draw scorn, willingness to engage in public enunciative production does not guarantee the generation of pleasure or insight for the audience. Riffing produces a supertext – ephemeral or mediated – that presents an opportunity for the audience to consider the discursive merits of one riff against other potential interpretations. This raises the ongoing question of competency, of why some riffs resonate with a given audience and others are ignored or even met with hostility.

In the interpretation of film, Staiger suggests, ‘What “competency” is really about is the possibility of ranking or dismissing interpretations’ (31). Put another way, ‘An attitude,’ Burke writes, ‘may be reasonable or unreasonable; it may contain an adequate meaning or an inadequate meaning – but in either case, it would contain a meaning’ (143). As with any act of criticism, riffing’s utterances can be destructive, incomplete, or incompetent. Yet there are moments when clever wordplay or intertextual wizardry are unnecessary to bind the audience together. At B-Fest, even the many alternate phrasings of ‘this movie sucks’ or begging a film to end mere minutes into its runtime may communicate a resonate appeal to the audience to think about what they are witnessing in a different way.

What new directions could movie rifiers – live or mass-mediated, professional or amateur – pursue by experimenting with the form’s potential for performing media criticism with rhetorical precision and purpose? For practicing rifiers and cult audiences eager to put voice and body into motion, future possibilities in the evolution of embodied audiencing as cultural performance can be understood in Dwight Conquergood’s model of *mimesis*, *poiesis*, and *kinesis*: ‘performance as imitation, construction, and dynamism’ (‘Beyond the Text’ 31).

Though at times content to rest on the most basic tropes of ‘so bad it’s good’ paracinematic performativity (*mimesis*), riffing at B-Fest is often precocious, creative and at times poetically persuasive (*poiesis*); to paraphrase Richard Schechner, riffing is *making*, not *faking*, meaning. Conquergood (‘Of Caravans and Carnivals’) characterized performance shifting from *poiesis* to *kinesis* as ‘movement, motion, fluidity, fluctuation, all those relentless energies that transgress boundaries and trouble closure’ (138). As D. Soyini Madison explains, ‘Kinesis is the point at which reflection and meaning now evoke intervention and change’ (170). If rifiers interested in exploring the craft endeavor to explore public performance that strives for kinesis – performing thoughtfully, passionately, and in dialogue with others to advance purposeful interpretations – it can serve as a conduit for productive engagement among passionate filmgoers who recognize the power of audiencing collectively and artistically.

I am not suggesting that riffing *must* be explicitly political to qualify as meaningful or that those who riff for fun or fellowship must be compelled to explore the political if doing so does not appeal to their audiencing desires. As I hope this essay has demonstrated, there is much critical meaning to be mined from close reading of riffing that makes no pretense of performing film criticism such of the tone or style favored in the academy or professional critical spheres. As B-Fest indicates, riffing as practiced today has potential to challenge the ideological content of a film, or it can reinforce it, or it can muddle or willfully ignore it; its foregrounded meanings can be absurdist, unreliable, and/or schizophrenic. Furthermore, the act of deconstructing an ideologically loaded film and artfully subverting it is one not every riffer is communicatively equipped to undertake even if interested in doing so; a riffer may strive to communicate one viewpoint and unwittingly reinforce another.² The pretence of making a critical statement is not a prerequisite for movie riffing producing critical statements.

In their analyses on the cults of *Rocky Horror* and *The Room*, respectively, Locke and McCulloch each suggest the cult audiences congregating around their beloved texts depart the ritual without lasting transformation: they perform their roles and return to their lives. This is not my perception or experience attending or studying B-Fest. While reflecting on my relationship to B-Fest and my experiences as a participant-observer, I am confident kinesis among its community is already occurring in ways that endure and extend beyond the acts produced during the annual gathering. Somewhere beyond the false binary of active audiencing and passive audiencing lies transformative audiencing: audiencing praxis that flows beyond any one ritual or text to everyday praxis through a shared, ever-evolving

heuristic vocabulary. For the cult of B-Fest, the spatial context may change, but the transformative interpretive praxis of riffing at B-Fest can be traced through the enunciative, textual, and hybrid productivities they carry on after McCormick Auditorium clears out. The talk continues on personal websites, on podcasts and social media interactions until B-Fest resumes again.

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Notes:

¹ The sentiment that *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is the worst movie ever made, famously coined by film critics Michael and Harry Medved and reproduced in popular texts such as *Seinfeld*, is largely rejected by B-movie aficionados. Any given B-Fest may feature as many as a half dozen films demonstratively more insufferable than *Plan 9*.

² See Foy ('Reanimating Bodies in the Dark') for a report on the author's attempt to experiment with live movie riffing as purposeful film criticism.