Marketing, Monsters, and Music: Teensploitation Horror Films

Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper

Teenagers, to midtwentieth-century America, represented both problem and possibility. Perceptions that rebellious youth were tearing at the moral fabric of society led FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to describe juvenile delinquency as a threat to the American way of life equivalent to communism (Doherty 40). At the same time, however, the teenage generation of the 1950s emerged as a locus for innovation in fashion, music, and other entertainment, and—with its burgeoning disposable income—as an attractive target for youth-focused products and marketing (Hine 225–27). Mindful of the perceived threat of the rebellious youth, but eager to cater to the teen audience, motion picture studios confronted this tension through "teensploitation" films such as *Untamed Youth* (1957) and *Dragstrip Riot* (1958). The publicity for such films promised lurid tales of crime, passion, rock music, and fast cars featuring teen heroes who rebelled against the status quo. The films themselves, however, typically resolved these conflicts in ways that reinforced established social norms, with the wayward teens dead, chastened, or reconciled with their elders—thus affirming production companies' role as responsible guardians of the moral order (Doherty; Tropiano; Betrock).

Rock-and-roll horror films, a product of the B-movie producers' endless search for novelty, fused elements of teensploitation and science fiction films into the tales of teen rockers and adult authority figures joining forces to confront fantastic creatures that threatened civilization. Production companies such as American International Pictures (AIP) churned out low-budget films such as *Earth vs. the Spider* (1958), *Eegah!* (1962), and *The Horror of Party Beach* (1964) that used rock and roll both as a marketing gimmick and as an icon of hedonistic, rebellious teen culture in order to capture the youth market. Science, in these films, is cast as deadened and emotionless—the antithesis of the passionate rock ethos—and scientists as distillations of the "adult" qualities that teens most vigorously rejected. Like earlier teensploitation films, however, monster-rock tales hedge their bets. The monsters are defeated only when the scientists and the rockers join forces, and adult efforts are infused with teenage bravado and ingenuity. Wayward youth are thus saved from delinquency—setting aside rebellion for responsibility and hedonism for practicality—and the studios saved from charges of inciting and corrupting already confused teens.

In their simultaneous pursuit of teen-funded profit and social respectability, the second-tier studios and low-budget producers responsible for the monster-rock films used this innovative merging of horror and contemporary teen music to

Cynthia J. Miller is a lecturer in the Institute for Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies at Emerson College. She is the editor of eight books, including Ray and Pat Browne Award-winner *Steaming Into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*, coedited with Julie Anne Taddeo.

A. Bowdoin Van Riper is a historian who specializes in depictions of science and technology in popular culture. An independent scholar, he is the author or editor of eleven books, including *1950s Rocketman TV Series and Their Fans: Cadets, Rangers, and Junior Space Men* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2012), co-edited with Cynthia J. Miller.

The Journal of American Culture, 38:2

support existing middle-class relationships, values, and distributions of power within the community. In doing so, however, their films also added range and dimension to the teen characters they put on screen, creating a continuum of identities that replaced the simple good/bad binary opposition of mid-1950s teen films.

Seldom the subject of serious consideration, the monster-rock film cluster merits discussion for its contribution to this dizzying constellation of cinematic texts, its films illustrating the innovation and low-budget spectacle that would rapidly come to signify the era, and then pass just as quickly, once teens put away childish monsters and turned their attention to the real-world threats taking shape outside the cinema. This essay, then, examines the decade-long heyday of monster-rock teensploitation film production (1957–1966), when studios, production companies, and distributors sought to address—and profit from—both sides of the era's generational divide. It argues that the monster-rock films were not aberrations, spoofs, or curiosities, but a cluster of carefully constructed attempts to keep the teensploitation genre successful by paying close attention to—and quickly responding to—perceived trends in the youths' tastes in films. These films served a significant function within the film industry at a unique socio-historical moment: satisfying the studios' mandate for moral "self-policing," while still attracting teens by echoing the youth movement's call to rebellion.

Kids Today: The Problem with Youth and the History of Teensploitation

The film industry, J. Edgar Hoover thundered, was nothing more than "trash mills which spew out celluloid poison destroying the impressionable minds of youth," afflicting the nation with "a flood of movies and television productions which flaunt indecency and applaud lawlessness" (Doherty 40, 96–97). What Hoover failed to grasp was that Hollywood was reflecting, as well as shaping, the cutting edge of the emergent teen culture of the mid-1950s. The onscreen symbols of the "indecency" he decried—short skirts, tight sweaters, leather jackets, fast cars, and rock-and-roll records—were icons of the culture that the newly enriched and empowered teens of the postwar era were creating for themselves. Teensploitation producers splashed them on movie screens, and featured them in advertising, for just that reason. They signaled that the film in question was designed to speak to *them*—not to adults.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's teen drama *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) had a decidedly adult sensibility, but drew a substantial teen audience. Its success inspired a flood of independently produced "juvenile delinquent" films that looked across the generational divide from the side of the youth, and its use of "Rock Around the Clock" over its opening and closing scenes propelled the Decca single to significant sales success (Doherty 57–59; Tropiano 48–52; Lev 244–46). Capitalizing on the song's popularity, Columbia Pictures' Sam Katzman produced the country's first rock and roll exploitation film, *Rock Around the Clock*, in 1956, pushing motion picture production strategy even more strongly toward the teenpic (Doherty 60–82; Tropiano 61–65). The following year saw the release of the first cycle of popular films produced for and about teenagers: the American International Pictures trio *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, *Blood of Dracula*, and *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (Tropiano 33). These formula films spoke directly to teen-adult relationships, with teens (victimized by adult scientists) becoming literal monsters, rather than the figurative monsters of juvenile delinquency (Tropiano 34–42; Doherty 131–37; Hendershot 112–16). "The teenager was the most valued force coming to the theaters," noted AIP producer Samuel Z. Arkoff, and thus began the motion picture studios' pursuit of the teen box-office dollar (Voger 76).

The seemingly unfettered teen culture of the early 1960s drew on the icons and artifacts of the 1950s rebellion, such as James Dean, Marlon Brando, Lee Marvin, and Chuck Berry, along with the writings of Beat authors Allan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, for inspiration. It engaged with

new cultural forces as the decade progressed—the anti-establishment, anticorporate stance of the emergent counterculture; the heady, highly sexualized performances of Elvis and the bands of the British Invasion; high-energy, innovative music of groups like the Ventures, Jan and Dean, and the Beach Boys; ideologies of experimentation and freedom, given form in the projects of Andy Warhol and the artists, actors, and filmmakers of the Factory—in ways that resulted in a range of teen identities with a complexity that mainstream cinematic portrayals of the times only hinted at.

Motion picture studios had been quick to capitalize, through various strategies, on the burgeoning teen market, and strategies that linked music and film—the inclusion of incidental rock and roll songs in nonmusical pictures, and the production of musical exploitation films—had been particularly successful. As the teenpic market continued to grow and expand in the early 1960s, the beach party film added an additional dimension to the ever-increasing body of rock and roll exploitation films (Lisanti; Betrock 100–28; Chidester and Priore 2008 157–76). It was a time of "endless summer" in teen culture, characterized in film, on one hand, by sun, surf, and freedom from cares, and on the other hand, by sexuality, rebellion, and transgression. Beach party and surf films like *Gidget* (1959) and AIP's surfsploitation sequence: *Beach Party* (1963), *Muscle Beach Party* (1964), *Bikini Beach* (1964), *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini* (1965), and *The Ghost in the Invisible Bikini* (1966), were populated by clean, carefree teens like Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, James Darren, and Sandra Dee—several of whom were already mainstream singing idols of the late 1950s—and the morally more complex bikers and fast women cast as their opposite numbers. The soundtracks of their lives brimmed over with the driving rhythms and reverb of surf music—a new sound that drew on the styles and energies of rockabilly, and rhythm and blues to represent the ocean landscape (Lueras; Crowley). The "king of the surf guitars," Dick Dale, and his band, the Del-Tones, along with bands like the Bel-Aires ("Mr. Moto"), the Chantays ("Pipeline"), and the Surfaris ("Wipe Out") were revolutionizing popular music on the West Coast, and across the country. Music historian John Blair observed: "It was white, danceable, and nonthreatening. Kids all over America picked up on it, despite the lack of beaches and surfboard" (Blair 7). Their sound spread through motion pictures like wildfire. Songs like "Muscle Bustle," "If it's Gonna Happen," and "Swingin' and a Surfin'" became the standards of beach party movies, as well as appearing (often re-recorded) on movie-related singles and LPs produced by labels like Buena Vista, Wand, and MGM (Figure 1).

Typically painted in the broad brush strokes of an older generation's morality, the clean-living teens of the beach party films conformed to overarching social norms, as they danced, sang, surfed, made out and fell in love, while the "troublemakers" smoked, drank, reveled in their sexuality, and actively defied authority—rebellious holdovers from the 1950s who alternately resented, disrupted, and subconsciously desired, the lives of their carefree counterparts (Doherty 145–86; Betrock 71–99). For many, this opposition mirrored, and addressed, what was happening in the world around them, and the recognition that teens were a social and cultural force to be reckoned with loomed large. Numbering somewhere between ten and fifteen million in the 1960s, the post-World War II baby boom generation (those born in 1946 and onward) was beginning to come of age, forming a social and economic demographic that was willing to turn up the volume to be heard (Hine 249–73).

Surf movies reached out to touch the teen fantasies of the sun, sand, waves, and romance, and gave them a soundtrack to groove on. Studios like Columbia *(Ride the Wild Surf,* 1964), Paramount (*Girls on the Beach*, 1965), and 20th Century-Fox (*Wild on the Beach*, 1965), all sought to cash in on the popularity that rock and roll brought to teen films. Capitalizing on the explosion of rock and roll's popularity in the wider teen culture—the Beatles, the Beau Brummels, Frank Sinatra Jr., Freddy Cannon, and others—they created the perfect teen utopias, where bikini-clad girls and their surfer boys twisted the nights (and days) away.

Figure 1. Press kits such as this one for Wild Guitar promised teen audiences sex, stars, and guitars. (Image courtesy of Arch Hall, Jr.)

Even at the height of the beach-party era, however, the teensploitation market was never defined by a single film type or subgenre. Independent producers' use of double features and saturation booking, and their determination to reach the widest possible teen audience, placed a premium on diversity and novelty. Personality-driven musical pictures offered young moviegoers teen idol Frankie Avalon in the war drama *Operation Bikini* (1963) while the horror genre featured the darkly troubled figure of Arch Hall, Jr. in *The Sadist* (1963) and John Arnold's gang of rebels affirmed that "Speed's their creed" in *Hot Rod Hullabaloo* (1966). Debbie Reynolds, whose portrayal of backwoods ingénue Tammy Tyree fed an early-60s vogue for "clean teen" films, coexisted with Ann Margaret, who stunned her fans in *Kitten with a Whip* (1964). Rebels and "clean" teens, rockers and monsters, all inhabited cinematic space simultaneously, their sensational posters and lobby cards clamoring for teen audiences' attention and box office dollars. Juvenile delinquents and speed-crazed hot-rodders competed with the literally monstrous teens of *Teenage Zombies* (1959).

The monster-rock cluster was a small, short-lived element in this kaleidoscopic array of teensploitation films. Film studios, eager to retain their

teenage moviegoers, had begun experimenting with genre-blending in the 1957 AIP double-bill of *I Was A Teenage Werewolf* and *Invasion of the Saucer Men*. The inclusion of Kenny Miller's single, "Eeny Meeny Miney Moe," in *Teenage Werewolf* suggested the possibility of further genre-blending, and helped to spawn, the following year, the first in the cluster of monster-rock films that would captivate teen audiences through much of the next decade, ultimately joining the ranks of cult classics as a result of their quirky snapshot of 1960s American teen culture.

Comprised of eight films released over the course of nine years, it spoke to teen audiences about life, love, morality, community, and the responsibilities inherent in coming of age. Teen subgenres waxed and waned, but genre-bending films such as *The Giant Gila Monster, The Horror of Party Beach*, *Eegah!*, and *Beach Girls and the Monster* were scattered throughout the late fifties and early to midsixties, designed to siphon fans from all manners of the teensploitation fare.

Constructing the Cluster

"[The] story… will tax the imagination of adult patrons," a reviewer in *Variety* wrote of *The Blob* upon its release in September 1958, but "the dialog and most of the situations are tailored to the teenage set, and they should reciprocate at the wicket." That, at least, was the fond hope of the film's producer, who envisioned it as the first in a series of similar pictures ("*The Blob*"). *Invasion of the Saucer Men,* released by American International Pictures in June 1957 on a double bill with *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*, had ventured into similar territory. It offered its target audience elements already familiar from dozens of earlier teen films—pretty girls, hot-headed boys, fast cars, make-out sessions, and juvenile delinquency—but added malevolent aliens like those in *Invaders from Mars* (1954) and *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956). Binding the disparate elements together was a delicious teen wish-fulfillment fantasy: quick-thinking youths save their town from a terrible danger that unimaginative adults fail to take seriously (Tropiano 42–44). *The Blob* refined the fantasy by having its teen and adult characters join forces, rather than remaining estranged and opposed. It also incorporated—as *Teenage Werewolf* had—a song designed to be independently promotable, and to increase the film's appeal to its target teen audience.[1]

Invasion of the Saucer Men and *The Blob* became the nucleus of a cluster of films that pitted rebellious teen rockers and sober adult scientists against invading monsters—a small, but notable, group in which *The Blob* served as the most significant box office hit.[2] They were soon followed by *Earth vs. the Spider,* produced by AIP and released in November 1958, which crystallized the form of the monster-rock film by adding an adult character who explicitly stood (and spoke) for Science, and by weaving rock and roll into the fabric of the story itself. Neither of its predecessors included those elements—the incongruously jaunty theme song from *The Blob* was added in postproduction and played only over the opening credits—but no monster-rock film released after 1958 would lack them. *The Giant Gila Monster*, independently produced but distributed by AIP, followed in 1959 and *Eegah!* in 1962. The rapid-fire release of *The Creeping Terror* (1964), *The Horror of Party Beach* (1964), *The Beach Girls and the Monster* (1965), and *Village of the Giants* (1965) expanded the cluster to a total of nine films in eight years before it abruptly collapsed, leaving not even a faint echo.

In their quest to cash-in on the successes of teensploitation cycles of the era, producers of monster-rock films poached liberally from popular beach party movies, juvenile delinquent exposés, emerging teen science fiction and horror productions, and "big bug" fad films of the mid- to late 1950s—appropriating and merging the visual lexicons of science fiction, horror, teen romance, small-town comedy, and of course, rock-and-roll, to create a familiar, yet novel, group of cinematic texts. The uniqueness resulting from these genre mash-ups set monster-rock films aside from existing teen cycles, defining them, as a

cluster of films, less by imitation than by innovation.

Establishing a plot template used in each succeeding film, *Earth vs. the Spider* begins with the familiar stuff of teen movies—high-school sweethearts Mike and Carol (Gene Persson and June Kenney) talking, flirting, arguing, and enduring a stupefying lecture from science teacher Art Kingman (Ed Kemmer)—intercut with brief scenes of the monster's first victim: Carol's ne'er-do-well father. His disappearance raises the teens' suspicions, but "responsible" adults such as Carol's mother, Mike's parents, and the sheriff dismiss them. Only Kingman—the open-minded scientist—listens seriously to their tale of a giant spider in the caves outside of town. Moved to action by Kingman, local authorities attack the spider, but a massive dose of DDT stuns rather than kills the beast.[3] It reawakens, breaks out of the high school gym where its "dead" body had been stored, and rampages through the town, claiming still more lives. Only when Kingman and Mike join forces, using an electrical arc to kill the spider, is the town saved (Figure 2).

Monster-rock films routinely juxtapose the rebellious, live-for-the-moment hedonism of teens with the dull, narrow, care-laden lives of adults. Rock and roll symbolizes the teens' carefree lifestyle; a few guitar chords are all that is necessary to set them dancing, their cares and responsibilities forgotten. Science is the antithesis of the rock ethos and the ultimate expression of "adult" values. Cautious, detached, and objective, scientists embody the existence against which teenagers rebel. The two groups inhabit different spaces and different social worlds, but their alliance to fight the monster requires them to find common ground. The teen heroes must leave behind their music, bringing with them only its energy and ingenuity, while scientists must learn to embrace the teens' vitality, boldness, and capacity for quick action.

The teen characters in the monster-rock cluster, more central to the films' stories and more important to their target audience, change far more than the scientists. The films, for all that they celebrate teen culture, are in fact tales of young people who "put away childish things" and embrace—sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently—adult responsibilities. Chase Winstead (Don Sullivan) of *The Giant Gila Monster* is an ace hot-rod mechanic and aspiring rock singer, an organizer of

Figure 2. A giant spider menaces the town in *Earth vs. the Spider.* (Image courtesy of Photofest, Inc.)

(legal) drag races, drive-in outings, and a record hop emceed by a famous disc jockey. He does not hesitate to confront the monster, however, risking his life and sacrificing his beloved roadster by turning it into a nitroglycerin-filled bomb. Tom (Arch Hall, Jr.), the young rocker-hero of *Eegah!,* swings into action to help his girlfriend, Roxy (Marilyn Manning), search for her father (Arch Hall, Sr.), a famous explorer. Leaving his easy life beside the pool at a Palm Springs resort, he arms himself with a guitar and a shotgun and – with Roxy by his side – roars into the surrounding desert aboard his dune buggy. After rescuing both Roxy *and* her father from a giant caveman (Richard Kiel), he returns to the comforts of the resort, dons a dinner jacket, and triumphantly rocks out with his band, the Archers.

Similarly, teens in the quiet California village of Hainesville, are initially drawn to the gang of rebellious youths who come to town when their car bogs down on a nearby road. The two groups of young people come together at a performance by the Beau Brummels, swaying and gyrating as the camera's close-ups on breasts and bottoms homogenize them into a single pleasure-seeking mob, lost in the rock and roll beat. As the plot unfolds, however, the outsider teens reveal their true delinquent nature. Discovering that a local 11-year-old (Ron Howard)—known to all the teens as "Genius"—has accidentally invented a growth-enhancing substance called "goo," they ingest it, transforming themselves into giants. They enact a burlesque version of the nightmares played straight, a decade earlier, in films like *The Wild One* and *The Blackboard Jungle*: mocking adults' demands for respect, sneering at their attempts to impose order, and demanding instead that the old serve the needs of the young. Appalled by the outsiders' toppling of the social world they know, the local youth turn against them. Slipping away while the giants give themselves up to the sensual pleasures of another extended dance sequence, the local teens set aside frivolity and embrace civic responsibility. Armed with a goo antidote invented by "Genius," they shrink the outsiders to normal size and restore the status quo.

Intransigence is, in the world of the monster-rock films, the ultimate sin. Dr. Otto Lindsey of *The Beach Girls and the Monster*, fearing that his own son is forsaking a promising scientific career for a rock-and-roll lifestyle and a "live before you die" attitude, becomes a monster himself. Disguised as a creature from the deep, he stalks the beach, killing off the "tramps" and "loafers" who, he believes, are leading his son astray. Tina, the dedicated party-girl who dominates the early scenes of *The Horror of Party Beach*, swigs liquor straight from the bottle and sheds her clothes as she dances barefoot on the beach with a gang of leather-clad bikers, but soon becomes the first victim of a monster brought to life by nuclear waste dumped illegally, just offshore. Like the slumber-partying girls attacked in a later scene, and the amorous teen couple devoured in *The Creeping Terror,* she is a victim of her own pleasure-seeking excesses, too self-absorbed to notice the danger around her. Time and again, roomfuls of dancing teens, similarly distracted and inattentive, barely escape with their lives, having learned (as Tina does not) of the price of unbridled hedonism.

The central figures in the monster-rock films, however, are typically youths like Tina's ex-boyfriend Hank: a former "campus hero" who has left behind rock and roll, beach parties, and an "anything for kicks" lifestyle to devote himself to science. "Times have changed," he tells Tina in the conversation that precipitates their breakup. "We're not kids anymore. I've got plans, and you can do all the partying you want, but you'd better stay out of my way." Hank, joining forces with his employer/mentor, Dr. Gavin (Allan Laurel) and Gavin's daughter Elaine (Alice Lyon), not only vanquishes the monster but finds a new romance—with the equally mature, science-oriented Elaine—and the road to a future unlocking the secrets of the universe, not dancing on the beach. Figures like Hank replaced the simple good/bad binary opposition of mid-1950s teen films with a continuum of more complex characters. "Clean teens" still coexisted with rebels and delinquents, but they yielded pride of place to teens who, when monsters threatened, armed themselves with science and ride their hot rods

into battle, the thump of bongos and the twang of surf guitars ringing in their ears.

Profit and Pretense: The Box Office Versus The Hays Code

Monster-rock productions reflect on a time of change in American films—a time when the morality of on-screen images was being renegotiated and the frontiers of the bold and shocking were being explored—nudging us to reconsider our assumptions about the industry and the narratives it produced. Independent film studios such as AIP were often on the front lines of censorship battles, as they stepped into spaces created by content regulation—taking advantage of opportunities and pushing boundaries where major studios did not dare (or care) to tread—and helping to pave the way for widespread change throughout the film industry in both teen and adult fare (Wittern-Keller 7–11).

The Production Code governing the content of motion pictures had been partially rewritten in the mid-1950s, to allow the treatment of such formerly taboo topics as drug addiction and prostitution, when "treated within the careful limits of good taste." Increasingly ignored by the studios in the mid-1960s, it would be eliminated entirely, replaced by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system, in 1968 (Jowett). The years in between were brimming over with experimentation, jaw-dropping sensationalism, and of course, exploitation. This was a moment in American culture that would never come again, when widespread innocence came of age, and camp, lust, crime, and gore collided on movie screens across the country.

Trends in adult films of the era—the charisma of dark, brooding antiheroes found in film noir, the newfound popularity of crime dramas, and the proliferation of "social issue" films focused on scandal and social malaise, all promoted through sensational advertising campaigns promising shocks, thrills, and "inside" glimpses at the fearless and forbidden—paved the way for the explosion of teensploitation films, as studios turned their sights to a new, younger market brimming over with box-office potential (Betrock 2–15). Teen films of the 1950s and '60s, then, did not emerge in a vacuum, but evolved from trends already found in the adult market—trends which, in films like *Knock on Any Door* (1949), starring John Derek, and *City Across the River* (1949), already featured teens as delinquents and gang members, reflecting postwar America's growing fears that the country's moral fabric was threatened as much from within as from without (Biskind; Pomerance; Halliwell 147–88).

Film studios continued to respond to and exploit those fears for the next two decades. Major studios such as Paramount released films such as *The Young Savages* (1961), which capitalized on the star power of Burt Lancaster and Dina Merrill as it exposed the "raw truth" about hoodlum teenagers, and *Wild Guitar*, Universal's 1962 vehicle for young rocker Arch Hall, Jr., which promised that "he played the wildest strings in this mad, mad town." On-screen sex was also edging into the mainstream, with films like Warner Bros.' *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) and MGM's *Lolita* (1962) (Semonche 120–25). As products of the industry's innovators and risk-takers, beach-party films brought their own carefree brazenness to the mix: chaste, clean-living main characters maintained a conventional moral core at the center of their films that would satisfy censors, parents, and moral interest groups, while music, dancing, and swimsuit-clad bodies provided the transgressive, exploitable content teen audiences demanded. The response was complex: *The New York Times* waged an ongoing campaign against teensploitation films' "idiocy … their moronic intellectual level … and their sexual leering and suggestiveness" while popular magazines, such as *Life* and *Look* celebrated the films, their stars, and the new social and consumer trends they promoted (Betrock 102) (Figure 3).

With films made, at least initially, on a shoestring, independent studios created, promoted, and exploited; but they also innovated, recruiting fresh talent, experimenting with new elements, and merging diverse genres (Davis; McGee). From

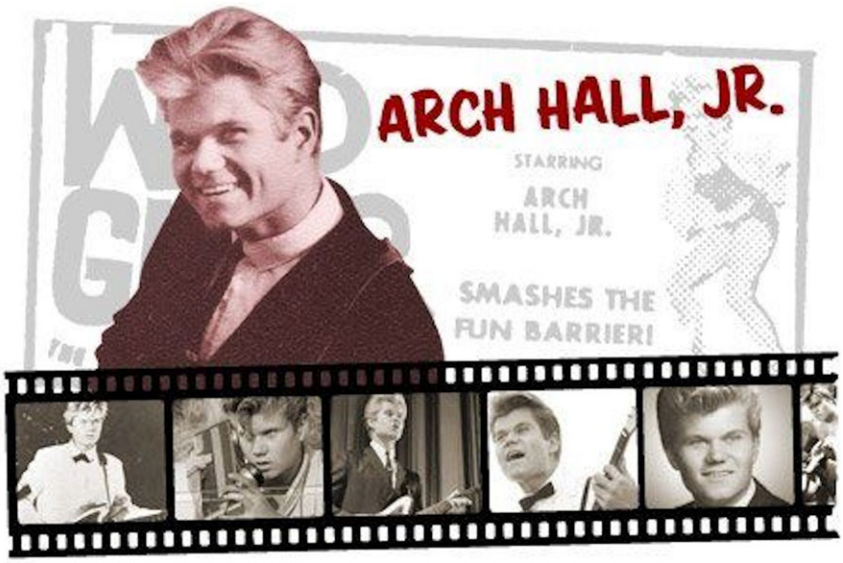

Figure 3. Audiences flocked to see young stars like actor, musician, and teen heartthrob Arch Hall, Jr. (Image courtesy of Arch Hall, Jr.)

the midst of this experimentation came the monster-rock cluster, an admittedly sensationalist attempt at novelty within a larger cycle of teen films. Stories that were, by definition, about strange juxtapositions—the intrusion of the fantastic into the world of the familiar—they lent themselves to such innovation, and producers took full advantage of the opportunity. Films such as *The Horror of Party Beach* and *Eegah!* were early contributions to what was, at the time, a short list of genre-bashing films like *Billy the Kid vs. Dracula* (1966) and its double-bill companion, *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter* that sought to win over teen audiences with the sensational come-on "Hey kid—bet you've never seen *this* before!"

Lobby cards, posters, and newspaper advertisements for monster-rock films promised a seemingly irresistible combination of carefree fun, rock-and-roll, beautiful bodies, and monstrous creatures threatening to ruin it all. Echoing campfire ghost stories, the trailer for *The Giant Gila Monster* depicted teen sweethearts kissing, then driving a dark country road in a hot rod, while a narrator ominously intoned: "If you're young people in love, look out!" Posters and lobby cards supplied the climax: an image of a giant lizard's claw descending on the same roadster and plucking a screaming girl from the passenger seat. The advertising for *The Horror of Party Beach*, released near the climax of the cluster's productivity in June 1964, was even less subtle. One large poster featured the sea monster of the title menacing a screaming, bikini-clad girl—clawed hand poised above her bare midriff—as other teens party, unaware, in the background. Text to either side continued the juxtaposition, promising "weird atomic beasts who live off human blood!" and "the big-beat sound of the Del-Aires, swingin' with the beach party set!" ("Horror of Party Beach") (Figure 4).

Independent producers' penchant for imitating past successes regularly shaped monster-rock films. *Earth vs. the Spider* cashed in on the fading "big bug" fad of the mid-1950s (Schoell 43–68), using teen heroes and a rock-and-roll interlude to enliven a tired formula. Posters for the film evoked *Them!* (1954),[4] but the ludicrous title alluded to a more recent success: *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (Warren 59). *The Horror of Party Beach* began as a project titled *Invasion of the Zombies*, to which co-producers Allen Iselin and Del Tenney—presumably taking note of the success of AIP's *Beach Party*—added music by The Del-Aires in order to "tie in some kind of a beach-blanket beat" (Weaver

Figure 4. "Bad girl" Tina meets her end at the hand of the monster in *The Horror of Party Beach.* (Image courtesy of Photofest, Inc.)

349). When *The Beach Girls and the Monster* was released a year later, the beach-party craze was in full swing, and the imitation was obvious and deliberate. "Beach party lovers making hey! hey! in the moonlight," the posters promised, "while the monster lurks in the shadows" ("Poster Art").

Ever-popular exploitation film themes of horror, music, and sex formed the core of monster-rock films' appeal to their young audiences. The later films of the cluster, released during the beach-party era of the mid-1960s, featured music prominently in the come-ons, paying more attention to the performers than to the actors. "Call it a bash! Call it a ball! Call it a blast!" trumpeted posters for *The Beach Girls and the Monster,* billing musician Frank Sinatra, Jr. well above the no-name cast. Trailers for the film featured a bongo-and-guitar driven song about dancing "to the beat of the pounding sea," and copious images of "the glamorous Watusi Dancing Girls." The relatively restrained violence on display in the films—deaths revealed in flash cuts and corpses discreetly kept off-camera—was amplified, in promotional materials, to Grand Guignol levels. Newspaper advertisements for *The Blob,* alluding to the gelatinous creature's dark red color, declared it to be "bloated with the blood of its victims," and trailers for *Earth vs. the Spider* promised to take viewers "deep into caverns whose very air is putrefied with the stench of death" (*Earth vs. the Spider* [trailer]*; The Blob* [advertisement]). Promises of sex were more straightforward, relying more on scenes of bikini-clad actresses than on vague intimations of "sin" and references to "hey-hey in the moonlight."

Departures from that restrained pattern took refuge in audacity. Advertising for *Eegah!* teased audiences with images of an unconscious Roxy lying at the title character's feet, her dress torn from her shoulders and pushed up to her hips, and references to "the crazed love of a prehistoric giant for a ravishing teenage girl!" and "primitive passions turned on!" ("*Eegah!* Poster 1"). Promotion for *Village of the Giants* was built around the image of a normal-sized Johnny Crawford clinging to the low-cut bikini top of a giant Joy Harvey, draped across her ample breasts and (implicitly) staring into her cleavage (Betrock 123; "Unofficial *Village of the Giants* Fan Page"). Director Bert I. Gordon cheerfully acceded to the Production Code Authority's requests for cuts to the film's overtly sexualized dance scenes, and then mentioned them at every opportunity—announcing, for example, that the trimmed footage had been stolen from the editing room ("Hot Footage"). As an exploitation-film veteran, he knew the power of the forbidden to entice audiences into the theater.

Conclusion

And, for a while, it worked. "The critics can pan this all they want to," one theater owner defended, "but, somehow or other, this has definite appeal for the teenagers that make up ninety

percent of my patrons. So who am I to complain if this pulled above average for me, which it did" (Betrock 111). The success of the monster-rock cluster and other teensploitation categories was, however, the product of a specific moment in the history of the American film industry: one that was already passing when *Village of the Giants* was released in October 1965.

The monster-rock films were defined by the tension between the lurid, teen-friendly spectacle —fast cars, loud music, smoldering passion, gruesome death—that they energetically promised and the Code-friendly message that they actually delivered. The Code, however, was crumbling by the mid-1960s. Its slide into irrelevance began with the 1964 decision to grant a seal of approval to *The Pawnbroker*—despite its depiction of bare breasts and an explicit-for-the time sex scene—and was complete by 1966, when *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was released with a Code Authority seal of approval, and *Blow-Up* flourished at the box office without one completed the process (Harris 173–76). The widening availability of the sights and sounds once proscribed by the Code diminished the appeal of the mild transgressions offered by the monster-rock films.

Even more significant, however, were the broader social and cultural changes that *made* the Code feel outdated and irrelevant by 1966. The years 1964–65, the peak period of the monster-rock cluster, also saw the escalation of the war in Vietnam, the first large-scale antiwar protests, the assassination of Malcolm X, and race riots in New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and a half-dozen other major cities. American youths' growing awareness of and engagement in an increasingly turbulent world—literally a matter of life and death for many young men—engendered a serious outlook at odds with cinematic tales of hot rods and beach parties. Nineteen sixty-five, the year that American Academy Productions released *The Beach Girls and the Monster* and American International Pictures offered teens *Village of the Giants* was, after all, also the year that The Who sang about "My Generation," and Bob Dylan declared "The Times They Are a' Changing."

The shared message that the monster-rock films delivered to their teen audiences was clear: Leave behind childish things and grow up. The subgenre died because the American teens, confronted by changes in the wider world, began to do just that. Skepticism of adult authorities, and an increasingly combative dissatisfaction with the world they had made, made the easy intergenerational rapprochement modeled in the monster-rock films feel naïve. It belonged, like *Wild Guitar* and *Beach Blanket Bingo*, to a world quickly receding into memory.

Notes

1. Added at the insistence of Paramount Pictures, which had signed a distribution deal with producer Jack Harris, "Beware of the Blob" was written in three days by Burt Bacharach and Hal David, then under contract to Paramount. It became a novelty hit in its own right, reaching the Billboard Top 40 (Biodrowski).

2. While the monster-rock cluster shares some characteristics of Richard Nowell's template for a film cycle (41–56)—a surge in production, a Trailblazer hit, and successive attempts to "cash in"—the output of these films is too small, finite, and diverse to adequately fit the film cycle blueprint.

3. Contrary to widely repeated claims (e.g., Rajewski 33), there is no suggestion in the film that the spider is "awakened by rock and roll." It simply revives when the effects of the DDT wear off.

4. Specifically, two of the most spectacular scenes in *Them!* which involves the use of submachine guns to fight off an attack by giant ants in the New Mexico desert, and the destruction of a giant underground nest with flamethrowers.

Works Cited

Beach Girls and the Monster. The. Dir. Jon Hall. 1965. Image Entertainment, 2002. DVD.

Betrock, Alan. *I Was a Teenage Juvenile Delinquent Rock 'n' Roll Beach Party Movie Book: A Complete Guide to the Teen Exploitation Film, 1954–1969*. New York: St. Martin's, 1986. Print.

Biodrowski, Steve. "The Blob (1958): A Retrospective." *Cinefantastique* 19.1–2 (January 1989). Web.

Biskind, Peter. *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*. New York: Basic Books, 1983. Print.

Blair, John. *The Illustrated Discography of Surf Music*, 3rd edition. Ann Arbor, MI: Popular Culture, Ink, 1995. Print.

The Blob. Dir. Irvin Yeaworth. 1958. Criterion, 2000. DVD.

The Blob [advertisement]. *Scenes from the Morgue: The Lost Art of Pulp Ads*. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

"*The Blob*" [review]. *Variety*. 10 Sep. 1958. Rpt. Variety's Complete Science Fiction Reviews. Ed. Donald Willis. New York: Garland, 1985. 132. Print.

Chidester, Brian, and Domenic Priore. *Pop Surf Culture: Music, Design, Film, and Fashion from the Bohemian Surf Boom*. Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2008. Print.

Continuum, 2011. Print.

The Creeping Terror. Dir. Vic Savage (as A. J. Nelson). 1964. Mill Creek Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

Crowley, Kent. *Surf Beat: Rock 'n' Roll's Forgotten Revolution*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2011. Print.

Davis, Blair. *The Battle for the Bs: 1950's Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012. Print.

Doherty, Thomas. *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*, revised and expanded edition. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002. Print.

Earth vs. the Spider. Dir. Bert I. Gordon. 1958. Lions Gate, 2006. DVD.

Earth vs. the Spider [Trailer]. *YouTube.com*. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

Eegah! Dir. Nicholas Merriweather. 1962. Alpha Video, 2002. DVD.

"*Eegah* Poster 1." *HorrorNews.net*. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

The Giant Gila Monster. Dir. Ray Kellogg. 1959. Image Entertainment, 2012. DVD.

Halliwell, Martin. *American Culture in the 1950s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006. Print.

Harris, Mark. *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood*. New York: Penguin, 2009. Print.

Hendershot, Cyndy. *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination*. Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 2001. Print.

Hine, Thomas. *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2000. Print.

The Horror of Party Beach. Dir. Del Tenney. 1964. Dark Sky Films, 2006. DVD.

"The Horror of Party Beach." *Scenes from the Morgue: The Lost Art of Pulp Ads*. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

"Hot Footage." *Variety*. 24 Aug. 1965. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

Invasion of the Saucer Men. Dir. Edward L. Cahn. 1957. Mill Creek Entertainment, 2006. DVD.

Jowett, Garth. "A Significant Medium for the Communication of Ideas: The *Miracle* Decision and the Decline of Motion Picture Censorship, 1952–1968." *Movie Censorship and American Culture*. Ed. Frances G. Couvares. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2006. 258–276. Print.

Lev, Peter. *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen, 1950–1959*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2006. Print.

Lisanti, Thomas. *Hollywood Surf and Beach Movies: The First Wave, 1959–1969*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. Print.

Lueras, Leonard. *Surfing: The Ultimate Pleasure*. New York: Workman, 1984. Print.

McGee, Mark Thomas. *Fast and Furious: The Story of American International Pictures*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1984. Print.

Nowell, Richard. *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2010.

Pomerance, Murray. *American Cinema of the 1950s*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005. Print.

"*Poster Art: Beach Girls and the Monster*." Martin Klasch. 24 June 2009. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

Rajewski, Genevieve. *Introducing The Deadly Mantis*. New York: Rosen, 2006. Print.

Schoell, William. *Creature Features: Nature Turned Nasty in the Movies*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. Print.

Semonche, John E. *Censoring Sex: A Historical Journey Through American Media*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007. Print.

Tropiano, Stephen. *Rebels and Chicks: A History of the Hollywood Teen Movie*. New York: Back Stage Books, 2006. Print.

The Unofficial Village of the Giants Fan Page. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

Village of the Giants. Dir. Bert I. Gordon. 1965. MGM, 2001. DVD.

Voger, Mark. "Call me Sam (Arkoff, that is)." *Filmfax* 73 (April/May 1991): 76. Print.

Warren, Bill. *Keep Watching the Skies! American Science Fiction Movies of the 1950s, volume 1*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007. Print.

Weaver, Tom. "Del Tenney." *Interviews with B Science Fiction and Horror Movie Makers*. Ed. Tom Weaver, John Brunas and Michael Brunas. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006. 343–53. Print.

Wittern-Keller, Laura. *Freedom of the Screen: Legal Challenges to State Film Censorship, 1915–1981*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2008. Print.