
Introduction

B Is for Bad Cinema

CLAIRE PERKINS AND CONSTANTINE VEREVIS

A batsqueak of genius, dishevelment and derangement.

—Peter Bradshaw (“Cannes 2012: *Holy Motors*”)

Taken from the *Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw’s review comment for *Holy Motors* (Leos Carax, 2012) has become the most famous description of a film that was anticipated, received, and reviewed in a state of near-constant hyperbole. Rarely mentioned outside of the superlatives that guaranteed it the leading spot in *Film Comment*’s “Top Films of 2012” poll, descriptions of *Holy Motors* include, “the most astonishing film at Cannes” (Powers, *Vogue*) and “one of the most electrifying films you will ever see” (Ebiri, *New York Magazine*). At the same time, reviews of *Holy Motors*, Carax’s long-awaited fifth feature and first film since the critical and commercial failure of *Pola X* (1999), have also emphasized the delirium of Carax’s vision, describing the film as: “[an] ecstatic, idiotic, fizzy, frightening provocation” (Lodge, *Time Out*); “an exhilarating lunatic odyssey” (Collins, *The Telegraph*); “[a] baffling, bonkers and utterly brilliant [film]” (Mottram, *Total Film*); a “mad hatter’s monsterpiece” (Hillis, *The Village Voice*), and “[a] balls-to-the-wall crazy, beautiful and unbelievably strange [work]” (Kohn, *Indiewire*).

For those who see Carax's film as a meditation on life, death, and artifice—and a profound reflection on the history and future of cinema itself—*Holy Motors* is a “visionary, game-changing masterpiece” (Romney, *Screen Daily*). More urgently, though, the superlative qualities of *Holy Motors* are perceived to lie in an energy that is framed as *craziness*; in what Bradshaw details as a “ferociously eccentric” drive to really use the fluidity of cinema in a way that “makes most other films look very buttoned-up” (“Cannes 2012: *Holy Motors*”). “Craziness” is a term that here stands for freedom, and in turn stands for goodness. At the same time, it readily—if not straightforwardly—opens onto *badness*.

In the tradition of polarizing “event” films—*The Tree of Life* (Terrence Malick, 2011), *Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier, 2000), *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (David Lynch, 1992)—the enthusiastic reactions to *Holy Motors* are naturally offset by those who see it more coolly. Many critics prefaced their own approval by noting that some audiences would find the film irritating, pretentious, and overdone. Writing in *Sight and Sound*, Ginette Vincendeau makes note of the film’s “invention and energy,” but also writes that the film’s structure—a series of performative episodes around the character of Oscar (Denis Lavant)—and its investment in “images and feelings over storytelling” results in “uneven,” indulgent filmmaking (89). An *Indiewire* blogger finds the film “sloppy” and “bitter,” reading the perceived references to Carax’s own uneven career as a statement that “those who can’t get their movie made, sneer at those who can instead” (Jagernauth). In a more expansive comment, Jonathan Rosenbaum questions the French tradition that involves “a certain licence to behave like a depraved lunatic and receive approval, endorsement, and other cultural rewards in return for this boorishness.” All of these receptions are cautioning against mistaking a *distinct* work for a *good* work. In this logic lie some fundamental aspects of the interest this collection takes in the concept of *bad cinema*.

What counts as “good” and “bad” in cinema? How should film discourse approach a film that is “bad” to some people and “good” to others? Can there be an “objective” component in determinations of “bad” and “good,” or are such judgments entirely subjective and impressionistic? It is worth recalling that the reflections of many commentators on *Holy Motors* locate the wildness of the film in Denis Lavant’s embodiment of “Monsieur Merde,” the mute, strident, and sewer-dwelling gremlin created by Carax for the “Merde” episode of the triptych *Tokyo!* (Joonho Bong, Leos Carax, and Michel Gondry, 2008). If “good” or “bad” derives from “shit,” how do “badness” and “goodness” collide, converge,

supplement each other, complement each other, or perhaps annihilate each other in particular films or groups of films?

In what is perhaps his most telling review comment, Bradshaw describes *Holy Motors* as a “gorgeous furry teacup,” foregrounding its “goodness” as surrealist provocation, or shock. This gesture connects with *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, where Gilles Deleuze writes: from the very beginning, “it is as if cinema were telling us: with me . . . you can’t escape the *shock* which arouses the thinker in you.” But, Deleuze immediately adds, “this pretension of the cinema, at least among [its] greatest pioneers, only raises a smile today” (156–57). The reason for this is that while it was believed that the cinema—an industrial art that had achieved “self-movement”—was capable of imposing this shock, classical cinema simultaneously evolved from a belief in the ideality of representation and the stability of Truth. For Deleuze, “the shock would be confused, in *bad cinema*, with the figurative violence of the represented [i.e., imposed by commercial Hollywood cinema] instead of achieving that *other* violence of a movement-image developing its vibrations in a moving sequence which embeds itself within us” (157, emphasis added). Deleuze continues, stating that the “artistic essence of the image,” its capacity to deliver a shock—akin to that of *Holy Motors*—is realized only in “a sublime conception of cinema,” whereby “the imagination suffers



Figure 1.1. Monsieur Merde (Denis Levant) and fashion model (Eva Mendes) in *Holy Motors* (2012). Courtesy Canal+ / The Kobal Collection.

a shock which pushes it to the limit and forces thought to think the whole as intellectual totality which goes beyond the imagination" (157).

Deleuze locates this *sublime conception of cinema* in the film theory and practice of Abel Gance, F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, S. M. Eisenstein, and Antonin Artaud who, for "a brief minute, . . . 'believes' in cinema" (165). The latter opens up Deleuze's account of bad cinema—one in which "violence is no longer that of the image and its vibrations but that of the represented" (164)—to the Surrealists and the theorization of a sublime (epiphanic) moment: "[that] dangerous moment of representation which points to an elsewhere . . . [and allows one] to think or fantasize a 'beyond' of cinema, a world beyond representation which only shimmers through in certain moments of the film" (Willemen 240–41). Underground actor-filmmaker Jack Smith seemed to understand this when he wrote that the "allure of movies was a thing of light and shadows": "a bad film is one which doesn't flicker and shift and move" ("Perfect Filmic" 31). More particularly, Smith rallied (in his films and writings) against conventionally "good" movies—"the hypocrisy of good acting, good this, good that"—to argue that the performance of a "bad actor"—we could add, the affect of bad film—was potentially "rich, unique, idiosyncratic, revealing" ("Belated Appreciation" 5). In the case of his aesthetic muse—Universal Studios "Queen of Technicolor," Maria Montez (figure 1.2)—Smith wrote that those who saw "the World's Worst Actress" could appreciate only the most conventional pattern of acting ("GOOD PERFS"), and failed to see that "one of her [Montez's] atrocious acting sighs suffused a thousand tons of dead plaster [Hollywood studio sets] with imaginative life and a truth. . . . To admit of Maria Montez validities would be to turn on to moldiness, Glamorous Rapture, schizophrenic delight, hopeless naivete, and glittering technicolored trash!" ("Perfect Filmic" 28).

Smith's moldy aesthetic—his project for anti-aesthetically redeeming the debris of everyday life and film culture—resonates with more recent evaluations of (film) work that is characterized by its aesthetic impoverishment and affective excess. In film studies, this is most notable in Jeffrey Sconce's influential "'Trashing' the Academy," an essay that draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's account of taste preference and class privilege to build a discussion of "paracinema" as a counter cultural valorization of all forms of trash cinema (372). In a different context, John Frow appeals to Bourdieu's work on the sociology of symbolic forms to investigate the circumstances of the construction of such (counter) cultural groups and to more broadly interrogate the "problem of value"



Figure 1.2. Jack Smith's muse, Maria Montez, in *Cobra Woman* (1944). Courtesy Universal / The Kobal Collection / Ray Jones.

that is foundational to the discipline of cultural studies (4). The chapters in this book spring from such discussions of taste and value to consider unworthy cinema—that is, aesthetically and/or morally disreputable film work—and mark out the broad contours of bad cinema. While some of the essays in this edition do share a kinship to discussions of “paracinema”—B movies and cult films—the observations herein do not describe the reality of a single aesthetic object, or represent a single methodology or critical agenda, but *variously* describe bad cinema in terms of its aesthetics, politics, and cultural value. Together the chapters in this volume suggest the protean nature of bad cinema, as well as the challenges such a concept poses to the ways many critics and audiences commonly think about films and film culture.

This collection takes up the idea of bad cinema and the organization of cultural value in a contemporary context where there is no longer a clear distinction or hierarchy between high and low culture, canonical and cult films, good and bad cinema. As the works of Sconce and Frow demonstrate in and through their indebtedness to Bourdieu's critique of taste, this situation is related to changes in audience structures and the role that critics and academics play in the circulation of cultural value. Some chapters in this book treat value as a problem of film aesthetics and (as in Deleuze's description) of the imbrications of film in an industrialized system of aesthetic production. Insofar as a connection is maintained to social structure and process these questions of value are also linked to issues of knowledge and power, and so raise broader social and political questions. Other chapters in this volume dwell not so much on the nature of the film object but rather deal (as in Smith's account) with its affect and the circumstances of its consumption. In these essays the championing of a particular type of cinema often has less to do with any objective aesthetic criteria of cinematic worth than with the social position and cultural status of the critic. In these ways, the chapters in this book seek to broadly understand what bad cinema might mean within contemporary conditions of film production and reception, and to examine on what basis and in which situations we continue to make judgments of taste and value within the field of film studies.

This volume continues and extends—but does not limit itself to—the trends in film scholarship that have made cult and exploitation films and other low genres increasingly acceptable objects for critical analysis. Individual chapters cover a range of issues, from the aesthetic and industrial mechanics of low-budget production through the terrain of audience responses and cinematic affect, and on to the broader moral and ethical implications of the material. As a result, this volume takes an interest in a wide range of film examples—overblown Hollywood blockbusters, faux pornographic works, and European art house films—to consider that material which lurks on the boundaries of acceptability in terms of taste, style, and politics. The book does not argue for any single value system (high or low, good or bad) but questions the insertion of the critic into the field of value and recognizes that this is a wider institutional problem, not an individual one. The very term “bad cinema” indicates how critically intertwined issues of taste, style, and politics are in all film practice and criticism. In this way, this collection of essays (like Frow's *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*) seeks to make its most general contribution

to an interrogation of some foundational categories for contemporary film studies: representation, culture, and audiences.

The twelve chapters in this volume pose a wide range of historical, political, and aesthetic questions around the idea of bad cinema, but despite their diversity they suggest points of reflection and convergence. As Dana Polan has pointed out, in the cinema (and beyond) the concept of badness (as well as goodness) covers at least two related ideas: on the one hand, the notion of *moral* (or political) badness, in which “cinema is interrogated for the ethics of its representations and their imputed effects.” On the other hand, the idea of *aesthetic* badness, where “cinema is judged for artistic quality [with some films] found to be bereft of beauty or related values” (202). In Polan’s essay these ideas of moral and aesthetic badness are mediated by a third term: namely, that of *auteurism*, and specifically the figure of Nicholas Ray. Polan puts forward Ray’s 1950 film, *Born to Be Bad*, not only as a useful case study of badness, but also as evidence of how aesthetic and moral badness need to be understood as historically contingent terms (figure 1.3). More generally, as demon-



Figure 1.3. Joan Fontaine on the movie poster for *Born to Be Bad* (1950). Courtesy RKO / The Kobal Collection.

strated by Thomas Elsaesser, auteurism (in its French, post–World War II incarnation) brings a sophisticated appreciation of aesthetic problems to a body of films—Hollywood output from 1940 onwards—to occasion an interpretive shift. Specifically, the attribution of a high *aesthetic* value to industrial products previously considered crassly commercial, vulgar, and *morally* bad (Elsaesser 200). From these leads, this volume groups its chapters into two corresponding and connected conceptual areas: aesthetics (part I) and authorship (part II).

The diverse inquiries, across and within each of the two areas of this edition, recognize that it is impossible to approach the idea of bad cinema without considering an audience for whom it is bad. Sconce’s work on paracinema—the movement that has grown up around sleazy, excessive, or poorly executed B movies to advocate them over and above A-list features—is the best known reception-based approach in cult and “badfilm” debates, and a source that has been widely drawn upon (see Mathijs and Mendik 100, as well as several authors in this collection). The most significant contribution that Sconce’s work makes to these debates is to identify paracinema not as a body of texts, or *genre*, but rather as an interpretive filter that is fundamentally interested in ironic readings of diverse texts. In Sconce’s words, “paracinema is . . . less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus” (“‘Trashing’ the Academy” 372). What is described here, and also in Sconce’s later work (*Sleaze Artists*), which takes up Pauline Kael’s “Trash, Art, and the Movies” to complicate orderly thought about bad cinema, is a phenomenon of taste: a way of reading that valorizes the inept, absurd, grotesque, and bizarre forms that have been rejected or ignored by legitimate film culture.

In part I, “Aesthetics,” the practice of identifying films as good or bad objects is linked to broader and more transparent issues of social representation. In a 2009 issue of *Sight and Sound* that created a pantheon of bad directors in a broader celebration of “mad, bad and dangerous” films, Mark Cousins suggests that “each of these ‘wild’ directors has a psychic energy that is manic to a degree and might well be fuelled by sexual rage, or colonial exploitation, or a Marxist hatred of consumerism, or a fear of modernity or the body . . . or by historical events” (23). Here, various kinds of “explosive” social materials are evaluated not only in the discursive terms of artistic worth but according to the real effects to which they give rise.

In his contribution to this volume, R. Barton Palmer precisely describes how this pattern of evaluation is always anchored in some

determining factor: “something is bad for something or seems good to someone in respect to some interest, and such contingent evaluations identify particular elements of a text and the context of its reception, in the process providing a kind of public ‘reading.’” The chapters in part I demonstrate this point by engaging a broad range of aesthetic “interests” that work as a determining force in the evaluation of badness (and goodness). In these chapters, film objects, or parts of film objects, that are publicly bad—sensationalist, incompetent, pornographic, gratuitous—are assembled and reoriented in relation to a concern that exceeds this nomination at a political or historical level. In this way, the authors draw out the constructive and *affirmative* aspects of bad cinema.

While none of the chapters in part I deals explicitly with the type of (neo-)camp or exploitative material more commonly investigated in paracinematic readings, many demonstrate something of this reception-based protocol by attending to examples of formal and narrative devices often marginalized or ignored in film criticism: explosions, subtitles, rear-projection, and character villainy. Further, the chapters are linked by their common focus on cinematic affect, or what Joan Hawkins calls the “operative criterion . . . that characterizes paracinema as a low cinematic culture” (4). The authors frequently frame a central aesthetic technique as something that directly engages the spectator’s body to induce or provoke affects that are overwhelming, dislocating, distracting, or thrilling. The aesthetic badness of Hollywood film—as both artistic failure and narrative design—is here linked to the “low” form of exploitation and “body genres” (Williams), and more broadly to an estimation of how specific genres figure in audience estimations of good and bad. The essays move beyond identifying these effects as evidence of the various texts’ production and distribution contexts to consider how they open a space for the re-conceptualization of what makes a film good, or bad.

In the first chapter, “Explosive Apathy,” Sconce addresses how the trend of his titular term can describe the “narcissistic” and “obnoxious” tendencies of much contemporary Hollywood blockbuster cinema. Citing examples from such films as *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry [now Lana] Wachowski, 1999) and *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) where protagonists walk nonchalantly away from enormous explosions that they patently can not survive, Sconce characterizes explosive apathy as a technique that threatens to undermine a film’s verisimilitude with its combination of excess and “stupid movie physics.” Referring to a 1980s paracinematic sketch on NBC’s SCTV, “The Farm Film Report”—where films were reviewed by actors pretending to

be hicks according purely to the presence or absence of explosions—as a prescient comment on a now dominant cultural trend, Sconce identifies the obnoxiousness of explosive apathy. Its effect, he says, is a self-reflexive moment of narration, “self-conscious to the point of being exhibitionist, and exhibitionist to the point of demanding, rather rudely, attention and even respect.” Connecting the tendency to theories of intensified continuity and impact aesthetics that seek to define the visceral effects of contemporary (action) cinema, Sconce argues that explosive apathy nonetheless goes beyond a functional imperative to integrate narrative and spectacle. It makes the “awesome” *obscene*, by engaging action technique in and of itself to overwhelm the audience with an attitude that is ultimately hostile and condescending: “the explosively apathetic announce in their very silence superiority over the viewer, immunity to the very thing designed to most engage the spectator.”

In the next two chapters, Tessa Dwyer and Adrian Danks evoke Sconce’s paracinematic framework more directly in discussions of inept examples of the pragmatic aesthetic strategies of subtitling and rear-projection. Dwyer’s “B-Grade Subtitles” begins by showing how the celebration of translational errors affectionately known as “flubtitles” or “English” fits clearly within the lexicon of paracinema. Linking the camp activity of reveling in the wrongness of these errors to both historical film criticism and contemporary Internet fandom, Dwyer demonstrates the place of careless subtitling and dubbing in the construction of the bad foreign-language film genre. This practice gives Dwyer the opportunity to move beyond traditional “badfilm” discourses to examine how translation and subtitling necessarily destabilize these in their capacity to transform “any film into *badfilm*.” In this context, translation itself is discussed as a bad object: a “blind spot” that film culture either ignores or acknowledges as a “necessary evil” that routinely condenses and obliterates the effect of the original. Mobilizing the work of Jacques Derrida, and looking forward to the ideas on “BADaptation” advanced later in the collection by I. Q. Hunter and Constantine Verevis, Dwyer contests this overdetermined negativity by arguing that translation always *necessarily* fails. She builds upon this position to conclude that, if the process of translation expresses the instability that underlies all language (and thereby dismantles any notion of a stable point of origin for translation) then bad translations can constitute a platform for rethinking badness itself.

In “Being in Two Places at the Same Time,” Adrian Danks identifies the device of rear-projection as another example of bad technique that has received inadequate critical attention. As he details, rear-pro-

jection developed historically in an effort to avoid the poor effects of location sound recording, but “the sometimes wildly disproportionate dimensions, movements and illumination” of the projection in relation to the primary image suggest the development of a new kind of bad cinema. While thus typically dismissed for its artificiality and disjunction, specific instances of rear-projection move Danks to consider how the technique can also give rise to uncanny effects felt directly at the level of spectatorship. In the extended example that is examined from *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964) this effect is understood as evidence of Hitchcock’s “profoundly impure cinema that mixes and contrasts aspects of realism with a heightened but often meticulous artificiality.” Danks argues that, in the sequence under consideration, *Marnie* mobilizes instances of repetition and redundancy to become a kind of experimental “installation,” one that advances rear-projection “as both an anachronistic and visionary technique.”

In a manner that continues this interest in the redemptive and revisionist tendency of auteur discourse (examined further in the chapters of part II), R. Barton Palmer next examines a “blind spot” in the reception of *Cruising*, William Friedkin’s 1980 investigative thriller set in New York’s gay bar scene. Turning directly to the *effects* of the type of judgment considered throughout the volume as a whole, Palmer discusses how the evaluative reception of Friedkin’s film as a bad object—incoherent and offensive—has bypassed its radical representational program which, “dependent on a kind of taboo-challenging neorealism, has never since been repeated.” Emphasizing the instrumental function of a bad nomination and reputation, Palmer traces the ways in which a perceived connection between homosexuality and violence in the film has contributed to it being seen as slanderous. His argument opens onto the issues suggested above, though, in considering the *usefulness* of this offensiveness to its cause. As he indicates, the ways in which *Cruising* became controversial “reflected the increasing fragmentation of national values and the emergence of powerful forms of identity politics.” The value of the film is thus revealed not in a straightforward reversal of taste, but in identifying it as a site for ongoing debates around essentialist and nonessentialist forms of homosexuality, heteronormality, and other forms of sexual being.

Murray Pomerance’s chapter, “The Villain We Love: Notes on the Dramaturgy of Screen Evil,” addresses a very different strategy of “offense”: the badness of the bad guy, or the presentational problems that narrative villainy poses for filmmaking. Here, Pomerance again evokes

issues around the reception of “low” material by drawing an analogy between the spectacle of public execution and the screening of a film in which villainy is destroyed. Vividly evoking the “weird and phantasmal organization” of the hour of execution, Pomerance argues that neither of these spectacles entertains inadvertently, “but is designed as a mechanism to produce an affective discharge and moral instruction through the exhibition of isolation, denigration, pain, and finally—in a notable culmination—death.” Through the examples of historical and filmic villains including Adolf Hitler, Gollum, Norman Bates, Hannibal Lecter, and the Joker, Pomerance demonstrates a dramaturgical point on the narrative orchestration of “screen badness.” In connection with the hero’s victory, he shows that the villain’s degradation “fills in a central jurisprudential lack, offering excuses, rationale, and teleological outcome for acts of vicious destruction played out in the name of all that is orderly, civilized, lovable, and true.” In interrogating how the familiar narrative trajectory of villainy and punishment makes certain ethical movements in this way, Pomerance’s discussion of the *aesthetically* bad—the gory and sensationalist—simultaneously emphasizes the ideas of *moral* badness raised elsewhere in the volume.

In the final entry to part I, Jamie Sexton turns directly to the topic of cult film as an issue of taste and value that many contributors evoke in their discussions of bad cinema. Sexton’s chapter, “From Bad to Good and Back to Bad Again? Cult Cinema and its Unstable Trajectory,” takes cult cinema itself as an object that has moved between “good” and “bad” status from after World War I to the present-day. In a piece that contributes to a fuller understanding of the connection between cult and badness, Sexton advances a three-part argument in which the flexibility of the term “cult” is demonstrated in and through its reception and construction by critics and audiences alike. Moving from its (bad) connection to the social forces of religion and mysticism as imagined by Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Harry A. Potamkin, through its (good) establishment as a critical term used in connection with both film culture and individual texts, and on to a more recent perception that its gradual mainstreaming has (badly) compromised its validity and led to a “post-cult” culture, Sexton shows how the aesthetic concepts of intertextuality, exploitation, irony, nostalgia, and transgression have mutated across historical contexts to authenticate the difficulty of actually pinpointing cinematic “cultism.” To say that we are now living in a “post-cult” culture, he argues, is itself ultimately bad, “implicitly valuing the critic’s own nostalgic perspective and devaluing the experiences of

newer generations.” In this argument, Sexton rounds out part I, drawing (implicit) connections to key works—Manny Farber’s “White Elephant vs. Termite Art,” Pauline Kael’s “Trash, Art and the Movies,” and Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp”—and demonstrating precisely how the codes of judgment mobilized by audiences and critics work ceaselessly in their location and relocation of films, directors, and styles.

While the first part of the book deals principally with questions of aesthetics, chapters such as those by Danks and Palmer, in their discussion of auteurs Hitchcock and Friedkin, go some way towards introducing the issues examined in part II, “Authorship.” As has already been signaled (through the work of Elsaesser), classical auteur theory plays a central role in broad historical estimations of cinematic value insofar as its principal contribution is to provide a framework for *redeeming* “bad” populist products as “good” aesthetic objects worthy of close consideration. For many contributors to the volume, this framework is evoked as a means of demonstrating how the critic is inserted into the field of value. In his introduction to the collection *Auteurs and Authorship*, Barry Keith Grant gives an overview of the discourse that emphasizes this dimension of judgment, detailing the trend practiced by the magazines *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Movie* and *Film Culture* of ranking directors in a deliberate effort to “provoke established critical orthodoxy” (2). In a move illustrated by Peter Wollen’s 1972 distinction between Howard Hawks, the biological person, and “Howard Hawks,” the critical concept, this trend ultimately evolves into a “code” for organizing the reception of the films bearing a director’s name (Grant 4).

In the chapters of part II, this code is interrogated as a tool for evaluating—and *re-evaluating*—what constitutes good and bad cinematic expression. These authors attend to the factors—textual, critical, and institutional—which contribute to a pervasive understanding that, in Grant’s description of Andrew Sarris’s position, “the least satisfying film of an auteur is better than the most interesting work by a director who isn’t” (3). Tom Conley offers the most explicit examination of this issue in “Coffee in Paradise: *The Horn Blows at Midnight*,” a chapter that reflects on how the discourse of authorship offers a particular way of construing bad cinema: specifically, “[how] its practice demands that a film attributed to a given director *must* be treated as a critical object, and rarely as a work whose worth is determined by the degree of pleasure or disquiet it affords.” Conley’s chapter provides a case study in this mode of investigation by demonstrating how the motif of coffee in Raoul Walsh’s self-described “terrible” film opens up to “comedies of

similar failure” (such as Preston Sturges’s 1940 *Christmas in July*), and more broadly to both manifest and latent content concerning historical issues of cinema and war. In showing how authorship necessarily turns viewing into a critical operation, Conley redeems this film as something other than what its reception has made it out to be. Its “bad” assessment can only remain in quotation marks, insofar as “an *auteur’s* film cannot be bad simply because auteurs, at least those who have been or remain worthy of the name, cannot fail to make what seem to be bad movies.”

In the next chapter, Adrian Martin draws on the concept of authorship to demonstrate how bad cinema should not be reduced to a specific type or kind. In this chapter, Martin considers the overreliance of film criticism on a type of codified analysis that gives rise to nonevaluative categories (see Grant 5), such as the “bad” tautological concept of authorship that Timothy Corrigan suggests the commerce of auteurism relies upon. In Jean-Claude Brisseau’s decadent and unpredictable films, Martin sees an occasion to move beyond the choices and values that compel criticism to designate films “bad” or “good” as “the unacceptable ridiculous, or the acceptable ridiculous.” In the aspects deemed risible by many of Brisseau’s critics—the incongruity, the elision of narrative detail, and the earnestness of the works—Martin sees an audacity that demonstrates the “triumph” of bad cinema in a “single, implicit rider, which is quite simply: *take it or leave it*; enter right into the movie, or just walk away. To take it you have to take it all, engage with it all, not cherry-pick the acceptable elements from the unacceptable ones, which is what the act of criticism (consciously or not) does all the time.” In making this argument, Martin more generally touches upon questions of critical orthodoxy: that is, whether there is an “objective” component to discussions of good or bad, or whether such judgments are so entirely “impressionistic” that critical ideals of impartiality are abandoned from the outset.

The notion of authorship is examined in a different manner in Kate Egan’s chapter, “*The Evil Dead* DVD Commentaries, Amateurishness, and Bad Film Discourse.” Commentaries on the historical transformations of the discourse of authorship often lead to the conclusion that the contemporary era marks the moment of the marketable “auteur star” who, in Corrigan’s description, “is meaningful primarily as a promotion or recovery of a movie or group of movies, frequently regardless of the filmic text itself” (105). In this move, promotional technology serves a key function in disseminating the auteur “brand” as a code that organizes the reception of a director’s work. In her chapter, Egan demonstrates the central place of the DVD director’s commentary in this process.

Attending to the remarks from director Sam Raimi, producer Robert Tapert, and star Bruce Campbell on a 1999 DVD release of the original 1981 film in the series, Egan identifies a paracinematic engagement that foregrounds and celebrates the film's flaws, gaffes, and mistakes. While acknowledging that this "bad" approach initially appears to contradict the typical function of the DVD commentary (that is, to enhance the aesthetic or cultural value of a film), Egan's discussion ultimately shows how the good-natured error-spotting does contribute to the film's status and appeal as a cult "artifact" from a past, pre-video era of film consumption. In part, she suggests, it achieves this by foregrounding the idea of the auteur star where, through "self-deprecation" and "sustaining camaraderie," Raimi, together with Tapert and Campbell, offers a reflection on the low-budget adventures of their filmmaking history to feed into an admiration for *The Evil Dead's* "authentically amateur" status.

In "Liking *The Magus*," I. Q. Hunter takes up the idea of a code for judging a film's worth in relation to adaptation studies, where the logic of comparison traditionally determines that a film is good or bad in direct proportion to its reproduction of an original text. Hunter's aim of detailing why he likes Guy Green's 1968 film of John Fowles's iconic novel directly addresses the key problems that arise from this singular logic, which include overlooking what the film is doing *beyond* imitating a single (often canonized) source text. Accordingly, Hunter attends to a range of symbols, themes, and intertexts in this "failed mainstream art film" without attempting to establish whether they derive or deviate from the meanings of the novel: this not only includes an excursion into the film's uniquely cinematic innovations of visual rhyming and repetition, but also to the "existentialist puzzle" structure that recalls both *L'avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960) and *The Game* (David Fincher, 1997), the presence of Anna Karina as a marker of the French New Wave, and Michael Caine's performance as a "retread" of his lead role in *Alfie* (Lewis Gilbert, 1966). In this way, Hunter effectively allows Green's film to "own" its badness, rather than be received as such through the code of its adaptation from a reputable source. *The Magus* is analyzed as a meaningful textual object with its own concerns, "inspired and structured by the novel, perhaps, but [a film that also] exhibits its own integrity, significance and (alas) style of relative failure."

In the volume's final entry, Constantine Verevis takes up these issues on the function and pleasure of adaptations in a discussion of *Candy*, Christian Marquand's 1968 film adapted from Terry Southern and Mason Hoffenberg's 1958 satiric novel *Candy*, itself inspired by Voltaire's

1759 picaresque, *Candide*. Verevis's essay, "BADaptation: Is *Candy* Faithful?," interrogates the "bad" rhetoric that pervades adaptation studies in and through those analyses that regularly employ terms of "betrayal and degradation" to lament the "infidelity" of film adaptations to their idealized sources and perceived points of origin. Verevis seeks to disturb this framework by examining what happens when a "bad object"—here, a controversial sex novel that becomes a U.S. best-seller—is adapted, thus mobilizing "BADaptation" as a concept to engage with and examine both the mutable reputation of the source text and traditional approaches to adaptation. In a detailed account of the inception of Marquand's film, Verevis demonstrates how its failure was ascribed to its tampering with the excesses of the *Candy* novel (labeled "unfilmable" by *Life* magazine) in an effort to translate the book's "hip, porno-parody" into a certified, mainstream film. In an argument that links back to I. Q. Hunter's assessment of *The Magus*, Verevis concludes that the value of *Candy* lies in its *transformation* of the sexual themes of the novel and its *negotiation* of the surrounding social and cultural changes: *Candy* succeeds "not by attempting a film that [is] 'adequate' to the ideals of the counter-culture, but by incorporating (however incoherently) disparate cinematic practices—mainstream, art house, exploitation—into its own positively 'unoriginal' and fractured film production."

In his emphatic description of the positive, *redemptive* force of combining these diverse practices, Verevis's chapter precisely sums up this volume's key theme: the idea—described above—of bad cinema not as one (generic) mode but as a term with which to interrogate and disrupt the categories of film criticism and culture. While many of the essays deal with bad cinema as what Deleuze sees as the "figurative violence" of (Hollywood) representation, their authors also see "epiphanies" in these films that—elsewhere in the collection—are seen exclusively in the "visionary" works of trash and art cinema, such as is the case of *Holy Motors*. Deleuze's "sublime conception of cinema" is thus revealed not as a purely textual quality but as a reading protocol. All the essays that follow address the *mobility* of bad cinema in a way that most exactly positions the term as a description of the activity of tracing a text, figure, or tradition in motion between the good and bad status ascribed by critics and audiences in specific contexts. The films discussed here all *shock* insofar as they arouse us as thinkers, and are in this way also transposed—moved, imagined—by thought. In this way, bad cinema is always founded upon the movement that Deleuze sees to transcend representation. The "violence" of this concept lies not always in what

is represented, but in the capacity for this to be embedded in—and wrenched from—a variety of positions that do ultimately lie within us.

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